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Putting On Her Man Pants

Social Reaction to Female Cross-Dressing and Gender Transgression in America 1850-1880

by
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Submitted on 4/30/2010 for Honors in History at Oberlin College

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Introduction

Between 1850 and 1880, Americans obsessed over cross-dressing women. Many women donned the breeches: ruined young daughters of respectable families, honest but poor girls looking for a living, and unseemly women who wished either to explore public places or prostitute themselves. This huge variation in station and intention of cross-dressing women allows an exploration of Victorian identity markers – not just gender, but also race, class, and respectability. Many of these young ladies were described as Romantic adventurers – they had heroic and beautiful, but often ultimately tragic, experiences. By studying the social reaction to these individuals, we discover that cross-dressing, paradoxically, was not always socially threatening. Instead the level of acceptance was related to the degree of conformity to both gender and other forms of social status markers.

Paul Johnson, in *A Shopkeeper's Millennium*, asserts that by the 1830's the Second Great Awakening, a massive religious and moral revival, had climaxed, setting off significant changes in American culture. Americans placed renewed emphasis on Christianity, sobriety and self-control. This new culture was in conflict with rowdy young men, apprentices who drank liquor on the job with their masters, and industries that worked on Sundays.¹ The Second Great Awakening also catalyzed feminism, abolitionism, and created a whole wave of utopian communities, including Oberlin. Though radical changes were mostly rejected by the middle class, more moderate reforms slowly worked on society.² These reforms transformed America to the advantage of the middle class by allowing them to hold moral superiority over the poor. Moreover, respectability was available to lower class families if they accepted the new moral laws which regulated away bawdy and unseemly behavior.³

By the 1850's, the rising interest in cross-dressing women came to maturity, with hundreds of

¹ Paul Johnson, *Shopkeepers Millennium* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978).

² Catherine Clinton, *The Other Civil War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1984), 80-81.

John D'Emillio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997).

³ For a more detailed discussion of the Second Great Awakening and how it reshaped American Society, see Paul Johnson, *Shopkeepers Millennium* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978).

newspaper articles about the phenomenon published between 1850 and the start of the Civil War. The first inklings of this obsession appeared in the 1830's, when the ideology of "separate spheres" was constructed during the Second Great Awakening.⁴ A central tenet of that ideology was that women were the moral, sexless angels of the home. Women became paragons of purity and morality, chaste by nature, with a duty to the home and an important place as mothers of citizens. Men, by contrast, were sorrowfully cast out into the public sphere, where they had to deal with immorality (drinking and prostitution), voting, holding a job, and making a living wage.⁵

Over the past twenty years historians have come to recognize that the separate spheres ideal failed to reflect the day-to-day life of most women in America, especially those who were not white and middle class. Many of these scholars have stepped away from the idea of separate spheres altogether, claiming that it impedes understanding of the full diversity of women's experiences in antebellum society.⁶ Nevertheless, some scholars continue to use the concept of separate spheres in their depictions of antebellum America. John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, in their overview of American sexuality, *Intimate Matters*, say of this period, "Women had neither the property and political rights, nor the freedom of movement enjoyed by white men ... an elaborate ideal of femininity emphasized innate sexual purity ... and stressed women's domestic and maternal roles. Women who did not achieve the ideal of purity were considered to have 'fallen' into a lower class."⁷

Regardless of the utility of the separate spheres model in imagining women's lives, the ideal existed, and was applied to understand and judge women's behaviors. Yet in spite of the spheres

4 Catherine Clinton, *The Other Civil War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1984), 42-43.

5 Lyde Sizer, *The Political Work of Northern Women Writers and the Civil War, 1850-1872* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 9.

Catherine Clinton, *The Other Civil War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1984), 43-49.

6 Catherine Kelly, *In The New England Fashion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

Linda Kerber, "Seperate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's place" In *Toward and Intellectual History of Women* ed. Linda Kerber, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 159-199.

Gary Kornblith and Carol Lasser, "More than Great White Men: A Century of Scholarship on American Social History" In *A Century of American historiography* ed. James Banner, Jr., (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2010), 11-21.

7 John D'Emillio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters* (Chicago; The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 57.

ideology, there were a few respectable ways for women to escape conventional expectations, including cross-dressing, which *could* be respectable, even for individuals from a low-class background under particular circumstances. Thus, while assertions of restricted options might have been true for most middle-class women, such claims evoke inaccurate images of powerless women trapped in a uniformly oppressive system of gender. Similarly, the belief that “tangled within separate sphere ideology were assumed ideologies of class and race”⁸ tends to conflate class and respectability, when in reality the relationship between the two factors was far more complex.

Respectability proves an especially difficult concept – it does not easily or visibly map on to modern society – yet it was deeply important to mid-nineteenth century American life. Fortunately, Richard Bushman has surveyed the development and implementation of refinement and respectability in America. Respectability derived initially from Europe, Bushman asserts, and an American longing to reproduce European society as the pinnacle of civilization. At the same time, European respectability, which was based largely on the twin systems of wealth and nobility, was at odds with young American Republicanism. As a way out of this conundrum, Americans offered respectability to all. If not everyone could afford to have servants, or slaves, wait on their every need, then they could at least afford a simple rug.⁹ While Bushman maps the spread of respectability in America in the first half of the 19th century, Johnson takes a closer look at how that change played out in Rochester, New York. He also finds that respectability was available to people of all classes, but in Rochester, it became shorthand for those who embraced the moral reforms of the Second Great Awakening, those who put away their rowdy drunkenness for sober capitalism.¹⁰ Though these books cover only antebellum society, ideas of refinement continued to be important throughout the period discussed here.

8 Lyde Sizer, *The Political Work of Northern Women Writers and the Civil War, 1850-1872* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 10.

9 Richard Bushman, *The Refinement of America* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, Inc, 1992).

10 Paul Johnson, *Shopkeepers Millennium* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978).

Many scholars have investigated Northern women who dressed as men during the Civil War. Most of this writing concerns the personal experience of these women, the day-to-day realities of camp-life or being a prisoner of war, as well as the reported reasons that most women had for cross-dressing.¹¹ This work is both important and difficult: it re-constructs our understanding of a group of people whose voices have rarely been heard and fully considered. However, few of these scholars consider why newspapers were so enamored of these stories. This paper seeks to deepen this field of research by analyzing journalistic accounts, not to look at the women who had this experience, but rather to explore social reactions to them, and what that reaction meant for American society.

Most works on women in the North during the Civil War ignore female soldiers' contributions when considering women's war effort and its effects on the Northern gender system. Lyde Sizer discusses how contemporaries understood the Civil War as an impetus for feminism, similar to World War II. However, Sizer warns that the war only catalyzed white, middle-class New Englanders.¹² Sizer argues that women's actions, exemplified by their writings, "demonstrated an ongoing and consistent effort to redefine in an outward motion the limits of women's sphere,"¹³ but that their actions also weakened gender solidarity across class lines.¹⁴ She also sees the war as opening space for the re-imagining of gender, but ultimately concludes, "The public social conventions of womanhood were not discernibly loosened in the decades that followed; in fact, the reverse may be true."¹⁵ Elizabeth Leonard concurs with this thesis. She notes that "Women's stories also suggest that the Civil War ... permitted a noticeable, if temporary, expansion of Victorian notions of what constituted 'appropriate' behavior, at

11 Richard Hall, *Women on the Civil War Battlefield* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006).

DeAnne Blanton and Lauren Cook, *They Fought Like Demons* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002).

12 Lyde Sizer, *The Political Work of Northern Women Writers and the Civil War, 1850-1872* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 2-3.

13 *Ibid.*, 15.

14 *Ibid.*, 8.

15 *Ibid.*, 3, 179.

least for Northern white women of the middle class.”¹⁶ Yet Leonard, too, portrays a restriction of gender roles after the war, though she argues that the war permanently expanded middle class women's sphere.¹⁷

Catherine Clinton also provides evidence for the growth then shrinkage of women's sphere during the Civil War. She details how nearly 500 women got white-collar government jobs over the course of the war, only to be forced to give them up “several years after harmonious integration.”¹⁸ Clinton relates, “Wartime modernization propelled women into greater prominence and afforded access to jobs which they were denied in peacetime. These dazzling gains were not without a price.”¹⁹ The price was backlash. Backlash against feminism not only caused women to lose their jobs, but also to be excluded from the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, an act which splintered the women's rights community.²⁰ Expanding these historic narratives about the North, I will show that cross-dressing female provide important and useful evidence for the changing shape of gender during the Civil War.

Work on women in the South during the Civil War has been similarly incomplete. Much of it describes Southern white women as incapable or unwilling to break through the especially restrictive gender norms of Southern society, bound as they were by the need to totally oppress African Americans, and create white solidarity. Clinton claims that Southern gender restrictions were stricter than Northern ones due to the need for strong white male identity and plantation patriarchy.²¹ She also asserts that Southern women organized less than their Northern counterparts during the war because of greater cultural concern about women outside of the home.²² According to Clinton, this does not mean that

16 Elizabeth Leonard, “Mary Walker, Mary Surratt, And Some Thoughts on Gender in the Civil War” in *Battle Scars*, ed. Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 105.

17 Elizabeth Leonard, “Mary Walker, Mary Surratt, And Some Thoughts on Gender in the Civil War” in *Battle Scars*, ed. Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 110.

18 Catherine Clinton, *The Other Civil War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1984), 90.

19 *Ibid.*, 93.

20 *Ibid.*, 93-95.

21 *Ibid.*, 38-9.

22 *Ibid.*, 82.

Southern women were less invested in the war. She asserts that “patriotism demanded women's total compliance with the war machine.” According to her thesis, this total compliance took the form of enforcing male participation in the war. Women were to refuse to love or support any man who showed ambivalence towards the bloody conflict. The South's enthusiasm for individual patriotism contrasted with Northern charitable war organizations, because Southern women, she argues, lacked the infrastructure that Northern women built when they participated in the moral reforms of the 1830's-1850's. This accounts, in Clinton's work, for the comparative lack of organized Southern women's aid societies.²³

Drew Faust outlines three major axes of identity for Southerners – race, gender, and class. At first, Faust agrees with Clinton, that the Civil War began by strengthening “traditional divisions between masculine and feminine by defining war as the glorious and exclusive domain of men.” But, unlike Clinton, Faust asserts that the war “soon produced widespread uncertainty about gender categories and identities.”²⁴ With the passing of the Civil War, Faust notes that a major challenge was posed to “the very categories that had defined and embodied ... dominance.” She finds that Southern women “invented new selves designed in large measure to resist change, to fashion the new out of as much of the old as could survive in the altered postwar world.”²⁵ Faust sees a South in which women's sphere was expanded, whether or not the women willed it. “Southern women found it difficult any longer to celebrate helplessness ... female dependence had proved far too costly and too painful.” Though Southern women found themselves unable to return to an antebellum innocence, Faust demonstrates how women fought to maintain their rights: “a mistrust of men fueled many of these women's zeal” for women's rights in the South after the war.²⁶

23 Catherine Clinton, *Tara Revisited* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1995), 57-60, 80.

24 Drew Faust, *Mothers of Invention* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 6.

25 *Ibid.*, 4-8.

26 *Ibid.*, 250-251, 253.

LeeAnn Whites recounts how the demands of the Civil War “went right to the core of the antebellum gender quid pro quo between white men and women, in which men had promised to 'protect' and women had agreed to 'obey.’”²⁷ Whites agrees with Clinton that the war strengthened gender distinctions, that Confederate women identified with and supported their patriotic men, and that “the initial outbreak of war served to intensify gender role difference, as confederate men set forth to fight and to aggressively defend their 'manhood', while confederate women redoubled their commitment to support.” However, Whites sees women as gaining power over the course of the war, at first with strengthened female kin relations, then with a call for the masculinization of women for wartime mobilization, with the need for women to fill in the traditional men's roles on the plantations and factories, and eventually with women as “the 'makers' of their men,” that is, controllers of male identity and validity. Whites sees Southern women as building infrastructure similar to that of the North, gaining social ground over the course of the war.²⁸

²⁷ Lee Ann Whites, *The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 4-5.

²⁸ Lee Ann Whites, *The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 11-13.

On the other side of the spectrum is *She Rebels on the Supply Line*. Kristen Streater argues that a Southern woman's domesticity was her patriotism, and that a rebel knitting grey socks in a Union prison was an act of political protest. Such actions tested the boundary of the public/private divide, and were the closest women came to challenging gender. Essentially, knitting socks was the best challenge the circumscribed woman could manage.²⁹ Anne Rubin recounts, "During the war, women had expanded their sphere of sanctioned activity from the privacy of the household to the public world of nursing, charity, and work. Women took part in political discussions, urged men to enlist and fight, and resisted the Yankee invaders, all while publicly maintaining a posture of ladylike femininity." After the war, though, men attempted to re-form their damaged masculinity by asserting control over women. While Rubin sees space for active and patriotic femininity, Streater believes that women's patriotism remained within previous realms of respectability.³⁰

Few authors, however, attempt to speak in any length about Southern cross-dressing soldiers. In *Tara Revisited*, Clinton celebrates the expansion of the Southern woman's sphere, and writes, briefly, about women who fought in the Civil War. However, she claims that there is too little evidence for the topic, and borrows from examples both North and South to conclude that these Southern women were considered "gender traitors, impermissible patriots."³¹ This paper disputes Clinton's conclusions. During the war, the South's gender system appeared more liberal than the North's, allowing both for patriotic cross-dressing women, and for openly female warriors. This study shows that Southern women could participate actively and patriotically in the Civil War without giving up their claim on womanhood.

War is always traumatic to gender systems. In America, the Civil War damaged Northern

29 Kristen Streater, "She-Rebels" on the supply line" in *Occupied Women*, ed. LeeAnn Whites and Alecia Long, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press), 88-92.

30 Anne Rubin, "Politics and Petticoats in the same pod" in *Battle Scars*, ed. Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 169-170.

31 Catherine Clinton, *Tara Revisited* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1995), 98-100.

conceptions of gender by allowing women a chance to conceptualize themselves as deeply important to and invested in the nation. Defeat devastated Southern identity, which was heavily invested in independence and patriotism. As both North and South struggled to find a new understanding of gender, newspapers continued both to construct new tropes about cross-dressing women, and to digest those stories produced during the war, all the the backdrop of massive national change.³²

The era directly after the Civil War was a time of deep social unrest. The frontier was both closing and being actively constructed as a place of national nostalgia and of transgression. Sexuality, gender, and race were all thrown into disarray by the war, and society scrambled to re-establish order as it careened into modernity. Lisa Duggan traces social uncertainty about race and sexuality along with attempts to contain them – the lynching narrative and the conflation of non-normative sexuality (lesbianism) and violent insanity. In *Sapphic Slashers*, she asserts that the medicalization of lesbianism “worked to depoliticize, trivialize, and marginalize the aspirations of women for political equality, economic autonomy, and alternative domesticities.” Her story is one of a society in which race, gender, and sexuality were all being actively renegotiated. Prosperous white men, in her telling, sought to control race through lynchings, and gender and sexual ambiguity in lesbians through the “lesbian love murder narrative.”³³

According to Pablo Mitchell, similar processes were happening with race, non-normative sexuality, and the rise of medicine in the American West, specifically in New Mexico. He recounts how modernity played out there: “At the forefront were changing gender roles and transforming relationships between men and women ... [which] ... led to new 'modern' forms of appropriate

32 Lyde Sizer, *The Political Work of Northern Women Writers and the Civil War, 1850-1872* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

Lee Ann Whites, *The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995).

Kristen Streater, “She-Rebels” on the supply line” in *Occupied Women*, ed. LeeAnn Whites and Alecia Long, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press).

Catherine Clinton, *The Other Civil War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1984).

33 Lisa Duggan, *Sapphic Slashers* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 2-3.

femininity and masculinity.” Mitchell also traces the emergence of white collar professionalism, and the related rise of medical science. These changes led to the desire to medically and scientifically classify and catalog racial and sexual differences. The same processes were then used to justify the assertion of racial inferiority and sexual perversion.³⁴ Even as America was becoming theoretically more equitable, worries about gender-bending became more pronounced. A language of medicine was used to attempt to subdue those women who were seen as transgressive. Where previously arguments framed transgressive people as immoral, they were now framed as psychologically inferior, stupid, or insane. All of these changes too found expression in the reactions to cross-dressing women, who became somewhat of a litmus test for social acceptability. By the 1880's, women who lived together were increasingly charged with insanity; other cross-dressers were trivialized to non-importance.

