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Physical and Rhetorical Compromise:

Louisa Caroline Tuthill Changes Women's Exercise in America, 1839-1869

The nineteenth century is filled with corporeal contradictions for women: physical fitness and lack of physical fitness, frailty and robustness, and even feminine sexual repression and liberation. These contradictions occupy rhetorical spaces throughout the nineteenth century. It is during this period in history when all of the lines of definition start to blur for women who want to understand their bodies, and meanwhile the descriptions of women's physical abilities in Louisa Caroline Tuthill's conduct book chapter on physical education remain unchanged over several decades and a multitude of editions. To a sizeable degree, the manner in which Tuthill characterizes feminine physical education captures nineteenth-century confusion over how women should conduct their bodies, but unexpectedly, Tuthill strays from conservative teachings in support of women's physical education. As a single point of common ground between Tuthill and the radical women's rights activists she disapproved of, Tuthill writes in approval of women's physical education, and actively seeks to reconcile old ideas about women's physical inferiority with new ideas about women requiring physical fitness just as much as men. In a most demure manner, Tuthill argues that women are capable of physical fitness, an activity once deemed unnecessary for their roles as mothers and caretakers.

The rhetorical career of conduct book author and self-culture authority Louisa Tuthill is a peculiar one worth investigating at length. For several centuries, the conduct book held its ground as a literary genre distinct from etiquette manuals or conduct fiction. However, it is only after women's education gains momentum in the nineteenth century that conduct books begin to move to the forefront of women's literature. With an opportunity to self-educate, women

consumed conduct books as an alternative educational outlet on personal matters deemed relevant to women's roles as daughter, wife, and mother. According to Sarah Newton, the conduct book was geared to fit the domestic interests of the "inexperienced young adult," and set out to "[define] an ethical, Christian-based code of behavior, and that normally include[d] gender role definitions" (4). Although Newton touches briefly on the subject of gender roles, it is worth noting further that women's conduct literature prescribed socially-accepted views of appropriate female behavior, and especially socially-accepted approaches to understanding women's bodies. Jane Rose discusses at length how conduct books set out "to explore social ideals for women's roles in antebellum America" (37). In the case of physical education, authors who chose to write about women's bodies played an integral role in the nineteenth-century understanding of the female body (37).

In order to better understand the historical context Tuthill was writing in, it is important to understand the relevant exercise regiments of her time. For most of the nineteenth century, men and women shared "the prevailing belief" that a woman was born with a "weaker physique" (Banner 90). To be clear, Tuthill was writing to an audience of white, middle- to upper-class women who were not exercising enough, not to the poorer classes of women who were required to exert their bodies in order to supplement the family income, or slave women who expected to engage in brutal physical labor. In comparison to men, the female audience Tuthill wrote to was seen as smaller, less muscular, and their role as matriarchs or caretakers usually eclipsed opportunities for physical improvement. By corresponding exercise with the "unique" situation of men and women, physicians were comfortable allowing men to partake in "vigorous exercise using heavy apparatus," but women were restricted to light calisthenics (Banner 90). Calisthenics required very light weights and easy movements that did not overburden women with unbearable amounts of weight. With the rise of gymnasiums and other arenas of

competitive sport and physical fitness, men would push to the forefront and dominate while women were held back and discouraged. Several feminist scholars have come forward denying that men are solely at fault for women's discouragement from arenas of physical fitness; rather, social conventions of the time did not permit women to intermingle within realms already predominated by men (Steele 58).

Within the first few decades of the nineteenth century, men's physical fitness was on the rise. The construction of gymnasiums and other bastions of masculine fitness vitalized the physical education movement for men, but the same cannot be said for the ladies. Physical educators wondered at whether women's bodies would even be able to handle the demands of exercise. When women first began writing during the earlier part of the nineteenth century, it was commonplace to rule women out as the weaker sex (Stanley 36). The majority of Americans deemed women's bodies too frail and inadequate for strenuous amounts of physical activity. George Kent Stanley highlights the fact that there were "medical pronouncements [that] served both to reflect and to reinforce the prevailing conservative view of women's social and domestic role," that confined them to the home in order to stave off unfeminine behavior (36). Physical exercise was considered exceptionally unfeminine, and young women feared it would lead to unwanted "muscularity while eroding grace and refinement" (Stanley 36, Todd 63). A secondary but equally strong objection to women's physical fitness is the notion that exercise could irreparably deteriorate the frail female frame, and once destroyed, exercised female bodies would not be able to stand up to their greatest physical challenge: childbearing and childrearing. Questioning whether it would endanger procreative abilities, many physicians were equally unsupportive of women's physical fitness. Conversely, a few would qualify this social opinion by prescribing light amounts of physical exercise believing that it would enhance maternal abilities.

