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“Clothes Make the Man”: Cross-Dressing on the Radcliffe Stage

Karen Lepri

Radcliffe students' fascination with the stage prepared them to be pioneers on the imaginative frontier beyond the boundaries of men's and women's gender roles in the Victorian era. Evidence of their “gender consciousness,” a term we can use only in retrospect, surfaces repeatedly, particularly in the texts that discuss theatrical cross-dressing. As Radcliffe students appropriated the right to go to college, they also laid claim to their brothers' breeches and all the inherent behaviors that go with wearing pants--behaviors not found in the realm of conventional femininity. Radcliffe women's cross-dressing experiences contradicted the expectations of femininity held by the college and the public at that time. In the tension between what students described in their writings about dramatics and how others expected them to act lies the importance of their sartorial transgression.

Elizabeth Briggs, Harvard Annex class of 1887 and founding member of the Idler Club, recalled her first fond memories of dramatics at the Annex in a 1910 article titled “The Beginning of the Idler.” “The standard was high, nothing less than Shakespeare,” she claimed with pride, adding, “Annie Winsor was a gallant Henry V.” In *The Spirit of '76*, a woman suffrage play, gender roles were even more confused. “Sarah Hanks, a lovely heroine, was wooed and won by Gertrude Tyler, a handsome and convincing lover, with the aid of a cradle-rocking and sock-darning father, myself.”¹

Briggs laughed at the double irony of not only having acted a man, but a sewing, child-nurturing man--possibly a gender confusion she saw fit for herself. Briggs and other

founders of the Idler Club initiated the belief that cross-dressing required the highest acting skills. No one could question the talent of a young woman who transformed herself into a convincing old man.

The interest in cross-dressing began early and remained deep. The author of a 1918 review of the freshman play *Adventures of Ursula* was astonished by the transforming power of dress on a young student: “Grace Cobb, who played Lady Ursula, was so much more charming when masquerading as her younger brother. She seemed flat and colorless as a girl, but the minute she donned breeches she revived and in acts two and three she gave us the most delightful impersonation of this impetuous and amusing eighteenth century Rosalind.” The author favored other performances that “gave the most masculine illusion as to appearance and voice.”²

Full-cast pictures demonstrate how elaborately these women transformed themselves. Although pants were often against the rules, the full beards, scraggly mustaches, makeup, and facial expressions all distract the viewer from noticing that the character is wearing a robe instead of pants or that he is really a she. The pictures tell a story that both corroborates and magnifies the tale told by surviving texts. The marvelous bearded faces speak profoundly of the metamorphosing experience, the material reality, and the satisfaction of playing male parts.

[See Image 5: Alice Heustis Wilbur]

Katharine Searle argued that “however absurd cold outsiders think college girls in their disguises, they must admit that they can adapt themselves to other ranks, ages, and periods in their acting more agreeably than college men of the same years.”³ But she also suggested that part of the difference could be attributed to status. “It may be a pleasant change sometimes for a boy to act a girl. This can never be the rapture for him that it is for a girl to pretend she is a man.”⁴ The “girl” pretends she is a “man”--someone older, more powerful, and deserving higher status in society. However, the “boy” becomes a “girl”--a young woman, someone without autonomy or rank.

Pleased with the privileges she gained by cross-dressing, even if only on stage, Searle sought men’s roles. Luckily, friends like Beulah Dix wrote heroic though comical parts for her to play. She justified her affection for these parts, “afraid that a gentlemanly renegade of some sort must be hidden in my ancestral tree, [for] I took to these parts with such unnatural naturalness.”⁵ When she described a scene in which she, a heroine who cross-dressed, had to punch a male character, Searle revealed the source of her manliness to be internal and quite possibly uncontrollable. “Litterly always instructed me to ‘bang away,’” she excused herself; “I did so, and broke several pairs of her glasses and gave her each time a real fright and a red ear. . . . It was the torrent, tempest and whirlwind of my genius that bore me away.”⁶ In her account, as in others,’ the border between the male character and the female actress blurs as the woman transcribes masculine traits onto herself.