This paper relies almost exclusively on a close reading of newspaper articles as a source to explore American gender in various times and places through social reaction to cross-dressing.³⁵ The first chapter outlines gender in antebellum America, with a strong focus on the North. In doing so it explores three main narratives: first, the narrative about bloomer attire and women's rights, next, acceptable cross-dressing in America, finally, inappropriate cross-dressing. By looking at these narratives together, the paper accesses both nineteenth century understanding of gender, and a more complete understanding of American identity. Chapter two focuses on cross-dressing soldiers in the North during the Civil War. It examines the rhetoric of Romanticism and how that rhetoric played into changing gender expectations during the war. Chapter three will again studies cross-dressing in the war, but this time in the South. Here the paper focuses on a language of patriotism instead of Romanticism. These chapters evaluate differences between the North and South in an attempt to understand the differences

³⁴ Pablo Mitchell, *Coyote Nation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 3-5.

³⁵ Searches for this material were done between September and December of 2009 on multiple online newspaper databases, primarily Gale and Proquest historical newspaper databases (New York Times and American Periodicals Series). Other resources are noted as they were used. The most successful search term varied by period, but generally “Male Attire” and “Romantic Female” were the best, turning up over half relevant results.

in rhetoric. Chapter four, the final chapter, examines gender transgression in the post-war landscape. It studies the different expectations about cross-dressing in the North, South, and West, and the intersection of identities that played into the narratives constructed after the war. This final chapter also returns to bloomerism, and more fully explores the connection between changes in gender expectations and changes in the social acceptability of cross-dressing.

The 1850's: A Separate Sphere "She Has Always worn Male Attire"¹

America's concern with cross-dressing began around 1830. A sampling of newspaper articles shows a 131% increase in newspaper articles about crossdressing women from 1825 to 1830. By 1850, the number had doubled again – a 337% total increase from 1825.² After 1850, overall interest, as indicated by prevalence of newspaper articles, remained relatively steady for the rest of the century. America's obsession with cross-dressing was also writ large in the contents of these articles. One tells of "A young man [who] was recently arrested... being thought a girl in male attire."³ Arresting men on the suspicion of being women dressed as men is hardly the act of a disinterested society. However, the reactions to cross-dressing women varied widely. Beginning the study in 1850 reveals not only what Americans thought about these women at mid-century, but provides contrast for the changes in American society caused by the Civil War.

1 "California in 1852," San Francisco *The Pioneer*, Aug 1855, in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

2 Sample taken by searching for "Male attire," "Female Soldier," and "Disguised as a man" on Proquest "American Series Periodical" and "New York Times" Databases. Percentage of relevant articles remained fairly constant around 66% throughout the search.

3 "Editorial Inkdrops" Boston *The Flag of our Union*, Dec 27, 1856, in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

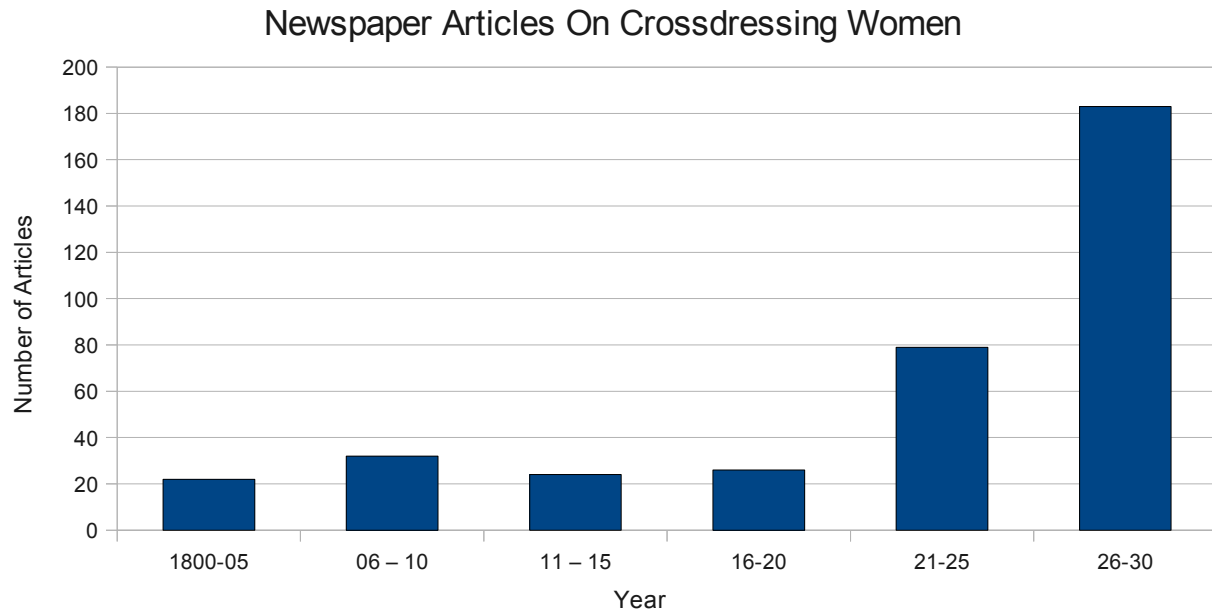


Chart 1

The rise of interest in cross-dressing women corresponded to other effects from the Second Great Awakening. The Second Great Awakening redefined respectability. It created standards for manly self-control and entrenched the separate spheres in American gender. The Second Great Awakening placed women in a new morally superior space. It became a woman's ideal and theoretical, if not actual, goal to create a safe, moral space in which to raise children and to ensure the religious well-being of her family. A respectable middle class woman should not have a job, or participate in politics, because those things were in the public sphere and a public woman was a prostitute. This understanding of gender was fairly well entrenched in society by the 1850's. American power systems, including gender, were relatively stable at this time, especially compared to the following decades. Some respectable women began to leverage their status as the moral guardians of the home and the nation to leave the private sphere. They started campaigns for increased American morality, including temperance, an end to prostitution. Sub-sets of these reform movements spawned utopian experiments and radical egalitarianism in both abolitionism and women's rights. Catherine Clinton notes that before the Civil War, there was little support, either among men or women, for early feminism. "Many middle-class

women prized their exalted role as mothers and homemakers, with few ambitions beyond the household.”⁴ However unpopular women's rights and abolitionist reforms were, they did, along with other more gentle reforms, begin to change American society.

These reforms and changes to American society were the impetus for certain types of transgression. Some ladies who demanded women's rights combined their desire for greater freedom and greater health and rejected the constricting and oppressive popular costume of the day. They replaced it with what they termed reform dress, widely known as the bloomer costume. The associated movement was sometimes termed bloomerism. Bloomerism was closely related to more explicit cross-dressing in the 1850's. Dress reformers (also known as bloomers) were often accused of wearing male attire, or appropriating male privileges, and were widely regarded as inappropriately masculine. For this reason, despite the fact that they did not technically cross-dress, they provide important insight into the border between genders.⁵

The bloomer costume was first adopted by women's rights campaigners in the early 1850's. Although it had been used by other groups, such as the water-cure reform movement and the Oneidan utopian experiment, it had attracted little national attention up to that point. By the time it had been adopted, there was longstanding criticism of women's dress as damaging to health, safety, and economy.⁶ At first dress reform was greeted with reserved endorsement. The *Syracuse Standard* printed a short, approving article: “Several ladies appeared in the streets yesterday with dresses of a very *laconic* pattern, and pantaloons *a la Turk*. The new style looks decidedly tidy and neat, and imparts to the wearer quite a sprightly and youthful appearance.” The *Home Journal* was more reserved in its editorial comment. After reporting the approval of other papers, it reprinted a piece about Spartan women: “So that our

4 Paul Johnson, *Shopkeepers Millennium* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978).

Bruce Dorsey, *Reforming Men and Women* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).

Catherine Clinton, *The Other Civil War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1984), 80.

5 Amy Kesselman, “The Freedom Suit: Feminism and Dress Reform in the United States, 1848-1875” *Gender and Society* (December 1991): 495-510.

6 *Ibid.*, 496.

American women may be able to see the tendency and results of more masculine education, and so know better how to modify the reform now progressing.”⁷ Within a year or two of the adoption of the bloomer costume by women's rights reformers, however, it was soundly denounced as “male attire” and completely inappropriate for respectable women who wished to get husbands and live normal lives, rather than end up as radical old maids.⁸

This opinion was expressed in many ways. Preachers railed against the danger of reversing “the natural relation of the sexes.”⁹ Newspapers printed stories about women being harassed by the police and crowds because of their dress, and editorials, cartoons, and works of fiction lampooned these women. But for all this, as many pointed out, the dress was not really all that radical. As image 1 illustrates, it consisted of a relaxed and modest short dress, ending about the knees, with loose, baggy trousers – sometimes called harem pants – underneath.¹⁰

7 “Ladies in Trousers,” New York *Home Journal* May 3, 1851 in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

8 Amy Kesselman, “The Freedom Suit: Feminism and Dress Reform in the United States, 1848-1875” *Gender and Society* (December 1991): 500.

9 “Act V – The chief sins of the people: A sermon delivered at the Melodeon, Boston, on Fast Day, April 10, 1851. By Rev. Theodore Parker. Boston: Benjamin H. Greene. 1851.” Boston *Brownson's Quarterly Review*, July 1, 1851, in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

10 “Bloomer” in Wikipedia <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Bloomer.gif>> (2/8/2010).



Image 1

In the picture, there can be little doubt of the subject's femininity. The large trousers accentuate small feet, and the large sleeves do the same for her hands. However, this was hardly how most other people saw these women, or their dress. Some accepted that this dress was feminine but warned that bloomers would still be perceived as ugly and inelegant, and so be passed over by men, in favor of their more elegantly dressed comrades.¹¹ Most, however, simply overly masculinized the bloomers. Image 2 shows a bloomer along with other marginalized caricatures, as they petition presidential candidate John Frémont to grant their interests. An overly foppish African American asks for abolitionism, a Catholic calls for recognition of Papal power in America, a harpy-like woman promotes freelove (and invites Frémont to an orgy), a drunkard asks for redivision of property, a bloomer demands “the recognition of Woman as the equal of man, with a right to Vote and hold Office,” and a Transcendentalist seeks to

¹¹ Carol Mattingly, *Appropriate[ing] Dress* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), 80.

make eating meat a capital crime. This image belittles women's rights demands, and masculinizes the character making them. Despite her diminutive height, she is markedly mannish. Her trousers are straight, and her hair short. She holds a riding crop, indicating that she claims the men's sport of riding. She also smokes a cigar, another masculine habit. Her stance is aggressive, and she makes demands, none of which are appropriate behavior for a respectable woman at the time.¹²



Image 2

Bloomerism met with similar disapproval from the *New York Observer and Chronicle*, which observed that women's rights advocates were complaining, loudly, that they were being harassed in the streets by idle boys and men because of their dress. The newspaper observed dryly, "The Bloomer women say in their card that they are ready to die for their principles, and if so they will surely be able to stand a few hisses when they make themselves ridiculous."¹³ Later the content became more obviously aggressive and disapproving towards bloomers. One article, entitled "Curing a Bloomer," told the tale of

¹² "The Great Republican Reform Party" in Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:1856-Republican-party-Fremont-isms-caricature.jpg> (2/8/2010).

¹³ "New Route to Albany" *New York Observer and Chronicle*, Feb 12, 1852 in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

a young man, Jack, and woman, Melinda, who become engaged, and then spent quite a bit of time apart from one another. The young man returned to claim his love, only to be informed, much to his horror, that she “had been infected with the Bloomer mania, and nothing could cure her of her ridiculous determination to wear pantaloons, and adopt the habits of the ruder sex.” He discovered that she had started to ride horses and was an expert marksman. He commented that such a thing never happen in civilized, respectable, European countries – except during the carnival season. He then compared bloomers to vaudeville actresses, “street singers” and “tight-rope dancers” - all public occupations, with the taint of prostitution upon them. Jack took the situation to an absurd extreme, though, when he pretended that he believed Melinda was a man, and her cousin was his beloved. In doing so Jack goaded Melinda into jealousy, and caused her to reject bloomerism. She burnt all her bloomer clothes, and returned to appropriate femininity. The story ended around the dinner table – her father rejoiced in having his daughter returned to him. “Hurrah!" shouted old winkle. I see through it all. Jack's cured you, when everybody else had tried and failed.' 'Will you forgive me?' asked Jack. 'There's my hand,' said Melinda, frankly. 'I forgive you, and thank you too! The lesson was a sharp one, but I needed it to cure me of my folly.'"¹⁴ In this piece, bloomerism was constructed as a social disease which leached the modesty and morality of women, and weakened America in the eyes of the older and more mature Europe. The women who participated in this “mania” were confused or foolish, and needed to be shown the error of their ways so that they could rediscover the satisfaction they could only feel by being appropriately feminine.

All this, however, stirs up a burning question: if bloomers were not wearing true male attire, if social opinion had long been against “Parisian fashion,” if newspapers had at first accepted and encouraged this change of dress, then why were bloomers so ridiculed and attacked within a year of the

¹⁴ “Curing a Bloomer” Boston *Flag of our union*, Oct 28, 1854 in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

reform becoming widespread? Advocates of women's rights were asking for radical egalitarianism – they were posing an actual challenge to the current gender system. Their threat was not theoretical but immediate. In the simplest terms, the demand of women's rights reformers was for access to the public sphere without losing respectability. They strove to demonstrate the possibility of this in bloomer costume: they could walk around and exercise with perfect freedom, but they still appeared feminine and respectable – no excess flesh was bared, the legs were not displayed and so on. Therefore, it was necessary to discredit the costume, to make it unrespectable, to associate it with the undesirable aspects of masculinity, such as smoking. This helped to discredit the larger, less directly spoken claim about the oppressive nature of “separate spheres.” This criticism, veiled in some attacks, came to the fore in others.

Brownson's Quarterly Review reprinted a sermon which roundly denounced several types of reformers, including proponents of women's rights. According to one preacher, these reformers had completely lost their moral compass:

They aim at reversing all judgments of mankind, and brand the Christian virtues as vices... They carry their zeal for reversing so far as to seek to reverse the natural relation of the sexes, to dishonor woman by making her the head, and sending her to the legislature, the cabinet, or into the field to command our armies, and compelling the man to remain at home, and nurse the children, wash the dishes, make the beds, and sweep the house. Already are their women usurping the male attire, and beginning to appear in our streets and assemblies dressed out in full *Bloomer* costume, and little remains for the men but to don the petticoat and draw the veil over their faces.¹⁵

Here is an explicit connection between bloomers, women's rights, and the complete loss of separation of the sexes with drastic results: dishonored women and emasculated men. The nation would become vulnerable to attack, and all because women were “usurping” male prerogatives.

Another article, published in the “Ladies Department” of the *Michigan Farmer*, allegedly written by “Antoinette,” makes an equally assertive argument against changing the current gender

¹⁵ “The Chief Sins of the People: A sermon delivered at the Melodeon” Boston *Brownson's Quarterly Review*, Jul 1, 1851 in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

system. The writer claimed that women who strove for education and public rights were struggling against their god-given nature, and their struggle “will only serve to diminish their influence and render them unhappy.” This author also imagined a world in which gender had become topsy-turvy, where men mixed dough and embroidered, while women enforced the law and brought in the harvest. Yet this piece went one step further, and accused the reformers of wishing for the rights without the responsibilities of manhood – of desiring to vote without being soldiers. It also marked the reform as distinctly urban in a way calculated for the paper's rural audience: “But I fancy I can see these self-same contenders for rights and privileges, recoil with horror at the idea of even toiling in the field. And no doubt, these very enthusiasts would spurn with contempt, the unsophisticated maiden whom they might chance to see assisting her father in getting his grain safely in his barns, before the approaching storm should render it unfit for the deposit.” Here these reformers not only desired the rights without the responsibilities (hard work), but recoiled at the rural labor in which a woman might, in some way, act outside of her sphere, but which was necessitated by filial piety and the pastoral ideal. Readers who might have considered allying themselves with this movement were told that the women who support dress-reform were ignorant city slickers who would destroy order.¹⁶

With such ready social disapproval of women who sought to reform, and thus upset, the gender system of America, one might expect that the 1850's would be equally hostile to women who were passing themselves off as men and doing the very things that these articles were warning against – hard labor, fighting, voting, and even taking wives. However, the opposite was true – in the 1850's cross-dressing was most acceptable when women took on traditionally masculine responsibilities and roles.

