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*Unmasking the Gentleman Soldier in the Memoirs of
Two Cross-dressing Female US Civil War Soldiers*

PRIVATE FRANKLIN THOMPSON OF THE Union army and Lieutenant Harry T. Buford of the Confederate army were highly praised, well-liked soldiers and spies during the US Civil War—they were also women. “Frank,” Sarah Emma Edmonds, and “Harry,” Loreta Janeta Velazquez were two of the hundreds of women who passed as men to fight on the front lines, refusing to be left behind with weeping mothers and sweethearts or limited to the domestic (although extremely important and difficult) roles of nurse and cook in the army camps. They took advantage of the high demand for “manpower” and the social chaos of wartime “to escape the confines of their sex”¹ and apply their transgendered abilities and ambitions to the battlefield, fully participating in the defining public event of their generation.

These strong, independent women took the prohibited step of “unsexing”² themselves to gain access to male space and authority. First, they confounded the contemporary conception of womanhood by cutting their hair, putting on uniforms and fake moustaches, and marching into battle. Then, they earned the trust and admiration of their male comrades and superiors through exemplary performance on the battlefield. Furthermore, their success sneaking through the dangerous and invisible lines of social combat helped them cross the military battle lines as spies, masquerading as enemy soldiers, African American slaves, and even “women.”³ As a result of their status and experiences as “male” Civil War veterans, the observations and conclusions about military life in their memoirs, Edmonds’s *Nurse and Spy in the Union Army* (1864)⁴ and Velazquez’s *The Woman in Battle* (1876), demanded respect from fellow soldiers and the American public.

Several excellent scholars recently have analyzed how these and other cross-dressing female Civil War soldiers transgressed the normative gender roles to assert their independence and selfhood. These scholars argue that by distinguishing themselves on the front lines of battle⁵ the female soldiers challenged American society's conception of womanhood and empowered themselves, demonstrating the physical, mental, and emotional strength that many men assumed women lacked. Edmonds and Velazquez, in particular, were courageous, self-reliant, and masculine enough to fool their comrades and commanders, and following the war, they gained personal agency and public respect by writing combat memoirs,⁶ a male genre that contrasted sharply with the stereotypical female qualities of gentility, self-denial, and self-silencing.⁷ Armed with a soldier's experiences and self-confidence, they crossed gendered artistic and authorial lines to publish their military memoirs under their own (female) names and assert themselves as "authoritative, speaking subjects."⁸

As these scholars indicate, Edmonds and Velazquez's actions had great symbolic importance. They lived an assertion of personal agency and a denouncement of contemporary assumptions about femaleness. However, the important implications of their actions—a demonstration that women are capable and eager to participate in "male" activities—should not efface the actual message they tried to communicate in their memoirs. Rather than glorifying themselves and demanding equality, the memoirs focus on an analysis of the war and its participants.⁹ The years Edmonds and Velazquez lived as male soldiers gave them unique insights into the truths behind the romance of war and their comrades' gentlemanly façade.

By "unsexing" themselves, they learned to "act, talk, and almost to think as a man."¹⁰ The "almost" was important in their masquerade as male soldiers because it helped them maintain objectivity as permanent outsiders-on-the-inside while they entered and observed all-male groups of soldiers and civilians. Although they lived and fought as male soldiers, they existed in a liminal space where they could analyze and critique male attitudes and behavior during war, one of the most closely guarded and mythologized male activities. Velazquez, proud of her own powers of perception, warned her readers: "No man of strongly-marked character can long conceal his real self from those who are accustomed to study human nature" (280). Consequently, their memoirs challenged the romantic notions their readers had about the war and the so-called gentlemen soldiers.

They accomplished this by not writing sentimental war literature, which was considered "a largely female and decidedly lowbrow genre."¹¹ Popular at the time, these stylized and melodramatic works romanticized the war and celebrated male soldiers, confining women to passive, domestic roles. *Nurse and Spy* and *The Woman in Battle* stood apart from the "sentimental and feminized war literature"¹² because they revealed the true, brutal nature of warfare and challenged "the powerful hold

that reverence for manhood exerted over wartime society.”¹³ Furthermore, the memoirs appeared decades before Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), which has been hailed as one of the first serious challenges to the myths that the Civil War was glorious and every white, male, American soldier was honorable and heroic.