By emphasizing the intuitive over the rational in women, these actors evoked traditional “separate spheres” rhetoric while simultaneously advocating cross-dressing.

Upon entering the imaginary realm of recreation and confidence on stage, they claimed women naturally gave more splendid performances. “Imagination, which is supposed to take the place of reason in so many of us, has in acting free play,” argued Katharine Searle, depicting the stage as a place open to creativity, a value that was possibly disregarded in the classroom.⁷ On stage, imagination and the rational desire to transcend a subjected position corroborated to produce a transgender experience.

In response to the depth of this transformative mental experience, many students personalized their memory of playing male roles. Beulah Dix wrote in an 1895 letter, “I wish you could have seen me. I wore a red wig, foot-ball length, and instead of a mustache I blackened the lower part of my face, giving myself an unshorn appearance that was very fetching.” After the first act, she explained, “Elsie had a curtain call and Elizabeth Marsh passed her up a great bunch of carnations that we men clubbed together and bought for her.”⁸ Through acting, she had assumed another gender identity to the point of giving flowers to the heroine. Years later in a memoir, Dix declared, “I was the swashbuckling hero”--not “I played” or “I acted” but “I was.”⁹

The homoerotic tone of some letters and memoirs represents one of the ways in which Radcliffe dramatists expanded their masculine roles from plays into relationships in daily life.¹⁰ Students of Radcliffe in the Victorian era, a time known for women’s intimate social circles, expressed a deep attraction to love scenes on stage and intimate friendships off stage.¹¹ Many social events required the same male-female role-play as their theatricals. Beulah Dix informed her cousin of the “grand jubilation the day Mid Years ended”:

We . . . danced and sang and romped. No men invited, just us by ourselves having a good time. . . . in my rash confidence [I] allowed one of the girls to seduce me into waltzing with her. It was very pleasant while it lasted but when she stopped I went right on going and almost landed on my nose. She got me onto the sofa and the dizziness wore off in time. I am very glad of the experience. I can now conceive of a drunken man's sensations.¹²

“No men invited” opened the dance floor to seductions and experiences usually limited to the stage. Such confrontations, be they exciting or confusing, were always good lessons on playing more than one part.

Radcliffe students constructed and idolized the images of certain actresses, creating a world of masculine and feminine role models for actresses to follow. Beulah Marie Dix assembled her famed cast as follows: “Katharine Searle was our gallant hero, to whom we all lost our hearts, and Josephine Sherwood our sweet heroine, and Ruth Delano--ah! you should have seen Ruth Delano play the sea-dog in *Diccon Goodnaught*, swathed in convincing layers of waistcoats and peajackets.”¹³

Dix's memories and fondness for her friends were deeply entrenched in the gendered personas they assumed onstage, especially in the plays she wrote for them, such as *Diccon Goodnaught* and *Cicely's Cavalier*. The place they held in her memory was not merely imaginary but also social. Constructing masculine-feminine categories, students restricted some women to men's roles and some to women's. One student noted that the beloved Josephine Sherwood Hull “does one thing--the heroine that calls for grace and

winsomeness, for wit and appealing femininity--and she does that so well that we have rarely let her try anything else.”¹⁴

On the masculine side of the student body stood Ruth Delano. In 1901 a fellow student memorialized her as an actress who could bring the audience beyond the material reality of the stage and biological sex into a world of infinite possibilities made real. She remembered Delano not merely as a Radcliffe student but more importantly as

a high-bred youth, careless, graceful, keenly alive, with a sense of humor, yet capable of earnestness that astonishes the audience into breathless intensity; or else an old man, cantakerous; or dignified; or senile; an astute Baron, a man of the world, able to play a desperate game, and win or lose gracefully; or a Puritan sea captain, rough, sheepish and loveable; or a choleric father, Sir Anthony, who reflects all the depravity of the 18th century; which ever it may be, the character is complete, convincing, an actual creation.¹⁵

This review evokes an amazing declaration--that each time Delano assumed one of these male characters she not only recreated herself, but also possessed the power to transport the audience beyond the concrete time and place of the stage and the sex of the cast.

