

2012

"Truly Theatrical" Deborah Sam(p)son Gannett: an analysis of cross-dressing, gender, and virtue in Revolutionary America and the Early American Republic

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**"Truly Theatrical" Deborah Sam(p)son Gannett: an analysis of cross-dressing,
gender, and virtue in Revolutionary America and the Early American Republic**

by

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A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Major: History

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2012

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INTRODUCTION

The life of Deborah Sam(p)son¹ Gannett is one which illustrates themes of cross-dressing, gender roles, virtue, theatricality, and the experience of women during the Revolutionary War Era in America. During the course of her existence she disguised herself as a man, and as a soldier in the 4th Massachusetts Regiment in the Continental Army during the American Revolution. Her ruse as a soldier required her to don the clothing of a man, and pretend to be one for eighteen months. Deborah's only other serious biographer, Alfred F. Young², in *Masquerade*, concluded that even though Deborah wore the clothes of a man for her time in service, she cannot be categorized as a cross-dresser. Young felt that the terms of cross-dresser, and transvestite are too modern, and therefore cannot be applied to a historical context. He also thinks that Deborah cross-dressed only because she wanted to be a soldier, and not because she desired to wear the clothes of a man. This thesis will disagree on both of his points. Instead, I argue that the historical accounts of Deborah illustrate that she experimented with cross-dressing both before and after her time in military service, so therefore, it is historically valid to consider her a cross-dresser. While the accuracy of these sources are questionable, due to reasons which will be discussed later, virtually every scholar who includes an account of Deborah's life either relies on those primary sources, or uses secondary literature which is based on the same sources.

In addition to examining issues of cross-dressing and gender, this thesis will also analyze how the issue of virtue, with its feminine and masculine characteristics, fits in to the

¹ Although often spelled Sampson in historical accounts, the correct spelling is actually Samson.

² Alfred F. Young, *Masquerade The life and times of Deborah Sampson, Continental Soldier* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2004).

overall guise of Deborah's masquerade. Revolutionary America was a political, social, and economic hotbed. It created a great upheaval and the eventual birth of a new nation, whose republican ideals had very specific concepts of virtue, and ideals of what it expected of women. During the war, women performed acts that they had rarely been expected to do before, which led to a great crossing of gender roles. This crossing of gender roles led to the actions of some women, such as Deborah, who cross-dressed for various reasons.

First it is important to understand what cross-dressing is, and then apply it to the historical framework of Revolutionary America and the Early Republic. Next, it is necessary to understand the many definitions of virtue during this time frame and how they relate to Deborah's specific case. In addition, this thesis will examine the primary sources available concerning Deborah's life, including her biography published in 1797, *The Female Review*, and one of the written speeches for her lecture tour, *An Address Delivered with Applause*. Both of these sources were actually written by a man, rather than by Gannett herself, which introduced revealing biases of the age. Hence, it is necessary to discuss the effect of these biases upon those who interpret Deborah's story. But before any analysis can begin, the story of Deborah's life is essential to know.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The life of Deborah Sampson Gannett is almost always included in studies of the contributions of women during the Revolution, but until recently, no historian has attempted to examine the entirety of her life or its relation to issues within Revolutionary and Early America. Deborah's life has been recorded with great inaccuracy as far back as her original

biographer, Herman Mann. Mann's 1797 book, *The Female Review*³, displayed Mann's underlying Republican agenda, which included his distaste for war and his ideas of androgynous virtue. At the same time, it provided a very unstable framework of Gannett's life and experiences, which has continued to plague her history up to the present era. Possibly the most important early book on women's contributions in the American Revolution, Elizabeth Ellet's 1848 work, (later edited by Lincoln Diamont in 1998), *Revolutionary Women in the War for Independence*⁴, does not truly praise Deborah's actions. This is not unusual, due to the time period during which Ellet was writing. Ellet wanted to highlight the experiences of women and at the same time to downplay them, in order to relate the extreme gender-crossing of boundaries to the necessities of war. In other words, she wished to illustrate the illustriousness of many women's actions but simultaneously explain that the horrors of war made such acts necessary, and that other women should not model themselves on such behavior. While she praised the Amazonian actions of the women she examined, she also related the nature of their actions to the seriousness of the times, and does not wish for women to follow in the footsteps of these heroines. It is only much later in the historiography that scholars have begun to appreciate the true complexity of Deborah's history as a woman and as a soldier.

The scholarship leading up to a new assessment of Deborah connects to the larger context of research focused on exploring the roles of women during the American Revolution, an approach that truly began to evolve with the emergence of Women's History

³ Herman Mann. *The Female Review: Life of Deborah Sampson The Female Soldier in the War of the Revolution*. (Tarrytown, NY: Reprinted by William Abbott, 1916).

⁴ Elizabeth Ellet, *Revolutionary Women in the War for American Independence*. Edited by Lincoln Diamant. (Westport, Connecticut, London: Praegar, 1998).

as a distinct discipline during the 1960s and 1970s. Some of the first books to appear in this period focused on the most publicly visible women in Revolutionary America. Not coincidentally, these works both reflected and stimulated new interest in this period of history, many appearing in connection with the bicentennial celebration for the Declaration of Independence. For example, *The Women of '76*, by Sally Smith Booth, looks at the lives of important women like Abigail Adams, Mercy Otis Warren, and even Deborah Sampson Deborah, and analyzed the uniqueness of their experience during the war.⁵ In *Weathering the Storm: Women of the American Revolution* (1976), Elizabeth Evans analyzed women's contributions and noted that women did not make many advancements, economically, politically, or socially, after the war had ended. This group of historians' significance lies within the great emergence and trend in Women's history and also lies within the context of discovering the more well-known women in history, like the great men in history. In other words, this is the familiar examination of the past through analyzing the greater figures, but instead studying a different gender, women.

In 1980, two women's history specialists, Mary Beth Norton and Linda K. Kerber, published two books that would prove deeply influential, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* and *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America*, respectively.⁶ Both look into the everyday lives of women, and both noted the limited impact the war had on changing the lives of women after it was over. It is in the 1990s and first decade of the twenty-first century where

⁵ Sally Smith Booth, *The Women of '76*, (New York: Hastings House, 1973).

⁶ Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1980); Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology In Revolutionary America*, Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

more and more historians continued to probe the topic of Revolutionary-era women's history. Examples include Charles E. Claghorn's *Women Patriots of the American Revolution: A Biographical Dictionary* (1991), Joan R. Gunderson's *To Be Useful to the World: Women in Revolutionary America, 1740-1790* (1996), Melissa Lukeman Bohrer's *Glory, Passion, and Principle: The Story of Eight Remarkable Women at the Core of the American Revolution* (2003), and Carol Berkin's *Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the Struggle for American Independence* (2005).⁷ These books focus much more closely on the experiences of lesser known women, and all agree that wartime allowed women to perform acts which otherwise may not have been permissible in society, such as espionage and armed combat. They also agree that the status of women did not change much after the end of the war. While the literature on the experiences and role of women during the American Revolution has evolved much over time and now more greatly analyzes and appreciates the roles of women during the Revolution, there is still room for even greater growth and improvement. There is now need for more studies like *Revolutionary Mothers*, which separates the roles of women into categories, like Loyalist Women, Black women, Native-American women, spies, Generals' Wives, etc. While there have been some biographies of important women, such as Abigail Adams, Mercy Otis Warren, etc. and also books which have examined the experience of camp followers, the field of women's Revolutionary-era history still needs much more work

⁷ Charles E. Claghorn, *Women Patriots of the American Revolution: A Biographical Dictionary*, (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1991); Joan R. Gunderson, *To be Useful to the World; Women in Revolutionary America, 1740-1790*, (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Melissa Lukeman Bohrer, *Glory, Passion, and Principle: The Story of Eight Remarkable Women at the Core of the American Revolution*, New York: Atria Books, 2003); Carol Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the Struggle for America's Independence*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2005).

and analysis.⁸ Furthermore, more analysis is needed examining the women within each of these subgroups in order to truly capture the voice of the subaltern.

As far as the literature on Deborah is concerned, only one historian so far has recently attempted a standalone biography of her life. While Deborah is included in the recently-authored histories of women in the American Revolution described above, not much analysis has been done on her specifically. Many scholars who study speech, such as Judith Hiltner⁹, have examined the language and rhetorical strategies that Deborah employed during her lecture tour of the early nineteenth century. Writers such as Julie Wheelwright and Jean Berhke Eishtain¹⁰, who are interested in the history of female soldiers, have noted Deborah's story.¹¹ But to date, the only scholarly account on Deborah's life is Alfred F. Young's, *Masquerade: The Life and Times of Deborah Sampson, Continental Soldier* (2004).¹² Young's work is problematic, as he biographies Deborah's life, but fails to see her for what she was, a cross-dresser. It is unacceptable to write an account of Deborah and note how she played with her gender both before, during, and after the war, and think that she cannot be considered a cross-dresser, even under the simplest definition of dressing in the clothes of a different gender. This thesis will illustrate that Deborah's role in the Revolution as a cross-dressing soldier displays a unique courage within the character of the subject, and that her

⁸ Berkin.

⁹ Judith R. Hiltner, "'Like a Bewildered Star': Deborah Sampson, Herman Mann, An Address Delivered With Applause," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*. 29. No. 2 (1999): 5-24. <http://tandfonline.com/loi/rrsq20> (accessed December 18, 2011); "'She Bled in Secret': Deborah Sampson, Herman Mann and *The Female Review*," *Early American Literature*. 34. No. 2. (1999): 190-220. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25057161>(accessed December 18, 2011).

¹⁰ Julie Wheelwright, *Amazons and Military Maids: Women who Dressed as Men in Pursuit of Life, Liberty, and Happiness* (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 1990); Jean Berhke Eshtain, *Women and War* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1995).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Young.

stint as a man during the war unearths interesting concepts of gender and the role of women during wartime.

