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1895 Letter from Harvard Philosophy Department

Introduction by CHARLENE HADDOCK SEIGFRIED

An official letter reporting the unauthorized Ph.D. examination at Harvard University of Mary Whiton Calkins records the anomalous position which women have occupied in philosophy from the beginning.

In 1895 the philosophy department of Harvard University sent the following letter to the Harvard Corporation certifying that Mary Whiton Calkins (1863-1930) had completed with distinction all requirements for the Ph.D. in philosophy. The signers expressed hope that “within a year or two” Harvard or Radcliffe would be conferring the doctorate on women. But Harvard did not grant doctorates to women until 1963 and never gave Calkins the degree she earned. By contrast, Christine Ladd-Franklin, who by 1882 had completed the requirements for a Ph.D. in logic and mathematics at Johns Hopkins University, was belatedly offered her degree in 1926. In 1902 Radcliffe offered a doctorate to Calkins and three other women who had earned Ph.D.’s at Harvard, including another philosopher, Ethel Dench Puffer (Howes).¹ Calkins refused the degree; Puffer accepted.

Having waited for three years after completing (1898) her doctoral studies, Puffer realized that Harvard had no intention of ever granting her a Ph.D., and she asked Radcliffe to confer one. Puffer feared that the lack of such degrees would hinder other women from pursuing advanced education at Harvard. In her rejection of this compromise Calkins wrote that although she occasionally found the lack of a degree an inconvenience and hoped that Radcliffe’s advanced degrees might indeed some day equal Harvard’s, she had not earned her degree at Radcliffe, nor did she think that women’s highest educational ideals would be served by Radcliffe’s offering the Ph.D. degree. Although she

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did not say so, the problem was that Radcliffe continued offering only an undergraduate program and by acting as a conduit for conferring doctorates on women who earned them at Harvard, it perpetuated women's second-class status and provided an excuse for Harvard's continuing discrimination against women.

William James frequently stated that Calkins had passed her Ph.D. examination more brilliantly than any other graduate student. Although Hugo Münsterberg was her dissertation director, Calkins later developed a philosophy of "personalistic absolutism" that was influenced by Josiah Royce. Calkins established a psychological laboratory and taught both philosophy and psychology at Wellesley College. She published many distinguished works in philosophy and psychology and was the first woman to be elected president of both the American Psychological Association (1905) and the American Philosophical Association (1918).

Calkins was a suffragist but did not identify herself as a feminist because she believed that marriage should take precedence over a scholarly career. She herself never married. Calkins does not seem to have theorized about women or supported women's issues in the four books and more than one hundred papers she authored. However, the title of her high school graduation essay was "The Apology Which Plato Should Have Written—A Vindication of the Character of Xantippe."