“...So long as she was decently dressed and deported herself in an orderly manner, she had a right to dress as she pleased.” So a newspaper summarized a debate over the legality of cross-dressing in a

¹⁶ “Ladies Department” Lansing *Michigan Farmer*, Sep, 1 1851 in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

Brooklyn court in the spring of 1856.¹⁷ In fact, New York City never enacted a municipal law prohibiting cross-dressing.¹⁸ Yet by the time this was published, most feminists had been brow-beaten into retreating from dress-reform. Why were bloomers so attacked for crossing gender lines, when a woman could dress and act like a man with the tacit agreement of the government? The difference was that if a cross-dressing woman acted appropriately, she could socially become a man while she was passing for one. By taking on all the roles and responsibilities of respectable masculinity, in addition to the clothes, she was using both masculine means and ends.¹⁹ She was not making a feminine claim to these rights, but rather acknowledged the full male-ness of them by forfeiting female-ness in order to participate in them. In doing so, she did not challenge the gender hierarchy of America by disputing a man's privileges but reaffirmed them.²⁰ In many cases cross-dressing also reinforced lines of class and respectability by allowing women born respectable to avoid falling to prostitution. The flip side of this, however, was that if a woman was never respectable, or acted inappropriately while dressed as a man, social condemnation was nearly ensured. After all, if acting as a respectable man affirmed a respectable man's place at the pinnacle of society, and also affirmed his privilege, then partially assuming male identity, or assuming non-appropriate male identity challenged those assertions.

The young lady who the court agreed could “dress as she pleased” exemplified the proper way for a woman to cross-dress in the 1850's. She claimed that she took on men's clothes “out of necessity,” rather than for fun, or to go out drinking, and then discovered that it was much easier to live in America as a man. That she put male clothes on out of necessity is important. This implied that she had to choose between maintaining class boundaries of respectability or gender boundaries – i.e. she either had

17 “Items,” *Brooklyn Circular*, Mar 20, 1856 in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

18 Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008), 32.

19 Some readers will undoubtedly, and correctly, challenge my use of the pronouns she/her/hers throughout the paper. Such readers will suppose that some of these individuals would have preferred he/him/his – this is quite possible, and in some circumstances, even likely. However, in order to avoid confusion in a futile attempt to attempt to properly guess the gender identity of each person I talk about in this paper, I have universally used she/her/hers.

20 Valerie Hotchkiss, *Clothes make the Man* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996).

to become a prostitute, or she had to become a man. She did not gleefully or lightly violate either of those boundaries. Though she confessed no shame or regret for her choice, she did not seem overly proud or eager about it. That her choices did not incur the disapproval of either the judicial system or the newspaper demonstrates that they agreed with her assessment that she “took the best course under the circumstances.” From there we can assert that preserving aspects of middle class respectability allowed individuals to cross the gender boundary.²¹

The importance and meaning of choosing morality over gender was explicitly addressed in another newspaper article about two women who were picked up for wearing men's clothes. They “gave as their reason ... that the wages of women were so much lower than those of men, they could not support life honorably by female occupations. ... [This] suggests a social evil which ought to be remedied. ... The hosts of sin are recruited largely from those whom starvation and despair drive to infamy.” This article explicitly draws the connection between the low wages of women and prostitution, and if it does not completely approve of these women's solution to the conundrum, certainly it does not condemn them either.²²

Just as important as a woman's reason for deciding to dress as a man was how she acted once she had made that decision. One woman testified that she worked “honest” jobs, and “worked constantly, except at such times as I have been out of employment...” as proof she offered up her hands, which she described as “hard as any boy's who works.” Throughout her account of her time spent living as a man, she put great emphasis on the consistency and honesty of her work. In doing so she associated herself with the ideals of responsible manhood that were established in the 1830's, namely work ethic, self reliance, and self control. At the same time she retained the morality which was the basis of respectable

21 “Items,” Brooklyn *Circular*, Mar 20, 1856, in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

22 “Condition of Our Women” Boston *Flag of our Union* April 26, 1856, in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

femininity by rejecting prostitution. The court, assured of her morals, was now free to believe that she was respectable, and thus assume that she had not been brawling, visiting bars and houses of prostitution, or otherwise corrupting herself and those around her. In order to get at least the tacit approval of society to cross-dress, she needed not only to do so somewhat reluctantly, but she also needed to maintain respectability once she had done so.²³

When a woman failed to act correctly, she would be punished. Such was the case of Ann Liuden, who “was arrested yesterday... as a vagrant, and sent by Justice Welsh to the penitentiary for sixty days. It appears that a few weeks ago she came from New Orleans, and since then has donned male attire, visiting the theaters, hotels, and other public places, and passing herself off as a gentleman of wealth and fortune, under various assumed names.”²⁴ Unlike previous examples, Liuden did not meet with the approval, or even avoid the disapproval, of society – instead she got sixty days in jail. The problem was that Liuden emulated masculinity but did not become a respectable man. She did not stick with one identity. Rather than simply changing her name and clothes, then living that identity, she lied about where she came from and her resources (class) and took a different name at every turn. Worse yet, she took advantage of male privilege but had not accepted male responsibility. Because she did not undertake hard and honest work, she failed to become a true man, and her access to public space was threatening. Finally, she cross-dressed for the wrong reasons. She did not do so in order to survive, or avoid dishonor, but for the sole reason of flouting social convention. Her actions constituted an actual threat to the gender system – she choose an inferior, non-respectable version of masculinity to emulate, and without the backing of respectability, her cross-dressing also challenged economic and social systems of power.

23 “Items,” Brooklyn *Circular*, Mar 20, 1856, in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

24 “Variety,” Boston, *Liberator*, Nov. 10, 1854 in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

Some cross-dressers, like African American women, were doomed to condemnation because they did not have access to respectability to begin with. The *Maine Farmer* printed the short article “Colored Women in Male Attire”: “Two colored women calling themselves Ellen Johnson and Jackson Townsend were found yesterday ... traveling the streets, as they said, in search of their husbands, who had deserted them some months ago. ... Both were locked up by Justice Flandreau[?]”²⁵ The article seems disinclined to believe anything that these women say – doubting their names and injecting “as they said” into a description of their activities, as if the paper did not want to be held accountable for the veracity of the material. Nor was there any outrage or disbelief that these women's husbands could have deserted them. Nevertheless, these women did not frivolously put on this costume, but rather had their chance of individual survival stripped away, since they could not possibly make a living wage alone, then waited months, probably until they had run out of resources, to take action and search for unfaithful husbands. The racism in this article is hardly surprising, but it illustrates that even when a woman acted appropriately, and dressed as a man for what might otherwise be considered a good reason, if she did not already come from a place of respectability, she could not expect to be allowed to cross social boundaries.

Women who violated more than one rule of respectability were treated even more severely. Another example comes from California. The story tells of a fight in a rough mining town from the perspective of a white woman. After the fight, a committee was formed to bring the troublemakers to justice.

The first act of the committee was to try a *Mejicana*, who had been foremost in the fray. She has always worn male attire, and on this occasion, armed with a pair of pistols, she fought like a very fury. Luckily, inexperienced in the use of fire-arms, she wounded no one. She was sentenced to leave the Bar [town] by day-

²⁵ “Freshet on sandy river,” Augusta *Maine Farmer*, October 6, 1856 in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

light, a perfectly just decision, for there is no doubt that she is a regular little demon.²⁶

This text is enormously dense. The unnamed woman's first disadvantage was being born into the status of unrespectable person of color. If she had been respectable, she would have been called a Spaniard, instead of a Mejicana, and there would not have been the same emphasis on her supposedly inferior racial origins. Her next problem was the adoption of male attire. She was not respectable to begin with, so she must have cross-dressed for nefarious reasons. Furthermore, the article contended that “she has always worn male attire.” There was no discussion of a reason at all, nor did there need to be. She was not respectable and had never been so. It was not that she had fallen, it was that she was the wrong sort of person. Once in male attire, she did the wrong things. She was not a bystander to the fray (all the white women moved themselves out of town for the event), but an active participant. However, she could not even perform manhood as she was no good with the guns she carried and did not manage to hurt anyone. She was not the terrifying threat to life that a man would have been, nor the model of femininity sitting on the ridge above town for the violence; she was neither threatening nor respectable. Instead, she was a “little demon.”

Women who violated many social norms could avoid being seen as a threat to society so long as they still accepted the basic duty of respectable masculinity – hard work. A newspaper related the story of John Curtis and Anna Maria Wilkins, who married, then separated, but did not divorce. Afterwards Wilkins “who was of masculine character,” put on men's clothes and began doing a man's work, first at a farm, then as a personal valet to a gentleman. While working for the gentleman, she got romantically involved with the house-maid, and under pressure from the house-maid's family, who “supposed...that the parties were more intimate than virtuous,” they were married, and lived as man and wife for several

²⁶ “California in 1852,” San Francisco *The Pioneer*, Aug 1855, in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

years. Eventually the house-maid “tired of her female husband, married a real man, and removed to a distant part of the country.” The narrative returns to Curtis, who had, in the intervening time, managed to marry another woman. “The fact was very shortly afterwards conveyed to the ears of his real wife ... upon which she assumed her female attire, had Curtis taken into custody, and appeared to prosecute him for bigamy. The magistrates, having heard the case, committed Curtis for trial.”²⁷

In this case, Wilkins was not necessarily respectable at the beginning of the story, but neither was she a complete disgrace. She became a man, and did a man's work – she even married. But in doing so she did not abandon all claims to femininity and her previous status. As soon as she heard that her husband had been unfaithful, she re-assumed her female identity and used it to make legal claims against her husband. Her own marriage to the maid, of course, did not count since it was never valid. She not only retained her identity as a woman, but her legal rights as a wife. Furthermore, she did all this without comment from the paper. The paper seems to consider the whole affair more amusing than shocking or disgusting. Importantly, there was no indication that because she had taken these actions that she was mentally ill, or did not have the right to her husband's loyalty. Later, this would not be the case.

Finally, there are those who were just not held to the same standards – eccentric Europeans, artists, and actresses. All of these characters were exempted from conventional expectations of behavior because of their genius – exceptional talent at their tasks. Most of them, however, also have the advantage of being European, a status which brought respectability with it in antebellum society. Their exceptions show more flexibility in what could be considered respectable behavior than in who could be considered respectable.

A great number of the cross-dressing artists and actresses featured in American papers were

²⁷ “Olla Podrida” New York *Spirit of the Times* Jun 22, 1850, in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

European, though not all the Europeans were actresses and actors. There was Princess Belgioso, who “assumed male attire, and acted as General, with distinguished bravery, in the recent Italian struggle for liberty... She is a woman of extraordinary talents and unlimited personal fascination. As an undisputed Princess, she would be received at every court in the world.”²⁸ Here was a woman with the ultimate claim to respectability, royalty, a claim that no American could make. Nor was she the decadent, evil royalty that drove America to revolution, but the royalty which was so dedicated to her nation that she would not just lead a war, but fight in it. It was because of her love of her country, her duty as royalty, that she was so accepted, as well as her extraordinary talents – her genius. According to the press, she operated at a level higher than ordinary humans, and was thus exempt from some of the rules which bound the rest of humanity.

The same was done with literary and artistic powerhouses, again Europeans – author Aurore Dupin, better known as George Sand, and artist Rosa Bonheur from France, both of whom were known for dressing as men when traveling. Both were also particularly widely written about in the American press. Each of them enjoyed the distinction of genius. According to *The Ladies Repository* Rosa Bonheur “by rights of genius [belongs] to the world. She is the most distinguished female painter living or dead. ... It is useless for any one to criticize the delicacy or lack of delicacy that could lead her to the choice of this special department.” The magazine explained, “Genius is subject to no ordinary laws. Nay, it is its special function to burst away from the conventionalities of society.”²⁹ As for Dupin, commentators always called her by her pseudonym, and even sometimes used male pronouns. “No writer of modern France has excited so much attention, either through his writings or his personal characteristics as the gifted woman who, under the name of George Sand, has, for the past twenty years

28 “Bits too good to be lost,” New York *Home Journal*, Feb 8 1851, in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

29 “Rosa Bonheur,” Cincinnati *The Ladies Repository*, March 1861, in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

delighted or shocked the world with the creations of her genius.” Yet she was still firmly a woman. “Her large eye beams with an expression of mild sadness – of modest womanhood – which can only be returned with love and sympathy.”³⁰ Both of these women not only entered male spaces, such as theaters, literary clubs, and horse auctions, but managed to maintain femininity and respectability for two reasons. First, their genius, which was explicitly explained in both cases to excuse otherwise unseemly behaviors, but also because they both came from at least moderately respectable places – that is to say, they were both western European women from well-regarded, if not rich, families.

Some actresses became famous in the mid-nineteenth century for their “breeches” roles – playing male characters in male attire. Actually, “breeches” roles were very popular at this time – entire acting troops went around the country, performing solely on this basis. Sometimes these actresses played young men, but talented breeches performers, such as Charlotte Cushman, played mature male roles, such as Hamlet. An article in the *Liberator* reviewed the performance of an Italian actress and singer, Parodi, in the role of Romeo. The article evaluated her performance largely on her success at becoming a man - “The absence of petticoats was no embarrassment to her usual locomotive unconsciousness ... It was in these stoopings down, by the way, that her movements made their only betrayal of the disguise, the knee-joints bending woman-esquely inwards instead of man-ishly outwards – in all other points, the gallant prima donna acting as any gentleman would do in her place.” Likewise, “the mustache was very becoming to Parodi's short upper lip...” Parodi was performing for an audience, but she was performing masculinity first, and Romeo second. Indeed, according to the article “In none of the religious or political journals have we seen a word in reprobation of Parodi's metamorphosis.” In this article, not only does the *Liberator* give weight to her symbolic and social change to a man, for the night, by the word metamorphosis, but we learn that they are not alone in this positive analysis of the

³⁰ “George Sand,” New York *Home Journal* Jul 21, 1855, in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

change.³¹

This, however, presents a problem. Actresses were not truly respectable. They were public women, and there was a taint of risqué sexuality around them. Indeed, scholar Elizabeth Mullinex suggests that the man-woman construct of breeches actresses was largely made possible by male sexualization and fetishization of the female cross-dressed body. However, it seems unlikely that the *Liberator*, with its commitment to a purification of American society, would be willingly participating in such a system. Perhaps we can interpret this acceptance of cross-dressing actresses as an exception for genius - genius in deception. After all, deception, taking on a different personality, is the basis of acting. Between that and Mullinex's argument that breeches actresses actually become dual-gendered because of the public's willingness to believe and support them, these actresses enjoyed enough respectability to avoid heavy policing.

Throughout the 1850's, the public's attitude towards cross-dressing depended on the perceived purpose of the action. Bloomers were gender rebels who actively worked against the systems which kept men more powerful than women, which doomed them to derision and ridicule. Similarly, women who dressed as men without seeking to maintain a middle class reputation, or who cross-dressed without otherwise re-enforcing proper, respectable masculinity were subject to the displeasure of the law. However, reluctant cross-dressing women demonstrated a desire to conform to the expectations of respectability and properly gendered behavior. In cross-dressing properly, they shored up already stable gender roles. Nor were they subverting middle class values; they were only breaking with gendered expectations in order to avoid prostitution. In this way, these women could give weight and respect to both the social frameworks of gender and refinement, so long as the choice was forced by the impending doom of the young damsel, not a decision made for the desire of excitement. Yet in every system there

³¹ Elizabeth Mullenix, *Wearing the Breeches* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

"Mark the Difference," Boston *The Liberator*, April 11, 1851, in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

are exceptions, and in the 1850's, the exception was genius, especially the exotic, inexplicable, and very respectable genius of Europeans.