BIOGRAPHY

The life of Deborah Samson Gannett is a hard one to chronicle, at best. The primary sources available on her life are either scarce or extremely fabricated. As various historians and scholars have examined her life, they have offered their own interpretations as to Deborah's character, lifestyle, thought patterns, and even dreams. Historians who record the history of her life, including the previously mentioned Evans, use *The Female Review* and *An Address Delivered with Applause*, Deborah's speech, to tell her story. It is essential to understand that almost all of the sources left behind which relate to Deborah are widely accepted to have great problems as to authenticity in relation to the actuality of her life events and experiences. In other words, any analysis of Deborah must be understood as possibly already flawed at its beginning. Therefore, her biography offered here is a pieced together remnant of the most probable events of her life.

Deborah Samson was born on December 17, 1760, in the small village of Plympton, Massachusetts, approximately nine miles west of Plymouth. Her father was Jonathan Samson, Jr. and her mother, Deborah Bradford. Her mother and father came from impressive lineages, linking Deborah Samson to important founders of the Massachusetts Bay colony. Deborah Bradford was the great-granddaughter of William Bradford, writer of the

Mayflower Compact, and her father was a descendant of Miles Standish and John Alden and Priscilla Mullins.¹³

Despite her prestigious links to the birth of Plymouth, Deborah faced a childhood of hardship, starting with the abandonment of the family by her father, when she was five years old. Her mother worked hard in order to provide for her family, to keep everyone fed and sheltered from the elements, but it was not enough for her father.¹⁴ Once a member of a family of great wealth and prestige, Samson, Jr. found the cost of the farm too great to bear and left his wife and children to seek a life at sea. He was not heard from again, although sometime later people informed Mrs. Samson that he had drowned at sea.¹⁵ Apparently, many years later Deborah said, "that she never forgot that day as long as she lived,"¹⁶ the impression of her father leaving.

Deborah's mother bore three more children before her father left, and she could not cope with the burden of running a farm on her own and raising all of the children. To relieve the household pressure, she sent Deborah into indentured servitude, to live with her cousin, a spinster in Middleborough, five miles southwest of Plympton.¹⁷ A few years later Deborah was indentured to a different household, to that of Reverend and Mrs. Peter Thatcher. It was here that she would be indentured until the age of eighteen, growing up around at least ten boys while completing gender-expected tasks of weaving and spinning, baking, cooking,

¹³ Lineage Chart, Collection Number PR4/PR004X- Private Julia Stickey- 312/GG/52/0, Photos retrieved from The Massachusetts State Archives, Boston, Massachusetts, July 28, 2011.

¹⁴ Bohrer, 183.

¹⁵ Evans, 303.

¹⁶ Bohrer, 183.

¹⁷ Ibid, 185.

tending the farm animals, and helping with the babies.¹⁸ Accounts of her life by both Herman Mann and Melissa Lukeman Bohrer portray Samson as an intelligent young woman who enjoyed both learning and reading, often poring over volumes of "Shakespeare, Dryden, Voltaire, Swift, and Locke."¹⁹ While Deborah was probably quite intelligent, other historians dispute as to whether Deborah did spend very much time educating herself. Bohrer goes further, to portray Deborah's ambitions as an early example of feminism. Bohrer declares that Samson believed in the equality of women at least through education and enjoyed feeling as adept as boys at hunting and farm work. The idea of whether or not Samson Gannett was a feminist will be discussed later, but this seems highly unlikely, as the term Feminist and a very concrete idea of Feminism did not exist at this time. While Deborah may have had some more progressive ideals for women of her time, Bohrer definitely overreaches with her claims of Feminist thought.

By the year 1778, Deborah had reached eighteen and was thus legally released from her indentured servitude from the Thomas family. However, she chose to remain with them for a few years, performing traditional chores and also teaching school in Middleborough.²⁰ It is often at this point where historians begin to inject feminist themes into Deborah's life, and they often disagree on the issue of whether or not she began to experiment with cross-dressing much earlier than her stint in the military. For example, some debate on whether or not Deborah felt that women should receive the same education as men. Some feel that Deborah became tired with her farm work and wished for a life of adventure instead. Her womanly appearance prevented her from seeking such a life of freedom, since traveling in

¹⁸ Ibid, 186.

¹⁹ Ibid, 187.

²⁰ Evans, 304.

feminine dress opened the risk of "...being molested and the certainty of being treated as a whore in such pleasurable places as coffee houses and taverns."²¹ That picture suggests that Deborah's entry into the male sphere began before her Revolutionary War service. The author suggests that she tailored a suit of man's clothes for her own use, bound her breasts and tied her hair, and taken off into the night, visiting taverns and other nearby towns.²² Once again, we return to the issue of reliability of sources, while *The Female Review* notes that, Deborah, "resolved...to put on male attire...(and) procured and put on these garments, several times, to try them, in the autumn of 1780."²³ Mann claims that Deborah enlists in 1781 (which is false), but this creates quite a length of time, during which Deborah experimented with her male clothing. After the war, Mann places her back with relatives in Massachusetts and, "assuming the name of her youngest brother, she passed the winter as a man of the world, and was not awkward in the common business of a farmer."²⁴ It is certain that *The Female Review* is intensely falsified, but since it is so relied upon by other historians, the information which it contains must be taken into account.

It was shortly after Deborah left her servanthip when drastic changes in the war took place. The British campaign to control the colonies shifted southward, away from the Mid-Atlantic and New England, and the *rage militaire*²⁵ from 1775 had died out years before, leaving the American Army desperately seeking more recruits during the cold winter of

²¹ Ibid, 304-305.

²² Ibid, 305.

²³ Mann, 83.

²⁴ Ibid, 161.

²⁵ This is a term frequently used to describe the national attitude in the colonies in 1775. It literally means "a passion for the arms" and characterizes the movement of those eager to fight for the War of Independence.

1781-1782.²⁶ Often soldiers did not receive their pay until late, and still sometimes were not paid at all. The Army usually offered cash bounties to men who signed on, but many would take advantage of these bounties and would enlist, desert, and later sign up somewhere else for another one.²⁷ By 1782, American support for the war had greatly died out, and the bulk of ordinary people became convinced that the war was indeed, over.²⁸ This leads to great confusion as to why Deborah waited until 1782 to enlist.

Deborah would make her first attempt to join the ranks as a man in the Continental Army in Middleborough. At the home of Captain Benjamin Leonard, where she was staying, she enlisted the help of her roommate, with whom she shared a bed, a black servant named Jennie, to assist her in stealing men's clothing from Leonard's son.²⁹ After donning her new garb, Deborah headed over to the local recruiting office, located in the home of Israel Wood.³⁰ It was here that she signed on under the name Timothy Thayer and taking her bounty, she continued on her journey two miles east of Middleborough to a tavern, where she drank to her success.³¹ Unfortunately for Deborah, her outrageous intoxicated behavior attracted the attention of an old woman by the fire, who noted that the young man held the quill in the peculiar manner of one Deborah Samson, who, due to an accident, could not use her forefinger properly.³² This telltale sign of her physical handicap would push Deborah to seek enlistment elsewhere when the time was right. More than likely this tale is fabricated in order to explain why Deborah had to go somewhere else to enlist. When Timothy Thayer did

²⁶ Evans, 305.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Royster, 333.

²⁹ Young, 78.

³⁰ Evans, 305.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

not appear at the regimental roll call, suspicions quickly arose and town officials descended upon Deborah, demanding the return of the bounty and leaving her with a severe warning.³³

Deborah's actions, of course, had immediate repercussions; authorities scandalized by the idea of a women donning men's clothing and acting like a man quickly questioned her membership with the Middleborough Baptist church. Local leaders considered her behavior "unchristianlike," and clergymen wrote in the church record that:

The Church considered the case of Deborah Sampson, a member of this church, who last spring was accused of dressing in men's clothes, and enlisting as a soldier in the army [Timothy Thayer affair], and although she was not convicted, yet strongly suspected of being guilty, and for some time before behaved very loose and unchristian like, and at last left our parts in a sudden manner, and it is not known among us where she is gone, and after considerable discourse, it appeared that as several brethren had labored with her before she went away, without obtaining satisfaction, concluded it is the Church's duty to withdraw fellowship until she returns and makes Christian satisfaction.³⁴

It is with this source where Alfred Young, her only serious biographer, begins to connect Deborah's religion with the fact that she donned men's clothing. Dressing in men's clothes violated the biblical verse in Deuteronomy 22:5 that, "The women shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the Lord thy God."³⁵ While it is quite clear from the church record that Deborah indeed caused scandal within the congregation, one must question how important the church was to her in the first place. As for the Massachusetts statute, apparently it did not bother Deborah in the slightest, as she put on men's clothing anyway.

³³ Ibid, 306.

³⁴ Church Record from Massachusetts State Archives, Collection Number PR4/PR004X- Private Julia Stickey-312/GG/52/0, Photos retrieved from the Massachusetts State Archives, Boston, Massachusetts, Retrieved July 28, 2011.

³⁵ Deuteronomy 22:5

Despite the consequences, Deborah decided that her time dressing as a man was not quite over, and chose to enlist again. On May 20, 1782, Deborah traveled to Bellingham, Massachusetts, dressed as a man, and found an agent who, in exchange for receiving part of her bounty, agreed to sign her up for enlistment in Uxbridge, Massachusetts.³⁶ It was with this enlistment that she used the name of her brother, Robert Shurtleff.³⁷ She was mustered in at Worcester, Massachusetts on the 23rd of May as Private Robert Shurtleff in the 4th Massachusetts Regiment which was commanded by Colonel Shepard, and later by Colonel Henry Jackson.³⁸ It was from this point on that Deborah began her journey in military service, where apparently, by all accounts, her gender was "never" suspected.

By the time Deborah signed on, the war was almost over. General Cornwallis had surrendered at Yorktown a year previously, but the army still needed men in order to continue the fight against the British Army. After 1780, relations between soldiers and society became strained, creating hostility.³⁹ The soldiers saw the American colonies as an agriculture paradise that gave them hardly anything for sustenance and hardly any pay as well.⁴⁰ They blamed not only army quartermasters and officers, but also those of society who they felt had abandoned them in their worthy cause.⁴¹ Deborah joined the army two years after large mutinies occurred within the Continental Army.

