



Vassar Encyclopedia

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Sophomore Trig Ceremonies

The Sophomore Trig Ceremonies represent a tradition apparently unique to Vassar. After the first semester, to celebrate their completion of the rigorous and detested Trigonometry course, a committee selected by the sophomores would write and perform an original drama to initiate the freshmen class into the study. The earliest ceremonies, begun in February or early March in 1871, focused more on speeches than on dramatics. As part of the event, both sophomores and the mathematics professors would give warnings of hardships to come, but also offer advice and wish the first-years good luck. The freshmen would respond in their own speech, declaring their determination to succeed in the imminent ordeal.

While there were never official guidelines for how the Trig Ceremonies should be held, commonalities among the dramas emerged over time. The plays were often parodies of well-known folktales or musicals and would include songs throughout or at the end. The productions also featured numerous references to trigonometry and the class years involved, especially represented in the naming of the characters. The main character in the 1881 ceremony was woman named “Sophie More”, and 1883 was very similar, with “Sophie M. Ore” in the leading role. Sometimes characters were named simply as class years, or other times with a little more creativity, like the 1886 characters “Ayty Ayt” (88) and the “Ayty Nines.” The villains in the performances were almost always representative of trigonometry, like 1878’s King Trig in a parody of Hamlet, or Queen Trig in 1889.

Trig Ceremonies were not complete without allusions to and jokes about Vassar, and students were pleased to hear references to college life within the drama. Elma G. Martin wrote in her diary in 1892 that the Trig Ceremony was “full of ‘hits’ and ‘grinds’ on Faculty and college. It was very good.” Similarly, the *Vassar Miscellany* review of the 1873 performance commented that it was “all bright and original, abounding in happy hits, and clever local allusions.”

Sophomores preparing and performing the Trig Ceremonies went to great lengths to hide their plans, in order to avoid censorship by faculty and also to keep their fellow students in suspense. Rumors of what was to occur dominated conversations in the days and weeks preceding the performances. Juniors and Seniors were often invited to witness the final dress rehearsal, yet they refused to give anything away. To further conceal their schemes, on some occasions the committee wouldn’t release the time and location of the Ceremony until the day of the event.

The lack of details about some Trig Ceremonies makes it difficult to piece together what occurred in productions like the class of 1886’s, where the traditional play was replaced by something the *Vassar Miscellany* called “new and enjoyable,” an exhibition of “wax-works.” The 1887 Trig Ceremony is the setting of one of the only surviving pictures of the Trig Ceremonies. An alarming group of five masked people with trigonometry elements on to their clothing, hold hands and circle around two figures on the ground who appear to be dead. They are Adam and Eve, who are tempted to eat the apple of Trig in the Garden of Eden.

The March edition of the *Miscellany* reported that “[Adam and Eve’s] death is rejoiced over by the mathematical imps, who join in a wild dance around the prostrate forms of ‘89 and ‘90. We regret that we are unable to go more into details of the play. . . .The stage was remarkably pretty, the singing excellent, while the acting has seldom been surpassed on the Vassar stage.” Mary Poppenheim’88, the student chosen to play Eve, wrote home to her family, “when the performance takes place I won’t be able to tell you anything about them.

A common theme in Trig Ceremonies, violence reflected the the sophomores’ feigned loathing of trigonometry. At the first Trig Ceremony, held in 1871, Trigonometry was put on trial. “Month after month,” claimed the opening text, “did this devoted class endure with ever increasing agony, tortures more intense than could have been expected from the perusal of any college catalogue, or the combined ingenuity of the most diabolically skilled mathematicians.” When the verdict is read, Trig is found guilty “of despotic, tyrannical, and criminal exercise of power.” The class of 1873’s retribution finally comes as Trig is burned upon a pyre. As chronicled in the 1881 *Vassar College Song Book*, the play closes with the sophomores singing:

“Sheriff, pile the faggots high,

And heap the branches higher.

Let the cinders reach the sky

From the roaring fire.

For our Trig, is burning here,

And his leaves do disappear,

Fast as in the closing year,

In the roaring fire.”

Classes that chose to limit violence and treat Trig with more kindness were often the source of ridicule. After the class of 1874 placed a “crown of flowers” upon Trig’s head during their ceremony, the class of 1875 mocked them in their ceremony the next year:

“74 had been [Trig’s] slave.

To fealty she was tied,

And so meekly thought his power

Could never be defied.

