

# The Theatricality of Sexual Difference in Late-Eighteenth-Century America

## Deborah Sampson's Staged Gender Masquerade

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Early American theater constituted an important site for women as performers as well as women as playwrights. Committed to the ideal of liberty, playwrights like Susanna Rowson and Mercy Otis Warren wielded their pens on behalf of independence and created plays that featured strong patriotic women. The stage offered possibilities to women for performing new public roles, allowing writers as well as performers to explore the boundaries of gender. Instrumental in the production of sexual difference, the stage in the early Republic constituted an important arena in which to negotiate the difficult questions of national and gender identity. As Sarah E. Chinn has argued:

Supporters of the theater saw within it the potential for civic education and engagement, the training of Americans toward virtue. For many American men, especially men in the expanding working classes, the stage was the site in which concerns about identity, masculinity, political power, and the relationship of the self to others and the individual to the group were worked through. (4)

The theater might have been “predominantly a male arena” (Chinn 3) in which the category of “manliness” was “a necessary attribute of the American stage” (Chinn 1), but it was also an important site for women who tried to challenge dominant definitions of sexual difference. As playwrights like Royall Tyler and William Dunlap participated actively in the efforts of creating a decidedly “American” theater, they ensured that this definition also relied heavily on a dichotomous, relational mode of defining gender, and thus contributed to the process of constructing sexual difference, which was then used to justify sep-

arate and unequal spheres of work and life.<sup>1</sup> This gendered split between the masculine realm of public life and the feminine world of domesticity was not, however, always neatly naturalized in plays, and some women dramatists offered criticism against the naturalization of sex and gender, focusing on their roles as independent women. Mrs. Marriott's *The Chimera; or Effusions of Fancy: A Farce in Two Acts* (1795), for instance, presents the story of the free-willed, "unsex'd" Matilda, who disguises herself as submissive and docile in order to display manly qualities and voice her independence.<sup>2</sup> The most important female playwrights who offered criticism were, however, Judith Sargent Murray, Susanna Rowson, and Mercy Otis Warren. Warren's *The Ladies of Castile* (1790), for instance, presents a strong female character, Donna Maria, who takes up the sword in war. Her plays, as Jeffrey H. Richards suggests, "are not just about women and in fact make few assertions about their being a woman, but they serve as a register for the often insoluble contradictions of how a woman in America is represented in dramatic, or even theatrical, form" (14). Susanna Rowson's *Slaves in Algiers* (1794) also asserts female independence. This play, which deals with the capture of American sea travelers by the Barbary pirates, is deeply concerned with issues of oppression and freedom, bringing forth strong arguments in favor of female independence. Making powerful statements on the situation of women in the early Republic, these plays link the ideals of the revolutionary cause to issues of gender.

With its potential to visualize and dramatize bodies and the effects of gender ideology, the stage offers a unique context for displaying the constructedness of gender. Performance, performativity, and theatricality are closely related, and this essay will have a closer look at the connections between gender performance and the theatricality of sexual difference on the post-revolutionary stage. It will do so by analyzing the staged gender masquerade of Deborah Sampson. On stage, the performance of gender is doubled, allowing the actor

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- 1 Royall Tyler's *The Contrast* (1787) is a case in point. The first play written by an American to be performed at a professional theater, *The Contrast* tellingly relies on a paradigm of difference to explain a series of contrasts, most notably between Europe and America, country and city, and "man" and "woman."
  - 2 Sarah Marriott was a Scottish actress who played for one year with the Old American Company (1794-95). However, neither her acting nor her play created much interest during her time. *The Chimera* was only performed once in Philadelphia and once in New York; see Richards 32.

to expose the theatricality of sexual difference.<sup>3</sup> When acts of cross-dressing and enactments of the female body are publicly staged, this duplication becomes especially apparent. Due to the open possibility of transformation, staged cross-dressing becomes a spectacle, “in either direction by maintaining an in-between doubleness, a state of being that could potentially (but not yet) resolve into masculine or feminine” (Gorman 10). As Elizabeth Maddock Dillon reminds us, theater “by its very nature, conveys meaning by operating at the intersection of embodiment and representation—by coupling physical presence and mimetic reference” (50). On stage, she argues, the “relation between embodied (ontic) persons and represented (mimetic) subjects is definitionally in play” (11). It is the possibility of performance to invent strategies for re-imagining and disturbing the process of naturalization of sexual difference that I aim to assert in my analysis of Sampson’s on-stage appearances. Participating in “the double nature of theatrical signification” (Dillon 51), Sampson’s performance, I want to argue, exposes the arbitrariness of the sex/gender system through masquerade.

Relying on the technique of cross-dressing, early American dramatists offered examples of women acting like men, engaging in a powerful critique of the gendered character of freedom in post-revolutionary America. Compared with the English tradition, instances of cross-dressing in early American literary texts in general may be relatively scarce, but there are some important depictions of gender-ambiguous bodies, manly women characters, and cross-

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3 While I want to distinguish between theater as a concrete place, institution, and art form and theatricality as a trope, I am aware of the elusiveness of the term “theatricality” and the unsettled tensions between the concepts of “theatricality,” “performance,” and “performativity.” Borrowing the term “performativity” from theater studies in order to formulate her gender theory, Judith Butler argues that “[t]he acts by which gender is constituted bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts” (“Performative Acts” 521). Famously, Roland Barthes has defined theatricality as “theaterminus-text,” that is “a density of signs and sensations built up on stage starting from the written argument” (25). Thomas Postlewait and Tracy C. Davis write that the term theatricality “can be defined exclusively as a specific type of performance style or inclusively as all the semiotic codes of theatrical representation” (1). In my analysis of Sampson’s staged gender masquerade, I use the terms theatricality and performativity, the citational practice which reproduces and/or subverts discourse, almost synonymously. I particularly use the term theatricality when I want to engage that term’s “longstanding association with the figural as well as longstanding debate about the intentionality of the actor” (Jackson 209). For the theoretical complications of the notions of theatricality and performativity, see Shannon Jackson’s “Theatricality’s Proper Objects.”

dressing instances in post-revolutionary literature.<sup>4</sup> Conspicuously, instances of disguise and travesty in late eighteenth-century Anglo-America are mostly associated with either the Revolutionary War or the experience of captivity. The American Revolution and the struggles over the Constitution contributed to a re-ordering of society and opened up an avenue for the discussion and reevaluation of gender relations. Although fears of “unsex’d women” soon began to dominate public discourse, many women still made their appearances in cultural representations.