³⁶ Evans, 306.

³⁷ The spelling of Shurtleff often varies within different sources. It is also common to find it spelled Shurtlieff and Shurtliff.

³⁸ Evans, 306.

³⁹ Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 295.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

It was from Worcester that Deborah and the other recruits went to West Point, New York, where they began training.⁴² The history of the following period, Deborah's service in the Army, is where a lot of the information, especially where wounds are concerned, is most likely inaccurate. Scholars are aware of the unique instances which Herman Mann fabricated in order to secure Deborah a pension. Nevertheless, it is critical to weave these fables into the fabric of Deborah's narrative, as their inclusion portrays themes important to the overall interpretation of the story. In his 1797 account of Deborah's life, Mann wrote that she had been wounded in battle. The account given by Evans indicates that in June of 1782, Deborah and a few others volunteered to rid East Chester, New York of some remaining Loyalists. One morning while they were in their encampment, gunfire erupted and in the ensuing chaos, Deborah was one of the wounded.⁴³ Apparently she concluded:

I considered this as a death wound, or as being equivalent to it; as it must, I thought, lead to the discovery of my sex. Covered with blood from head to foot, I told my companions I fear I had received a mortal wound; and I begged them to leave me to die on the spot: preferring to take the small chance I should in this case have of surviving, rather than be carried to the hospital. To this my comrades would not consent; but one of them took me before him on his horse, and in this painful manner I was borne six miles to the hospital of the French army, at a place called Crompond. On coming in sight of the hospital, my heart again failed me. In a paroxysm of despair, I actually drew a pistol from the holster, and was about to put an end to my life. That I did not proceed to the fatal act, I can ascribe only to the interposition of Divine Mercy.⁴⁴

Her words suggest the fear that any doctor treating her wounds might well have uncovered her gendered disguise. Later accounts suggest that some of the tales concerning "wounds" are most likely fabricated, and most historians agree that Herman Mann fashioned tales to illustrate just how far Deborah would go to conceal her condition. Nevertheless, this very

⁴² Young, 97.

⁴³ Ibid, 308.

⁴⁴ Mann, 121.

stretching of the truth underlines the gendered themes so crucial to the overall interpretation of the story.

Not long into her service, the end of the war was in sight. However, by January 1783, the new nation faced a serious challenge. Rebellious American enlisted men threatened a great mutiny unless their demands for back pay and retirement benefits were met. Deborah was part of the troops which went to stop the revolt. However, by the time Deborah and her small group of soldiers reached Philadelphia, the mutineers had stepped down. Arriving in the disease-ridden city, Deborah soon became ill with a fever, which was raging through the city.⁴⁵ She, "...was soon seized with it. I scarcely felt its symptoms before I was carried to the hospital. I was thrown into a loathsome bunk, out of which had just been removed a corpse for burial; soon after which, I became utterly insensible. It was not long before I came to some degree of consciousness, when I perceived preparations for my burial."⁴⁶

According to the account by Mann, it was there, in that hospital, where things would quickly change for Deborah. Her physician, Dr. Barnabus Binney, began to question her, and then, physically examine her. "Thrusting his hand into my bosom to ascertain if there were motion at the heart, he was surprised at finding an inner vest tightly compressing my breasts, the instant removal of which not only ascertained the fact of life, but disclosed the fact that I was a woman!"⁴⁷ Deeply shocked, Dr. Binney had Deborah immediately moved to his own residence for close treatment. Nevertheless, she continued her charade as a man even after she became well; at this point, the doctor had not told any military authorities about her

⁴⁵ Evans, 311.

⁴⁶ Mann, 135.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 136.

disguise, and her terms of military service continued unchanged. While she recuperated at the Binney house, Deborah continued to dress as a man, and reportedly several women there admired "'his' sensitive gracefulness and beardless face."⁴⁸

While Deborah continued to stay with the Binneys in Philadelphia, the Treaty of Paris was signed in September 1783, which formally ended the war. At that point, Deborah received orders from West Point to return for the disbanding of the 4th Massachusetts Regiment. When she left Philadelphia, Dr. Binney gave her a letter to deliver to Major General John Patterson, the commander of West Point.⁴⁹ While on the way back to West Point from Philadelphia, the boat on the passage up the North River (now known as the Hudson River) capsized, sending the passengers and their belongings overboard into the icy water.⁵⁰ While Deborah and her knapsack (containing the letter) safely made it to shore, her trunk, which contained clothes and her daily journal, sank to the bottom of the riverbed.⁵¹

Deborah had no choice but to deliver the letter. The letter did exactly what she had feared, it revealed her biological sex, while at the same time Dr. Binney praised her "moral and intellectual assets."⁵² General Patterson could not believe that there had actually been a woman in the army, until Deborah changed into more gender appropriate clothing. Shortly after, General Henry Knox issued a honorable discharge to "Robert Shurtleff." Deborah returned to her family, receiving employment from her uncle to work upon a farm in

⁴⁸ Evans, 312.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 315.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

Stoughton, Massachusetts.⁵³ It was here that her uncle allowed her to assume the name of her youngest brother, Ephraim Sampson, and she labored as a farmhand, "enjoying friendships with women" and she continued to wear men's clothing.⁵⁴ Her persistent masquerade as a man is key. Deborah was clearly enjoying the freedom of working and living as a man, and therefore enjoying playing with her gender.

It was shortly after her move to Stoughton that she attracted the attention of Benjamin Gannett, a farmer from Sharon, Massachusetts. They married in the spring of 1784 and between the years of 1786 and 1790, their children were born, Earl, Mary, and Patience.⁵⁵ They also adopted a young orphan, Susanna, in 1796.⁵⁶ It was not long after the birth of her children that Deborah began a long chain of petitions and various ventures in order to receive more money for her children and husband, probably reflecting the economic hardship the family faced, since their farm had failed to prosper.

In January of 1792, Deborah petitioned the Massachusetts State Legislature for back pay which she had not received:

The memorials of Deborah Gannett humbly sheweth, that your memorialist from the zeal for the good of her country was induced, and by the name of Robert Shurtleff did, on May 20, 1782, enlist as a soldier in the Continental service, for three years, into the 4th Regiment, Col. Shepard (afterwards Col. Jackson's) in Capt. George Webb's company and was mustered at Worcester...the 23rd of the same month, and went to camp, under the command of Sergeant Gambel, and was constant and faithful in doing duty with other soldiers. Deborah Gannett.⁵⁷

⁵³ Booth, 268.

⁵⁴ Evans, 316.

⁵⁵ Young, 183.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Petition to Massachusetts State Legislature, Deborah Sampson Gannett. Collection Number PR4/PR004X-Private-Julia Stickey- 312/GG/52/0, Photos retrieved from the Massachusetts State Archives, Boston, Massachusetts, July 28, 2011.

This petition actually passed through the Massachusetts Senate and was also approved and signed by Governor John Hancock. Most importantly the General Court praised Deborah for, "preserving her virtue (while serving) and chastity of her sex unsuspected and unblemished."⁵⁸ Afterward, the Massachusetts Senate paid Deborah £34.⁵⁹

Unfortunately, Deborah's financial needs and those of her family continued to grow larger and larger, forcing her to look for other means to generate revenue. Deborah began to appear before audiences in Massachusetts and New York, telling the story of her life and in particular, her military service. She did this several times in the first decade of the 19th century to great success, not only speaking but also performing military drills to entertain the crowd. Despite the money collected from these appearances, the family farm was still in want of money. Furthermore, Deborah's wartime injuries reportedly often caused her great physical pain and discomfiture. Her friendship with Paul Revere proved very beneficial; Deborah asked Revere to plead to Congress for her to get additional back pay, and he indeed wrote a letter on her behalf. Deborah even asked Revere for a personal loan.⁶⁰

Deborah died on April 29, 1827.⁶¹ Years after her death, her husband, Benjamin Gannett, continued to ask for aid, based on his wife's veteran status.⁶² In a strange course of events, the House Committee on Revolutionary Pensions investigated his petition and noted that Deborah's military records had been destroyed in a fire when the British burned the

⁵⁸ Evans, 317.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Booth, 269.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

capitol during the War of 1812.⁶³ The Committee decided not to grant the petition, but in its commentary on the case, specifically noted the uniqueness of the gendered situation.

In order to understand the complexity of her masquerade, it is important to examine her life and experience as a soldier through a lens of gender. Because she dressed as a man in order to serve as a soldier, she lived as a cross-dresser or transvestite. In order to understand the wider scope of how Colonial and Revolutionary Americans perceived gender, it is important to understand the act of cross-dressing.

Present times dictate that it is common for women to wear pants, something which in the era of Deborah Samson Gannett would have not been so. In fact, now it is much more common (at least in certain situations, classes, and cultures) to see a woman wearing pants as opposed to a woman wearing a skirt, or a dress. Today, long dresses and fancy skirts are usually donned for more special or formal occasions. Therefore, female to male cross-dressing is today a much more blurred line, while male to female dressing remains much more taboo. It is considered more of a unique fascination with performance. Men in “drag” will often be judged in contests or dress up as famous celebrity divas. If people are able to dress in attire usually designated for the opposite sex so easily, what is it that allows them to do so? This requires a detailed examination of gender.

Many people believe that gender is physically determined or confuse it with biological sex, assuming that there are two (and only two) clearly defined genders, one being male and the other female. But late twentieth-century scholars have established that the term and concept of “gender” must be appreciated in a far more complex, nuanced fashion. Judith

⁶³ Ibid.