Instead of idealizing or domesticating the war, Edmonds and Velazquez’s patriotic, honest, and realistic narratives exploded romantic myth that the Civil War was a “heroic and romantic melodrama, an honorable sectional duel, a time of martial glory on both sides, and triumphant nationalism.”¹⁴ Their memoirs also criticized the exaggerated masculinity of the idolized gentleman soldiers, exposing the many rude, selfish, and cowardly men masquerading as gentleman soldiers. They separated masculinity from maleness in order to celebrate their own masculine traits and challenge their society’s automatic and absolute faith in the American male. However, they did not merely criticize all male soldiers. They praised the men who, like themselves, wore a transgendered identity and balanced self-confidence with humility and respect, strength with compassion, and courage with intuition.

Becoming a Gentle(wo)man Soldier

Edmonds and Velazquez’s unique perspective resulted from their continual crossing into the liminal spaces (the “no man’s land”) of nineteenth-century American life. For example, before they crossed gender lines to become soldiers, both women crossed national and cultural boundaries to become Americans. Edmonds immigrated from Canada and Velazquez immigrated from Cuba to escape marriages arranged by their fathers and make their own life choices. With an “honest love for the United States”¹⁵ and its promise of personal freedom and socio-economic opportunities, each adorned a new cultural and ethnic persona. By leaving father and fatherland, Edmonds and Velazquez engaged in the quintessentially American acts of rebellion and self-creation. Then they donned fake mustaches and soldiers’ coats to step outside the rigid gender barriers and claim all the rights and responsibilities of full citizenship (reserved for white men only).

Sarah Edmonds began confounding gender roles and sexual expectations even before coming to the United States. Born in 1841, she grew up on a farm in New Brunswick where she often wore a boy’s clothes so she could perform a boy’s strenuous, out-door chores and play a boy’s games.¹⁶ In 1859, she disguised herself as a man and escaped her father’s control, becoming American Franklin Thompson and working as a bookseller and publisher’s agent, a profession denied women at the time. When war broke out in 1861, Frank Thompson enlisted as a private in the Second Michigan Infantry as a male nurse. During her two years of

service Edmonds also performed the duties of fighting soldier, postmaster, and spy.

Loreta Velazquez, born in 1842, spent her childhood in Havana and the Mexican territory that would become Texas. As a young girl, she idolized Joan of Arc and had “masculine aspirations,”¹⁷ hoping to be able to fight in a war and prove her heroism. Velazquez married for love and to avoid the marriage her father had arranged. After she and her husband moved to New Orleans, curiosity about male freedom and independence caused her to dress in her husband’s suits, copy his mannerisms, and carefully observe those around her as she walked through town and visited men’s clubs. When the war began, she disobeyed her husband’s wishes and raised her own regiment for the Confederate army. During her four years of military service, Velazquez performed the duties of fighting soldier, counterfeiter, blockade-runner, and spy. She demanded the privileges, opportunities, and freedoms that white, American men enjoyed, writing: “I have no hesitation in saying that I wish I had been created a man instead of a woman” (130). However, Velazquez soon realized that she wanted male privilege but not male arrogance or rudeness. Living in an all-male environment allowed her, and Edmonds, to observe and critique the truths about how men think and behave when women are believed to be absent.

In addition to their own ambitions, Edmonds and Velazquez drew inspiration from literary cross-dressing female soldiers. Even before the Civil War, there existed a rich literary tradition of real and fictional females masquerading as men, who fought in wars, traveled safely on their own, obtained employment, and assumed social roles and privileges available only to men.¹⁸ Edmonds was inspired by Maturin Murray Ballou’s cross-dressing protagonist in *Fanny Campbell, the Female Pirate Captain*, which takes place during the American Revolution.¹⁹ Velazquez read about and admired several “historical heroines: Catalina de Eranso, the sixteenth-century Spanish nun who left the convent to join the conquest of the New World; Appolonia Jagiello, who fought for Poland and Hungary during their mid-nineteenth-century revolutions; and of course Joan of Arc.”²⁰ In addition, both women probably read nineteenth-century autobiographies about cross-dressing soldiers, such as Eliza Allen’s 1851 work *The Female Volunteer*.²¹ Allen also ran away from a dictatorial father; described bloody, inglorious battles; and challenged the belief that all American male soldiers were brave and honorable.