Katharine Searle (circa 1900) and Marjorie Smith 1911 were admired for their “true” dramatic ability--in other words, their talent in rendering men as well as women--perfect dramatic hermaphroditism.¹⁶ This versatility was crucial to the process of defining a place at Harvard and Radcliffe as a woman who had simultaneously to represent her sex and seek an education in a male-dominated academic world. In the words of athletics

advocate and Radcliffe gym instructor Dudley Sargent, “There is a time in the life of a girl . . . when it is better for her and her community to be something of a boy rather than too much of a girl.”¹⁷ Radcliffe students understood the need for flexibility and admired its extremity on stage. An actress’s “genuine dramatic instinct” naturally manifested itself in gender versatility. At Radcliffe, those born to act were born to stretch gender boundaries.¹⁸

The students’ admiration for cross-dressing, enthusiasm for all-female romance, and the creation of role models in actresses according to gender all demonstrate how progressively Radcliffe students thought about their role as women at the turn of the twentieth century. As college students, they were more exposed than most young women to ideas about suffrage, women in the professions, and other feminist causes. Students wrote sarcastically about roles and expectations, releasing the frustrations they felt as young women.

As Gloria Bruce has shown, college women were some of the first to benefit from the Dress Reform Movement, which brought bloomers and gym suits to the gymnasium and the fields.¹⁹ As designers and moralists debated the question of how high bloomers should join between ladies’ legs, Radcliffe administrators battled over the propriety of pants in student plays. In both groups, the problem was well understood--open legs would lead to new freedoms and behaviors unacceptable for educated young women. Not only could a woman walk, jump, sit, and move entirely differently while wearing pants, but she also would appear dangerously seductive, marked by a new silhouette so close to the shape of the body itself.

A photograph taken in the spring of 1894 stuck conspicuously in an album offers a clue to the original decision to regulate pants. The photo captured Alice Heustis, who graduated that June and married in the same month, dressed and posed as the most convincing gentleman found in all visual evidence preserved in the Radcliffe archives. Her hair, mustache, full suit and pose--hand on hip, leg extended, and lips pursed--proposed a trespass of gender boundaries that officials could not ignore.²⁰

Beulah Dix expressed frustration with the rule against pants.²¹ Without pants, she felt quite ugly and out of place, barricaded from the path to new freedoms and confidence. In a letter to her cousin, she complained about the college's puritanical restrictions:

Next Friday Elsie Tetlow's play is to be given, and we are on the fly with rehearsals. . . . I play a young man who sighs like a September gale etc. It's a clever little farce, but it will be spoiled by the prudery of the corporation. We can't wear trousers but must appear in full bloomers or scant skirts, hang them! One of the girls has a brother as obliging as herself from whom she intends to borrow a dress coat, vest, and shirt. With that and my own black skirt I shall present a curious half and half appearance like a Centaur or a Siren or a Harpy, for that matter.²²

Dix blamed the college for her failure to render successfully the young man she played. A year later, excited by the radical costuming she saw at an Idler show, she wrote, "Riding boots and trousers have appeared upon the stage."²³ In her letters, the clothing

takes on a life of its own, appearing, disappearing, and being forbidden to return.

Undoubtedly, the students' blatant disregard of the 1894 ruling motivated the Students' Committee to reinstate their regulation in 1897.