Butler concludes in her book, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), that gender is actually performed, and therefore is not something which people are, but actually something which people do.⁶⁴ Gender is strictly policed by society, meaning that those who step beyond these perceived appropriate gender roles are often ostracized or outcast. In addition, gender is so important, that it must be re-performed constantly, in order to know exactly what it is and what is expected, into many repetitions. Traditionally, genders are assigned certain roles or behaviors that go along with it. For example, in the present day, even as society has accepted women who wear pants and girls who consider themselves tomboys, young girls are often expected to play with doll-like toys, such as Barbies, and are given the color pink to wear at birth. Boys, on the other hand, are supposed to play with toy cars, action-figures, and enjoy sports like little league and peewee football. As time passes, these preferences are slowly starting to become blurred, often with opposite sex children sharing toys, but the differences still remain.

For now, with most of society, gender and sex remain attached to one another. In other words, most people view a biological male to be a male gender and the same as a female. However, science dictates that there are actually many different variations within the chromosomal structure, other than the biological standard of XX for females and XY for males. There are XXX variations, XXY, and a few others to boot. To complicate matters further, biology also produces hermaphrodites (intersex or third gender), those who have both female and male reproductive organs. While many examples of intersex animals occur regularly in nature, such as with fish and amphibians, humans have yet to see a great number of biological examples of a third sex. Examples of third genders or perceived genders other

⁶⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

than the traditional male and female are visible in many areas of modern society.⁶⁵ Before examining the more deviant examples of gender, one must understand why divisions exist between male and female. In order to do so, it is essential to understand gender binaries, which are introduced and examined by scholar Sherry Ortner.

Ortner notes in her work, *Making Gender: The Politics and Erotics of Culture* (1996) the binaries which have been constructed linking women with nature and men with culture. These binaries have helped lead to cultures that consider women inferior due to an ideology which devalues women, symbolic devices which are often interpreted as insinuating the inferiority of women, and social-structural arrangements which exclude women from participation.⁶⁶ The binaries function in opposition of nature and culture. Ortner concludes that women are seen as closer to Nature due to body functions specific to them alone, especially women's involvement with "species life" (reproduction) in contrast to men's ability to wander. A woman's body and its functions have been culturally interpreted to place her in social roles considered to be lower than a man's, while her traditional roles give her a different psyche structure when femaleness is seen as connected to nature.⁶⁷ Often these characteristics, especially linkage to the body and vaginal cavity, including its invasion, are thus connected to issues of purity and pollution, giving virgins one type of identity, and non-virgins a different type.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Studies such as Elizabeth Reis', *Bodies in Doubt: An America History of Intersex*, the edited volume of, *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History*; Alice Domurat Dreger's, *Hermaphrodites And the Medical Invention of Sex*; Gerald N. Callahan's, *Between XX and XY: Intersexuality and the Myth of Two Sexes*; and Sharon E. Preves', *Intersex and Identity: The Contested Self*, explore intersex cases within History and the effects of being an intersex person.

⁶⁶ Sherry Ortner, *Making Gender: The Politics and Erotics of Culture*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 23.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 27.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 23.

Going back to the ideas of Judith Butler, historians need to re-examine the stories of those who decide to stay outside the boundaries of gender norms. Some of the most obvious examples of these individuals, Butler believes, are transvestites, or cross-dressers.

Transvestites are those who reveal that gender is indeed not a matter of biology, but a learned process. Deborah is an example of such an individual, as she dressed as a man and pretended to be one within her guise as a soldier. Her experience as a cross-dresser must be explored as it exposes gender norms during the era of Revolutionary America. While all studies which mention Deborah talk about her time spent as a soldier, few of them deeply analyze the idea of playing with gender. This is strange, especially since in some accounts of her life historians indicate that Deborah began dressing in a more masculine fashion before her period of military service, illuminating reasons which may have had a deeper root than simply patriotism.⁶⁹

Others who have explored gender roles, such as Linda Garber, in her book *Vested Interest: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, note the importance of cross-dressing for “expanding human potential,” but also find that transvestism threatens social norms and therefore it is often left out of cultural representations.⁷⁰ In other words, since society is more comfortable with concrete roles of male/female with appropriate dress, often cross-dressers or those who blur the gendered lines are unwelcome in representations of cultures. Garber mentions a narrative form which she calls “the transvestite’s progress” that helps explain

⁶⁹ Robert Alan Brookey, "Keeping a Good Wo/Man Down: Normalizing Deborah Sampson Gannett," *Communication Studies*, 49, no. 1 (1998): 73-85, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10510979809368519> (accessed December 18, 2011), 73.

⁷⁰ Linda Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing & Cultural Anxiety*, (London: Taylor and Francis, Inc., 1997), 69.

cross-dressing and attempts to normalize it to society.⁷¹ It is defined as, “Whatever discomfiture is felt by the reader or audience...is smoothed over and narrativized by a story that recuperates social and sexual norms, not only reinstating the binary (male/female) but also retaining, and encoding, a progress narrative: s/he did this in order to a) get a job, b) find a place in the man’s world, c) realize or fulfill some deep but acceptable need in terms of personal destiny.”⁷² In the context of early American history, the way that Deborah talked about her life while on her speaking tours illustrates this concept of making outsiders less uncomfortable with cross-dressing by excusing it as a necessary part of her patriotic devotion. So while she may have later tried to normalize her experience to her audience, is it possible that society was familiar with women who cross-dressed for various means? It is important to explore the history of cross-dressing, to understand society’s perceptions of those who do it.

Women and men have cross-dressed farther back into human history than most people would realize. Krista Scott-Dixon reveals in her article, “Cross Purposes: A Short history of Cross-Dressing Women” that many women who have worn men’s clothing, across different cultures and centuries, are recorded in stories, songs, and art.⁷³ This reveals both the enduring power of gender roles and people’s creative subversion of them. Others who study cross-dressing and those who play with gender have similar views.

Alfred F. Young, Deborah’s principal biographer thinks that the concept of cross-dressing is not applicable to her case. He believes that words like “cross-dresser” and

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

“transvestite” are modern terms that illustrate obsession with the idea of a medical condition or problem.⁷⁴ He claims that she adopted her first disguise of “Timothy Thayer” in an attempt to win the bounty that came with enlisting and to try out a disguise.⁷⁵ Therefore, he believes that this attempt does not count, as it should not be taken seriously. Young adds that she assumed her second male guise, “Robert Shurtliff”, solely in order to “take flight from the threat of legal prosecution for the first, as well as from the threat of excommunication by the Baptists. She disguised herself as a man because it was dangerous for a young single woman to take to the road. Then, it was the only way for a woman to serve in the army, as opposed to serving in an army camp.”⁷⁶ While Young is correct regarding some of the reasons as to why Deborah changed her dress to suit her means, the issue of motivation does not erase the fact that she indeed did it, and some scholars and Herman Mann have noted that Deborah was indeed playing with her gender and dress before her military stints. It is necessary to look at the definition of cross-dressing. Even if Deborah did not want to be biologically male, she still performed as a male and adopted the dress of a male, meaning that she became a cross-dresser. Simply having objectives that would force her to dress as a man are not enough to excuse the fact that she indeed became a cross-dresser, making Young's point simply not adequate.

In her 2004 work, *Unzipping Gender: Sex, Cross-Dressing and Culture*, Charlotte Suthrell notes the importance of clothing while playing with gender by saying, “...through the use of a significant piece of material culture-clothing-transvestism highlights key areas of the ongoing discourses on sex, gender and sexuality, and that a study of cross-dressing,

⁷⁴ Young, 317.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 317-18.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

possible because it illustrates how fundamental aspects of our lives- the lived realities of men and women- differ, and why it matters.”⁷⁷ Clothing is very important as it is the simplest outward indicator, and before modern medicine, indeed represented one of the few ways to play with gender.

While male to female cross-dressing is one component of the overall issue of cross-dressing, history views female cross-dressing through a different light. Suthrell notes that some women who cross-dressed have clearly been lesbians, while others have not, and that some have cross-dressed out of curiosity and experimentation. Some wished to pass into the world as men, as this was a world which often viewed masculinity as the ideal gender and femininity as imperfect. This interpretation of womanhood as inferior could present some women across previous centuries of Western culture with both social limits and practical obstacles in everyday life. Male life, in comparison to the female world, might appear temptingly free of physical vulnerability, of living constraints, of chaperones and sexual expectations.

Looking at the history of female cross-dressing, Suthrell notes that research reveals illustrates, “In the period from the late sixteenth century to the nineteenth century, many examples of females cross dressing to enable a more outdoor or exciting lifestyle from the one ordained for them as women, whether as buccaneers, soldiers, doctors, or refugees from the law.”⁷⁸ An important example of such a woman is Catalina de Erauso, a woman who masqueraded as a Spanish Conquistador in the quest for the New World. Catalina recorded her experience in her diary, published in modern edited form under the title, *Lieutenant Nun*:

⁷⁷ Charlotte A. Suthrell, *Unzipping Gender: Sex, Cross-Dressing, and Culture*, (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2004), 2.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 16.

Memoir of a Basque Transvestite in the New World. As a young woman in Spain, Catalina lived as a nun, before she slipped off, assumed her new identity, and swashbuckled her way across the New World.⁷⁹ Her memoir illustrates frequent flings with women, and she most likely had intercourse with some of them. After her adventure, she returns to Spain, becoming well known within the church and forgiven for her lifestyle by the Pope himself. This is most likely due to the fact that she was still, medically, a virgin. Preserving her “chastity” and sticking to one gender (not slipping back and forth between male and female) allowed her the forgiveness of the head of Catholicism. Comparisons can be made between Erauso and Deborah because they were both militant women. Despite the grandeur of these tales, it is important to remember that Erauso’s story is an adventure tale, and therefore, like Deborah’s biography which is discussed later, must be taken with a grain of salt.

WOMEN AND WAR

Women, as well as men, have been involved in war as long as civilizations or groups of people have clashed with each other. While the roles of women in warfare have varied, those who have participated in battle have more than likely cross-dressed, whether or not they were pretending to be a man. Even the fabled Joan of Arc may have worn a suit of armor out into battle. Therefore, examining the theme of women and war is essential in order to understand this more romanticized form of cross-dressing. Gender is both extremely apparent, and quite fluid, during wartime.