All of the aforementioned questions contributed to the uncertainties that shrouded society's understanding of women's bodies, and especially women's understanding of their bodies. Yet, as the nineteenth century progressed forward, so too did society's perception of women's bodies. The ending of the Civil War in 1865 signifies to scholars the point at which exercise and sport gain leverage in America and improve the supposed declining health of American women; however, this increased understanding of physical fitness did not necessarily generate positive ideas from women about other women who chose to exercise (Stanley 41). For the next forty years or so, women would continue to reject physical fitness and the possibility of developing a robust, healthy body in favor of a weaker, more delicate one. In many cases, women began resisting exercise altogether because they found it "unfashionable" and "unfeminine."

Tuthill advocates for women's engagement in physical fitness at a time when young girls turn away from a practice of physical development thought superfluous and unfashionable. Additionally, her take on physical fitness is grounded in the context of matriarchal development. It is very likely that Tuthill followed doctor's orders strictly. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has created a formula for perfect maternity by nineteenth-century physicians' standards that resonates with Tuthill's chapter on physical education. Smith-Rosenberg's studies on nineteenth-century conduct reveal that women were instructed to "spend much of their time in the fresh air, enjoy moderate exercise, avoid down beds, corsets, or liquor... Ample rest and a simple diet of unstimulating food were equally necessary" (187). This description almost exactly outlines an outline for Tuthill's chapter on physical education. By mentioning the benefits of exercise in regards to marriageability, Tuthill would have an easier time recruiting young girls to the cause of exercise. Throughout this paper I will bring to light how Tuthill—as the model conservative female author—is able to reconcile traditionally conservative positions on women's conduct with more

progressive ideas regarding women's physical fitness by using rhetorical strategies that promised maternal improvement. Analyzing the strategies Tuthill has embedded in her conduct book chapter on physical education can offer scholars in rhetoric further insight into how conduct authors literally mobilized inactive girls of the nineteenth century.

Born in 1798 in New Haven, Connecticut, Louisa Tuthill probably was not enthusiastic about entering into the ranks of women's conduct book authors (Allaback 6). After the death of her husband, Cornelius Tuthill, in 1825, Tuthill was left with four children and almost no financial support (Allaback 6). It is believed that Tuthill may have always had an impressive aptitude for writing starting from a very young age, but initially Tuthill was not supportive of women who chose to write. When she was a young girl, she wrote extensively in her free time, but it is reported that she burned all of her youthful writings because of the unfeminine stigma attached to women writers. Many years later she would lift her pen again in order to financially support herself and her four children (Hart 101).

With dozens of books and an estimated one hundred later editions of those books, Tuthill was a prolific writer (Eldred and Mortensen 114). Yet, it is uncertain why Tuthill's conduct books have been disregarded almost entirely by nineteenth-century women's rhetoric scholars. On the contrary, two scholars that have acknowledged Tuthill's prominence as a conduct book writer, Janet Carey Eldred and Peter Mortensen, agree that her conduct books provide useful insight into how women conducted themselves in public and private spaces. Eldred and Mortensen state that "the length of her career, her frequency of publication, and her association with major presses" are all strong attestations supporting the notion "that Tuthill must have been widely known among a popular readership" (114). In and of itself, Tuthill's popularity indicates that her take on women's conduct was one her contemporaries appreciated, and the

aforementioned rhetorical strategies she utilized influenced thousands of girls who consumed her advice.

Another important point Eldred and Mortensen make in regards to Tuthill's writing is that she was labeled as conservative, and vigilantly opposed to suffragettes who fought for women's rights, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton or Amelia Bloomer (113). Conduct book scholar Sarah Newton points out that Tuthill spoke against women's rights advocates around the time of the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, and the brash conservatism she adhered to is most accurately conveyed in her opinion of the women who led the Seneca Falls Convention:

Alas! are we to be persuaded out of our best and truest interests by these masculine marauders? Can any one deny that there is a desire to mingle in public affairs, a wrangling in controversy, and a hankering for public applause, unbecoming the dignity and delicacy of woman? (Tuthill qtd. in Newton 93).