Romantic Females: Women Soldiers in the North

During the Civil War, Northern newspapers often commented on female soldiers, but rarely treated them with respect. While they were often described as curiosities, each woman was treated differently depending on her background and actions. If she had lost respectability, or never had it – if she was born lower class, had become rough in the army camps, or gone to fight from her own desires – she was condemned as manly. Conversely, if she was born upper-class or maintained her feminine she while serving was likely to be tolerated, and perhaps even commended. Essentially, if she maintained the ideal of Victorian middle class femininity and morality she would be lauded, but if she violated it, she

would be punished either legally or in public opinion. This represented an important shift from before the war, when establishing a respectable masculinity was the most acceptable way to assert one's propriety. The armed forces made an exception to this wartime pattern, however. Often at the time commanders and fellow soldiers would mention the outstanding loyalty, fighting ability, and strength of spirit of female warriors, celebrating their manly accomplishments.

Northern women who cross-dressed and fought in the Civil War encountered a variety of reactions when they were exposed. Some were wholeheartedly approved and congratulated by the papers that wrote about them. Such was the case of Fanny Britten. Britten went out to seek her brother, "a cherished relative," and was captured by Southern soldiers who held her on suspicion of being a spy. She found a set of men's clothes that fit her, however, and thus disguised stole a horse and rode northward. After arriving in Mayville, she told her story to the mayor, who found a household that would re-supply her with feminine attire. This transition made, a quandary arose: "In the meantime the mayor, who has charge of the horse, which is a valuable Bucephalus, is in a muddle. It is a Bulwerian question, 'What will be done with it?'" The paper suggested giving it to her "as a trophy of her womanhood and daring." In addition, the article described her as a "good looking, dashing girl"¹ Here, despite her 'mannish' actions, her bravery, daring, and autonomy, she was described as especially feminine, both physically and psychologically. This was, by far, the extreme end of a spectrum of treatments from the public media. The endorsement of this girl was wholehearted: she had done nothing wrong, and everything right. Indeed, she deserved to be rewarded with a very fine horse for her cross-dressing.

Britten was not the only woman who was commended for her good service. Mrs. Reynolds from Illinois followed her husband into the army. It appears that she did so without the aid of any disguise.

¹ "Adventures of a Loyal Maiden among the Secesh [Reprinted from Cincinnati Enquire]," *Peoria (Ill) Morning Mail*, November 15, 1862, http://www.utttyler.edu/vbetts/women_soldiers.htm. (accessed 10/29/08)

She was commended by the *Debuque Herald* for acting “like a ministering angel” in attending “to the wants of as many of the wounded and dying soldiers as she could, thus winning the gratitude and esteem of the brave fellows by whom she was surrounded.” In repayment for her hard work, Governor Yates made her a major in the Illinois militia. The article concluded, “Probably no lady in America will ever again have such a distinguished military honor conferred upon her.”² This article, while commending Mrs. Reynolds for her actions, also assumes that women would not, in the future, attain such heights. This renders Reynolds effectively non-threatening to the male army – she was a major, but she was unique in this regard, she healed rather than fought, and followed her husband rather than striking out on her own. In essence, she both retained her femininity almost completely and was among the best rewarded women in the Civil War.

Many reports were both more detailed than this one and more judgmental. Such was the case of Mary Fitzallan, reported by the *Chicago Daily Tribune*.³ In this story a young lady, dressed as a Union soldier, was recognized and arrested by a police officer. She was then brought to the Armory and questioned. The first detail related in this account, aside from her name, was that she was eighteen and unmarried. After this, that she had worn men's clothes for the past seven months, only four of those as a Union soldier. Before that she spent three months as a field hand. “She refused to be communicative” when questioned about “what made her dress in clothes unbecoming her sex.” In this passage the wording of her refusal to answer the questions indicates that the author found her actions unacceptable. In his opinion, she refused to cooperate when asked a reasonable question. Just as importantly, the clothes she wore were inappropriate for her; cross-dressing to preserve morality was no longer in the national vocabulary. It had been replaced by what was appropriate based on her physical sex.⁴

2 “A Woman Appointed Major. From the Peoria Transcript,” *Debuque Herald*, May 1, 1862, http://www.utttyler.edu/vbetts/women_soldiers.htm. (accessed 10/29/08)

3 “A Romantic Female,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 18, 1862, http://www.utttyler.edu/vbetts/women_soldiers.htm. (accessed 10/29/08)

4 “A Romantic Female,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 18, 1862, http://www.utttyler.edu/vbetts/women_soldiers.htm.

Fitzallan was also physically marked as male. Not only did “her hands betray evidences of manual labor” but “her features [were] more masculine than otherwise” and she “stood in the presence of the magistrate with a bold but confident air... betraying but little of the modesty and shrinking nature ... [of] the gentler sex.” In this account, Fitzallan is the paragon of pre-war cross-dressing. Indeed, before the war women offered up their hardened hands and masculine self-control as evidence that they had reinforced gender conventions, and were acting appropriately. Here, those same traits betray her as an inappropriate woman. The two options offered for her at the end of the story, after she had left the courthouse, were to leave for Canada or remain in the city searching for “a friend – or lover,” which would inevitably lead to another arrest. All in all, the article looks at her with disdain and a bit of pity. The language shows distaste for Fitzallan, especially her masculine characteristics: she was “betrayed” by her hands, she was stubbornly uncommunicative and bold in front of the magistrate. Nevertheless, this was not an all-out condemnation of the girl, the article did not impart its own advice, and she was called “A Romantic Female,” which indicates a grudging acceptance.⁵

During the war there was a great deal of diversity in how individuals were dealt with, but this diversity was not random. It was based on a strict hierarchy of gender performance. Women who remained true to their gender were often treated kindly – an extreme example was Mrs. Reynolds being commissioned a major in a state militia. She retained femininity and so was well rewarded by the governor of Illinois as well as by the newspaper.⁶ In contrast, women who seem more masculine to Victorian eyes were often treated more harshly – such as the “Romantic Female”⁷ Mary Fitzallan who was given some “sound advice” and “fined... \$20” by the judge.

(accessed 10/29/08)

5 “A Romantic Female,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 18, 1862, http://www.utttyler.edu/vbetts/women_soldiers.htm. (accessed 10/29/08)

6 “A Woman Appointed Major. From the Peoria Transcript,” *Debuque Herald*, May 1, 1862, http://www.utttyler.edu/vbetts/women_soldiers.htm. (accessed 10/29/08)

7 “A Romantic Female,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 18, 1862, http://www.utttyler.edu/vbetts/women_soldiers.htm. (accessed 10/29/08)

Most women who dressed up in men's attire and struck out on a martial path were neither wholeheartedly commended nor condemned. Instead, many of them were simply treated as slightly humorous, with overtones of either appreciation or disapproval. An excellent example of this appeared in the *New York Times*. Sandwiched in between tales of a fire among various encampments and the return of several regiments was the story of a corporal who had a baby.

A Corporal in a New-York city regiment gave birth to a fine boy a few days since. For two years this female soldier has served in the ranks without any suspicion of her sex, even by her messmates. The mother and child are now in the hospital doing well.⁸

The incident was considered trivial, her name was not even mentioned. The story is shuffled in with other details of the campaign against the South and treated as a light-hearted, mildly surprising break in dull camp life. Most of the surprise comes not from the fact that a woman has been serving, “this female soldier” indicates that she is only one of an entire series – but rather from the fact that there was no suspicion about her sex, “even by her messmates.” It is more remarkable that she has been going unnoticed in the army than that she was there at all.

In the North, a woman's success at maintaining femininity was essential for her continued respectability. This raises the question: what exactly counted as feminine? One particularly important aspect of femininity was a certain dependence on men. Often this played out in a woman's experience as following a man into service. Often a lover or husband, but sometimes a brother or father was listed as the reason for joining the army. Sometimes the woman followed her husband into the service not intending to fight, but after he fell she “took up his rifle and fought in his stead.”⁹ Similarly, Ms. Britten, who was commended for cross-dressing to escape Confederates, had left her home to see her brother

⁸ “A Fire Among the Camps -- A Review -- A Birth, &c.,” *The New York Times*, April 27, 1863.
<http://query.nytimes.com/search/query?srchst=p>. (accessed 10/26/08)

⁹ “A Female Civil War Vetran.;"Aunt Lucy" Nickols of Indiana to Have a Pension.," *The New York Times*, December 27, 1898, <http://query.nytimes.com/search/query?srchst=p>. (accessed 10/27/08)

and avail “herself of an opportunity to embrace a cherished relative.”¹⁰ Another sympathetic story was told about an anonymous young woman, found after her death, who had “followed her lover into the army, and to be near him had willingly braved the dangers of the battle-field and the hardships and exposures of camp life.”¹¹ While women who were married or following a man into war had passed the test for having a good reason to disguise their gender, in order to be truly vaunted, they would also need to behave themselves once they were in the army.

Once a woman was in camp, there were two standards of proper behavior for her. First, she should try to keep from actually fighting as much as possible. Second, she should act as healer and a nurse. Diligent nursing, especially for those women who avoided active combat on the the battle field, fully justified cross-dressing. The case of Sarah E.E. Seelye illustrates this well. She served as a soldier for quite a while, then, after deserting for fear of being found out, published a book about her experiences. Her publishers defended her in her decision to dress as a man and fight in the war:

In the opinion of many, it is the privilege of women to minister to the sick and soothe the sorrowing -...-and whether duty leads her to the couch of luxury, the abode of poverty, the crowded hospital, or the terrible battlefield - it makes but little difference what costume she assumes while in discharge of her duties.¹²

Though this statement was obviously in the best monetary interests of those who wrote it – making Sarah Seeley respectable kept the book selling, and the money flowing – it also encapsulates a popular belief at the time, that cross-dressing was excusable as a means so long as the end was feminine.

Poor women, and women without a family, or without a family of high class, were often considered inferior to their comrades. Two such women were discovered in the Missouri infantry. The authorities wished to “send ... [them] to their homes, if they have any.” The implication was that these

¹⁰ “Adventures of a Loyal Maiden among the Secech” *Peoria Morning Mail*, Nov. 15, 1862
http://www.uttyler.edu/vbetts/women_soldiers.htm.

¹¹ “Death of a cavalry soldier who proves to be a woman” reprinted in WOMEN IN THE WAR :I. “DEATH OF A CAVALRY SOLDIER WHO PROVES TO BE A WOMAN. THE “BRAVE SOLDIER-GIRL.” JOAN OF ARC IN THE WEST. The United States Service Magazine (1864-1866), March 1, 1865. 270. in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

¹² S. Emma E. Edmonds, *Nurse and Spy in the Union Army*, 1865.

were improper women; they did not seem like women at all when they were in uniform, they joined to fight rather than follow a lover, and they may not even have families or men to take care of them. This evidence exposes a stronger link between class and respectability than existed in the antebellum era. During the Civil War, the ability to maintain femininity was reduced for those who came from the lowest classes.¹³

On the other side of the spectrum there was an account of a woman being allowed to finish out her service after being discovered. When "Frank Martin," as she was known in the army, was assigned service in a barracks, she was recognized there by a man who had grown up in her home town. Nevertheless, when she "begged to be retained" in the army, "her wish was granted." What merited this extraordinary treatment? She was apparently well educated, having "more than ordinary accomplishments;" she was also commended for continuing to act with proper etiquette, showing none of the "rudeness which might naturally be expected from her late associations." Finally, she was born to "highly respectable people, and in good circumstances."¹⁴ Her privilege as a well-educated, relatively wealthy woman from a respected household protected her from some of the social disapproval that less wealthy women without the benefit of a prestigious family experienced. As indicated by Frank Martin's story, a woman's manner, as well as her class, was crucial to constructing her as either a good citizen or an inappropriate woman.

In contrast, women who performed masculinity more fully were often denigrated. Interestingly, the willingness to take up masculine social traits- such as drinking, smoking, swearing, and gambling, was often associated with a more masculine look. Frances Clayton was a good example. Not only was

13 "Female Soldiers.; TWO WOMEN DISCOVERED IN THE UNION UNIFORM," *The New York Times*, August 23, 1864, <http://query.nytimes.com/search/query?srchst=p>.

14 Louisville Journal, reprinted reprinted in WOMEN IN THE WAR :I. "DEATH OF A CAVALRY SOLDIER WHO PROVES TO BE A WOMAN. THE "BRAVE SOLDIER-GIRL." JOAN OF ARC IN THE WEST.. 1865. *The United States Service Magazine* (1864-1866), March 1, 5-6. in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>,

she “heavy on tobacco,” but she possessed “a very masculine figure.”¹⁵ Two other women who demonstrated this correlation were Jane Short and Lou Morris. Short was described as looking “much like an unsophisticated country lad of twenty years.” Morris was said to “look as little like a woman as her companion.” Both had fought and been discovered previously, and re-enlisted not for the desire to follow men, or nurse, as good women might, but rather because of their desire for “licking the rebels.”¹⁶ This desire for battle and blood was every bit as much an attack upon the calm, home-centered morality of a woman as was Frances Clayton's heavy tobacco use. In abandoning their roles as the moral guardians of the nation, these women forfeited both the sympathy of newspapers and all visible signs of femininity.

Military men, by contrast, had some of the highest opinions of women who served. Often these women would become “company favorites.” Both Sarah E.E. Seelye and Annie Lillybridge earned this distinction.¹⁷ An article from the *U.S. Service Magazine* in 1865 commented that it was “unsurprising” that a few women had joined the army, given the dire straights they were often driven to during the war. Furthermore, the magazine praised their heroism and defended them against “Those who generalize on the impropriety and unladylikeness of such conduct,” the critics were in the right by the standards of the parlor, but the magazine concluded that “they know very little of the vast variety of phases which humanity... is forced by Nature and circumstances.”¹⁸ The *Service Magazine* did not choose to defend these women in the way they were often defended by the newspapers. While the newspapers were

15 “Personal,” *The New York Times*, August 14, 1864, <http://query.nytimes.com/search/query?srchst=p>.

16 “Female Soldiers.; TWO WOMEN DISCOVERED IN THE UNION UNIFORM,” *The New York Times*, August 23, 1864, <http://query.nytimes.com/search/query?srchst=p>.

17 Byron Cutcheon, *Franklin Thompson, Alias S. E. E. Seelye*, (desertion) U.S. Congressional Serial Set (49th congress, 1st Session, March 8, 1886), <http://infoweb.newsbank.com/>
WOMEN IN THE WAR :I. "DEATH OF A CAVALRY SOLDIER WHO PROVES TO BE A WOMAN. THE "BRAVE SOLDIER-GIRL." JOAN OF ARC IN THE WEST. *The United States Service Magazine*, March 1, 1865.

18 “WOMEN IN THE WAR :I. "DEATH OF A CAVALRY SOLDIER WHO PROVES TO BE A WOMAN. THE "BRAVE SOLDIER-GIRL." JOAN OF ARC IN THE WEST.” *The United States Service Magazine*, March 1, 1865.

defending the femininity of these women, the *Service Magazine* decided instead to excuse these women from the need to be feminine. This break with common public opinion harkens back to the 1850's, but also raises interesting questions about the psychology of accepting deviance. It may be that soldiers were more tolerant of non-gender conforming members of their companies because of their close day-to-day relations, and the need for able-bodied soldiers for war.

Perhaps the best account of what soldiers thought of the women in their midst came from the private journal entries of Jerome Robbins, who knew Seeley well during the war. In November of 1861, Frank Thompson (Seeley) and Robbins had a bit of a heart-to-heart. Suddenly, Robbins was very confused about his feelings towards his friend. "But how sad is the reaction which often occurs when we think we have friendship in exchange for friendship and find the friend differing so widely from our own natures. ... but since [we talked] I learned that in friends we may be deceived." He went on to recount Seeley's story of leaving home, all the while using male pronouns (he/him/his), until the moment of revelation. "Though never frankly asserted by her, it will be understood that my friend Frank is a female." Frank is still his friend and his comrade, though now she is a woman. Robbins continued to use female pronouns for the rest of the entry, where he struggled with his feelings about Seeley's personality.¹⁹ Yet they remained friends. She was mentioned throughout his journal on a regular basis until she deserted. The entire time after this one entry, though, he used male pronouns for her, and always used the name Frank. Never did he indicate that he had given Seeley's secret away, and in later entries he even seems to have forgotten it, mentioning that Frank had such a sensitive character that he didn't like to be teased about his feminine appearance.²⁰ Whatever Robbins' personal feelings towards Seeley, he did not let her female body interfere with their relationship, but rather continued to regard

¹⁹ Nov. 1861, Jerome John Robbins Papers, Michigan Historical Collections, Bently Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

²⁰ Dec 25, 1861, Jerome John Robbins Papers, Michigan Historical Collections, Bently Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

her as a soldier, and thus, by necessity, a man.