⁷⁹ Catalina De Erauso, *Lieutenant Nun: Memoir of a Basque Transvestite in the New World*, trans. Michele Stepto And Gabriel Stepto (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1996).

This concept of “militant women” brings forth another concept which must be evaluated. This is the issue of women during wartime. War across the ages is something which has usually been a theater for men. War is viewed as masculine. Weaponry, violence, valiant death, empire, and victory are all highly masculinized, until recent wars, where women became more active participants in the military. The characterizations of war as male-territory became intensified with the implementation of modernized warfare moving into the 20th century with the idea of the masculine machine. This is often a problem with military history, in that the role of the home front, where women usually are, is ignored, passed over, or not concentrated upon, further eliminating the mention of women in the history. In fact, gender roles are prominent nowhere more so than war.⁸⁰ While this idea of war is fairly accurate, there are always some problems with it at the same time, which is why discussing the inclusion of women in military actions is as important as it is taboo. The history of many wars, understandably, fades into military, diplomatic, and political history, and quite often other events which happen are ignored or forgotten. Often, many who have remembered or retold the histories of wars, have excluded women because focusing on the stories of the women seemingly takes away from the virtue of the men.⁸¹ The ultimate reward for the man returning home from the war or the man going to war is the love of the woman, so therefore, women must be placed into the more passive, receiving role.⁸² Linda Grant De Pauw notes that, “For this reason, not only have women been written out of military history,

⁸⁰ Joshua S. Goldstein, *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1.

⁸¹ Linda Grant De Pauw. *Battle Cries and Lullabies: Women in War from Prehistory to the Present*. (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998).

⁸² *Ibid*, 17.

but all of the military functions unrelated to heroic combat or usually performed by women receive scant attention.”⁸³

Scholars like De Pauw have categorized women into three categories to illustrate their roles during wartime throughout history; these roles are the Classic Women’s Roles, Virago Roles, and the Androgynous Warriors.⁸⁴ The Classic Women’s Roles include women who are passive. Essentially these are the victims and the camp followers, examples of which are very visible during the American Revolution. Viragos are those who retain their gender during war, but become very influential as militant women; such examples are the Amazons, who are extremely heavily shrouded in myth in the first place. Third, we have the Androgynous warriors. These are the women who cross the gender boundary entirely; not only do they play with their gender but they also cross-dress to appear as though they are actually a man, and therefore take on the important characteristics of both genders at the same time. Deborah is an example of an androgynous warrior, as displayed by her life and experience as a soldier in the Continental Army.

During war, an even greater separation between public and private spheres occurs than in peacetime. During the Revolution, except in areas on the frontier, many of the colonies did not witness a lot of the military action. Until very recently, society has viewed women as the weaker or the fairer sex, unable to handle the carnage and devastation of war. Such assumptions led many, if not most, people to wish to protect women from the horrors which war caused, death, injury, and even rape. Despite this separation of public and private, and men’s traditional role associated with public life and women with private, women have

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

found various ways to creep over the line, and become female warriors. One such scholar who examines women's relationship with war is scholar Jean Bethke Elshtain.

In *Women in War*, Elshtain reveals that, "Female fighters have surfaced throughout our history as stories of private transgression- an *honored* boundary crossing rather than a repudiated misstep."⁸⁵ This point might be true for some women in history, but not for all. Gender can become extremely fluid during wartime and often allows women to perform tasks which peacetime would not allow. As explained before, sometimes women passing over the gender boundary was seen as understandable in a way, as society viewed the male sex as much more perfect than the female sex. The women that history has remembered the most as aggressive militants are the Amazons. In Julie Wheelwright's, *Amazons and Military Maids: Women who dressed as men in the pursuit of life, liberty and happiness*, she notes that, "Throughout the nineteenth century collections of stories about some of these famous Amazons appeared on book sellers lists and peppered the pages of antiquarian magazines. Collected editions of their life-histories sanitized to conform to the prevailing notions of Victorian morality, were still produced at the end of the century."⁸⁶

While other scholars have indicated that women often felt a great liberation as soldiers, for the act of cross-dressing allowed them rights and experiences usually denied to them because of their sex, Wheelwright offers a different perspective. She illustrates that often the process of cross-dressing for women could be an "irritation", because often they were not only not used to the clothes, but they also found that they had to constantly prove

⁸⁵ Elshtain, 174.

⁸⁶ Wheelwright, 9.

their masculinity to themselves.⁸⁷ Wheelwright adds, “Their exploits challenged existing categories of sexual difference but the terms of the debate usually remained the same.”⁸⁸ In other words, they made an impact as unique actors, but at the same time they did not permanently change the broader concepts of gendered limitations, precisely because they were so unique. As Wheelwright explains, while “They proved that women were equally capable of excelling in the masculine sphere... (at the same time) the female soldiers and sailors remained such staunch individualists; they presented little threat to the established order.”⁸⁹

Women in the military often faced unique gender crises that scholars still analyze today. Wheelwright explains that often women in the military became so immersed into their male identities that they began to view women as “the other”.⁹⁰ They often made love with other women, flirted, teased and abused them in order to more deeply cement their roles as men.⁹¹

History illustrates that women in wartime have had to suffer innumerable hardships that were very evident during the American Revolution. Jeanne Vickers notes in *Women and War*, that women are often left alone at home, usually feeling abandoned, to care for the young, their children, and others who depend on them for support.⁹² The people who they care for are off fighting, and even those who they love who remain at home may suffer or die. Women in war may lose their homes or their dwellings may become extremely damaged;

⁸⁷ Ibid, 11.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Jeanne Vickers, *Women and War* (United Kingdom: Hemingway Ventures, Ltd., 1991).

they must deal with low food supplies and the possibility of hunger, and always the overwhelming possibility of rape.⁹³ It is wartime in itself which creates a greater gap between the male and female gender roles, “Sex role separation has imposed value distinctions between men and women under which women accept their subordination and men assume power and the right to pursue their goals aggressively. Many societies encourage women to be dependent and submissive, and men to be dominant and aggressive. Such behavior is constantly reinforced by society when violence erupts and the passive are victimized.”⁹⁴ In other words, wartime’s violent nature causes a greater retreat to traditional gender roles (with some obvious exceptions), creating an overwhelming need for men to participate within the physical realm of warfare and a need to protect the women. These characteristics of war are very plain in the American Revolution. Many women were left alone to take care of their families and became the sole providers, especially those on farms, and out on the frontier. Quite a number of rapes occurred during the war not only by Continental soldiers but by the British as well. Shame and disgrace often prevented many women from coming forward with their accusations. One British officer, Lord Rawdon, stationed on Staten Island, New York considered the cases of these women with amusement, remarking, “A girl cannot step onto the bushes to pluck a rose without running the most immediate risk of being ravished, and they are so little accustomed to these vigorous methods that they don’t bear them with proper resignation, and of consequence we have the most entertaining courtmartial every day.”⁹⁵ This is a primary example of how women were often treated as the spoils of war, resulting from the ever-widening gender gap. Essentially, this is why women like Deborah are so

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 107.

⁹⁵ Berkin, 41.

unique and so fascinating to society, as the gender boundary that she crossed was much wider than usual.

While Deborah is an example of the cross-dressing female soldier in the American theater, it is a tradition which has even greater roots in the European area of war. It is many of these women, such as the infamous Hannah Snell, an English soldier, who drew a wide audience for popular literature, plays, songs, and art. This can be viewed as another aspect of the fascination with the world turned upside down and the gendered “battle for the pants.” The sword was always a symbol of male power, and in the person of the female soldier, it literally passed to a woman's hands.”⁹⁶ In fact, “Popular culture recognized and reflected the fact that women served as soldiers; however, it also filtered and elaborated this reality to titillate the public, to highlight issues of gender in society, and to stimulate military values. The existence of real, embellished and fictional accounts of women in the ranks helped to spread the idea that such gender transformation was possible, and, as such, probably encouraged some women to make the decision to adopt this course.”⁹⁷ No doubt, it is quite possible that Revolutionary-era popular stories about women such as Hannah Snell may have inspired Deborah.

Then and now, people have often been fascinated by accounts of female warriors. While it is extremely important to examine military women, it is also crucial to keep in mind their historical context. Many academics disagree as to when the origin of Feminism took place, and it is often easy to examine many of these women and to envision them as

⁹⁶ John A. Lynn II, *Women, Armies, and Warfare in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 166.

“Feminists”.⁹⁸ However, their lives must be examined much more closely as the lives of these women, “present a myriad of contradictions that raise questions about understandings of gender and heroism that are not easily resolved.”⁹⁹ These stories illustrate a desire for male rights and privileges and an escape for the confines of domesticity. One of the ways to achieve this escape was through dress.

VIRTUE

Beyond the a-historical question of whether Gannett was a feminist, it is more vital to ask, what did gender mean during her lifetime, and what exactly were the gender divisions in Revolutionary America and into the Early Republic? One of the ways to examine differences between genders during these periods is by analyzing the concept of virtue. While examining virtue during this timeframe, it is easy to note its gendered aspects. Deborah, clothed in her male attire, represented both the masculine and feminine concepts of virtue.

The meaning of virtue had roots that stemmed from far back into Western culture, well into ancient and medieval times.¹⁰⁰ The idea of virtue was embodied into the actual virtues, the serene heavenly virtues from Greek myth.¹⁰¹ The most popular definition of virtue is a term for “female sexual prudence and benevolent activity with old-fashioned connotations. It evokes traits like chastity and altruism and, in a cynical post-sexual revolution world, prudery and hypocritical do-goodism.”¹⁰² The Church has also helped influence the meaning of virtue, and over the decades Catholic principles of celibacy and

⁹⁸ Wheelwright, 9-10.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ruth H. Bloch, "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America," *Signs*, 13, no. 1 (1987): 37-58, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174026> (accessed December 24, 2011), 37.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

chastity combined with Protestant Reformation ideals of piety, temperance, frugality, and useful work.¹⁰³ These different concepts of virtue helped shape virtue into what it represented during the Revolution.