From the well-known heroic female soldiers like Hannah Snell to the infamous Chevalier D’Eon, historical cases of changing sex attracted great attention in the Atlantic world in the early modern period. The late eighteenth century, on both sides of the Atlantic, witnessed paradigmatic changes in the conceptions of sexuality, gender, and the female body, according to which the view of sexual difference as an ontological difference between “man” and “woman” became increasingly dominant. The performativity of sex/gender can be registered in the frequent instances of cross-dressing and gender masquerade, which expose the constructed nature of sex/gender and express points of structural resistance to the beginning corporealization of “natural” gender differences at the turn of the century. Historically, there were a series of poor white women who cross-dressed as men in order to serve in the American Revolutionary War. Ann Bailey, for instance, enlisted in the Continental Army under the name of “Samuel Gay,” and Anne Smith adopted the name of “Samuel Smith” (see Weyler 146). Both women were, however, severely punished for their behaviors and were tried for fraud. There is only one historical figure who achieved fame, earning accolades for her brave deeds: Deborah Sam(p)son Gannett (1760-1827).<sup>5</sup> Unlike the others,

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4 Apart from Mann’s *The Female Review. Life of Deborah Sampson* (1797), other interesting cases of literary cross-dressing can be found in the anonymous *The History of Constantius and Pulchra* (1797), K. White’s *A Narrative of the Life, Occurrences, Vicissitudes, and Present Situation of K. White. Compiled and Collated by Herself* (1809), Tabitha Tenney’s *Female Quixotism* (1801), and Charles Brockden Brown’s *Ormond* (1799).

5 Although often spelled Sampson in historical accounts, the correct spelling of Deborah’s maiden name is Samson. Since I am not so much interested in the actual historical person as in the stage character and the performed person and since most studies use the name Sampson, I will refer to her as Deborah Sampson throughout my paper. In 1784, she was married to Benjamin Gannett, a farmer from Sharon, Massachusetts, which is why the *Address* carries the name Gannett as its author, even though it is unlikely that Sampson really penned this public lecture. Like *The Female Review*, her mem-

Sampson used her embodied self and, through a carefully crafted act of gender performance on the American stage, managed to transform herself into a celebrity.<sup>6</sup>

The written speech for Sampson's lecture tour, *An Address Delivered with Applause*, and her public performances in theaters in New England and eastern New York between March and October 1802 offer important sites for the investigation of tensions concerning gender identities in late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century America. I want to treat Sampson's lecture as a dramatic performance because, on the one hand, her lecture was performed in conjunction with other theatrical productions, and, on the other, because her address was fashioned as a performative piece and was performed in front of an audience. As a cross-dresser, Sampson was a spectacular sight on stage and her/his gender identity was captured in a state of potentiality, hinging on the question of whether her/his gender performance referred to the world beyond the theater or whether it served to make the theatrical aspects of her/his presentation explicit. The gender trouble s/he caused on stage was exacerbated by the fact that the audience had heard of Sampson's real-life experiences as a soldier. It is this act of self-stylization performed both on and off stage that contributed to Deborah Sampson's fame.<sup>7</sup> I read Samp-

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oir, which was written by Herman Mann, this address was also drafted by him. For biographical information, see Lucy Freeman and Alma Halbert Bond's *America's First Woman Warrior*, which is a romanticized account of her life, including pictures of Sampson's hometown. Alfred F. Young's *Masquerade: The Life and Times of Deborah Sampson, Continental Soldier* is a scholarly biographical account of Deborah Sampson, in which he has uncovered the story of the historical person, disentangling the layers of fiction that have surrounded her person.

- 6 Following Greta LaFleur, I will rely on the personal pronouns "she" and "her" when I refer to Sampson during the times she lived as a woman, but use both "she/her" and "he/his" when talking about her performance as Robert Shurtliff, one of the names Sampson used in the military (see *Natural History* 141). I will also use "she/her" and "he/his" when I speak about Sampson's real-life performance on stage as Sampson/Shurtliff.
- 7 For more details on why Sampson, in contrast to the other female soldiers who fought in the American Revolution, achieved fame, see Karen Ann Weyler's chapter in *Empowering Words*, "Becoming 'The American Heroine': Deborah Sampson, Collaboration, and Performance." According to Weyler, there were four factors which contributed to her success at becoming a celebrity: "first, her ability to fulfill expectations for both masculine and feminine virtues; second, her strategic deployment of male intermediaries to speak for and represent her in the public sphere; third, her understanding of the performative nature of gender; and, finally, and most important, her keen awareness of the importance of print in shaping public opinion" (145). My article does not so

son's staged cross-dressing as a cleverly disguised expression of her/his fluid gender identity which in a subversive manner exposes the constructedness of sexual difference. Engaging in the theatricality of sexual difference, Sampson's performance draws attention to a general question concerning the status of representation in theatrical mimesis. As Thomas Postlewait and Tracy C. Davis sum up this debate: "Does dramatic performance refer beyond itself to the world or does it serve to make explicit the theatrical aspects of presentation?" (13).