Overall, Northern society's opinions of female soldiers were based on a variety of factors, including, most importantly, the background of the woman and her ability to continue to present respectable femininity. Compared to before the war, the North was more concerned with the possible challenges raised by cross-dressing women. The war was a time of intense gender confusion in the North, as women vastly and rapidly increased their sphere of respectable activities to include working outside the home both in white-collar jobs and in active, war-time jobs, such as nursing. In response to this rapid and destabilizing change in gender, Northerners disparaged and dismissed women who seemed to challenge convention by assuming manhood, and rather encouraged women who managed to maintain normative femininity in spite of their actions to take advantage of the loosened social control of wartime.

Women Soldiers in the War of Northern Aggression

Scholars often portray the nineteenth-century South as an overwhelmingly politically and socially conservative region. Books on Southern white women before and during the Civil War explain that compared to their Northern counterparts, they had few opportunities. Before the war, the rural nature and strict social hierarchies of the society made it difficult for women to organize for reforms. “A few outspoken or radical women in the North became active participants in antebellum reform issues and even questioned traditional assumptions about women's positions,” writes Sally G. McMillan. “But ... [in the South] to confront women's status would have called into question all that the South embraced, including slavery.” By this logic the South's strict hierarchy which maintained the slave system made it highly undesirable for women to organize and become activists. White women accepted

and participated in this structure because they had a vested interest in it: even though they were firmly below white men, they were also firmly above slaves.¹

It is not surprising, given this narrative of the willingly suppressed Southern woman, that historians have written about a form of subdued patriotism for Southern women during the Civil War. The standard narrative tells how women's roles in the South during the war expanded to include acts like writing and publishing, so long as the object was to support the war. Indeed, some argue that white women's main patriotic act of the war was to enforce the participation of men, that is, to scorn men who did not wish to go to war, and to encourage those who did. This narrative shows that the war strengthened antebellum Southern white gender norms – that “confederate men set forth to fight and aggressively defend their 'manhood,' while confederate women redoubled their commitment to support...”² and that in strengthening this status quo, women became “the 'makers' of their men” and thus became more powerful as controllers of male identity.³

1 Sally G. McMillen, *Southern Women*, (Arlington Heights: Harlan Davidson, 1992), 9.
Catherine Clinton, *The Other Civil War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1984), 38-41.

2 Lee Ann Whites, *The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 11.

3 *Ibid.*, 13.

Others scholars have argued that Southern women invented a domestic patriotism, that they took their traditional private sphere duties and expanded them to the fledgling nation; in effect the entire Confederacy became the home of Southern women. Thus acts such as knitting socks for soldiers were simply an expansion of the household to the nation, and raising money for a gunboat was simply providing a large, protective coat for a son, brother, or husband. In this paradigm, a Southern woman seeking an act of political resistance to the North might knit *grey* socks in a Union prison. This thesis claims that overall the Civil War allowed women to use their private sphere experience in the public sphere, but that the war did not really liberalize Southern society. By this account, the private sphere did not expand to include any new duties, and in terms of supporting the war, women did the best they could, given their circumstances.⁴

Yet in contrast with the North, where cross-dressing soldiers needed to actively maintain their femininity in order to be accepted, female soldiers in the South enjoyed overwhelming support. Where the large population in the North meant the government could almost always recruit more soldiers, especially after allowing African Americans to fight, the South needed every body, even female ones if they were willing and capable. Thus while the North restricted the acceptability of cross-dressing to deal with changing gender norms, the South included active and virulent patriotism, including cross-dressing to fight in the army, in their definition of femininity. For Southern women cross-dressing and fighting were not necessarily at odds with continued respectability. This is not to say that Southerners reached a consensus on the acceptability of cross-dressing. Societies are rarely unanimous, but the South did, on the whole, voice support.

Respectability was still important in the South, but it was also more often taken for granted. After all, every white Southerner was more respectable than any black Southerner, and those least

4 Kristen Streater, "She-Rebels" on the supply line" in *Occupied Women*, ed. LeeAnn Whites and Alecia Long, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press), 88-92.

respectable Southerners had neither the opportunity, nor much motivation, for joining the army. So the Southern newspapers tended to focus on rationales for joining, rather than social position. One paper taunted Northerners: “The distress among the poor at the North is so great that their papers give account of women, dressed in men's clothes, enlisting as privates in the army.”⁵ Here, Northern women were given an explicitly economic motive for joining the army – rather than for love of men, as Northerners themselves often claimed, or love of the country, as Southerners frequently maintained. Thus, we can see this as a Southern criticism of Northern culture, which was comparatively capitalistic.

The Southerners also, perhaps unintentionally, leveled a more subtle critique at Northerners. Where Northerners often wrote, “She followed her husband into the army” or “She joined to be with a lover,” a more common Southern claim was that a woman “volunteered *with* her husband” (my emphasis). The implication was that the wife was joining for the same reasons as her husband – patriotism – versus the Northern assumption that women were joining to follow a man. This seems to be at odds with claims that Southern women universally accepted and supported the patriarchal system of their own oppression – since they were being ascribed with more agency than their Northern counterparts when taking the same actions. It appears as though the North was more socially conservative than the South. Indeed, Northerners had a difficult time understanding or accepting that women could be patriotic.⁶

An article in the *Southern Confederacy* illustrates the point. It tells of a man named Blaylow, who joined the Southern army. When he was discharged, his wife revealed herself in order that she might leave too. The paper notes that she “went with” her husband to war, and had been drilling with the company, even doing well at it. “The boys were sorry to part with such a good soldier, but they were unable to determine which she loved best, Blaylow or the confederacy; but it was unanimously voted

5 *Austin State Gazette*, Feb 22, 1862, http://www.uttyler.edu/vbetts/women_soldiers.htm.

6 “A Female Soldier,” Savannah *Daily Morning News* Jan 9, 1863. in Gale 19th century U.S. Newspapers database <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/> (10/11/2009)

that Mrs. Blaylow is 'some pumpkins.'" What is exceptional here is that it would be easy to claim that she was joining more to be close to her husband than to fight Yankees, since she left with him, but this is not how the paper chose to tell the story. Instead, it emphasized her patriotism and claimed that not even her fellow soldiers could tell if she was a better wife or patriot. Just as important, though, she received the total support of each and every member of the company, as well as the newspaper. This contrasts starkly with the Northern narrative: the fact that she left with her husband would have shown a Northern audience that she was fulfilling her feminine duty of love. Such a tale would have earned her a grudging support in the North, but not the same kind of full-fledged backing she received in the South.⁷

In other situations, Southern acceptance of women's patriotism was asserted even more firmly. The *Savannah Republican* wrote of a Southern female spy who was discovered in a Northern Regiment. "She boldly avowed that she was in the service of her native and beloved South, and desired the vengeance of its invaders; she knew her fate, and as a patriot she was ready to meet it." Such fierce rhetoric hardly matched the image of a subservient woman, or even the rebellious woman knitting grey socks in prison. Rather she was bold and overwhelmingly patriotic. Not only did she exhibit a lack of traditional femininity, she drew praise for her masculine actions. The *Savannah Republican* editorialized, "We hope our Government will see to it that this patriotic woman does not suffer the penalty of death, whatever may be the ransom. Spare two spies on our side, or exchange five hundred prisoners of war, before a hair on her head shall be touched." The loyalty and patriotism, indeed, the mannishness of this woman is not merely tolerated, but encouraged. Furthermore, she was rewarded for taking this position – a female spy is said to be worth twice as much as a male spy, and five hundred times worth a male soldier. Not just patriotism but active female patriotism was being encouraged here.⁸

7 "A North Carolina Amazon," *Atlanta Southern Confederacy*, May 23 1862, http://www.utttyler.edu/vbetts/women_soldiers.htm.

8 "Don't hurt that woman," *Savannah Republican*, August 8, 1861 http://www.utttyler.edu/vbetts/women_soldiers.htm.

Good Southern women also vigorously opposed disloyal men and revenged dead male kin. This behavior marks another stark difference from the Northern narrative of following a lover. In doing so, Southern women set a cultural mile-marker for manhood – good Southern men must not be any less patriotic and bold than women. In this sense, the discourse about female soldiers looks very much like the role of women other historians have recorded – to urge their men on to war, and to keep the fervor for independence high. But even while fulfilling that role, these stories show glimpses of women who are far more independent than even Scarlet O'Hara would ever dare be.

One “pretty little Georgia girl” no sooner enrolled than she was discovered. She explained to the general “that she had the consent of her parents to disguise herself in male attire, and enter the army to revenge the death of her brother...”⁹ It is certainly in some ways unexpected to hear about a “pretty little” woman, who is apparently very identifiably feminine, even in a uniform, joining the army to extract revenge on the North. However, perhaps the most notable feature of the story is that she had, or claimed she had, the “consent of her parents.” Not only was it socially acceptable enough for her to join the army that she could bring it up with them, but it was well within the realm of possibility, even to the point of desirability, since her parents ended up giving explicit consent to the plan. Another paper tells a similar story about a young lady who, when she was discovered, “acknowledged that she had determined to accompany her friends in the perils of war, and avenge the death of a brother who fell in the fight near Richmond. We have heard nothing in any degree to implicate [sic] the good character and standing of this *gallant heroine*”¹⁰ (My emphasis). Again, we are confronted with a young lady being granted a exemption from antebellum social rules. The *Weekly Columbus Enquirer* gave its stamp of approval – not only is her character, her respectability, beyond question, but she is a heroine, and by logic then

9 Camden, SC. *The Camden Confederate*, Oct 2, 1863. in Gale Nineteenth century newspaper database.
<http://infotrac.galegroup.com/> (10/11/2009)

10 “A Female Volunteer,” *Weekly Columbus (GA) Enquirer*, Aug. 19, 1862.
http://www.uttlyer.edu/vbetts/women_soldiers.htm.

should be mimicked by men and women alike. The key is that both of these young ladies went out to war with the stated purpose of avenging a brother. In doing so, they reminded all Southerners that they were duty-bound to avenge all the death and devastation that had been visited upon their homelands. This act appears as decidedly unfeminine as it is Southern, but the opposite is true. These young ladies' status as good Southerners reinforces their status as good women.

Other women went even further beyond the former boundaries of acceptability, to directly oppose their husband or father. The *Savannah Republican* tells a particularly strong version of this story. Mrs. Laura J. Williams' "whole soul was enlisted in the struggle for independence" but "her husband was a Northern man by birth and education, and a strong Union man." Predictably, when the war started, he lied to her, went North, and never returned. When she learned that he had actually joined the Union army, she enlisted in the South as "Henry Benford." She was discovered, but this did not keep her from the front. After the North won New Orleans, she participated as a blockade runner. Finally, she was captured by the dreadful Yankees. "She made her appearance before Gen. B[utler] in a Southern homespun dress. She refused to take the oath – told him she gloried in being a rebel – had fought side by side with Southern *men* for Southern rights and that if she ever lived to see 'Dixie' she would do it again." Here let us note the newspaper's emphasis of the word men, which indicates she, and thus the newspaper, valued Southern masculinity above Northern. There is an implicit weighing of Southern *men* against the Yankees she found herself surrounded by, and a subsequent dismissal of those Northern examples. Perhaps the paper seeks to imply that she was more masculine than Northern men.

The narrative continues with General Butler – he declared her "the most incorrigible she rebel he had ever met with" and imprisoned her. Her husband discovered that she had been captured, and asked if she would speak with him. "She sent him word she never wanted to see him so long as he wore the Yankee uniform. *But he forced himself upon her*, tried to persuade her to take the oath, and get a

release, when he said he would resign and take her to his relations in Connecticut. She indignantly spurned his proposition, and he left her to her fate.” [my emphasis] Her womanhood and Southern identity were carefully and strongly constructed as interdependent in this article. First, she appeared in a homespun dress. In doing so she established her femininity – not the femininity of the North, but the strong and independent femininity of the South. In spite of her following masculinity, her close ties to the private sphere, indicated by the ability to make a dress, allow her to maintain femininity in Southern eyes. Next, she spurns her husband in favor of her country – her patriotism is not only greater than her womanly duties, her patriotism now *is* her womanly duty, and this is quite endorsed in the tone of the retelling. Next, he retorts with inappropriate behavior for a man toward a respectable woman: “he forced himself upon her.” Here it means that he visited her without her consent, but given other anti-Union comments (such as calling a general a beast), we can safely say that the newspaper intended the a scandalous double entendre of rape, just as the North, in invading and making war, is metaphorically raping the entire South. However, she, being a proper Southern woman, re-enacts the whole of the metaphor and rejects him, even when he offers to abandon the war if she will just rejoin him in peace in the North. She is not only an outstanding patriot, but she actually becomes the South incarnate. The heroism of rejecting a man is a re-enactment of the South rejecting the North.¹¹

Another article told of a woman who converted a man to the Southern cause. General Boyde was an early supporter of the rebellion, and when he joined the war his daughter came along with him to the war “and on two occasions, heroically, as a modern Joan of Arc led on the troops to battle...” Unfortunately, she was captured. While traveling on a federal steamer, the young lady met Yankee Lt. Hardinge. “They mutually became enamored and escaped together from the ship, and found their way to this country, the bride having succeeded in withdrawing her lover from his allegiance to the United

¹¹ “Career of a Female Volunteer,” *Savannah Republican*, June 30, 1863, http://www.utttyler.edu/vbetts/women_soldiers.htm.

States flag, and enlisted his sympathies and support for the South.” Here she did not merely reject an inappropriate Northern man, she transformed him into a supporter of the South. Nor was this her only active participation in the rebellion; she also led troops. Her exceedingly active patriotism matched her father's, yet she did not merely follow his lead; she also acted in her own capacities. Just as impressively and importantly, she succeeded at a basic feminine imperative – love and marriage. Her fearless patriotism heightened, rather than damaged, her claims to womanhood.¹²

Compared to Northern papers, the Southern ones placed little emphasis what happened to these women after discovery. Sometimes a story about a woman-soldier revealed that a woman who at first pretended manhood could continue to be a patriot after being discovered, or even after a marriage. One such story is that of Mrs. Williams, who masqueraded as Lt. Harry Buford until she was arrested. She was released, and thereafter continued to serve in the secret service. Later, she married Jeruth DeCaulp, after “obtaining a divorce from her first husband, Williams, who is in the army of General Grant.” She has fought, been discovered, released, continued to fight against her own husband, divorced him, and married a good Southerner. The paper goes on to tell what judgment such behavior brings: “In consideration of her services the Confederate Government has commissioned Mrs. DeCaulp with the rank of Captain.... The heroine of this sketch is a native of Mississippi, and a devoted Southern Woman.” Unlike in the North, where a discovered woman was expected to go home, in the South she could continue fighting and be rewarded for it. Furthermore, she was honored as a woman and a heroine, despite what we might expect would be a relatively scandalous divorce under normal circumstances.¹³ In the North, by comparison, one woman was given the honorary rank of major in a state militia, and the Federal government ended up rewarding a few female veterans with pensions, but

12 “Marriage of a Confederate Heroine,” *Bellville [TX] Countryman*, Nov 1, 1864,
http://www.utttyler.edu/vbetts/women_soldiers.htm.

13 “The Female Lieutenant” *Weekly Columbus[GA] Enquirer*, Oct 6, 1863,
http://www.utttyler.edu/vbetts/women_soldiers.htm.

never did a woman receive a commission.

A remarkably similar tale surfaced directly after the war about Mrs. Loretta De Camp – possibly the same person, given the similarity of the last name. She worked her way up from soldier to provost marshal, doing many acts of manly heroism before she met Major De Camp, “To whom she was engaged to be married previous to the war.” She married him, and “From the dashing Lieutenant Roach she was transformed to the sober Mrs. Major De Camp.” When De Camp married it was no longer acceptable for her to have youthful adventures, but that did not mean that she must stop actively supporting the war. After her marriage she began to work in the secret service, traveling far and wide, “and even... as far as the Sioux country.” Unfortunately for her, her husband was captured, and though she got him released, he died soon after. The Confederacy collapsed, and she invested her remaining fortune in an ill-fated trading venture.¹⁴ Again, though the nature of her service changed somewhat, she continued to act in masculine ways, saving her husband from the Yankees, and going far abroad into the land of exotic and threatening Native tribes. While the article had the tempered air of a defeated country and the celebration of her heroism was dampened by later failure, she was not condemned at all for a lack of appropriate femininity.