It was during the great call to war, or the *rage militare*, that revolutionary ideals of virtue began to spring forth, meaning that the “virtue of service lay in the desire to serve” rather than the “viciousness of sin.” In other words, when God called one to serve, the person would find that he loved his country and would not be hindered by British corruption or coercion.¹⁰⁴ However, during the war, “virtue” became a word that so many used so often that its meaning became multifaceted. People most often used the word virtue to describe the “state of mind” that they wanted to characterize as American.¹⁰⁵ This word had a great meaning for those who called themselves Americans, “The main qualities of virtue were restraint and sacrifice. The virtuous person avoided excess in prosperity and did not sell out in adversity. At all times the virtuous person gave up private advantage for the welfare of others or the welfare of the whole community...Benevolence, disinterestedness, virtue—these strengths gave revolutionaries the promise of defeating British conspiracy.”¹⁰⁶

Those who have studied the history of the American Revolution tend to relate the term virtue with political meaning.¹⁰⁷ Virtue, “Resurrected in its classical and early modern republican forms, the term refers not to female private morality but to male public spirit, that is, to the willingness of citizens to engage actively in civic life and to sacrifice individual

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Royster, 17.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 22-23

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 23.

¹⁰⁷ Bloch, 38.

interests for the common good.¹⁰⁸ Does that mean that virtue should be understood with two different meanings, a feminine personal side and a male political side?¹⁰⁹ If this is the case, it is important to understand both sides of the term.

Historian James T. Kloppenberg noted that in Revolutionary America, virtue had different meanings in different situations and that one form of virtue's roots lay within Christianity while others came from classical republican tradition.¹¹⁰ In addition to these two forms of virtue lay moral philosophy, which is a branch of ethics meant to explore the concepts of right and wrong behavior. It was not until the events of 1763, including the Proclamation of 1763, when Colonists began to braid these three types of strands together.¹¹¹ Virtue for women changed into the period of the Early Republic, and the combined meanings of virtue no longer simply applied to resistance to government and authority.

During the time of the American Revolution, the term "virtue" began to acquire new political meaning. In her article, "Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America", Ruth H. Bloch notes that:

...it is becoming increasingly clear that such an appreciation must also take into account the history of masculine and feminine symbolism. Conceptions of politics and gender were tied together in late eighteenth-century America in ways that historians have only begun to unravel. The transition toward the personal and feminine definition of "virtue" was a development already occurring during the Revolutionary period, partly in response to political events and partly in response to change in gender-based symbols that had already begun.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ James T. Kloppenberg, "Virtue" In, *A Companion to the American Revolution*, ed. Jack P. Greene and J.R. Pole. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 1993).

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Bloch, 38.

Bloch notes that ideas about differences between the genders were the basis for many of the premises of the Revolution and also shaped many ideological changes.¹¹³ The era the Revolution was one in which gender and politics were linked closely together, underlining the importance of exploring the impact of women in both political history and the history of the war for Independence.

The most important political principle during the era of the Revolution and during the Early Republic was classical republicanism, which embodied the concept of virtue.¹¹⁴ During the period of the Revolution, Bloch explains, “virtue was the most valued quality defining individual commitment to the American republican cause.”¹¹⁵ It is here that distinctions between the gender values of virtue take place. Society classified public virtue as a masculine trait whereas women were believed to be capable of a different kind of virtue, private virtue.¹¹⁶ Society thought women just as rational in exercising virtue when it came to the private version, which included temperance, prudence, faith, and charity.¹¹⁷ Public virtue, on the other hand, which included activism and “self-sacrificial service to the state on behalf of the common good”, was masculine.¹¹⁸ Public virtue was indeed achievable for exceptional women but was never a feminine characteristic.¹¹⁹ The definition of virtue in the public sense equated men with a mirror image of republican politics. In other words, men who owned property would be statesmen, soldiers, enfranchised citizens, etc.¹²⁰ In other words,

¹¹³ *Ibid*, 39.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, 40.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, 41.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 41-42

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, 42.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, 43.

becoming a soldier would be a virtuous act. Not only did the ideals of a statesmen and republican politics influence the masculine qualities of virtue, but so did that of a patriot, or a soldier. Joan B. Landes illustrates in *Women and the Public Sphere: In the Age of the French Revolution*, that women played a great role in the French Revolution, but after the end of the struggle, their rights were greatly constricted, even by the radical Jacobin party.¹²¹

During the early to mid-1770s, the colonies experienced a surge of patriotism, a *rage militaire* (which was very visible in Massachusetts, Deborah's homeland), and the outbreak of revolution and war.¹²² It was during this time when public virtue received an even greater emphasis as the, "...model patriot was frequently described according to classical republican ideals as a heroic orator or citizen-soldier."¹²³ It is here when manliness was indeed closely connected to virtue. But what did this mean for women? Since virtues of "heroic courage, glory, fame"¹²⁴ were manly, were the opposites of such virtues descriptive of women? Not exactly. Instead, they were used to characterize more effeminate men. Even courageous women like Deborah could not change how society viewed the generalized category of women during the American Revolution. Most images of women which carry characteristics of virtue are essentially passive.¹²⁵ For example, a virtuous women during the Revolution could be considered one who sought to uphold the ideals of independence in a mild manner. Those who abstained from drinking tea, or making home spun clothes, would perform within the bounds of their socially accepted gender and illustrate mild-mannered resistance.

¹²¹ Joan B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere: In the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1988).

¹²² Bloch, 44.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

Women before and during the war, did, in fact, wield some purchasing power, which contributed to their overall importance in Non-Importation and Boycott campaigns. However, it was not until the end of the war period and the Early Republic (the era when Deborah actually served as a soldier and then lectured to audiences about her military experiences) when another image of public women appeared, one which historian Linda Kerber has coined “Republican Motherhood.”¹²⁶ This ideology grew from a vision in which women should instill virtues in their children (especially sons) and raise them to become good republican citizens. It was during the Early American Republic, where ideas of women's overall purity and moral superiority began to emerge, and the idea that one way to instill virtue into men was through marriage.¹²⁷

Although virtue had quite a few definitions, quite often during the Early Republic it was linked to sexual purity and to self-discipline, with both women and men. In fact, “often the word virtue was used simply to mean chastity, and in the didactic literature of the period women were repeatedly enjoined to protect their sexual purity. In the midst of the early Revolutionary fervor a patriot magazine instructed its readers, ‘What Bravery is in Man, Chastity is in Woman.’”¹²⁸ This is something which is extremely important while examining the life of Deborah. The key that both Deborah and others reiterate (including Paul Revere) in justifying and promoting her experiences in military service disguised as a man is the fact that she kept her virtue, or chastity intact. They illustrate this to demonstrate how she kept herself within a good character, even while surrounded by so many men.

¹²⁶ Kerber.

¹²⁷ Bloch, 47.

¹²⁸ Ibid, 52.

Another important part of Deborah's life was her lecture tour, in which she traveled around Boston and New York City, speaking about her life as a soldier and also giving a brief demonstration of military drills while in uniform. It was within the context of her lectures where more themes about virtue come forth. In her address at the Federal Street Theater in Boston, beginning in March 22, 1802, Deborah delved deeply into her story as a soldier, offering key points into feminine virtue. Notably, Deborah referred to her military adventure as a "foible, an error and presumption".¹²⁹ She remarked further that, "They (her military escapades) are a breach in the decorum of my sex, unquestionably; and, perhaps, too unfortunately ever irreconcilable with the rigid maxims of the moralist; and a sacrifice, which, while it may seem perfectly incompatible with the requirements of virtue-and which of course must ring discord in the ear, and disgust to the bosom of sensibility and refinement, I must be content to leave to time and the most scrutinizing enquiry to disclose."¹³⁰ Behind this fundamental lack of faith in her sex, Deborah, like many others before her, and even now, justified her participation by citing the seriousness of wartime. "This I am ready to affirm, though it may be deemed unnatural in my sex, is not a demoralization of human nature....Perhaps nothing but the critical juncture of the times could have excused such a philosophical disquisition of politics in woman, notwithstanding it was a theme of universal speculation and concern to man."¹³¹ In such language, Deborah clearly wrestled with

¹²⁹ *An Address, Delivered With Applause, At the Federal-Street Theatre, Boston, Four Successive Nights of the Different Plays, Beginning March 22, 1802; And After, at Other Principal Towns, A Number of Nights Successively at Each Place; By Mrs. Deborah Gannett, The American Heroine. Who Served three years with Reputation (undiscovered as a female) in the late American Army*, included in Publications of the Sharon Historical Society of Sharon, Massachusetts (Boston: Press of H.M. Hight: April, 1905) Retrieved online from http://www.hatitrust.org/access_use#pd-google on January 5, 2011.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, 19.

¹³¹ *Ibid*, 20.

confused ideas and impressions of gender; while she on one hand praises her own actions, she simultaneously condemns them.

Virtue played a great part in the actions of those in both Revolutionary and Early America. While it clearly had gendered implications before the start of the war, it greatly separated upon its conclusion, placing great sexual constraints upon women in the Early American Republic. In Deborah's case, she was able to personify both genders through virtue. She became a soldier and through her service achieved masculine virtue of service to the cause, and after the war returned to feminine virtue, marrying and having children, but continuing to blur the line with her lectures and re-enactments, at the same time.