Referred to as the American Jeanne d'Arc,<sup>8</sup> Sampson managed to stylize herself into a heroic and successful cross-dressing figure by putting on a sophisticated and subversive performance of sex/gender, which functioned as a camouflaged form of criticism that did not offend dominant hegemonic cultural expectations of gender as it excused cross-dressing as a necessary part of patriotic devotion. Sampson's performance of her/his story as a female warrior on the stage,<sup>9</sup> I argue, used the "unnaturalness" of gender transgression in order to criticize the naturalization of sexual difference and enacted a potent intervention into the public discourse on gender and the roles of women in the new Republic. Carefully and shrewdly negotiating dominant discourses on gender, which also included a keen awareness of the workings of female

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much focus on the historical Deborah Sampson as it aims at exposing the theatricality of sexual difference in Sampson's appearance on stage, which constituted a powerful intervention into the process of the consolidation of sex/gender in post-revolutionary America.

- 8 In her 1848 three-volume work *The Women of the American Revolution*, Elizabeth F. Ellet wrote about Deborah Sampson, stating that it "cannot be denied that this romantic girl exhibited something of the same spirit as Joan of Arc, the lowly herdsmaid who, amid the round of her humble duties, felt herself inspired with resolution to go forth and do battle in her country's cause—exchanging her peasant garb for mail, helmet, and sword" (Diamant 35). In fact, it was Philip Freneau, who first described Sampson as a "faithful amazon" who fought "with the same vigorous soul inspired / As Joan of Arc, of old, / With zeal against the Briton fired, / Her spirit warm and bold / She march'd to face her country's foes" (183). In 1983, Deborah Sampson was declared "Official Heroine of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts" by Governor Michael Dukakis.
- 9 Narratives of female warriors were well-known in eighteenth-century Anglo-America. In *Warrior Women and Popular Balladry*, Dianne Dugaw has identified more than one hundred different "female warrior" narratives printed primarily in Great Britain between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Female warriors, according to her, "were an imaginative preoccupation of the early modern era, appearing not only in popular street ballads but in a host of other genres as well: epic, romance, biography, comedy, tragedy, opera, and ballad opera" (1).

virtue, Sampson relied on the help of men with whom she collaborated in order to achieve the sympathy of her audience and shape public sentiment in her favor. As a result, Sampson's performances constituted a subversive act of self-fashioning which exposed the politics (and polemics) of gender on the post-revolutionary stage.

## Gender Masquerade in Post-Revolutionary America

Deborah Sampson's performance of sexual difference can be taken literally: she cross-dressed and enacted her own body on the post-revolutionary stage. In doing so, she drew attention to the dissonance between sex and performance because the "natural" sex of the performer was not the same as the gender being performed. Cross-dressing and drag are modes of queer performance that subversively cite ostensibly natural signs of gender, eschewing the notion that sex can be directly read off the body. Obscuring the transparency of "natural" sex which is inherent in the body, cross-dressing destabilized the process of the establishment of the body as a marker of sexual difference by dramatizing incoherence in the ostensibly stable links between sex/gender/desire. Masquerade, as many feminist critics long have argued, can serve as a powerful metaphor for the construction of gender categories. Already in her 1929 essay "Womanliness as a Masquerade," Joan Rivière argues that it is impossible to separate masquerade from womanliness. For her, femininity is always already a form of masquerade, a construct that depends, for reasons social and political as well as erotic, upon masks. Famously, Judith Butler has built on this concept of masquerade when she argues that gender is a performance, in that it constitutes the identity it is purported to be. As she suggests:

Consider that a sedimentation of gender norms produces the peculiar phenomenon of a "natural sex" or a "real woman" or any number of prevalent and compelling social functions, and that this is a sedimentation that over time has produced a set of corporeal styles which, in reified form, appear as the natural configuration of bodies into sexes existing in a binary relation to one another. If these styles are enacted, and if they produce the coherent gendered subjects who pose as their originators, what kind of performance might reveal this ostensible "cause" to be an "effect"? (*Gender Trouble* 140)

Masquerade and cross-dressing cut gender off from its presumed origins in biological difference and thus turn it into performance. As Butler says: “If gender attributes [...] are not expressive but performative, then these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal” (*Gender Trouble* 141). The attributes that are ascribed to men and women thus constitute our conception of man and woman. Herein lies the attraction of camouflage and cross-dressing for women, who use these techniques in order to gain self-authorization. More importantly, cross-dressing allows women “male” freedom, enabling them to leave the confines of the domestic sphere.

In “Women on Top,” Natalie Zemon Davis argues that in early modern Europe, carnival and the image of the carnivalesque woman “could *undermine* as well as reinforce” (131, original emphasis) the renewal of existing social frames. As she suggests, the image

of the disorderly woman did not always function to keep women in their place. On the contrary, it was a multivalent image that could operate, first, to widen behavioral options for women within and even outside marriage, and second, to sanction riot and political disobedience for both men and women in a society that allowed the lower orders few formal means of protest. Play with an unruly woman is partly a chance for temporary release from the traditional and stable hierarchy; but it is also part of the conflict over efforts to change the basic distribution of power within society. (131)

Representations of women-on-top may “clarify the social structure by the process of reversing it” (Davis 130) or they may constitute a form of disobedience that undermines the order of society. The gender hierarchy of the eighteenth century clearly limited women’s participation in the public sphere, so pretending to be a man often constituted an empowering act, opening doors to other possibilities. As Julie Wheelwright explains in *Amazons and Military Maids*, stories of popular woman warriors were typically about working-class women who joined the military for many different reasons. Generally, they “were unconventional women who spent their lives rebelling against their assigned role before they pursued a male career. Most could only conceive of themselves as active and powerful in male disguise” (19).

