

Introduction

Fleeting glimpses of leisure activity from the nineteenth-century United States imply a developing culture attracted to spectacle and technological innovation, quizzical about the potential of government, eager to regulate boundaries for public speech, intrigued with celebrity, and conscious of the performances of socioeconomic class. For example, magic-lantern slides of apes, monkeys, and baboons were a great hit during the 1829–30 lecture season in Concord, Massachusetts. A decade later, in January 1840, a debating club in Euclid, Ohio, considered the question “Does the present form of United States government possess the elements of perpetual duration?” After the debate, 90 percent of the members voted in the negative. In Cincinnati in 1852, the Young Men’s Mercantile Library Association sponsored a lecture by Orestes Brownson, who denounced the popular Hungarian exile Louis Kossuth and was subsequently censured by the association for “travelling outside the proprieties of the lecture hall.” On 14 March 1855, Charlotte Forten heard Ralph Waldo Emerson lecture in Salem, Massachusetts. In her diary, she pronounced Emerson “a fine lecturer, and a very peculiar-looking man.” A year and a day later, in New Orleans, William Makepeace Thackeray lectured on the English king George IV. During the Civil War, lecture-goers of Providence, Rhode Island, heard Wendell Phillips’s “The War; or, The Times,” Henry Ward Beecher’s “The Beautiful,” and George Vandenhoff’s readings from *Don Quixote*. In the early 1870s, the celebrity lecturer Anna Dickinson wrote to her mother from Kansas City, Missouri, of the “ostentation” of the West, of the “wonderfully fine clothes” of lecture-goers and the “ivory rings” on the harnesses of their horses.¹

These incidents demonstrate a high degree of variability, yet owing to nineteenth-century rhetorical practice, they can be discussed as linked, if not continuous. Parts of a singular phenomenon, these and thousands of other ordinary moments were called by a single name: lyceum. The connections between these variable events, then, are both rhetorical and cultural. They are rhetorical first because they were associated through a public symbol, the word *lyceum*. This naming, as well as the regular enactment of ordinary activities under the rubric of the name, was symbolic action that constituted a self-representational public practice. The incidents performed as lyceum practice not only defined the parameters of what

lyceum activity could be but also gave participants a means of creating and maintaining a sense of themselves as individuals who were parts of groups, both local and national. Lyceum activity was thus a means of simultaneously making and expressing culture, understood as distinctive patterns in the behavior of human groups.² It is in the broad, neutral sense of symbolic action as culture-making practice that the word *rhetoric* is used in this book: here it is construed not as “art of the public speaker” or “empty words” but rather as “that art by which culture and community and character are constituted and transformed.”³ The legal scholar James Boyd White’s functional definition resonates with Kenneth Burke’s claims that it is through the use of symbols that human beings represent themselves as selves, band together in groups, and create and destroy boundaries among those groups.⁴ It is by rhetorical action that cultures are made. This book operates from the premise that the lyceum in the nineteenth-century United States was a discontinuous, culture-making rhetorical practice. In the particularity of ordinary moments, nineteenth-century Americans made sense of themselves and their world, and it is that process of “making sense”—shaping what would be validated as common beliefs and values—that this book attempts to explicate.⁵

The history of the changing lyceum in the nineteenth century illustrates a process of expansion, diffusion, and eventual commercialization. In the United States in the late 1820s, a politically and economically dominant culture—the white Protestant northeastern middle class—institutionalized the practice of public debating and public lecturing for education and moral uplift. The lyceum in the 1820s and 1830s was characterized by organized groups in cities and towns, particularly in the Northeast and the Old Northwest, or what is now called the Midwest.⁶ These groups were established to promote debate, to create a setting for individual and group study, and to provide a forum for members to lecture to one another about their own areas of expertise. The groups also supported public schools and the founding of libraries, and they offered leisure activity for young people, especially young men, that contemporaries identified as morally sound. Some lyceum organizations continued debating and other participatory activities into the late nineteenth century. In the 1840s and 1850s, however, the most visible activity of many lyceums was the sponsorship of public lectures, which were presented for institutional profit as well as public instruction and entertainment. By the late 1860s, arranging lyceum lectures had become a lucrative commercial enterprise, and the most highly sought

platform celebrities during the Reconstruction era earned large incomes from lecturing.

Lyceum activity thus began as part of a movement for public education and self-improvement and gradually metamorphosed into commercial entertainment. Yet the function of entertainment (as acceptable use of leisure) was present in the discourse of early lyceum promoters, and an emphasis on learning remained salient in the lyceum's commercial phase. An oscillation between the functions of education and entertainment typifies nineteenth-century discussions of the lyceum. Indeed, the shifts in meaning of the term *lyceum* itself provide a lens through which to view this interplay.

The Word Lyceum

During the nineteenth century, the denotative and connotative meanings of the term *lyceum* changed as a result of common usage and public behavior. The term in the 1820s illustrated the classical interests of early promoters. Through use, it became a word to denote a widespread social practice, a specific local association, a building constructed for the use of such an association, and the programs and performances sponsored by such a group. As the explicitly educational emphases waned in the 1840s and 1850s, *lyceum* was paired, attributively, with terms like *amusement* or *entertainment*. Despite the changes, *lyceum*, as historian Carl Bode observed, "continued to stand, grandly if a little vaguely, for learning."⁷

To advocates of mutual-education societies in the 1820s and 1830s, the correlation between *lyceum* and learning was anything but vague. Early promotional materials present the lyceum as a return to the much-admired splendors of ancient Greece and also a herald of a new, broad-based democracy in the nineteenth-century United States. Athens was to be recreated in the New World, only better. In 1832 Josiah Holbrook, the lyceum's major promoter, explicitly identified the U.S. lyceum with the Lyceum in Athens, the garden with covered walkways adjacent to the temple of Apollo Lyceus where Aristotle taught his pupils in the fourth century B.C.E.⁸ The choice of *lyceum*, a Latin word derived from a Greek epithet for the god of the sun, emphasizes the classical training of the U.S. lyceum's college-educated advocates. Holbrook, for example, was a graduate of Yale.⁹ In addition, the term *lyceum* was associated with organizations that promoted the natural sciences, such as the eighteenth-century Lycée (later the Athénée) in Paris and the early nineteenth-century Lyceum of Natural