Sometimes a woman could even act rebellion out openly, without disguising her gender. A notable example is Diana Smith. The newspapers carried a rather Romantic account of her time in the war, though she did not serve as a regular. She was the tender, beautiful, pious, patriotic, freedom loving, sixteen-year-old daughter of a pious, peaceful man who lived in the mountains until the North invaded, at which time he raised a company of guerrillas and led them until he was captured. She, too, the paper claims, had resisted the Yankees and acted quite heroically, escaping from their capture five times, engaging them in battle alongside her father, and seeing “blood flow like water.” The paper even

¹⁴ “Romance of the War – Thrilling Adventures of a Young and Beautiful Woman” *Bellville [TX] Countryman* April 13, 1866, http://www.uttyler.edu/vbetts/women_soldiers.htm.

tells of one event where “this fearless girl was surrounded by fifty Yankees and Union men, when she went rushing through their ranks with a daring that struck terror to their craven hearts.” After this, she made her way West, to live with the “Mountain Rangers,” knowing, of course, that such brave and noble men would protect her. The paper concluded that she had been out there for months, living a hard but honest life in the mountains.

This article reflects many aspects of Southern culture. First, the article uses the rhetoric of rural freedom-loving. “She is descended from a race of unflinching nerve, and satisfied with nothing less than freedom as unrestrained as the pure air of their mountain home.” There is a lot of idealizing rural people, and almost the application of the noble-savage myth, both to her, and to the mountain rangers she eventually lived with. Secondly, her femininity was carefully maintained; she might fight ferociously, but she did so because of filial piety – because she so loved her father, and her father had raised her to so love freedom. She was beautiful, young, and virtuous, the epitome of uncorrupted womanhood. Finally, she was more masculine than Yankee men. When she charged through a group of fifty of them and struck fear into all of their hearts, she was doing so with pure bravado, an ultimate demonstration of individual masculinity in war-time. The fact that Yankees could not stand up to it, but were struck still, indicates that all of them together could not match her. A Southern and Western *woman*, who never stops being a woman, is more *manly* than Yankee men.¹⁵

On the other hand, sometimes these women were blamed for the failures of the rebellion, or accused of unforgivably violating social laws. In 1862 at least one editorialist was firmly opposed to the idea of female cross-dressing. “A *female* woman arrived in our city a few days since, dressed in the *male* uniform of a confederate soldier, accompanied by a gentleman who represented himself as an officer in the Confederate army” (original italics). When they were arrested, they claimed to be following a spy

¹⁵ “Diana Smith, the Heroine of the Northwest” *Dallas Herald* Jan. 7, 1863
http://www.uttyler.edu/vbetts/women_soldiers.htm.

and were released. The correspondent editorialized, "I am teetotally opposed to women 'wearing the breeches,' and hope our city authorities will permit no feminines to pass through the city in that sort of disguise. It is an infringement upon the 'rights of men' that ought not for a moment to be tolerated."¹⁶ This editorial was published relatively early in the war and undoubtedly displays an opinion that many held before it. Few others openly criticized female soldiers during the war, but this criticism offers important evidence that the South had not yet reached a unanimous cultural agreement about this issue.

Criticizing women on account of their violating gender conventions was extremely rare. Only slightly less rare was attacking them for violating the rules of respectability. In one instance, two young ladies had recently been found in the army. At first, the papers lauded them as heroines. However, a bit later, a paper ran a story that "the captain [of their company] asserts that the women were common camp followers, and that they have been the means of demoralizing several hundred men in his command." Of course, the slightly veiled accusation here is that these women were prostitutes. The article explained the danger that these women posed: "The country had here an insight into one of the probable causes of the utter worthlessness and inefficiency of some of the commands in the valley. Hidden in Early's camp like the stolen Babylonian garment and silver in the camp of the Hebrews, defeat and disaster ever follows, and ever will continue to cling to it, like the shirt of Nemish until purged of the unclean presence."¹⁷ In this case, these women were scapegoats for the failure of the army, but there needed to be specific circumstances before this could happen. First, the army had to fail. Even when women were found in the midst of failure, they were not blamed until their reputations had been called into question. It was only after they had been accused, not just of not being respectable, but of being whores, an unclean presence that offended God, that they became the source of the army's failure,

¹⁶ "Our Special Correspondence from Rome" Atlanta *Southern Confederacy*, May 31, 1862
http://www.utttyler.edu/vbetts/women_soldiers.htm.

¹⁷ "Pants Versus Petticoats," *Richmond Daily Examiner*, Oct. 31, 1864
http://www.utttyler.edu/vbetts/women_soldiers.htm.

and were rejected. Note that the article did not condemn female soldiers as a group, but used language of the Bible and pollution, language that would apply only to the worst women, such as these women, accused of prostitution.

It is important to recognize the differences between Northern and Southern accounts of cross-dressing women. Stories about how women took up vices such as smoking to look more like men, a common trope in the North, were completely absent in the South. Also missing was the indication that love of a man should be superior to, or even equal to, love of the country. Rather the opposite! In contrast, Northern discourse completely lacked women taking up arms in opposition to men. Of course, the Southerners also rarely had to deal with unrespectable women, especially African Americans, joining the army.

The South had a completely different, and much more complimentary, view of female soldiers than the North. In the North, women had to struggle to maintain femininity in spite of mannish actions, such as volunteering for the army. Few cross-dressing women were thought of as patriots; most were explained away in terms of love and youthful spirit. The South, in contrast, actively celebrated the patriotism of these women. These women's patriotism seemed to heighten their femininity. This supports the thesis that women in the South were important because they encouraged their men to patriotism and commitment, but it also shows that the South was remarkably flexible with its gender system. The stress of fighting an undermanned war stretched the definition of womanhood to focus more on self-reliance and love of freedom than the constrained responsibilities of the private sphere. The end result was that the Southern virtue of active, public-sphere patriotism became a lauded, if non-essential, part of womanhood.

“It would be more proper to send them both to the insane asylum”¹
After the war

After the Civil War, the landscape of American identity changed drastically. Perhaps the most obvious outcome of the war was the elimination of many of the legal distinctions between African Americans and whites. While the fervor from the Second Great Awakening was receding into historical memory, women's demands for rights increased. The bloomer costume regained popularity, and by the 1890's, several Western states had granted women suffrage. The West itself was being constructed in the American imagination as a place of lawlessness, even as the area itself was being settled and managed. Medical institutions were on the rise, and with them, the perception of the cross-dressing woman as criminal or insane became a viable way to address their threat to changing understandings of gender. These changes, and others, so upset American identity that cross-dressing was no longer always a safe way to address or circumvent gender. Women who passed as men were now often thought of as threatening, so cross-dressing was commonly either trivialized through failure, or, in case of irrefutable success, trivialized through insanity. Exceptions to this model, however, undoubtedly existed. Many stories were told of cross-dressing in the West without a hint of disapproval. At other times, cross-dressing was not only allowed, it seemed to heighten femininity. After the war, there were divergent discourses on cross-dressing, an indication that American gender was becoming even more complex. These changes to American culture, and their resultant anxieties, were not taking place in discrete vacuums, but were interacting to create densely woven intersectional texts.

The following article, accompanied by image 3, is an excellent example of how difficult it can be to pick apart and analyze these texts, due to the intersection of shifting identities.

“Jefferson, Tex., February 8 – A young actress, Miss Viola Rosedale, created a sensation here to-day by blacking her face, putting on male attire, and, in the character of a negro hostler, riding a race-horse at break-neck speed through the town.”²

1 “Article 1 – no title,” Philadelphia *Saturday Evening Post*, May 19, 1866, in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

For being so short, this article does an amazing amount. First, the story is set as quintessentially Western – it is set in Texas in fact, the most freedom-loving and lawless of the states, which had been, for a time, its own country. Next, the article introduces a young actress, a working woman, who sought notoriety to help her find work. She put on black-face, and so became racially charged. She dressed as a man and gained the necessary social capital to pull the stunt off. Then, in the guise of a horse-groom, she rode a fine horse quickly through town. While the article does not explicitly state that this act was actually illegal, the accompanying picture shows a rather distressed horse being goaded on by an effeminate person, breaking through a small flock of geese, possibly a mother and chicks. The implication is that this activity disturbed the peace of this small town, and was rather dangerous to boot. In this small article, we can see several cultural shifts: defining the West, increased racial anxiety, and, since the woman was not punished, an increased acceptance of non-threatening, task based, cross-dressing. While this article may be somewhat unique in its denseness, it was not unusual in its expression of the intersection of cultural anxieties.

2 “A Variety Actress in a New Sensation,” New York, *The National Police Gazette*, Feb 22, 1879, in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.



Image 3

However, the shift of public opinion about the bloomer, or American costume, in post-war rhetoric occurred more independently than other similar changes. Public opinion in the 1850's held bloomerism as a social disgrace. Yet directly after the Civil war, the bloomer costume came to be seen as a positive social good. This change was part of a larger move towards women's rights. While not yet achieved, feminist goals became less threatening and more mainstream after the Civil War.

After the war, doctors again lectured on the unhealthiness of women's current attire and even went so far as to suggest that women and girls dress precisely as men and boys, but with a "light, loose, flowing gown" over top, to distinguish the sexes. Stays and long heavy skirts, Dr. Richardson asserted, caused deformity and illness.³ The remarkable difference between before and after the war, however, is that the American public, or at least the newspaper editors, were listening. Dr. Mary Walker, made famous by the war, provided excellent grounds for contesting the issue. She was arrested for wearing male attire in 1866, when she wore the bloomer costume. But the headline in the *Circular* now blared "The Dress Revolution," and "Their [New Yorkers] First Sight of a Woman Sensibly Dressed," a far cry from earlier attacks, such as "How to Cure a Bloomer."⁴ The article began, "An incident occurred this

3 "Health and Disease" Chicago *Christian Advocate*, April 9, 1880, in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

4 "Curing a Bloomer" Boston *Flag of our union*, Oct 28, 1854, in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

week in New York which will call renewed attention to the rights of American women to free themselves from the absurd tyranny of Paris milliners, and to dress in a costume of their own invention, suited to good sense and health. A lady, appearing in the streets in her usual dress – that of a short skirt and pantallets – was beset by a mob, arrested and subjected to the proceedings before a magistrate.” This paragraph leaves no uncertainty about the paper's opinion on the subject. A woman, in her usual and sensible dress was rebelling against tyranny, without revoking or disguising her femininity, when she was harassed, arrested, and tried. The blame for the situation rests solely on the masses and the police.⁵

This *Circular* went on to give a digest of other pieces published around the event, starting with the *New York Times*, which related that Dr. Mary Walker was an object of substantial sympathy for Americans because of her service in the war. When she was walking downtown she “was followed by a few rowdies, who were anxious to get a glimpse of her peculiar attire. Officer Johnson, ... instead of dispersing the rabble, preferred to exercise his authority upon the unoffending lady.” She was charged with disorderly conduct and wearing male attire, but, the *New York Times* protested, “The lady dresses in a manner which she was compelled to resort to while on duty in the army ...” She was fined \$800, and jailed for two hours. The *Times* complained that “Justice Mansfield, however ... proclaims that Mrs. Walker must dress according to his idea of the fashions.” The *Circular's* article then went on to introduce a piece from the *Tribune*, which “issued its protest against the action of the police authorities in the case, in the following manly words.” Here protecting a woman's right to choose her dress is labeled as manly. The proper duty of every man is now to defend both a woman, and her right to dress, as the *Tribune* puts it, more comfortably and modestly than what was being worn at “fashionable parties.” The article went on to recount how the case was dismissed, and the arresting officer

5 “The Dress Revolution” Brooklyn *Circular*, Jun 18, 1866, in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

reprimanded. Finally, the *Circular* editorialized, “Thus the right of women to wear the short dress in the city is on the whole vindicated. The women of the country will thank Mrs. Dr. Walker for the courage and firmness with which she has asserted this right for them all.”⁶ Over and over again this article commented on the modest look of the dress, and over and over this article indicated a *right* to wear short dress, where before the war the short dress was widely attacked as ridiculous. As the chronology of the article progressed public opinion actively shifted, and a court decision which at first condemned Walker changed to condemn instead her arresting officer. Eventually, even the very judge who first ordered her fined changed his mind, and canceled it.⁷

The *National Citizen and Ballot-Box* also weighed in. The paper asked “If Dr. Mary Walker or any woman is to be arrested for wearing male attire, why not arrest the Supreme Court of the United States when they appear in their big-sleeved, voluminous black satin gowns? What is sauce for the goose should be sauce for the gander also.”⁸ Remarkably, the article asserted that women wearing short-dress were just as respectable as the justices in their formal robes of the Supreme Court, or, just as shockingly, that it was as unseemly for the Supreme Court to appear in their robes as it was for a woman to wear the bloomer costume.

This shift in public rhetoric cannot simply be chalked up to Dr. Mary Walker being a war hero. When the any woman was arrested for wearing the bloomer costume, it looked surprisingly similar to Walker's experience. She might be arrested, or even fined, but overall, the newspapers decried such judgments as unfair, or accused the judges of being hypocrites, as some judges claimed that they had no personal objection to the clothing, and that there was no law against it, but threatened a fine anyways.⁹

6 “The Dress Revolution Brooklyn” Brooklyn *Circular*, Jun 18, 1866, in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

7 “More about the Short Dress,” Brooklyn *Circular*, June 25, 1866, in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

8 Quoted in “Woman's Topics” Oneida *The American Socialist*, Jul 12, 1879, in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

9 “Curiosities of the Law,” Oneida *The American Socialist* May 17, 1877, in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

Nor was the paper's pressure unheeded; arresting officers were reprimanded and told to resign.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the arrests continued, and continued to be commented on, at least until the late 1870's. Social commentary from respectable sources, well informed-judges, superior police officers, and the newspapers supported these women. Yet unrespectable individuals – the rabble, unemployed boys and men – and lower police officers continued to perceive these women as a threat and harass them. Still, middle class standards had shifted such that women were now permitted, in the respectable American mind, to wear these clothes. Respectability was beginning to shift to include women's rights, at least among the more progressive of the middle class.

Along with the surprising acceptance of bloomers, a new pattern for cross-dressing women appeared – dressing as a man for a very specific, short term goal. In many articles this goal was to escape an untenable living situation, while in others it was to run away with a lover. Still other articles tell of ladies who went out on a lark to flirt with their friends, to vote, to see what went on in saloons, or even just to wear a particularly snazzy hat. While a few stories from before or during the war told of women cross-dressing in order to travel, or occasionally in order to enter public places for fun, the quantity, diversity, and tone of post-war the articles are worth new attention. The emergence of this narrative was one part of an attempt to make cross-dressing women non-threatening. In these stories, the cross-dressers are either irrefutably marked as women or fail at performing masculinity. They manage to avoid strict censure because they do not appropriate manhood. A narrative of normative women failing at reproducing masculinity helped to assuage concerns about the rights women had gained during the Civil War.