THE FEMALE REVIEW

While the role of virtue played a great part in Deborah's life, as equally noteworthy is the impact that Herman Mann's biography made upon our ongoing assessments of Deborah's history. Not surprisingly, the tones in which he painted her military and cross-dressing experiences illustrate the assumptions of his day, concepts of virtue and gender in the Early Republic. In fact, as Hiltner notes, the period between the American Revolution and the Early Republic (until approximately 1830) was one of rapidly shifting "gender identifications with powerful consequences for national identity. The valorization of the feminine as a signifier of national virtue contributed to an increasingly androgynous ideal for national heroism; the "feminization of republican manhood" transpired as one adjustment of republican ideology to market capitalism and emergent liberalism."¹³² This is visible through Herman Mann's construction of Deborah's life as a revolutionary soldier. It is also through

¹³² Hiltner, "'She Bled in Secret': Deborah Sampson, Herman Mann and The Female Review", 190.

his work, that his own personality comes out. He, like many other republican commentators of the time, saw women as agents of social control who placed influence upon both men and children.¹³³ This relates back to the idea of Republican Motherhood, where women are envisioned as ideal for raising virtuous republican citizens. His biography of Deborah, *The Female Review*, remains important, as the most used primary source for those who wish to explore the life of Deborah. Most interestingly, Mann published this account of Deborah's "memoirs" without introducing much of Deborah's actual life experiences. Instead, he apparently preferred to fabricate much of the material (as historians such as Alfred F. Young have since established), weaving a story of Deborah which he could use in order to support his own agenda of gendered Republican ideals. He handles her story with kid gloves, both praising and berating her at the same time, and warning other women to stay away from her manner of behavior. Scholar Judith Hiltner, in her article "'She Bled in Secret': Deborah Sampson, Herman Mann, and *The Female Review*", notes that Mann created his Deborah in the form of two different characters who he felt represented models of republican virtue: "Charles Worthy in Enos Hitchcock's 1793 novel, *The Farmer's Friend*; and Hannah Snell, the English "Female Soldier" whose combat adventures on land and sea had been reprinted in America repeatedly since the 1770's."¹³⁴

The most influential part of Mann's text is the section which discusses Deborah's early life. It is here that he reinterprets her life into a path that he suggests influences her to become a soldier. Writing about her childhood and young life, Mann attempts to characterize Deborah as a genderless child, who enjoys both male and female activities. His underlying

¹³³ *ibid.*

¹³⁴ *ibid.*, 192.

goal, lay in promoting his own republican ideals which including more progressive ideas for female education and anti-war sentiments during growing tensions with France. Mann speaks about how Deborah often feared punishment for always having her nose in a book, and how she had a great taste for the study of Natural Philosophy,¹³⁵ something which more than likely was a subject which men studied, not women. It is when he begins discussing Deborah's life as a soldier that Mann begins to weave the "popular female warrior narrative" into his story, thus relying on balladry which had been circulating around the lower classes in England and North American since the seventeenth century.¹³⁶ One such example is Hannah Snell, a woman who, it is believed, Herman Mann modeled Deborah's character after. Hannah Snell was an English woman who fought as a man and had many ballads composed about her, which may or may not have reached Deborah's ears. Mann's careful characterization of Deborah allowed him to relate "the popular story of the earthy, swashbuckling, cross-dressing woman warrior...defuse Sampson's threatening gender transgression and to tailor an exemplary specimen of Republican Womanhood."¹³⁷

Although Mann tried quite hard to force Deborah into his particular androgynous mold, he often found himself working very hard to backtrack, and agree with her actions while at the same time condemning them. In other words, when he wrote about Deborah's need to transcend the barriers of her sex he created a misstep, and must swiftly contradict himself by warning readers against her actions. In this light, he juxtaposes both custom and virtue, which by the time of his writing, 1797, have become gendered concepts.¹³⁸ As already

¹³⁵ Mann, 48.

¹³⁶ Bloch, 192.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid, 195.

noted by the work of Ruth Bloch, it is during this time that a shift has taken place. During the Revolutionary era women were able to engage in “masculine” activities due to the seriousness of war, but by the end of the century times had changed and, “the virtue of any woman who completely abandoned the domestic sphere for a public venture was suspect, and one who left home to travel with a company of soldiers of course would be anathema.”¹³⁹

It is at this point that Mann faced a balancing act, he must satisfy his audiences, those who he believed would support Deborah’s actions and those who would condemn her. Therefore, he used the most powerful tool he had, the ability to manipulate Deborah’s story into conveying what he wanted. On one hand, he informed his female readers that he only praised the reputable qualities within Deborah.¹⁴⁰ In order to soften the opinions of those who would scorn her, he used gendered characterizations of love. Love was what prompted Deborah to become an ardent patriot, not self-gratifying love, but “masculine selfless love” of freedom.¹⁴¹ These actions, then, created an androgynous character, which helped symbolize the gendered virtues of the new nation which would emerge. Not only does Mann endorse his political agenda through characterization of Deborah, but he also showed his anti-war beliefs as well. When he wrote on Deborah’s participation in battle, he noted that she “recoiled and shed tears” as she recalled her first skirmish where three men were killed.¹⁴² Her “feminine” response to battle reasserts the anti-war agenda Mann wishes to assert.

¹³⁹ *Ibid*, 196.

¹⁴⁰ Mann, 87

¹⁴¹ *Ibid*, 89.

¹⁴² *Ibid*, 102.

One of the most important tasks that Mann sought to accomplish was to painstakingly assure his reader that Deborah never compromised her virtue, or chastity. The most familiar female figures in the Revolution were the camp followers, who travelled with the armies, and they were often assumed to be loose, or prostitutes. These women often found themselves the victims of two problems, not only were they guilty of loose virtue, but they were also guilty of poverty, which were two characteristics that were closely linked together, as Hiltner has noted.¹⁴³ Therefore, convincing his audience that Deborah had indeed preserved her chastity was crucial, and Mann cites this as the success of her heroism, not her actual service as a soldier.

An example of how Mann weaved this idea of preservation of virtue, or chastity into Deborah's tale, is his probably fictionalized account of her wounds in battles. Mann's book asserts that during one skirmish, a musket ball landed in Deborah's groin, and rather than be discovered, she risked removing it herself.¹⁴⁴ This symbolic, sexually infused medical act reflects Mann's insistence that Deborah was dedicated to preserving her façade in any way to eliminate the risk of being caught. With examples such as these, he chooses scenarios of virtue over those who choose custom.

In addition to exploring Deborah's several brushes with discovery, Mann also explores the charm which she, in male dress, supposedly held over her female admirers. Revolutionary and post-Revolution Americans, of course, had no formal sense equivalent to the modern concept of "lesbians". In the literature of the western world in between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries, passionate female friendships, which sometimes even

¹⁴³ Bloch, 199.

¹⁴⁴ Mann, 123.

included physical acts like kissing, etc., were perceived as noble and even full of virtue. Often these types of relationship could serve as temporary distractions and more than that, as introductions into more advanced romantic relationships, such as those which took place with men.¹⁴⁵ According to Lillian Fadermann in *Surpassing the Love of Man: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*, this relationship was only acceptable if both women wore gender appropriate clothing.¹⁴⁶ This makes the case with Deborah problematic. Not only do we have the situation of Deborah being a transvestite, and therefore everyone assuming that her relationships are male-female, including those who express interest in her, but also there is the issue of the masculinity of her biographer, who often places his own agenda upon her biography, imploring “females” to listen to him. However, when Mann does talk about Deborah’s experience with her female admirers, he notes that she considered it as a starting point, or a model, for heterosexual attraction in the future. Mann even paints Deborah in the appearance of an educator, teaching women that they must attract men for companion's sake, not simply to fulfill sexual desires.¹⁴⁷ His book provided him with a platform to advocate a national attitude of virtuous feminine ideas and allowed him to illustrate the remarkability of Deborah’s story.

Mann’s other intention for writing *The Female Review* was to secure a federal pension for Deborah. This makes sense when one examines his work carefully. Many of the stories, such as those of battle are indeed fabricated, tailored to place Deborah in situations that never happened, bolstering her claims of actually fighting in battle in order to seem

¹⁴⁵ Bloch, 206.

¹⁴⁶ Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the love of men: romantic friendship and love between women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: Harper Paperbacks, 1998).

¹⁴⁷ Hiltner, ““She Bled in Secret”: Deborah Sampson, Hermann Mann, and *The Female Review*”, 207-8.

worthy of monetary reward. While many would think it would be hard to prove that she participated in battles that she did not, some of her records were destroyed later in a fire, making these allegations slightly easier to claim. Significantly, Mann published a later version of his 1797 book, in 1829, after Deborah had passed away, he wrote entirely in the first person. Through her voice, he “appears liberated from any obligation of fidelity to the historical Sampson or any concern about her reputation. Sampson becomes an androgynous conflation...and member of a moral reform society: she rambles from camp to absorb breathtaking vistas from the peaks surrounding West Point, endorses compassionate Universalism over exclusive Calvinist faith, helps relieve other women in distress, and campaigns against dueling and prostitution.”¹⁴⁸ Mann’s voice and literature were characteristic of the time in that he weaves necessity (the plea for a federal pension) with the idea of Amazonian women. The book “articulates in its instability, exuberance, and contradictions the aspirations and anxieties of the early republic.”¹⁴⁹

HERMAN MANN AND AN ADDRESS DELIVERED WITH APPLAUSE

In fact, it is not even clear that Deborah wrote her own speeches; there is great evidence that Herman Mann, her original biographer, also wrote her speeches. Scholars have taken note that many early speeches by women were in fact written by men, because women were not thought capable of creating complex thought and argument.¹⁵⁰ This speech is full of falsifications, including the claim that she served in the Yorktown campaign and that she had gone with Schuyler to fight Native Americans on the Canadian border. It seems likely that

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 211.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid*.

¹⁵⁰ Hiltner, ““Like a Bewildered Star”: Deborah Sampson, Herman Mann, And *An Address Delivered With Applause*”, 8.

she asserted this falsehood at least partially to help her secure a Federal Invalid Pension. Since it has been proven that Deborah did not enlist until May 1782, her participation in those prominent battles was by definition impossible.