As I want to suggest here, Deborah Sampson’s gender masquerade was also an empowering act, which was successful in two ways. On the one hand, it ensured her financial compensation in the form of a federal invalid pension for the battle wounds she had sustained during the Revolution, and it helped her achieve fame. On the other, it managed to destabilize traditional

hierarchies, drawing attention to the importance of sexual difference and the female body in the making of the new nation. In my study *Bodily Sensations: The Female Body in Late-Eighteenth-Century American Culture*, I have argued that the American Revolution constituted a watershed moment in the making of the body in the United States, as the unsettling effect of the Revolution on the meaning of the body as a site of subjectivity created a need for the cultural inscription of bodily difference. Historian Thomas Laqueur has recorded the emergence of a new rhetoric about womanhood at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the Atlantic world, which gave new meaning to the concept of sexual differentiation.<sup>10</sup> Even though Laqueur has been criticized for assuming a complete break with previous ways of thinking, most scholars, as Greta LaFleur states, “nonetheless generally do concur that both colloquial and scientific understandings of the nonidentical ‘nature’ of manhood and womanhood crystallized in new and more formal ways during this era” (“Sex and ‘Unsex’” 475). Difference, the opposition between “male” and “female,” became the crucial point of political and economic pressure at that time, insuring the coordination of male and female bodies, and helping to distinguish between productive and non-productive practices as well as proper, virtuous, and immoral behavior. Anatomy and a physiology of incommensurability replaced a metaphysics of hierarchy in the representation of woman in relation to man and the sexed body was transformed from “a sign of” to the “foundation for civil society” (Laqueur 157). The category “woman” came to occupy a special proximity to nature—women were referred to as “the sex”—and the female body was seen as radically different from man’s body. Much of post-revolutionary literary production contributed to the dissemination of this view of sexual difference. Through its reiterated practices of normative racial and heterosexual imperatives, it was thus ideologically complicit in the consolidation of gender identities. Just as the sentimental novel and the genre of conduct books propagated the new female ideal and acted as guides for women and girls, “plays

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10 In his discussion of a shift from a one-sex/flesh model to a two-sex/flesh model, Thomas Laqueur offers a detailed account of the history of sexual difference in Europe, showing that scientific perceptions of bodily differences have changed over time. While the differences between men and women in terms of their societal roles and position within the order of the cosmos had long been debated in Western culture, the bodily opposition between men and women, he claims, assumed a new meaning in the eighteenth century. My book *Bodily Sensations* is concerned with the various processes that contributed to the changing meaning of sex/gender and the establishment of the body as a marker of sexual difference in late-eighteenth-century America.

functioned as a kind of conduct literature for workingmen” (Chinn 7). The appearance of manly women and female warriors on stage, however, exposed the constructed nature of sex/gender, expressing points of structural resistance to the corporealization of “natural” gender differences. Performance, as Elin Diamond has it, “is the site in which performativity materializes in a concentrated form, where the ‘concealed or dissimulated conventions’ of which acts are mere repetitions might be investigated and reimagined” (47). For Sampson, the stage was therefore the ideal site in which this female warrior could enact both embodied and representational selves.

As Sandra Gustafson points out, the female warrior figure “reached a zenith of her popularity in both England and America in the 1790s” (389). Conspicuously, when the two-sex-model became consolidated at the end of the eighteenth century, a decline soon followed in the popularity of women warriors (see Friedman-Romell 461). It is precisely during these turbulent times that Deborah Sampson appeared on the post-revolutionary stage. While Herman Mann’s narrative *The Female Review*, which was published in 1797, highlighted that Deborah’s cross-dressing stemmed from the worthy cause of the Revolutionary War and thereby contained the subversiveness of Sampson’s behavior, Deborah Sampson Gannett’s 1802 appearances on stage exposed her/him as a strong “masculine woman” who clearly wanted to challenge the status quo.<sup>11</sup> I concur with Robert Alan Brookey that Sampson Gannett “was more than a female soldier”; she was a woman who “succeeded in assuming a masculine identity, performing as a man in a masculine arena” (75). Shrewdly transforming the transgressive act of gender masquerade, Sampson adopted masculinity to showcase the performative nature of gender. Certainly, Sampson’s motivation for masculine self-making can be read as more than a means to make money. Recent scholarly work has explored Mann’s character in his *The Female Review* as a “‘lesbian-like’ protagonist” (La Fleur, “Precipitous” 94; *Natural History* 138). LaFleur, for instance, traces the important contribution of *The Female Review* to early American sexual epistemology: Mann’s text is “rife with biological imagery and metaphor,” she observes, “a narrative texture that sets *The Female Review* apart from contemporary representations of

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11 According to Judith Jack Halberstam, the concept of the “masculine woman” can be theorized as female masculinity, which is a form of gender variance that falls within the purview of masculinity rather than femininity. Female masculine identity, Halberstam argues, is not an imitation of masculinity but a form of gender expression that constructs “masculinity without men.” See *Female Masculinity* 1-43.

cross-dressing female soldiers” (“Precipitous” 98). With its focus on female masculinity, the text might also be interpreted as an early trans narrative, before the rise of sexology and more recent understandings of that term.<sup>12</sup>