Tuthill uses the feminine body to make her point. She has alluded to the physical inferiority of the female sex in suggesting their "delicacy," but she also attempts to demean women's rights advocates by accusing them of being "masculine marauders." In her justification, she describes the women as criminal in nature because they have stolen an aspect of superiority and strength that is typically associated with the strong male, not the weak female. Tuthill plays on social constructions of women as physically weaker, and consequently unworthy of social equality to men.

A quick, superficial analysis of Tuthill's physical education chapter would strike most readers as drastically more conservative than the writings of Tuthill's progressive, feminist counterparts. Ironically enough, Stanton, Bloomer, and Tuthill were all in favor of the women's physical educational movement. In fact, most women's rights advocates supported this movement long before it was implemented in the American school system, but most conduct authors strayed away from or dedicated a minimal number of pages to the subject of women's

physical fitness. United on one front but divided on many others, this marginal point of similarity between women's rights advocates and a conservative conduct author offers a tremendous topic of investigation for scholars in the field of nineteenth-century women's literature. For a staunch conservative like Tuthill to align with women on the other end of the feminist spectrum on the fledgling, but controversial topic of women's physical fitness would have shattered the expectations of her audience.

First published in 1839, *The Young Lady at Home and in Society* adopted novel ideas from competing medical theories that supported women's physical activity. In the very first line of Tuthill's chapter on physical education, she acknowledges that previous modes of thought have been opposed to women's health and will contradict her recommendations:

It has been thought vulgar to possess health, not that any one would acknowledge herself so ridiculously absurd, yet the old adage in this case is true, "Actions speak louder than words." It is generally believed that beautiful, fragile beings, too delicate to meet the first rude blast without shrinking, are the most interesting to those arbiters whose taste is all decisive on this matter. Man, strong and robust, likes to be the defender and the protector of the weak; he likes, too, that his superiority should be felt and acknowledged. (78)

In this passage, Tuthill depicts the male sex in physically superior terms that resonate with the description set forth by Leslie. In contrast to the "strong and robust" man who enjoys his fair share of "superiority," Tuthill depicts the female sex as "beautiful" but weak and incapable of physical equality. Nonetheless, within the first few lines Tuthill vocalizes her ability to see the other side of the controversy. In discussing how it was once "thought vulgar to possess health," she highlights that this thought is an idea of the past. Tuthill's assertion, that health is now a desirable quality of self-conduct, is further authorized by "the old adage" that "Actions speak louder than words." Here, Tuthill is taking a conservative, moralistic adage and situating it next to a radical idea: that women should exercise and care for their bodies. The juxtaposition of an

old adage and a new way of thinking are remarkable, especially when one resigns to the commonly held belief that she laces the pages of her books with conservatism. Although her signature conservative style may hold a stronger presence in other chapters, and though she was opposed to suffrage, Tuthill's chapter on Physical Education begs one to differ from the crowd that claims she is purely conservative in her writings. Louisa Tuthill was neither friendly towards women's rights activists, nor was she willing to push heavy, masculine forms of exercise on her young female readership, but on occasion she was fond of nudging women in a progressive direction. Tuthill ought to be remembered for how her rhetorical style adopted new science and theory on women's health and reconciled it with the conservative genre of the conduct book.

Yet there were those who disagreed. Those who were opposed launched "attacks on any behavior deemed unfeminine," and alleged that women who exercised would experience heightened levels of "disease and debility" (Stanley 36). Opinion leaders and physicians who opposed women's engagement in physical education predominated the beginning of the century, but as time passed their arguments would be discredited by a gradually emerging group that supported women's physical fitness, Tuthill being one of the earliest supporters. She specifically warns the young lady who discredits physical fitness:

Want of exercise. Perhaps you have no regular system with regard to this, and spend whole days in languid inactivity. Occupied with reading and needle-work, days pass without any more exercise than is necessary to take you from one room to another. Your reluctance to move demonstrates the *vis inertia* of matter; the slightest labor becomes an intolerable burden. Beware! The monster dyspepsia is beckoning you for one of his sallow, meager train. Escape for your life! Regular active exercise is indispensable. (78)