One woman, sixteen years old, ran away from home with “no particular direction” or

¹⁰ “Patrick Vs. 'The Am. Costume'” *New York Herald of Health*, Jun 1865, in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

A Question of Dress in a San Francisco Court , *New York Times*, Jun 11, 1866, in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

destination. She got all the way from Massachusetts to Chicago dressed as a man before being discovered by a police officer. When asked about why she left, “a vague reference was made to the existence of a stepmother. As to love, or any other foolishness of that sort, it was perfectly preposterous ... nor was she pursuing ... any body who had wronged her or her family.” The article went on to assure readers that she came from a respectable family and that her sisters were married. The authorities decided to notify her parents and provided her with comfortable lodgings in the house of the police superintendent for the night. In this story, a respectable, if slightly misguided, young lady dressed as a man for one reason – simply to travel. In the end, she was not punished for her harmless donning of male attire, but treated gently, and then sent home.¹¹

Another young lady relived the tale of the prodigal son. Just seventeen, she lived with her widowed father in New England. She was courted by a man who seemed agreeable to both of them, but who was really a scoundrel. He induced her to run away from her father and marry him. They traveled all the way to the desert of California where they lived in a tent, and he abused her dreadfully. Finally, he ran off and she recovered. Determined to leave the place, she cut her hair and dressed as a man, then gained employment as a shepherd. She was no good at the work so she gave it up, and began to walk to the coast. Alone and friendless, she collapsed in the desert, where she was found by a rancher, who cared for her until her father could come redeem her. Again, male attire was adopted solely in order to travel. Most importantly, dressing as a man did not, in this case, enable anything but travel – it did not allow her to find good work and make money, or enable her to find greater fortitude within herself, but merely allowed her to pass unmolested from her abusive husband to her loving father. Again, her dressing in male attire was neither rewarded nor condemned.¹²

11 “In Male Attire,” *Little Rock Daily Republican*, Jan 17, 1873. In Gale 19th century U.S. Newspapers database <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/> (11/03/09)

12 “Real Romance,” *Inter Ocean* (Chicago, IL) Aug 4, 1874, in Gale 19th century U.S. Newspapers database <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/> (11/3/09)

Other articles recount more frivolous stories about women's cross-dressing. A Western paper told about a young woman “who imagines that her sex deprives her of a great many pleasures ...” She decided to don the breeches and “visited one or two of her female acquaintances, and had a delightful time making love to them and playing the beau after a fashion peculiarly her own.” At last, she started home again, “cocking her hat jauntily on one side, and swaggering into the street with an exaggerated idea of a masculine walk.” However, walking home she began to imagine herself followed and giving into her “feminine instincts” she ran, which of course prompted a chase. She ran all the way home, and burst back into her house. Her father, convinced that she was a burglar, “sprung to the lamp and turned up the light, and instead of the ferocious features of the burglar and assassin, beheld the terror-stricken countenance of his little ewe lamb.” The article went on to suppose that she was lectured, but also commented that she made a “very attractive young gentleman.” Once more, the story is of a woman who dressed as a man for a specific purpose – to play a trick on her friends, and have a bit of fun. Once again, the story reached an odd conclusion. She was not very heavily punished or judged, but at the same time, her escapades failed, and her actions left no doubt that she was a woman – she failed at performing manhood, but she did not merit the harsh judgment of women who dressed as men for fun before the war.¹³

One of the most fascinating articles from this period is the following advertisement:

THE REASON WHY. - Our readers will remember the circumstances of the arrest of a woman who was taken into custody last week on a charge of wearing male attire. The reason given for her assumption of the garments of the other sex caused her immediate release. She had only donned pantaloons that she might wear one of KNOX'S Spring-style hats, to be had at No. 212 Broadway, New-York.¹⁴

The piece shows a previously unthinkable latitude for cross-dressing, and exemplifies the amplification

13 “In Male Attire,” *Daily Rocky Mountain News* (Denver, Co) Jan 9, 1879, In Gale 19th century U.S. Newspapers database <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/> (11/3/09)

14 “Classified Ad 9 – No title,” *New York Times*, June 12, 1868, in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

of the phenomenon in post-war years. Cross-dressing on a lark, to simply experience a single aspect of male privilege, in this case, the privilege to wear an INCREDIBLY snazzy hat, had grown so prevalent in the public consciousness that it could be used for an advertisement. The advertisement suggested that this particular male privilege was so tempting that it would be excusable for a woman to transgress boundaries in order to participate in it. So of course men, who would need to do nothing more than spend money, should wish to obtain the object as well. The advertisement also indicated that this transgression was not a big deal – she only wore pants in order to wear a hat, rather than to actually participate in society as a man.

Yet another article tells of an early and illegitimate attempt at women's suffrage.

A young lady ... got herself into a serious scrape on election day by attempting to assume the rights of a suffragist under false pretenses. Dressing herself up in male garments, she boldly advanced to the ballot box and offered her ticket. Her feminine manners excited suspicion, and one of the onlookers raised her hat, and down tumbled a mass of auburn hair. She was taken into custody, and will probably be cured of any desire for voting in the future.¹⁵

The accompanying picture (image 4) makes the distinction even more clear. The girl, in the foreground, holds a dynamic pose, her hat just lifted, surprise and dismay written across her face. The three men in the picture, however, have have somber expressions, and are depicted as nearly static compared to the girl. Again, she is dressing as a man for a specific reason, to vote, but she does not manage to attain that goal. While a dark threat, that she would be “cured of any desire for voting,” still looms in her future, the article did not actually treat her attempt to vote seriously.

¹⁵ “How A Jersey Girl Tried to be an Elector” New York *The National Police Gazette*, Nov 13, 1880, in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.



Image 4

Still more articles tell of women wearing the breeches for practical reasons. One tells the story of Jane Wesner, who was picked up for wearing men's clothes. She argued that she worked at a forge in an instrument factory, and that if she wore a dress, it would catch fire and she would die. The judge merely “recommended her to wear her proper habiliments when she went into the street.”¹⁶ Similarly, the *New York Observer and Chronicle* reported on a

woman in Sandisfield who goes into the field partly arrayed in male attire, and swings the scythe with all the ease, grace and efficiency of a farmer. About the eleventh hour she repairs to her domicile, prepares the frugal meal for self and family, and after the repast, with rake in hand, does duty for the remainder of the day. She has been the mother of thirteen children. There is another who goes into the woods in mid-winter, and helps propel a cross-cut saw with as much dexterity as any man, and can wield the hoe equal to the best.¹⁷

These articles perfectly demonstrate the change implicit in both the acceptance of bloomerism,

16 “Woman Compelled to wear Male Attire” *St Louis Globe-Democrat*, October 7, 1876, in Gale 19th century U.S. Newspapers database <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/>

17 “Gleanings,” *New York Observer and Chronicle*, Sept 2, 1869, in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

and in the proliferation of stories about short-term cross-dressing. Women could now dress as men, without becoming, or even desiring to become, them. Indeed, cross-dressing women were now expected to fail at masculinity, or alternately excel at a mutually exclusive femininity. A woman could go out to the field and do a man's labor dressed as a man but her position as a woman was unassailable since she was the mother of thirteen children and also cared for the household. Similarly, the young Western woman who dressed up to flirt with her friends did not abandon womanhood, or else she would not have had to flee from her pursuers. Similarly the young woman who ran from her abusive husband in male attire could not participate in masculinity by getting a job, or successfully traveling through a harsh climate, but fainted and had to be rescued by a real man. Again, the young woman who attempted to vote was discovered and dealt with before she could do so. So long as a woman sought only one privilege, whether that be the privilege to move, or to vote, to flirt with her friends, or to wear a fancy hat, she was not actually seeking to become a man. This is a fundamental shift from before the war, when doing so was seen as an inappropriate attempt to become the wrong type of man, whereas after the war, it was simply women attempting to claim non-threatening and small rights, and failing at becoming full men.

Other shifts in national anxiety played out in this time period. Some were particularly visible through the lens of cross-dressing women. One of these easy-to-spot social anxieties was race. At the close of the Civil War, with the passage of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, African American men were granted all the legal rights of citizenship. After a brief time of black leadership in the South, however, there was a great deal of white concern about re-establishing hierarchy. One article reported, “A *white* woman created a sensation in Tuscaloosa, Ala., the other day, by parading the streets in male attire, with a pistol buckled at her waist.”¹⁸ (my emphasis). What is truly

¹⁸ “Fashion and Gossip,” Boston *Flag of our Union*, Oct 30, 1869, in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

remarkable in this article is that it notes the generally unmarked term of whiteness. The action, not just of cross-dressing, but of parading, displaying oneself publicly, with a visible weapon no less, is not the action of a proper *white* woman, the indication being that perhaps this would be more expected from an African American woman. Similarly, we can look back at the first article in this paper, about the young actress who wore black-face and rode through town at breakneck speeds.¹⁹ In this case, a white woman actively participated in constructing stereotypes about African American men as irresponsible and troublesome, even while gaining notoriety which would later help her win an audience.

At the same time, Americans were beginning to construct the national memory of the West. As the land grew increasingly settled throughout the second half of the 1800's, a kind of national nostalgia set in, a desire to create and claim the West as a wild and lawless place, a place which could construct the rugged American national identity. This national nostalgia can perhaps be seen most clearly in acts like "Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show," which started in 1872. Part of that construction, true or not, was the definition of the West as a place of gender transgression. Just as in recent time the West has been seen as a place of flexible masculinity, full of men who embraced femininity in the homosocial spaces of mining camps, so too was the West was constructed as a place of flexible femininity in the 1800's.²⁰

Another tale, distinctly Western in nature, told of a young woman, Ruth, who masqueraded as Tom Johnson, "the son of a prominent citizen," in Texas for several weeks. The story established Tom as an quintessentially Western figure. He was good at riding a horse as well as using revolvers and rifles. He went to camp-meetings and sat on the anxious bench, praying to be reborn. He freely associated with the other young men and called "on several young ladies ... [carrying out] the part of a beau admirably." Indeed, disguised as Tom, Ruth was actually so successful at being a Western man, that "she

19 "A Variety Actress in a New Sensation" New York *The National Police Gazette*, Feb 22, 1879, in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

20 Peter Boag, "Go West Young Man, Go East Young Woman: Searching for the Trans in Western Gender History," *The Western Historical Quarterly* Winter 2005 <<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/whq/36.4/boag.html>> (25 Apr. 2010).

John D'Emillio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters* (Chicago; The University of Chicago Press, 1997), 124.

was fast becoming popular with people of all ages and sexes, particularly with the young ladies of the neighborhood, when, by an unfortunate accident her sex became known.” She was arrested, then released because the judge “knew of no law by which he could hold her.” In the lawless and wild West, it was acceptable to cross-dress. Not only was it not legislated, but the piece seems to have a great deal of sympathy for her.

But the story was also tied up with racial meanings. She dressed as a man because she had “killed a Mexican in Brownwood.” This crime was a marker of both Western identity, and racial tensions. The killing of a Mexican was a purely Western experience; neither Mexicans nor cross-dressing murderers were common in the Eastern cities. The exploration of the racial boundary, her lack of punishment for killing a foreigner with dark skin, is a simultaneous and inseparable marking of race and place. A young lady commits murder, is unafraid to tell people about it, dresses as a man and pretends respectability, then is given the sympathetic benefit of the doubt by the judge, the townspeople, and the newspaper. Yet it is important to remember that she had murdered a Mexican, and social reaction might have been just as much a tacit approval of such actions as a reflection of Western lawlessness.

The West was also constructed more explicitly as a place of female gender transgression. “Nebraska,” it was reported, “produced” a “queer girl ... who speaks four languages, chews and smokes tobacco, plays the most difficult music on the piano, swears, dances superbly, and takes whiskey 'straight.'”²¹ Neither the attributes ascribed to this young woman, nor their order, were random. The attributes were evenly and alternately meted out, coarse, disrespectful, and masculine, versus refined, acceptable, and feminine. Though not officially accused of cross-dressing, she is an excellent example of gender ambiguity in the West. Firstly, it is important that Nebraska has *produced* this girl – she is a wholly Western entity. Next, she has been given half undesirably masculine elements, tobacco,

²¹ “Varieties,” New York *Appletons' Journal of Literature, Science and Art*, Dec. 3, 1870. in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

swearing, and whiskey, but the other half of her is eminently respectable, and thus preserves her from social judgment – she might be queer, but she is not unnatural, mentally ill, or in need of punishment.

A particularly interesting, and likely fictional, account took place in the “far West.” A man was traveling along a rough road after dark. He was jumped by a ruffian, who pointed a gun at his head, and demanded his money. The hero ended up knocking his attacker out with his riding crop, and then discovered that his “assailant was a woman, young, and bearing traces of refinement about her, despite her rough male attire.” He wondered briefly why she had undertaken “an act so dangerous and unwomanly,” but no sooner deposited all of his money in her coat than she awoke, and he escorted her back to her father’s house, a miserable hut, practically falling down, in the middle of the woods. The hero assured her, “I understand you ... no one shall ever know what has occurred tonight from my lips. No wrong has been done that you will forgive. Now go to your father.” At the next town, he found that no one knew how the girl and her father got along, but that they were originally from the East. He reflected, “I had learned one of those ‘means,’ (by which they survived), and I went away from the town with a deeper respect for Julia Windsor than I had ever felt for a woman.” Even if the article ended here, it would be a rich source. A woman moves West, dresses as a man, and engages in highway robbery – and is commended for doing so. Her actions are seen not as unfeminine, as they undoubtedly would be in the East, but rather as ultra-feminine, and as necessary to her filial piety, made possible by the looser standards of the West.²²

But the story did not end there; it picked back up a few years later, back in the East. Julia had returned to society, and apparently was no longer destitute. The hero and heroine re-united and expressed their true and undying love to one another. The hero re-stated his *admiration* of her acts. Her dressing as a man and participating in crime are not only palatable within the context of the West, but

²² “The Road Agent” Boston *Massachusetts Ploughman and New England Journal of Agriculture*, Aug. 16, 1879, in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

laudable, and rewarded with true love and the prospect of a good marriage. Just as important, however, is that she experienced fluid boundaries in the West – she was both refined, and a criminal, a woman and dressed as a man. This fluidity was made possible only by the standards of the West, though it was encouraged by her love of her father. But she also returned to the proper standards of behavior when she returned to the East; she resumed female attire, and her place in respectable society. It was imperative to shift the American cultural imagining of cross-dressing women from successful masculinity before the war to ultimately feminine after the war. This shift sought to contain the growth of the woman's sphere before it became an abolishment of the separate spheres ideology altogether. This story was the fusion of the construction of the West as lawless, and an attempt to re-explain what might be threatening stories of successful cross-dressing as gender normative. She may have been successful in masculinity – cross-dressing and robbing – in the West, but only in for the sake of her father. Thus her success at masculinity, and other previous successes at manhood from before the war, might be explained away as appropriate femininity.²³

After the Civil War, American ideas about how to deal with threatening differences changed. The Second Great Awakening, and its moral imperatives, must have seemed distant after four wrenching years of bloody war. As moralistic language and gender stability began to wane, Americans sought to contain the newly threatening successful cross-dressing women. America began to think more and more about institutionalizing the irregular in order to trivialize and contain it. Medical language, especially language of mental sickness, was increasingly applied to cross-dressing women who were successful at passing as men. This label also often, but not always, applied to women who were involved in what would today be termed lesbian relationships, which threatened the status quo and hegemony of compulsory heterosexuality. The branding of same-sex relations as a disease was facilitated by reduced expectations of social sentimentalism between women. That reduction itself was a symptom of the

²³ Ibid.

shrinking ideal of separate spheres, and the growth of women's rights.

By the late 1860s women who had dressed as men and taken a wife for a long time were almost guaranteed to be seen as insane. The following is a good, if short, example of the rhetoric:

About a year ago a daughter of Major Daniel Perry, who is somewhat deranged, disappeared, and wandering off, was at last lodged in Sullivan county almshouse, N.Y., as a vagrant. Here she met another monomaniac by the name of Lucy Slater, and the two becoming very much attached to each other, decided to become man and wife. They left the almshouse last summer, and returned to Abington, where they have lived in the bonds of wedlock, as supposed by the neighbors, Lucy, alias James Slater, wearing male attire up to the present time. She was arrested last Monday, and brought before Justice Hersey, of Abington, for this offense, and sentenced to the Plymouth house of correction. It would be more proper to send them both to the insane asylum at Taunton.²⁴

In this article, both individuals are described as insane, and in their depravity and insanity, unfortunately unaided by society, they attached to one another. Eventually this led to the imprisonment of the more aggressively transgressive one, Lucy, who wore men's clothes. The newspaper asserted, however, that these two women could not help this behavior, and ought to be treated for their medical problems, rather than imprisoned. Still, considering these women by the previous rubric of morality yields useful results. They met in a poor house, hardly a highly desirable place, but at least one of them was the daughter of a major, and thus came from a relatively respectable family. Furthermore, neither one was accused of gross breeches of morality, such as prostitution. They went on to live together without exciting suspicion or attracting attention to themselves. Lucy was playing the man for money and the ability to exist in the world, rather than going to bars. While they might have been somewhat condemned by antebellum society, they certainly would not have been termed insane.