## America’s First Warrior Woman

Deborah Sam(p)son was born on December 17, 1760, in the small village of Plympton, Massachusetts, close to Plymouth. Her parents were descendants of important founders of the Massachusetts Bay colony. While her mother, Deborah Bradford, was the great-granddaughter of William Bradford, her father was a descendant of Miles Standish and John Alden, and Priscilla Mullins (see Buchanan 7-8). Despite this prominent lineage, Deborah faced a childhood of hardship and poverty. During the Revolutionary War, she secretly sewed a set of men’s clothes, hid in the woods to change out of her dress, and became a man. Adopting the name Robert Shurtliff, he enlisted in the Continental Army on May 20, 1782.<sup>13</sup> During a military engagement near Tarrytown, New York, he was wounded but treated his injury himself in order to prevent discovery that he was a woman. His sex was, however, discovered when he was hospitalized with a fever, and s/he was honorably discharged from the service in October 1783. Soon after the discharge from the army, a story in the *New York Gazette* was published of a successful masquerade in the American army: “An extraordinary instance of virtue in a *female soldier*, has occurred lately in the American army, in the Massachusetts line viz, a lively comely young nymph, 19 years old, dressed in man’s apparel has been discovered” (qtd. in Young 4). Since Sampson remained poor all her life, she

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12 Refraining from asking the question whether Sampson was a feminist, a queer person, or a trans person, LaFleur nevertheless is interested in how Sampson might have understood herself/himself, speculating: “If Sampson were alive today, he or she might be feminist, queer, *and* trans” (*Natural History* 141, original emphasis). In this chapter, I am not interested in the person of Deborah Sampson but in her/his performance of gender on the post-revolutionary stage.

13 As Weyler states, Sampson first enlisted under the name “Timothy Thayer” but had to change her identity after she got drunk at a tavern and her masquerade was discovered. The name that Sampson employed during her second enlistment is the one that appears in military documents and publications of the time. There exist various spellings, “among them Shurtliff, Shirtliff, Shurtlief, and Shirtlief” (264).

anxiously sought all possible income from lectures, books, and pensions. Petitioning the state of Massachusetts for pay and also petitioning Congress for a veteran's pension, she finally succeeded in obtaining a federal pension in 1805.<sup>14</sup>

Cooperating with Herman Mann (1770-1833), "a schoolteacher with literary aspirations" (Young 11), Sampson told Mann her story so that he could write her memoir. Published in 1797 as *The Female Review: or, Memoirs of an American Young Lady; whose Life and Character are Peculiarly Distinguished—Being a Continental Soldier, for Nearly Three Years, in the Late American War*, Mann's story about Sampson is "part memoir, part novel, part factual, in good part fantasy" (Young 11). Written in the tradition of the female warrior narrative, *The Female Review* displays many parallels with the English *The Female Soldier; or, The Surprising Life and Adventures of Hannah Snell* (1750). In fact, as Alfred F. Young states, there are so many parallels between the two works that it could have been the case that "he and/or Sampson were familiar with the English narrative" (14).

Mann clearly aligned Sampson's cross-dressing with her exceptional allegiance to her country, and he wanted his audience to realize that Sampson's cross-dressing stemmed from a worthy cause: "Those, who are unacquainted with masquerade," Mann explains, "must make a difference between that, which is to heighten beauty for fantastical amusement and pleasure—and that which is to continue, perhaps, for life, to accomplish some important event" (*Female* 129-30).<sup>15</sup> Mann stresses Sampson's intense patriotism, shaping, as Judith R. Hiltner puts it, "an icon of national virtue and a myth of the early republic from the raw material of a cross-dressing female soldier" ("Bled" 190). Unusual times call for unusual measures, this text implies, and

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14 A copy of Sampson's "Petition to the Governor, Senate and House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Jan. 11, 1792" is reprinted in John Adams Vinton's introduction to his 1866 edition of *The Female Review*; see xv-xxvii. For other records concerning Sampson's enlistment in the Continental Army, see Julia Ward Stickley, "The Records of Deborah Sampson Gannett, Woman Soldier of the Revolution."

15 My references are to the 1972 Arno Press edition, which is a reprint of Adams Vinton's 1866 edition, entitled *The Female Review, Life of Deborah Sampson, the Female Soldier in the War of the Revolution*. As Young states, there are four different versions of the *Female Review*: the one Mann published in 1797, an unpublished revision, a condensed version entitled "The American Heroine," which Mann's son wanted to publish, and Adams Vinton's 1866 edition (with an introduction and notes) of Mann's 1797 version. For more details, see Young 15-16.

in the case of Deborah Sampson it was, as Mann puts it, the unnatural event of the American Revolution that called for the “unnatural” act of donning the clothes of a soldier and fighting in the Continental Army. Presenting Sampson’s story in the language of sentimental novelists, Mann paints a romanticized portrait, in which he alternately refers to Sampson as virago, female soldier, and American heroine.<sup>16</sup> Throughout the fictionalized story, Mann associates Sampson’s act of cross-dressing with the virtue of heroic self-sacrifice. Sampson, he stresses, donned military garb out of the disembodied love of freedom. Because of love for her country, Sampson was able to transcend the “inadequateness of her nature” to “accomplish enterprises and attain objects unattainable by the efforts of the other passions” (*Female* 135).

It is obvious that Mann considers Sampson’s enlistment in the army as an audacious move beyond her “nature.” Her stage appearance, I argue, uses precisely the “unnaturalness” of gender transgression in order to criticize the naturalization of sexual difference. By transgressing fixed gender identities, Sampson revealed the performative nature of gender and exposed the constructedness of sexual difference.

### The Celebrated Mrs. Gannett

In desperate need of money, Deborah Sampson—now married and called Mrs. Gannett—embarked on a lecture tour and started to deliver an oration, which was most likely also written for her by Mann, at a series of towns and cities throughout Massachusetts, Rhode Island and New York in 1802 and 1803.<sup>17</sup> An estimated “1,500 people” paid to see and hear “the celebrated Mrs. Gannett” (Young 209). According to Dianne Dugaw, “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” (181-82). Famously, Hannah Snell had performed in London, speaking about her life as a soldier, and the fascination with these theatrical performances later spread to the United States. In the new Republic Sampson was, however, a pioneer when

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16 Sampson was commonly referred to as an “American heroine” in newspapers of the day, a label that Freneau employed in his poem in her honor entitled “On Deborah Gannett.” The designation “American heroine” also appears on the title page of Gannett’s *Address Delivered with Applause*, the oration she delivered on stage.