Burning wasn’t the only way that Trig met a gruesome end. The class of 1875’s rendition depicts the life of Julius Caesar, but “with, of course, some slight improvements.” It begins with Caesar’s boastful speech, which the *Miscellany* says “might have struck awe to most enterprising and faithful hearts.” Caesar is ultimately killed when he is viciously stabbed with “his own white chalk.” Just as did the 1871 class, the class of 1875 celebrates the death of Trig by joyfully singing:

“Alas for Trigonometry!

For gallant Trig, is dead;

His throne of power is empty now,

He fills a grave instead.”

The class of 1883 arguably wins the award for the most outrageous and violent Trig Ceremony. The play, entitled “Trigonometric Bluebeard,” is the story of Sophie M. Ore who marries “Trigono Metry,” also known as Bluebeard. Bluebeard’s previous six wives have all mysteriously disappeared, but Sophie hopes she will be the lucky seventh and have a successful marriage. Bluebeard gives his wife the keys to every room in the mansion, but forbids her to enter one specific room. When Sophie’s curiosity eventually compels her to enter the room, she is struck by a gory sight. The dismembered heads of the previous six wives are arranged upon the wall, and they begin to serenade Sophie:

“We are his wives you do see,

Fulay, fulay

And we are dead as dead can be

Fulay, fulay;

And with a log he did us kill,

And cruelly our blood did spill,

While we all opened our eyes and cried

Oh! Oh! Oh!”

Some classes desired to hold other types of events for their Trig Ceremonies, but still sought to kill Trig. At the 1882 ceremony, Trig’s remains were cremated, and a dance with plane and spherical refreshments followed. As a comical flourish, each guest was presented with an urn of Trig’s ashes as a party favor.

The scope of the violence portrayed by the female college students in the ceremonies was probably looked down upon by Lady Principal, but the secrecy that was maintained made it all the more difficult for the ritual to be regulated. For the students, however, the Trig Ceremonies consistently created intense excitement on campus for both freshmen and sophomores, and turnout was early and high. The *Miscellany* said that “the Freshmen were there to a woman” at the 1873 Ceremony, and the journal proclaimed in 1887 that “there is nothing that is anticipated with more pleasure than the yearly Trig ceremonies.” By 1894, the fervor had spread to all four class years, as the whole college filled the hall. While waiting, the “upper classes recalled their respective T.C.’s, while the Freshman, all in white, made every effort to restrain their excitement.”

The Ceremonies were valuable and time-intensive experiences for the students involved in them as well. The committee was typically assembled in January, and the students committed significant time the next two months in order to create the most ambitious, brazen, and entertaining spectacles. In 1887, the *Miscellany* noted “Without doubt there is nothing harder to prepare than these same ceremonies.” Beyond the elaborate dramas, the committee’s effort showed in the small touches: the sets, decorations and themed programs. Examples of intricate programs include a “dainty little black coffin” in 1878, a lawyer’s manuscript in 1879, and a key-shaped program for “Trigonometric Bluebeard” in 1871.

Another feature of some Trig Ceremonies were the frequent allusions to sex and marriage. When Trig is put on trial at the first Ceremony, the class of 1873 seeks vengeance, saying that no one will ever be able to forget “the agonies caused by Trig’s May-poles.” As the *Miscellany* details, upon witnessing this horrific singing head scene in the ‘81 Ceremony (Trigonometric Bluebeard), “the timid Freshman is made to feel a realizing sense of the horrors of a union with Trig.” Finally, the 1895 Trig Ceremony’s plot was centered around witches, who were often accused of having sex with the devil, or in this case, Trig.

As time progressed, freshmen entered the college with more prior experience in mathematics, and were thus qualified to start the study of trigonometry earlier in their college careers than were the first Vassar students. In 1886, trigonometry became a two-semester course, beginning in the spring of the first year and ending in the fall of sophomore year. In 1896, the study was officially catalogued as a spring semester freshmen course. Combined with growing concerns from the Vassar faculty that the extensive preparations were distracting students from their studies, it appeared the tradition of the Trig Ceremonies was coming to an end.

The sophomores in 1895 wrote their drama, “Ye Laste Dayes of Vassalem Wytchcraft,” with the understanding that it would be the final ceremony. Not much is known about the performance, although it appears to be just as audacious as its predecessors. In a parody of the Salem Witch Trials, the play concluded with the burning of the accused witch “Goodie Trig” at the stake.

The end of the Trig Ceremonies may have also represented a shift in the social culture at Vassar. The *Miscellany*’s 50th Anniversary Edition remarked that “After [1895], a change in the number and kind of parties and celebrations is clearly marked. They are much less frequent but more elaborately and carefully planned.”

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