Yet this couple was not the only one judged insane. Another excellent example was provided by the case of Edward DeLacy Evans, "A Woman who for twenty years played a man's part and was married as a man." The article starts – "Extraordinary disclosures have been made regarding the female

²⁴ "Married and Single," Philadelphia *Saturday Evening Post*, May 19, 1866, in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

lunatic discovered in male attire.” Again, insanity was established from the beginning. The rest of the article goes on to recount Evans' life, including three marriages, at least one of which produced a child, despite the wife's insistence that “she never knew the secret of her presumed husband's sex.” This account captured the Victorian imagination as much as it does the modern, for the article spends a great deal of time considering various seemingly impossible situations in which Evans escapes detection as a woman, such as sleeping in the same room as the warden of the mental hospital for six weeks. In this account, at least, we may establish Evans and Evans' wife as unrespectable people – since Evans' wife must have cheated on her husband in order to get pregnant, and Evans married not once, but three times. Still, the assumption that Evans was not only insane, but violently so, was a new element of the social reaction to women who dressed as men.²⁵

The insanity of cross-dressing was not limited to women who dressed as men and acquired lovers, but was applied to those who we might otherwise expect to be treated with relative respect and acceptance. One such example was Emma Sands, who went missing for two weeks in June of 1879. The paper recounted that she was presumed to have been murdered or to have killed herself until she was found, skillfully disguised as a man: “She was dressed in male attire, her hair was cut short, and her efforts to conceal her sex had been skillfully, and for the most part successfully, made.” She was described as one of four outstandingly intelligent and beautiful daughters of a widow – a poor but honest family. However, readers were informed, “Whether it will restore the wanderer to her home is doubtful, as there seems to be no question that she is hopelessly insane.” Despite this assertion, the newspaper gave no account of any behavior that would prompt the belief that this young woman was insane. In fact, rather the opposite, the article ends, “It is not known that Miss Sands had any mental troubles that would account for her insane actions. She had not given indications of a disordered mind...”

25 “In Male Attire,” *Inter Ocean (Chicago)*, November 5, 1879, in Gale 19th century U.S. Newspapers database <http://infotrac.galegroup.com/> (11/3/09)

No motive, sane or insane, is ascribed to her “tramp,” a stark change from even during the war, when women were often given romantic motives, such as the search for a lover, without any evidence at all. Instead, she is ascribed with insanity to circumscribe and remove the threat posed by her skillful “and for the most part successful” attempts to disguise her sex. Thus, the shift from the assumption of love to the assumption of insanity is both novel and significant. It indicates a new discomfort with cross-dressing, an attempt to end a past era of relative respectability, and replace it with an era of dangerous insanity. In other words, if a language of insanity was the means, the re-establishing of gender role was the ends.²⁶

Another article outlined the details of the new insanity explicitly. It began by defining “harmless” insanities - “an insane passion for old postage stamps,” for example. Next, the article went on to detail how those previously thought to be criminal or immoral were truly sick. Such was “the poor drunkard, whose feeble will is unable to resist his powerful desire for intoxicating drinks” and “is now confined to an asylum, and treated with drugs instead of moral lectures.” Kleptomaniacs too were now described as insane. Their stealing would be paid for and hushed up if rich, but if the “victim of this passion is poor and without influence, it is looked upon as a crime and punished as such.” So far the article has outlined how what was previously seen as criminal or immoral was changing to be seen as insane, and acknowledged that the upper classes were more likely to accept medicalization and treatment than lower classes, who would probably merely be punished for inappropriate behavior.²⁷

The article went on, however, to recount a new disease – gynomania, or transvestitism. As the article put it, “We refer to the passion that some younger people have for the dress and manner of the opposite sex.” The author identifies it as a new disease – one which affects only young people. This corresponded with cross-dressing's recent social status as a problem. This definition also avoids the

26 “General Telegraph News: An Insane Girl's Tramp,” *New York Times*, Jun 20, 1879, in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

27 “Gynomania and other Manias” *New York Scientific American*, Jan 20, 1877, in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

question of what to do with all those female veterans of the Civil War – now twelve years past. Since the disease was a recent issue, those who cross-dressed years ago were not affected. Though old standards of morality were receding, they were still potent. The article reminded readers that young ladies who put on too much of a masculine air are considered “fast” and thus “modest and virtuous girls relinquish the extreme styles to their sisters of a bolder class.” So this disease was rendered by the remnants of moral judgments from the Second Great Awakening to be something which seized mostly the less respectable in its grasp. Perhaps the most striking feature of this article, however, is its attention towards not just cross-dressing women, but also cross-dressing men. Here, though, rather than claiming that a fully respectable man might simply steer clear, an example is given of a respectable young man who passed himself off as a woman in neighboring towns. In spite of his firm resolve he could not manage to refrain, no matter how he might be punished when discovered.²⁸

Not all agreed, however, that these insane women were harmless. Especially towards the end of the century, a new narrative came into fashion, the narrative of an insane young lady attaching to a normal peer and then murdering her. In 1879 Lily Duer shot and killed Ella Hearn, to whom she allegedly had a morbid attachment. Papers went so far as to posit that Duer even had an amount of control “over her more womanly but weaker minded companion...” Articles made a great deal of how both young ladies were from old and respectable families, how beautiful and womanly and promising Ella Hearn was, and how intelligent Lily Duer was. In other words, the article presented this tragedy and insanity as happening to young women who were otherwise the paragon of femininity and social grace – young, intelligent, beautiful, with excellent families – eminently marriageable. Yet Duer was also strange, with an unnatural attachment to Hearn, and marked eccentricities – particularly a skill and fondness for guns, as well as male attire and masculine deportment – meeting stares, and masculine facial features. She was thus marked out as being masculine in spite of herself – masculinity is assigned

²⁸ Ibid.

to her by her features, from which her actions follow, including murder. The hideous crime is an unavoidable result of the insane masculinity which leads to an impossible and insane, even non-functional, love between these two young ladies. Their high social position served to remind readers how Second Great Awakening judgments of morality and social class were morphing to a new order of medicalization.²⁹

In the time after the Civil War, America struggled to stabilize identity and status. National narratives about cross-dressing reflect the attempt to re-contain gender, women who attempted to pass as men were either framed as failures or insane. At the same time opinions on cross-dressing women reached to more areas of American life. This allows reflection on the structures of individual privilege and power, such as gender and class, as well as the social issues of national identity, construction of the West, movement away from morality and towards medicine, the burgeoning women's rights movement, and the social status of African Americans. The restriction of cross-dressing was a result of the very social turbulence that allowed the acceptance of bloomer attire. Social response to cross-dressing women became a reflection of the deep struggles in American life in this period. It showed the decline of the Romantic cross-dressing woman, exchanged for the trivialized or insane, even as feminism matured and began to make demands.

²⁹ "A Female Romeo," New York *The National Police Gazette*, Jun 7, 1879, in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

Afterword

The nineteenth century saw drastic changes in the acceptability and social meaning of cross-dressing. Sometimes it was acceptable in one time and place, but not in another. Since cross-dressing can both reinforce and challenge boundaries, the messages society gives about cross-dressing can at first seem confusing. Generally, in mid to late nineteenth-century America cross-dressing became a barometer for the stability of gender. In places and times where gender was durable, such as in the antebellum North, or when it was not the most important identity marker, such as in the post-war West, cross-dressing was non-threatening and sometimes even further affirmed the gender system. By contrast, in times and places where gender was being actively renegotiated, such as the North during the Civil War, cross-dressing was trivialized or contained because it was seen as a threat.

Much of the evidence covered in this paper was novel and surprising, as well as difficult to interpret. Antebellum expectations that women would totally assume manhood when cross-dressing were thrilling and unexpected, especially given the negative treatment of the bloomer reform at the same time. Stories about Southern women avenging fallen brothers and spurning traitorous husbands were

similarly startling, as they did not fit neatly into pre-existing narratives of the war or Southern gender.

Given the captivating results turned up by this narrow paper, further research would most likely be both interesting and useful. There is a huge amount of material yet to cover when considering cross-dressing in America; the field is still very young. This paper, for instance, deals hardly at all with transgressive men. Though there may have been cross-dressing men throughout the period, only a few examples appeared in the research for this paper. Just as important, the examples that were found displayed very different narratives and understandings than those applied to women from the same period. Compared to female cross-dressers, men were treated with more petty disgust and assumed to have less agency, or even to be completely non-threatening.

Reactions to male cross-dressing were varied in post-war America, but it was often seen as trivial. Such was the reaction of one editorialist who was very happy that two men accused of cross-dressing had been acquitted, since the issue should have been “in the first instance, dealt with in the police courts ... The chief justice's remark, that a sound whipping is the proper penalty for such tricks, has commanded general approval.” This irritation with the case, however, does not indicate a lack of concern about the issue. The author also comments, “It is quite intolerable that such a disgusting and confusing masquerade should be permitted in a decent community.”¹

Another article shows cross-dressing men in an even less threatening light – that of young men playing the role of women in college drama productions. The article brags of how well young men crossed the gender line - “Gradually, from practice and habit, the actor learned to carry himself as if “he” were a “she.” Gradually, too, he began to expect and claim, in the dressing and green rooms, the attention, courtesies and aid which would have been extended to a young woman.” Not only did these young men become women, but they did it often enough to be good at it, though of course, all couched

¹ “The Men In Women's Clothes,” *New York Times*, Jun 2, 1871, in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

in the safety of college and male privilege.² Obviously, the exploration of the issue of male cross-dressing is very limited here. Further research should be done on male cross-dressing in all times and places, as little of what has been written on historical cross-dressing touches on the male experience.

Additionally, much work is left to be done on social reaction to female soldiers of the Civil War. A few Congressional reports on pensions for women who fought in the war have survived and become readily available, but the material fell outside of the time period of the paper. Still, a brief review of what is available for the North is both useful and pertinent. These sources hold important clues for scholars of Northern cross-dressing women not only to the continuing relationship of our nation with female patriotism and the legacy of the Civil War, but also to the continued relationship these women had with their fellow soldiers. Many of these records depended on soldier's testimony as evidence for the granting of a pension.

Veterans continued to have remarkably supportive relationships with their female compatriots from the war. The congressional records on Sarah Seelye contain a good deal of testimony from men who fought alongside her. On March 8, 1886, Congress recieved a report on the possibility of removing the charge of desertion from Sarah. E.E. Seelye's name. Over half of it was testimony submitted on Seelye's behalf by fellow soldiers. They all paint one picture – Seelye was universally liked and respected. Many of the men who testified used male pronouns and continued to use the name Frank for Seelye – even though, according to Byron M. Cutcheon, “As early as that time ... it was suspected and discussed in the brigade that Frank Thompson was a girl, and when he (or she) deserted at Lebenon it excited much comment.”³

This indicates that despite the widespread suspicion that Frank Thompson was actually a

2 “He Playing She,” New York *Scribner's Monthly*, Dec 1878, in Proquest Historical Newspapers. American Periodicals Series, <http://www.proquest.com/en-US/>.

3 Byron Cutcheon, *Franklin Thompson, Alias S. E. E. Seelye*, (desertion) U.S. Congressional Serial Set (49th congress, 1st Session, March 8, 1886), <http://infoweb.newsbank.com>, 10.

woman, she was afforded a great deal of respect and love by her fellow soldiers. They did not jeer or ostracize her, but rather commended her as “a person of good moral character” and as a good soldier - “always ready for duty”⁴ and full of “faithfulness, bravery, [and] efficiency...”⁵ When they wrote to support her, they did so with the same amount of love and admiration that Jerome Robbins had for her during the war. Three of her comrades wrote a letter together, pleading Congress “to grant her a pension for the remainder of her life and any other favors which in your wisdom and generosity you deem just and politic.”⁶ To the soldiers who fought with her it was her abilities as a soldier, not her performance of femininity, that qualified their acceptance and support of Sarah Seelye.

The available documents show that Congress, too, was relatively accepting of women who fought. Congress acknowledged that these women gave good service, and often recommend either the removal of the black mark of desertion or the gift of a pension.⁷ Contrary to what we might expect from newspaper articles published during the Civil War, Congress does not indicate that these rewards are based on womanly service such as nursing. In fact, in Mrs. Brownell's case, they recommend a pension after dwelling on her “conspicuous bravery” rather than her nursing.⁸ Furthermore, they note that Seelye was “a general favorite,” and that “she served honestly and faithfully for two years as a private soldier...; that during her term of service she bore an unblemished character as a soldier, and promptness and cheerfulness in the discharge of every duty.”⁹ The congressmen dealing with these cases were

4 Ibid., 4.

5 Ibid., 5.

6 Ibid., 8.

7 Byron Cutcheon, *Franklin Thompson, Alias S. E. E. Seelye*, (desertion) U.S. Congressional Serial Set (49th congress, 1st Session, March 8, 1886), <http://infoweb.newsbank.com>.

Henry William Blair, *Franklin Thompson, Alias SEE Seelye* (pension), U.S. Congressional Serial Set (48th Congress, 1st Session, June 1 1884), <http://infoweb.newsbank.com>.

Henry William Blair, *Granting a pension to Mrs. Kady Brownell*, U.S. Congressional Serial Set (48th Congress, 1st Session, May 8, 1884) <http://infoweb.newsbank.com>.

8 Henry William Blair, *Granting a pension to Mrs. Kady Brownell*, U.S. Congressional Serial Set (48th Congress, 1st Session, May 8, 1884) <http://infoweb.newsbank.com>.

9 Henry William Blair, *Franklin Thompson, Alias SEE Seelye* (pension), U.S. Congressional Serial Set (48th Congress, 1st Session, June 1 1884), <http://infoweb.newsbank.com>.

comfortable with the idea of women as good and loyal soldiers, worthy of reward.

They still had reservations about female soldiers however. In the report on giving a pension to Seelye, they first describe her case as “remarkable” The document starts by listing the good service that Franklin Thompson gave – but then claims “Truth is oft times stranger than fiction, and now comes the sequel.” It is only after this that the report reveals that Franklin Thompson was born a woman.¹⁰ Still, when attempting to explain Seelye’s desire to join the army, rather than attributing it to some feminine instinct, as newspapers did, the report simply states “by a strange impulse she felt constrained to enter the service.”¹¹ This language indicates that the men writing this report did not understand why a woman would want to join the army, but no longer felt so threatened that they had to make up an appropriately domestic explanation for the behavior. Congress was willing to accept these women, and the service they rendered – fundamentally willing to see them as soldiers, which newspapers often were not, but they still feel queasy and unsure about such a move.

Although cross-dressing has frequently been ignored in American history, this paper proves it can be a deep and important source for sorting out cultural issues, including gender, race, sexuality, and national identity. Scholars of gender have often marginalized cross-dressing as fringe behavior, but cross-dressing offered a very real way for some women to gain privilege and mobility in order to navigate systems which could be incredibly oppressive. Finally, authors who have considered cross-dressing women often failed to recognize their full political potential. These writers have spent much time thinking and writing about the actual lived experience of cross-dressing individuals in America, and the modern implications of older narratives. Such scholars have, for example, detailed out the “progress narrative,” the story of a woman dressing as a man in order to attain some goal, then reclaiming femininity. Having outlined this story they worry about the “highly problematic” intellectual

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ *Franklin Thompson, Alias SEE Seelye* (desertion)

“appropriations of transvestism” implicit in it, and how well it relates to individual experience. Such scholarship raises important and interesting questions about how scholars can we avoid obliterating transgender and other non-normative experiences.¹²

While those discussions are important for considering the experiences of our ancestors, and modern intellectual conundrums, they can only get us so far. Regardless of whether individuals lived the experience of the progress narrative, the story had cultural weight. More important than the truth of any article or narrative are the cultural needs and desires it fills. Bloomers, breeches actresses, female soldiers and Romantic adventurers were all explained with narratives designed to establish definitions of propriety and render their possible transgressions non-threatening. By applying this understanding to narratives and stories told throughout our history we can gain better access to widespread beliefs and fears, and develop a more complex view of America, both past and present.

12 Marjory Garber, *Vested Interests* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993) 68-70

Peter Boag, "Go West Young Man, Go East Young Woman: Searching for the Trans in Western Gender History," *The Western Historical Quarterly* Winter 2005 <<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/whq/36.4/boag.html>> (25 Apr. 2010).

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