17 For more details on the authorship of this text, see Hiltner, “Bewildered Star” 6-8.

standing on the platform and “daring to speak in public of her enlistment as a man in the Continental Army during an era women sat at home sewing, spinning or churning butter” (Freeman and Bond 189). Apparently, Sampson was also “a master of the art of self-fashioning, a would-be self-made woman” (Young 11-12), displaying a strong sense of the need to make her case public in order to secure help for a state pension. Hence her *Address* is full of appeals to the “brilliant and polite circle” that comprises her audience (Gannett, *Address* 7).

As the first woman in the United States to ever go on such a speaking tour (see Elmes-Crahall 383), Sampson entered uncharted territory. A woman in soldier’s garb on stage during an entire oration was new on the American stage. Clearly, as an impoverished, female soldier who sought public attention, Sampson overstepped the boundaries of the dominant gender ideology of republican womanhood. As Freeman and Bond explain: “Traveling alone, keeping her own itemized expenses, she arranged her performances after she arrived in each town. She journeyed in private carriages, stagecoaches carrying the mail, once took a six-day wagon trip over rutted roads” (189-90). As her diary reveals, these journeys were stressful and left their mark on Sampson. The entries are full of reports of physical sufferings like digestive ailments, headaches, and toothaches. While Sampson’s tour diary confirms that her motives in undertaking the project were to raise needed money for her family, it also shows that she enjoyed appearing on stage. On May 5, 1802, for instance, Sampson Gannett wrote that she was “much pleased in the appearance of the audience,” being especially happy with “their serious attention” (*Diary* 11). At the same time, it was especially important to her to win the approval of “the Ladies” (*Diary* 12).

Sampson’s tour lasted from June 1802 through the spring of 1803, and led her to perform in front of audiences in Boston and in a number of other northeastern towns and cities, including Providence, Springfield, Northampton, and Albany.<sup>18</sup> But even beyond her public speeches and stage appearances, Sampson’s gender performances must have been a spectacle. When General Patterson, the commanding officer to Sampson during the war, was informed of Sampson’s sex, he apparently remarked: “This is truly theatrical” (Wright

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18 A list of Sampson’s appearances can be found in her diary. See also the appendix to Freeman and Bond’s *America’s First Woman Warrior*, 211-14. According to Gustafson, Sampson also performed in New York City, a city that does not appear in her diary (see 384).

102). And in her own *Address*, Samspon Gannett relies on the metaphor of theater to describe her gender masquerade: “Thus I became an actor in that important drama, with an inflexible resolution to persevere through the last scene” (12-13).

“At five feet, seven inches in height, she made a convincing enough man in uniform” (Gustafson 385). While her appearance surely “heightened her audience’s sense of incongruity” (Gustafson 385), the stagedness of her speech suggested the unreliability of surfaces and appearances. Conspicuously, the descriptions of her heroic acts, on the one hand, and her admission of the gender transgression that is entailed in such conduct, on the other, created an interesting tension in the *Address*. Oscillating between “aggressive challenges to gender and class conventions and self-conscious submission to them” (Gustafson 382), Sampson engaged in a play of duplicity that exposed the slipperiness of the sexed body. It is through “these acts of rhetorical and performative instability” (Gustafson 382) that Sampson used her/his own body to stage the debates on gender in post-revolutionary American theater. Her/his reliance on “convoluted syntax and multiple, contradictory rhetorics” (Gustafson 380) underlined the ambiguity and fluidity of Sampson’s subversive gender masquerade.

Making her/his first appearance in the Federal Street Theatre in Boston in 1802, Sampson again donned a soldier’s uniform years after the war and performed the soldier’s manual exercise of arms on stage. The Boston performance of her/his oration and her/his staging of the manual exercise were especially spectacular because they appeared within the context of regular plays on a theater stage. Nothing in the tour, as Young states, “came close to the theatricality of her opening appearances in Boston late in March 1802, where for four nights spread over a week she was the star attraction at the Federal Street Theatre” (203). Each evening was carefully staged to pave the way for Mrs. Gannett’s appearance. The company “set the mood with a popular play touching on a theme of her address: Frederick Reynold’s *The Will; or a School for Daughters* (1797), the first night, March 22” (Young 204). *The Will* “featured a cross-dressing theme: Albina, the heroine, follows her loved one into the navy, masquerading as a naval officer, wielding both gun and sword” (Young 204-05). The second night, they played William Shakespeare’s *King Henry the IVth with the Humors of Sir John Falstaff* (most likely a version of *Henry IV, Part 2*), and the third Thomas Morton’s *The Way to Get Married* (1796). On the fourth night, there was *The Grand Historical Drama of Columbus; or, America Discovered* (1792, also by Thomas Morton) in which “Nelti, a Native American woman, fights

alongside her lover, saving his life" (Young 205). The featured plays, which involve elements of cross-dressing, all reflect the disruptive power that masquerade entails, but patriarchal order is established at the end of these plays. The Boston performances therefore took place in a theatrical context that, while highlighting the pleasures and the playfulness of gender masquerade, also stressed the renewal of existing social order (see Gustafson 395). Clearly, the institutional framing of her/his performance by other plays which contained the subversiveness of gender masquerade also affected the destabilizing potential of Sampson's disruption of gender categories. As Gustafson argues, the performances that Sampson gave outside the city, however, provided her/him with more personal freedom over her/his gender masquerade because these orations happened in "courthouses and Masonic halls without the elaborate companion pieces of her Boston appearances" (Gustafson 395-96). While the performance dimension of Sampson's lecture could unfold well on a theater stage, the sharing of the bill in Boston with plays which relied on masquerade in order to celebrate patriotism threatened the subversive potential of the performativity of gender categories that Sampson's performance highlighted.