When students brought cross-dressing noticeably into the public eye, eyebrows rose. In one review, the author excitedly described Rebecca Hooper Eastman's rendering of a male character, reveling in "Her smile, her swagger, and . . . wildfire."²⁴ Although the college supported dramatics, proper society did not agree that a theatrical life was a righteous path for young, educated, middle- to upper-class women. Beulah Dix recalled a cautioning lecture by "Major Brewer who spoke at Radcliffe last year . . . [and] insinuated pretty strongly that the theatre was the road to hell."²⁵

Despite such moral condemnations, some men preferred to watch women onstage. Josephine Sherwood received two curious letters from admirers after a Radcliffe performance in 1898. One man remarked, "You girls beat the boys art and art at this sort of performance. I have seen many Harvard theatricals, but never any that equaled this. Hasty Pudding may be good in its way, but divine ambrosia is better; and nectar from the hands of Hebe has a finer flavor and produces a more exquisite exhilaration than bottled beer."²⁶ Another young man wrote of a theatrical performance, "It might be called the Pureè of Radcliffe--because it is so vastly ahead of the Pudding plays . . . and truly Miss C.P. Folsom? How could you get yourself up as such a splendid villain?"²⁷

Questions and conflicts about the changing public perception of women onstage led to the advent of coed casting beginning around 1912.²⁸ The choice to bring Harvard and Radcliffe students together in theatricals may seem an obvious one today. However,

both moral concern about young men and women socializing and acting together and the enthusiasm of single-sex student bodies separated the two dramatics groups until that time. When Professor George Pierce Baker founded the coeducational Workshop 47, he saw no good reason to maintain the tradition of cross-dressing. The president of Radcliffe agreed on the propriety of coed productions, noting, “The Harvard Dramatic Club, because of the seriousness of its attempts and of Mr. Baker’s interests in it, and because of the unsatisfactoriness of boys in girls parts, has had the girls parts taken by girls.”²⁹

Despite the new trend of coed casting, Radcliffe’s Idler Club continued to produce all-women’s theatricals until 1953, although those performances inevitably lost the radical daring and enthusiasm heralded by the earlier students. With the suffrage victory, the ensuing muffling of the feminist movement, and the great changes in moral expectations in the 1920s and 1930s, cross-dressing lost its power of transgression. One alumna expressed disappointment over how such changes had stripped the humor and power of their gender-crossing in an article called “The Clothes Make the Man.” After the 1931 alumnae revival of *The Amazons*, the play with which they most identified and most liked to perform, she wrote:

There was only one shock about the performance, which went without a hitch at both shows and received great applause, and that was, we are afraid, that there was no shock at all. We howled with delight years ago, at visions of maidens going about attired more or less casually as boys. But we are used now to girls in exactly that blend of knickers and semi-bob that we barely realize they were supposed to be dressed as boys. Eheu fugaces! However the

female costumes more than made up, for they were carefully 1890, and entertaining accordingly.³⁰

Change in dress styles signaled a change in what *made* a man. Pants were not the social and biological indicator that they had been earlier, even though they were still far from incorporated into the average school girl's dress.³¹ In retrospect, the feminine dress most shocked the women audience members, making them laugh at the silliness of the conventionally long skirts and tight-fitting corsets. From the liberated perspective, it was more difficult to believe one would choose those garments over the comfort of trousers.

One could say it was the years of romping and howling on stage, with silliness or with dignity, that flexed and pressed the confining constraints of gender categories until the temporary burst in the 1920s. As early as 1884, when Annie Winsor and Elizabeth Briggs decided it was time to start acting, they made a greater, more serious gesture than a mere Shakespearean production. For in due course, there followed a whirlwind of Radcliffe women filled with talent, enthusiasm, and the determination to be what others saw them as not. First, they would be college students--the students of Harvard professors--but to do that successfully, it was necessary to form a language of the body that communicated beyond the contemporary confines of femininity. To be students, they needed to find a voice as both man and woman and to write, speak, and walk as both. They found entertainment, excitement, confidence, romance, personal heroes, superior approval, and, for some, even a career in their world around the stage because of the ability to create two sexes out of one.