Alerting the young reader to the importance of caring for her body is the central message, and the peripheral messages attempt to relate to women who feel sluggish and exhausted from the

simplest exertion. Tuthill opens channels of physical feeling and attention that will engage young girls who lack fitness, and she lets them know that they can change these feelings. She vilifies the effects of laziness calling it a disease, a bodily intruder, and in doing so she refutes the challenge that women's exercise would cause "disease and debility" (Stanley 36). This excerpt is also demonstrative of how Tuthill pinpoints a commonly held concern of the time, that "most girls educated at home led unhealthy lives" (Todd 13). At the very end, she reiterates that "active exercise" is imperative to one's personal health, but in case the premise of personal improvement is not enough, Tuthill takes her argument one step further. At this point, she has addressed women's concerns about exercising as unfashionable, dismissed perceptions of exercise as dangerous to women's bodies, and discussed how physical fitness is a cure for laziness. Each of these points builds up to her final rhetorical strategy of playing on the domestic vocations of women. Toward the beginning of the physical education movement, it was common to "overlap" women's physical education with the study of "domestic science," that taught girls how to nourish and clean their bodies and the bodies of those placed in their care (Stanley 50). Tuthill takes this overlap and applies it to the maternal, caring duties typically associated with women caregivers:

The natural delicacy and weakness of the other sex are thus fostered. That it should be so, is owing to a refined one, among its evils. But the arduous, imperative duties that in life's progress devolve upon woman call for physical, as well as mental vigor. To hover around the couch of sickness, and smooth the pillow of the dying; to bear patiently with the querulous impatience of the aged, and the petulance of childhood; to lead into the right path the boisterous waywardness of youth; and to soothe, by unwearied kindness, tempers rendered harsh and irritable by intercourse with a cold, unfeeling world;—are not these a part of her humble ministry? (79)

Acknowledging the supposed weakness of the female sex, Tuthill goes on to list commendable maternal duties that will be enhanced with physical strength and health. She urges

women to take care of their bodies so they can take care of others. Thus, she legitimizes the feminine role as one that requires physical capacity. Despite the fact that Tuthill is more or less confining women to a certain role, it is essential to recognize that she is redirecting women's attention to the importance of physical fitness, an activity that had previously been unwelcoming to them. If we can recognize how she takes a new idea that is challenged by critics who argue against women exercising their bodies, we can appreciate her attempts to mold it into something that is more comfortable for a skeptical society that expects women to be good mothers and wives and not much else. This distinction was bolstered in the later half of the century when the eugenics movement began to take hold.

Many conduct authors frowned upon women who focused on developing their bodies because these physically-conscious women were accused of redirecting precious maternal efforts away from their children's health and towards exercising and cultivating their own health.

Further confirmation comes from Lois Banner, who affirms that "the majority of writers of nineteenth-century advice literature also scorned women who engaged in 'vigorous physical exercise,'" but not for the same reasons as young girls who thought it unfashionable to exercise (91). Instead, conduct book authors advised against women's involvement in sports and other forms of physical activity because physically fit and maternally fit were considered mutually exclusive. In other words, one could not be an exemplary mother if one were vested in a physical fitness regimen. Banner argues that suspicions about the physically-fit female body were probably the norm for physical-education chapters in nineteenth-century women's conduct books (91).

Equally relevant to the analysis of Tuthill's rhetorical strategies is the coming of physical education activists and reformers later in the century. One activist and contemporary of Tuthill's, Orson Fowler, truly believed that "vigorous exercise" could "increase [women's] brain

size, improve their intelligence, and enhance their maternal capacities” (Todd 178). It is very possible that Fowler, like other physical education activists, was influenced by Tuthill’s rhetorical strategy of highlighting maternal benefits in order to validate physical fitness to women. Fowler’s writings were considered progressive, and they serve as an interesting point of comparison to Tuthill’s chapter on physical education. Jan Todd’s explanation of Fowler’s stance on women’s physical fitness demonstrates that his earliest writings included “recommendations primarily centered on manual labor and domestic work,” but from mid-century onward he would begin to slowly prod the sprouting women’s physical fitness movement in a more vigorous direction (184). Tuthill and Fowler begin on the same terms—encouraging women to train their bodies for the rigors of motherhood—but the same progression is not seen in Tuthill’s writing. They adopt radical ideas about what women’s bodies need in conjunction with rhetoric about fitness benefits that will improve the maternal capabilities of a woman—a hook for the true woman. Over the course of approximately thirty editions, Tuthill’s advice on exercise remains unchanged and illustrates that she was not overtly progressive or conservative. If Tuthill had followed trends toward elevated levels of vigorous exercise, we could label her as progressive. However, her signature conservatism is what prevented her from revising her chapter on physical education to praise girls’ participation in sports or strenuous physical exertion. Instead, Tuthill adheres to the following recommendations for over three decades:

Walking, riding, and in a rainy day, or on other days if it be possible, active employment within doors. If your situation precludes the necessity for assisting in keeping the house in order, you can fill the flower-vases, tastefully arrange the furniture, put the books in their places, keep your own room in the neatest possible order, and find many other things to give you employment, not entirely sedentary. (78)

Ostensibly, walking and riding do not leave many options for the lazy girl who wishes to play out-of-doors, but when one considers that girls had been previously discouraged from doing so, it

becomes clear that these suggestions were progressive ones. Tuthill is not going to tell young girls that they need to run a marathon, but instead she cautiously recommends mild forms of exercise that match-up with emerging medical theory. This prescription will sail through approximately thirty editions of Tuthill's *Young Lady at Home* unchanged. What is more, these editions are revised and re-published after the end of the Civil War, a turning point that marks the rise of organized sporting activity, in which women gained limited participation. Even after many women's colleges were permitting girls to engage in recreational sport during physical education classes, Tuthill makes the decision to exclude organized sporting events as a recommended form of exercise. Considering Tuthill's opposition to suffragettes and radical feminists, it is no surprise that she opposes organized sports that might promote a sense of camaraderie and lay the groundwork for collective actions. Promoting individual exercise over organized sports extinguishes the possibility of collaboration and dissent, and in accordance, she encourages her delicate reader to keep the body busy within the home, performing domestic duties with vigorous enthusiasm.

As a talented rhetor that re-shaped the conservative nature of the conduct book, Tuthill is simultaneously able to prevent women from going overboard with physical fitness. She did not propose that women go out and radically alter their bodies by taking up wrestling, rugby, or other masculine sports, but she is encouraging young women to break with traditional, in vogue ideas about passive delicacy and refinement in order to make a physical change. More importantly, Tuthill's reader must understand that her rhetorical compromise is not entirely unique to her situation; instead, it is better labeled as an undercurrent. Stanley has suggested that there was an undercurrent of "writers [who] used various tactics in reconciling the passive notion of true womanhood with the dynamic image of physical exercise" (44). Scholars should look to Tuthill as a representative of the physical education undercurrent. During Tuthill's career, many

writers—herself included—emerged from beneath the assumption that women were physically inferior and must be confined to the safety of the home that would not challenge them. In doing so, writers worked stealthily to persuade the public that mild amounts of physical activity would allow women to become better mothers, maintain their socially-prescribed roles, and meanwhile, transcend the restrictions placed on how they exercised their bodies. Tuthill rhetorically deters skepticism by directly stating that physical training will improve women’s domestic capabilities.

Still, the physical education movement would not sink into educational systems until the very end of the century. Lois Banner comments on how this movement “had not gained universal popularity” even in the 1880s, but toward the end of that decade an administrator at the Brooklyn Normal School of Gymnastics would write, “it is now generally admitted by educators that pupils need physical education” (139-140). Tuthill would not be around to see this change take root. Louisa Tuthill’s influential life came to an end in 1878, but the educators of the 1880s and onward would heed Tuthill’s advice. These educators would make advanced strides towards the women’s physical education movement and bolstering a positive image of the strong, physically fit woman (Smith-Rosenberg 262). Once again, Tuthill’s life as a conservative conduct author helped liberate women of the nineteenth century, and ultimately, may have paved the way for the coming of the “New Woman” at the turn of the century.

The debate over women’s bodies persisted throughout the nineteenth century, and in many ways, still exists today. During a time when physicians were just beginning to explore the benefits exercise held for women, Tuthill captures this fledgling debate in the 1869 version of *The Young Lady at Home and in Society* in a single statement: “Who shall decide when doctors disagree?” (80). What is interesting about this sentence is that it is one of the only changes made to her conduct book over the course of thirty years. To an exceptional degree, the addition of

this statement is demonstrative of how Tuthill chose to advise young ladies on the importance of actively educating themselves about their bodies. Despite an abundance of controversy over women's bodies, she openly informs her young reader that doctors can provide no definite answers for the time being. Tuthill's chapter sets out to deter women away from organized, collectivist sports while also tearing down past assumptions about physical exercise as dangerous to women's health. Both of these sub-arguments buttress Tuthill's central argument: women must submit to an exercise regimen that will enable them to become better mothers, wives, and caretakers. After reading Tuthill's physical education chapter, the reader is left with a blend of old and new ideas about women's physical culture, and she neatly abridges competing ideas into a conduct-book version that will be palatable to the minds of young ladies.

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