Sampson's speech is divided into two parts, consisting of a narrative of her experiences in the Revolutionary War (18-26) and an explanation of her motivation for her conduct (27-32). As Karlyn Kohrs Campbell has stated, Gannett's lecture combined two familiar genres, on the one hand, "the patriotic oration celebrating bravery and love of country" (480), a genre which was associated with "male discourse," and, on the other, the confession of a repentant sinner that functions as a moral warning to others, a "female genre" that dates back to Christine de Pizan's fifteenth-century book *The Treasure of the City of Ladies: or The Book of the Three Virtues* (480). However, as Hiltner adds, "a similar rhetorical form, the condemned prisoner's confession or 'last words,' had been popular in New England since the seventeenth century" ("Bewildered Star" 14). In the *Address*, Sampson reinvented herself, offering the public "at once an apology for her transgression and an assertion of pride in her achievement that might have astonished as well as alienated advocates of the 'rights of women'" (Young 197). Apologizing for her deeds, Sampson began to admit that the achievements were "a breach in the decorum of my sex, unquestionably; and perhaps, too unfortunately ever irreconcilable with the rigid maxims of the moralist" (8). This sentence, especially the word "unfortunately" highlights the texture of ambiguity characteristic of the entire speech, drawing attention to the internal conflicts of Sampson. In delivering a narration whose facts are

“uncouth as they are unnatural” (8), Sampson wants to present a “tale—the truth of which I was ready to say, but which, perhaps, others already said for me, ought to expel me from the enjoyment of society, from the acknowledgment of my own sex, and from the endearing friendship of the other” (6). But, as Gustafson has stressed, while Sampson got up on the stage and bowed “submissive to an audience” (Gannett, *Address* 6), “her submissiveness could not control the potentially destructive effects of her speech” (Gustafson 386), which, as Sampson was afraid of, might be “wounding to the ear of more refined delicacy and taste” (Gannett, *Address* 8).

Just as in *The Female Review*, Sampson justifies her masquerade in the *Address* when she says that she was inspired by the selfless love of freedom during revolutionary times:

But most of all, my mind became agitated with the enquiry—why a nation, separated from us by an ocean more than three thousand miles in extent, should endeavor to enforce on us plans of subjugation, the most unnatural in themselves, unjust, inhuman, in their operations, and unpractised even by the uncivilized savages of the wilderness? 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. (10)

Speaking in two distinct voices throughout her speech, Sampson simultaneously asserts her heroism and condemns her trespassing of the boundaries of woman's sphere. As Campbell suggests, because she thought of herself as “guilty by soldiering of a gross violation of the female role, only certain rhetorical options were available to her,” which led her to combine a “patriotic oration of self-vindication with a confession and abject repentance” (491). Masking her life as a person who transgressed gender boundaries, her speech therefore engages in “a performance of female modesty” (Weyler 146). In her oration, then, she admits 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!” (23-24, original emphasis). The emphasis in her speech, however, demonstrates her awareness of the gendered character of freedom in post-revolutionary America. Sampson knows that if she were a man, she would have received praise for her actions:

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. (24)

Willing to hide her fame and direct her praise to other heroes and patriots, Sampson asks for recognition of her deeds, couching her words in a subtle but clever criticism of the fate of women whose stories are silenced and obscured:

Yet if even this deemed too much of an extenuation of a breach in the modesty of the *female world*—humiliated [sic] 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 obscured in the presence of the sun. (25, original emphasis)

Now that Sampson could speak for herself on stage, she stressed that she wanted to free herself from the constraints of being a woman. Protected by a “cloak of patriotism” (Young 220), Sampson then could launch her critique of the status of women:

Wrought upon length, you may say, by an enthusiasm and phrenzy, that could brook no control—I burst the tyrant bonds, which *held my sex in awe*, and clandestinely, or by stealth, grasped an opportunity, which custom and the world seemed to deny, as a natural privilege. And whilst poverty, hunger, nakedness, cold and disease had dwindled the *American Armies* to a handful—whilst universal terror and dismay ran through the camps [...] did I throw off the soft habiliments of *my sex*, and assume those of the *warrior*, already prepared for battle. (12, original emphasis)

Assuming again the role of the woman warrior in her/his speech, Sampson enacted “two conflicting selves [...] speaking in two competing voices” (Campbell 490). One can argue that every time that Sampson changed back into her/his military uniform on stage s/he managed to solidify her/his gender transition by reiterating her/his masquerade beyond her/his role as a soldier in the Revolutionary War. The theatrical setting of her public lecture—the the-

ater where actresses impersonated soldiers—may have contained Sampson's subversive transgression of gender boundaries, but it also provided her/him with a stage for her/his personal doubled act of gender imitation. For Sampson, the stage opened up a space in which a play between her/his embodied self and her/his representational self could be enacted. This visible mediation between Sampson's material body and her/his role-playing also drew attention to the constructedness and theatricality of sexual difference. Her/his sartorial performance denied the body as a locus from which to read off gender identity, presenting it rather as a battlefield upon which various conflicting constructions of gender and sexual identities are enacted. In his introduction to the printed text of the *Address*, Mann may have reinforced the theatrical dimensions of Sampson's performance when he claims that the speaker, in narrating her story, will revisit "the theatre of her personating the soldier" (3). "Yet the performance dimension of her tour—the costume, the arms drill, Gannett's substantial physical presence—both aestheticized her own role and invited members of her audience to recognize the republican woman as a figure requiring a similar, if less dramatic, kind of role-playing" (Gustafson 398). It is this act of deliberate cultural staging of her/his body, I argue, which enabled Sampson to give voice and visibility to that which has been silenced and erased in the written texts. On stage, Sampson could be in control of her/his oration, turning it into a spectacle by making use of the open possibility of transformation in either direction of "woman" or "man," at the same time upholding an in-between doubleness.