Notes

1. Elizabeth Briggs, "The Beginnings of the Idler," *Radcliffe Magazine* 12 (June 1910): 178.
2. R.L.F. (Rachel Lyman Field), "The Freshman Play," *Radcliffe Magazine* 20 (April 1918): 98.
3. Katherine Searle, "College Plays," *Radcliffe Magazine* 7 (Dec, 1904): 17.
4. Ibid., 18.
5. Ibid., 20.
6. Ibid., 21.
7. Ibid.
8. Beulah Marie Dix to Mary Ruggles Chandler, Nov. 1895, typescript transcribed by Radcliffe Archives, Alumnae Association Class Collections of 1897, Radcliffe College Archives [hereafter RCA].
9. Beulah Dix Flebbe, "Recollections of a Prominent Graduate," *Radcliffe Magazine* 13 (June 1911): 187.
10. Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Alma Mater: Design and Experience in the Women's Colleges from their Nineteenth-Century Beginnings to the 1930s* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 58-68.
11. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth Century America," *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 53-76.
12. Dix to Chandler, March 3, 1895.
13. Flebbe, "Recollections of a Prominent Graduate," 187.
14. Elizabeth Stevens, "Radcliffe Dramatics: a five-Year Perspective," *Radcliffe Magazine* 3, (March 1901); 78.

15. Ibid., 79.
16. Ibid.
17. Kim Townsend, *Manhood at Harvard: William James and Others* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1996), 225.
18. Caroline Solis, "Monsieur Beaucaire," *Radcliffe Magazine* 13 (April 1911): 129.
19. Gloria Bruce, "Radcliffe Women at Play," this volume; Patricia Campbell Warner, "The Gym Suit: Freedom at Last," *Dress in American Culture*, ed. Patricia A. Cunningham and Susan Voso Lab (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1993), 154-57.
20. Photograph taken from Alumnae Class Collections album, RCA.
21. Beulah Marie Dix, Cambridge, to Mary Ruggles Chandler, Chelsea, November 1895, typescript transcribed by Karen Lepri, Radcliffe Archives, Alumnae Association Class Collections of 1897, RCA.
22. Beulah Marie Dix, Cambridge, to Mary Ruggles Chandler, Chelsea, October 1895, typescript transcribed by Karen Lepri, Radcliffe Archives, Alumnae Association Class Collections of 1897, RCA.
23. Beulah Marie Dix, Cambridge, to Mary Ruggles Chandler, Chelsea, Nov. 8, 1896, ALS, Beulah Dix Flebbe Papers, RCA.
24. N.a., n.p., n.d, review from 1900, folder of reviews, Josephine Sherwood Hull Collection, Schlesinger Library [hereafter JSH collection].
25. Beulah Marie Dix, Cambridge, to Mary Ruggles Chandler, Cambridge, March 3, 1895, ALS, Beulah Dix Flebbe Papers, RCA.
26. W. J. Rolfe, Cambridge, to Josephine Sherwood Hull, Cambridge, May 28, 1898, JSH Collection.

27. Henry L. Raud, Cambridge, to Josephine Sherwood Hull, Cambridge, May 28, 1898, ALS, JSH Collection.
28. Evidence exists of a small number of coed shows produced in the 1890s, but in proportion to single-sex productions they remain insignificant. Continual coed casting did not begin until the advent of the 47 Workshop in 1912. See the Papers of the 47 Workshop, Records of Student Activities, RCA, and the Papers of George Pierce Baker, Theatre Collection.
29. Mr. Le Baron Briggs to Miss Lucia R. Briggs, Nov. 8, 1912, Papers of the President of Radcliffe Vol. II, RCA. Although Briggs and Baker encode their preference for women in women's role in a desire for the best aesthetic, they most likely feared the emasculation of men through cross-dressing. See Townsend's *Manhood at Harvard*, 146-47, for a further explanation of developing ideas on homosexuality at Harvard during the late nineteenth century.
30. "Clothes Make the Man: The Amazons," *Radcliffe Quarterly* 15 (July 1931): 108-9.
31. "School Girl" fashion plate, *Vanity Fair* 1 (1913): 12.