It turns out that both Deborah and Mann were greatly concerned with her reputation, so much so, that this affected the tailoring of the speech. Repeatedly, questions and reassertions about her chastity appear, and questions about whether or not fighting in male disguise was the proper type of behavior for women. The speech notes that, “I am indeed willing to acknowledge what I have done, an error and presumption. I will call it an *error* and *presumption*, because I swerved from the accustomed flowry paths of *female delicacy*, to walk upon the heroic precipice of feminine perdition!”¹⁵¹

She continues with:

Had all this been achieved by the rougher hand, more properly assigned to wield the sword in duty and danger in a defensive war, the most cruel in its measures, though important in its consequences; these thorns might have been converted into wreaths of immortal glory and fame. I therefore yield every claim of honor and distinction to the hero and patriot, who met the foe in his own name; though not with more heartfelt satisfaction, with the trophies, which were most to redound to the future grandeur and importance of the country in which he lives.¹⁵²

In other words, had she been male, she would have asked for or deserved glory, but as a woman, she was ready to give up praise and direct it to others who were more deserving. She concludes that, “...even this deemed too much of an extenuation of a breach in the modesty of the *female world*- humilized and contented will I sit down inglorious, for having unfortunately performed an important part assigned for another-like a bewildered star traversing out of its accustomed orbit, whose twinkling beauty at most has become totally

¹⁵¹ *An Address Delivered with Applause*, 29.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

obscured in the presense of the sun.”¹⁵³ The speech ends with, “On the whole, as we readily acquiesce in the acknowledgement, that the *field* and the *cabinet* are the proper spheres assigned to our Masters and our Lords; may *we*, also, deserve the dignified title and encomium of Mistress and Lady, in our *kitchens* and in our *parlors*. And as an overruling providence may succeed our wishes- let us rear an offspring in every respect worthy to fill the most illustrious stations of their predecessors.”¹⁵⁴

As mentioned before, one of the reasons for both Gannett’s speaking tour and her book was to help raise money for her family and failing farm. She also wished to seek the approval of middle class audiences for which her address was mainly written.¹⁵⁵ It is here that we must examine the theatricality of Deborah’s speaking tour, for the speeches which she gave took place within theaters. Dianne Dugaw notes in her work, *Women Warriors in Popular Balladry, 1650-1850*, that at the end of the eighteenth century in Europe, “stage demonstrations by women performers in military garb had become a popular theatrical convention, both in musical reviews as well as scenes in full length plays.”¹⁵⁶ An early example was Hannah Snell (the heroine from England) who performed as herself in London, speaking about her life as a soldier. Dugaw notes that the theatrical performances and the wide attendance that they drew illustrate a fascination in Europe which later spread to the United States, via Deborah and others, with gender fluidity and cross-dressing, something which had roots as deep as the era of Shakespeare.¹⁵⁷ Karlyn Kohrs Campbell notes in her

¹⁵³ *Ibid*, 30.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 32.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 16.

¹⁵⁶ Dianne Dugaw, *Warrior Women and Popular Balladry, 1650-1850*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 181-82.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 163-89.

article, "Gender and Genre: Loci of Invention and Contradiction in the Earliest Speeches by U.S. Women" that Deborah's change back into her military uniform after her *Address* helped solidify her gender transitions where she balanced between the "male heroic" and the "female pentinent".¹⁵⁸ Deborah's lectures are important to the overall argument of her cross-dressing escapades. Part of her overall performance was to change out of her traditional female attire and to complete a military drill onstage for her audience. Not only does this solidify the performativity of her play with gender, but it illustrates that Deborah indeed continued to dress as a man (for various means) after her role as a soldier had ended. Hiltner adds,

the containment of Sampson's subversive transgression of gender boundaries within what had become a popular form of stage entertainment, where actresses merely *impersonated* soldiers, was another vehicle for confining and diffusing its threatening implications. In his introduction to the printed text, Mann reinforces the conventional and theatrical dimensions of Sampson's performance- which replace and efface her *actual* transgression of convention. He claims that the speaker, in narrating her story, will revisit 'the theater of her personating the soldier.'¹⁵⁹

In fact, Deborah's whole life, even beyond her public speeches, often appeared to other observers as a performing mindset. Her own military commander referred to her case as "truly theatrical"¹⁶⁰ and Deborah in her own address said, "Thus I became an actor in that important drama, with an inflexible resolution to persevere through the last scene."¹⁶¹

Theaters in themselves are important; by definition, audiences expect that upon going to a theater, they will be viewing not reality, but play. It is possible that those who went to see

¹⁵⁸Karlynn Kohrs Campbell, "Gender and Genre: Loci of Invention and Contradiction in the Earliest Speeches by U.S. Women," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 81, no. 4. (1995): 479-95.

¹⁵⁹ Hiltner, 17.

¹⁶⁰ Brookey, 73.

¹⁶¹ *An Address Delivered with Applause*, 22.

Deborah speak accepted what she had to say more easily, as it presented itself to them within a theater, and was different from reality.

Deborah's lecture tour proved quite successful. She visited twenty different towns in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and New York and she made at least \$100 in profit.¹⁶² These profits equaled the amount a schoolteacher might have made in approximately a year or two of work.¹⁶³ Within the rhetoric of her address, Deborah says that by traveling around to present her experience in public, she hoped to achieve three main goals, to: "enhance the pecuniary interest of her family", "open the eyes of the incredulous, and...wipe off any aspersions, which the whispers of satire, caprice, or malevolence may have been wantonly thrown upon her", and, "re-visit some of the principle places, which were the theatre of her personating the soldier."¹⁶⁴ Within her actual performance she provided her truth of military service by "using facts about the war not known to the general public, by demonstrating her skill with "Old Betsy" in the Manual of Arms, by staying in the homes of her former commanding officers while on tour, including Captain George Webb and General John Patterson, and by presenting a compelling rationale for joining the army in terms her audience could accept.

CONCLUSION

So what are some of the reasons that the role of women changed between the time of the American Revolution, when they were able to blur gendered boundaries much more

¹⁶² Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, *Women Public Speakers in the United States, 1800-1925: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook*, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1993), 383.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ *An Address Delivered with Applause*, 1-3

freely, into the Early Republic and further along the timeline of American History, when gender roles appeared more strict? Cultural historians and other scholars often attribute the change to “a conservative reaction to excesses of the French Revolution; the 1798 publication of Mary Wollstonecraft’s scandalous memoirs, which supplied grist for conservation mills...and the evolution of a “separate spheres” economy that reinforced the spiritualization of domesticity.”¹⁶⁵ Historian Joan Jensen has argued that this idea of separate spheres often remained more loose anyway in rural areas (she uses rural counties in Pennsylvania for an example), as women who do not live in town often live on farms, and must assist with the farm or the fieldwork, areas which would usually be restricted to men.¹⁶⁶ This is something to keep in mind while examining the case of Deborah, as she grew up, and lived in, more rural areas in Eastern and Central Massachusetts. In addition, events which were happening in Europe were still creating a large impact upon society within the United States. Deborah’s story illustrates the importance of biography, as in her case, it is visible that sweeping generalizations about the spheres of domesticity do not completely apply.

Deborah’s life is one that illustrates changes in virtue in both Revolutionary America and the Early American Republic. Her experience as a soldier displayed both feminine and masculine qualities of virtue and her lectures showed how those gendered separations became ever more distinct in the new nation. Her cross-dressing also characterizes these gendered separations and how the theater of war creates fluidity in the overall social construct.

¹⁶⁵ Hiltner, ““Like a Bewildered Star”: Deborah Sampson, Herman Mann, and Address, Delivered With Applause”, 15.

¹⁶⁶ Joan Jensen, *Loosening the Bonds :Mid-Atlantic Farm Women, 1750-1850*, (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University, 1986).

What is also important to examine, is the effect of the previously mentioned ballads upon the American public, which told the story of the Anglo-American female warrior who acts as a man and goes off to war for either glory or love. The Female Warrior in ballads, like Deborah, represents a female and male dichotomy, both Mars the God of War, and Venus the Goddess of Love. It is also through her cross-dressing, that Deborah straddles both the masculine and the feminine genders.

What is notable to focus on now, is how Deborah has passed into history. How do people remember her now? In addition, what do historians have as tools to remember her by, besides Herman Mann's disastrous biography? One thing, in particular, is artwork, or even her memorials. In 1797, for her biography, artist Joseph Stone painted her likeness into a very Republican looking frame, meaning that the portrait contained both masculine and feminine characteristics. While Deborah is clothed in a dress with a necklace and long locks of hair, the painting shows her with incredibly close-set eyes and a prominent square jaw, giving her the androgynous appearance that Herman Mann no doubt desired. This trend in her image continued through history, in a painting done of Deborah for an exhibition at West Point in 1954. That twentieth-century painting, again, combines both male and female elements. She appears tall and strapping but also sprightly and cute at the same time. Probably the most important piece of artwork that immortalizes Deborah is a sculpture creation of her that resides outside the Sharon Public Library in Sharon, Massachusetts. The statue, commissioned by the town in 1989, portrays Deborah after the war. It is a life-sized figure in blackened bronze, in which, as recent biographer Young notes, "she wears a dress,

and a soldier's coat is draped over her soldier, her musket is at rest at her side; her right hand holds a powderhorn, her left a man's colonial tricornered hat."¹⁶⁷

The life of Deborah Sampson Gannett was one of extraordinary circumstance and accomplishments. Everyone, historians included, want to make their own Deborah, regardless of how she really was. Her lifespan illustrates the rapid change experienced within America between the era of the Revolution and that of the Early Republic. Her life as a soldier displays how, as history has passed, the gender-crossing actions of women of the war were often accepted and romanticized, especially in the case of the female warrior. Her later life in the Early American Republic conveys the rapid shift in ideas of virtue, separate spheres, and Republican Motherhood and early hints of Feminism in the United States.

It is impossible to understand the life of Deborah Sampson Gannett without considering her as a cross-dresser. The sources which are consistently used to evaluate her life note that she experimented with her dress both before and after she became a soldier in the American Revolution. While her life as a soldier is often used in studies which examine the experience of women in the revolution, it is important now to understand her as a cross-dresser, and someone whose life should be examined to analyze the meaning of gender in Revolutionary America and the Early American Republic.

¹⁶⁷ Young, 310.

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