Sampson Gannett's lecture was not solely a public oral address. At the end of the lecture, s/he would perform the "Manual of Arms," a rifle drill, in full military uniform. This performance, as Brookey argues, "reintroduces the transgendered specter of Robert Shirliff" (77), undermining Sampson's attempt in her speech to apologize for her cross-dressing. While in the introduction to the *Address*, Mann stresses that Sampson was in "complete uniform" (4) during the manual exercise, one may speculate that at some venues Sampson also delivered her/his entire speech in male attire or at least in gender-ambiguous outfits. In the diary entry on her/his performance in Providence, for instance, Sampson indicates that she/he wore male clothing during the speech as well. Sampson writes that when she/he got up to deliver the *Address*, she/he heard several members of the audience swear that "I was a lad of not more than eighteen years of age" (11).

After finishing the address in Boston, Sampson would leave the stage and return "as the visible embodiment of her masculine alter ego dressed in the

buff and blue uniform of a Continental Army infantryman, complete with gun, and finish her rhetorical act by performing the manual of arms” (Campbell 490). The Federalist *Boston Gazette* ran an advance “Theatrical Notice” promoting her: “The appearance of the American Heroine is at least a subject of great curiosity,” adding that “Madam D’Ens herself was not so great a phenomenon in character as this *Female Soldier*” (qtd. in Young 203, original emphasis). Sampson’s performance on stage must have been groundbreaking. As Young states, “it is possible that she delivered her address with numerous gestures: spreading her arms wide, crossing them over her chest, pointing with her right hand to the heavens, or clasping hands in front when pleading” (219-20). Local newspapers referred to her style of delivery as “manly elocution,” (qtd. in Young 220) and this type of elocution according to Ciceronian literary style, prescribed gestures (see Young 219-20). In the *Columbian Minerva*, Mann’s Dedham newspaper, there appeared a piece under the heading of “Theatrical,” in which the writer (probably Mann) described Sampson’s performance:

During an ingenious performance of a Comedy called *The Will or a School for Daughters* [...] she rehearsed to a crowded and brilliant assembly, a remarkably pathetic sketch of her achievements during the time she personated a soldier. At the close of the farce, Mrs. GANNET, equipped in complete uniform, went though [sic?] the *Mannual Exercises*, attended by a company of officers. The whole concluded with the song and chorus, *God Save the Sixteen States*. On her entering the Stage an universal acclamation of joy involuntarily escaped the audience, and was repeated during the exhibition. (n.pag.)

Despite the fact that Sampson’s oration “is filled with rhetorical contradictions, the combination of the *Address* and the military drill as a whole” (Weyler 160) fulfilled Sampson’s purposes: It authenticated her story, restored her feminine virtue so that she could be seen as a heroine, contributed to her receiving a pension, and brought her fame. Sampson’s example, therefore, shows how a woman in post-revolutionary America shrewdly managed to turn a transgressive act into a “gallant, quixotic, and patriotic gesture that future writers could construe as one of feminist liberation” (Weyler 148). With its self-conscious focus on theatricality, Sampson’s *Address* cleverly exposed the constructedness of sexual difference, offering an important site for the investigation of sexual difference in post-revolutionary America.

## Conclusion

As a space for women as performers and authors, the stage offered the possibility for women to assume new public roles. Often embodying the ideals of the nation, women performed their bodies and thus were able to performatively offer a critique of the situation of women in post-revolutionary America. Obscuring the transparency of “natural” sex which is inherent in the body, Deborah Sampson troubled the process of the establishment of the body as a marker of sexual difference by dramatizing incoherences in the ostensibly stable links between sex/gender/desire. At a time in the late eighteenth century when gender categories began to consolidate around the sexed body, performances that feature women trying to act like men are of particular importance as they draw attention to the making of sex/gender, demonstrating the performative quality of gender. Instances of cross-dressing expose the boundaries between the sexes as cultural, registering the flexibility and performativity of sexual difference. At the same time, the concern with cross-dressing also points to the instability of other categories. According to Marjorie Garber, cross-dressing indicates the existence of “a *category crisis elsewhere*, an irresolvable conflict or epistemological crux that destabilizes comfortable binarity, and displaces the resulting discomfort onto a figure that already inhabits, indeed incarnates, the margin” (17, original emphasis). And, indeed, in the case of Deborah Sampson, her act of cross-dressing also points to her marginality in terms of class. It is because of her poverty that she had to live and labor like a man; this, at least was “one of the prevalent explanatory narratives for the aberrant gendered behavior” (LaFleur, “Sex and ‘Unsex’” 481). Outside of this particular class context, her decision to join the military, as LaFleur explains it, “could not necessarily have been culturally comprehensible, or might not have been widely socially celebrated” (“Sex and ‘Unsex’” 481). Her cross-dressing then, as LaFleur argues, also serves as a reminder of the way that social, religious, and racial positioning inflect cultural expectations surrounding specific gendered behaviors, etiquettes, and dress” (“Sex and ‘Unsex’” 480).

With its self-conscious focus on theatricality, Sampson’s *Address* offers an important site for the investigation of the politics concerning gender identities in post-revolutionary America, a time when binary logic was briefly called into question at the very moment that it was firmly put into operation. American theater offered the possibility for women to transgress the gendered split between the masculine realm of public life and the feminine, domestic world. Through the depiction of the “unnatural” behavior of performing gen-

der which cuts gender off from its presumed origins in biological difference, Sampson's *Address* opened a gap through which the audience could see the contingency of gender and the performative character of the categories of "male" and "female."

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