The History of Her Heart: Kentucky Author Rosa Praigg Dickerson

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by Lynn Niedermeier

When Rosa Praigg Dickerson died in 1902 at her home in the Plano community of Warren County, the Bowling Green Times-Journal eulogized her as a good Christian woman, a doctor’s wife, the mother of five daughters and, more uniquely, as a “writer of marked ability.” While the full record of Dickerson’s published work will never be known, at a minimum it comprised twenty-nine poems and another twenty-nine sketches and stories, including at least eight in one of the most popular periodicals of the 19th century, Godey’s Lady’s Book and Magazine.

That Dickerson is unknown today is hardly surprising, for the literary endeavors of women whose bylines appeared in Victorian-era mass-market magazines have long brought condescension, if not outright scorn. Dismissal of their work—which typically involved earnest musings on nature, mortality, beauty, love and loss—as unbearably sentimental and moralistic dates from their own time, when Nathaniel Hawthorne famously derided them as that “d[amne]d mob of scribbling women” whose “trash” monopolized both the public’s attention and its purse.

In 1930, magazine historian Frank Luther Mott offered an example of the sentimentality that “infected” the pages of Godey’s Lady’s Book. He cited a story in its December, 1868 issue by one Violette Woods called “The Frozen Heart,” in which the heroine, despite having her capacity for love extinguished by an untrue suitor, marries and bravely devotes herself to another man in the single year of life she has left. Although Mott made clear that he had selected this tale entirely at random, his roll of the dice was especially unlucky, for “Violette Woods” was, in fact, Rosa Praigg Dickerson.

Perhaps, through Dickerson’s own story, we can see Violette Woods in a kinder light. Rosa Belle Praigg was born in Louisville on July 17, 1843, the second of five children of John G. and Arabella Praigg. Rosa’s father appears to have died in her youth, because by 1859 Arabella was living with the children in Perryville, Kentucky. There, in common with many sixteen-year-olds, Rosa seems to have cultivated both a poor self-image—she always thought she was ugly—and a desire to write. She found a model in the 6th century B.C. Greek poet Sappho—petite, dark, lacking in beauty, but described by a colleague as “pure” and “violet-haired.” Sappho was also at the forefront of a new style of poetry, one that put aside epic verses about gods and heroes and focused on lyrical expressions of individual emotion.

In August 1859, an author named only as “Violet” made her debut in Godey’s Lady’s Book with a story called “Principle.” It told of the angelic Alice Lee, who is engaged to Arthur Leslie but who sends him away in anguish upon learning that he does not believe in God. After Alice marries another man and has a child, Arthur reappears, now converted by the memory of her piety but, alas, mortally ill. When he dies and leaves his fortune to her daughter, Alice

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1 Unidentified newspaper clipping, [Times-Journal (Bowling Green, Ky.), 30 July 1902], Rosa Praigg Dickerson Collection (MSS 327), Kentucky Library & Museum (hereinafter Dickerson Collection).
3 Family information, Dickerson Collection; Mrs. Frank P. Moore, “Early Bowling Green Writer Discovered,” Dickerson Collection. Rosa’s age as recorded in the 1850 and 1860 census would place her birth in 1839 or 1840, but later census data, and that supplied by her descendants, insists on 1843.
serenely resumes her exemplary life without regret that she once sacrificed love on the altar of principle. With her fifteen-dollar payment from *Godey’s*, Rosa Praigg is said to have purchased the first kerosene oil lamp to glow in a window of Perryville.4

Three years later, as valedictorian of her graduating class at Perryville’s Harmonia College, Rosa was featured prominently in a program of music and oration that accompanied the conferring of degrees. Perhaps it was the name of the proceedings—the “Sapphonian Exhibition”—or the high praise the author now known as “Violet Woods” had attracted from editors at the *Louisville Journal* and the *Kentucky Military Institute Magazine* that provided Rosa with the theme for her graduating essay. In an unrestrained hymn to the nobility of the inner life that doubled as a defense of her literary technique, she declared that, for true knowledge and understanding, one must look to the “history of the human heart” and its “record of deeds of moral courage and moral cowardice, compared with which the heroism and the turpitude that we read of in books, sinks into utter nothingness.”5

In 1867, two years after she arrived in Bowling Green to teach school at Reverend Thomas H. Storts’ Baptist academy (later known as the Green River Female Seminary), Rosa married Dr. William H. Dickerson, a veteran of the Confederate medical corps and the son of a prominent pastor. By this time, she had earned an affectionate following for prose and poetry that appeared in newspapers and periodicals under both “Violet Woods” and “Violette Woods.”6 But Rosa’s new domestic obligations did not foreclose her study of “heart history.” A few months before the birth of her first child, *Godey’s Lady’s Book* published “Nettie’s Sacrifice,” a tangled tale in which the young woman of the title sends her fiancé back to his estranged first love after learning that the girl had thrown doubt upon her own reputation in order to protect the secrets of a friend.7

By the 1880s, Violet Woods no longer secluded herself behind her pen name, publishing poetry and fiction as “Mrs. Rosa B. Dickerson” in two Bowling Green newspapers, the *Democrat* and the *Gazette*. Rosa also tried her hand at other literary forms. In an unpublished memoir based on her family’s experiences during the Battle of Perryville in October 1862, she recalled their bewildered flight from the massing Union and Confederate troops. Granted shelter in the home of an old woman in the nearby hills, they find comfort and humility when her aged slave leads them in prayer. Perhaps under the influence of another local author, Eliza Calvert Hall, Rosa even attempted a story in rural dialect. “A Mast-Meetin’ in Kentucky” told of the dispute between two hayseeds over a proposed turnpike through their county, and their comical attempts to engineer a democratic resolution.8

For the most part, however, Rosa remained true to her belief that the best stories lay in the heart. She chronicled her (generally young and female) protagonists’ roiling but virtuous emotions in the face of what might be described as soap opera fare—the appearance and

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4 Violet, “Principle,” *Godey’s Lady’s Book and Magazine*, August 1859, 126-31; Family information, Dickerson Collection.
5 George D. Prentice to Violet, 7 January 1860; J. S. Standley to Violet Woods, 23 January 1860; Rosa Praigg, “Unwritten History,” Dickerson Collection.
6 See, for example, the letter of praise “To Violet Woods,” by “Jalfrey,” and the poem “To Violette Woods,” Dickerson Collection.
8 Dickerson Collection.
departure of lovers, mistaken identities, deceptions, fatal accidents and illnesses, fortunes gained and lost—before introducing a final plot revelation that brought them to a higher understanding of themselves and others. But unlike the stars of daytime drama, her characters never seemed fated merely to lurch ahead to the next misadventure. If they were, to borrow historian Mott’s phrase, “often so pious and good that we hate them heartily,” it was only because they set such a clear example for the reader by grasping firmly the moral lesson to be learned from their experience.

Rosa Dickerson’s literary career ended when, just over a month after her daughter Mabel’s wedding, she died, possibly of tuberculosis, at age fifty-nine. She was buried at Mount Pleasant Cemetery near her home, and when her husband died ten years later her remains were moved to Bowling Green’s Fairview Cemetery to rest beside his. Like all good heart historians, Rosa had sighed as much over humans’ inescapable mortality as over the passion that animated their lives, but years before had concluded one of her stories with the main character’s resolution not to linger upon the unfathomable. “Let there be a white stone,” she declared, “marked with the name and date, and indicative of the hopes which slumber in dreamless silence beneath, reared over the early grave, but let oblivion attend the rest.” It could have been Rosa’s own modest epitaph for “Violet Woods.”

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10 Violet Woods, “Leaves From an Old Journal.”