Both women wrote about their desire to be able to participate in public life without masquerading as men, believing that exceptional women, like exceptional men, would prove themselves on the battlefield if given the opportunity. According to *Nurse and Spy* and *The Woman in Battle* the best soldiers and the best human beings should be defined by their character and ability not their sex. However, most men, including Edmonds and Velazquez’s comrades in arms, never even considered that women could express the highest “male” virtues or that they could or would infiltrate “the homosociality of the battlefield.”²² Refusing to accept the

limitations placed upon them as women, Edmonds and Velazquez used the men's assumptions, in conjunction with their own capabilities, to easily pass as men. The Civil War, according to Elizabeth Young, created a "permeable boundary between masculinity and femininity" (71), and texts like *Nurse and Spy* and *The Woman in Battle* "suggested that in a world in which sexual and regional boundaries are volatile, masculinity is as much within the domain of female identity as femininity—if not more so" (20). These soldier-authors revealed their true identities in their memoirs to prove that the best human qualities are not sex-specific.

Undressing the Romance of War

Even before Walt Whitman stated in *Specimen Days* (1882) that "the real war will never get in the books,"²³ *Nurse and Spy* and *The Woman in Battle* provided honest insight into the war and its participants. Although Edmonds and Velazquez did add a little embellishment and sentimentalization, each accurately described life on the battlefield and in the camps, showing the true characters of those involved. Reflecting back on the beginning of the war, both authors recognized that they, like male enlistees, subscribed to the romantic idealism of the Civil War. Each believed the political and intellectual authorities when they proclaimed it to be a noble endeavor, playing upon patriotic fervor and adventurous curiosity to swell the ranks. They were "full of romantic idealism"²⁴ as they eagerly sacrificed comfort and risked their lives and liberty to join the army—Velazquez's own commanders jailed and fined her several times when they discovered her dressed as a male soldier.²⁵ These women had a variety of reasons to enlist: "patriotism, self-sacrifice, the prospect for adventure, and, of course, money,"²⁶ but what was most attractive was the chance to participate in the "great drama"²⁷ of the American Civil War.

From the start, Edmonds recognized that she belonged among the "manly forms" leaving for war, writing: "I could only thank God that I was free and could go forward and work, and was not obliged to stay at home and weep" (5). This notion challenged most contemporary "women's" literature, which reinforced the nation's "conservative domestic ideology,"²⁸ including the belief that women did not belong in the workforce, let alone the military. Once the fighting began, Edmonds confounded this assumption further by not fleeing, hiding, or even hesitating to fire her weapon in combat situations. She distinguished herself and took pleasure in developing male-male relationships with comrades, including childhood friend Lieutenant James V., who did not recognize her. Rather than reveal herself and reassume her traditional gender role, as would a heroine in a sentimental novel, Edmonds maintained her disguise, her independence, and her equality with a fellow soldier, stating, "we both believed that duty called us there, and were willing to lay down even life itself, if need be, in this glorious cause."²⁹ Although she did not die on the battlefield, she did fight valiantly and received a serious wound.

Velazquez also distinguished herself in battle and wrote that women could be men's equals, and even their superiors, as both soldiers and human beings. She recognized that society resisted allowing women to prove this, writing, "there are many points which society insists upon for the sake of the proprieties, which are absolutely absurd when tested by any common-sense standard."³⁰ Her actions and her writing mocked the men and women who lacked enough common sense to detect society's hypocrisy on this issue. At one point, she satirized female modesty, propriety, and self-sacrifice by issuing a coarse, "male" insult to a woman after she says to Velazquez, "if you really are a young man, you deserve credit for what you have done to advance the interests of the cause. If you are a woman, however, you are disgracing your sex by dressing yourself up in men's clothes, and attempting to be a soldier. If you wanted to serve your country, you might have found some other way of doing it, and you ought to be ashamed of yourself" (286). Velazquez prided herself on projecting a male public persona, bragging that one general called her a "plucky little devil" (100), who showed "his" devotion by fighting on the front lines and accepting dangerous assignments. She wrote that Brigadier General Milledge Bonham told her: "you are the right sort [of man] to have around when a fight is going on" (96). Velazquez, like Edmonds, earned her red badge of courage after being wounded in battle (twice), and both asserted their strength, valor, courage, and self-reliance.

Edmonds and Velazquez quickly discovered, however, that the romantic "drama" of being a soldier and fighting a war did not match the ugly reality. They utilized the longstanding tradition that theater is a medium of revelation and social instruction as much as one of disguise and entertainment.³¹ Edmonds and Velazquez's "role" as soldiers allowed them to witness the disturbing truths behind the scenes about war and soldiers. As authors, they publicly exposed both their own masquerade and the war's masquerade as a glorious or even "civil" affair. They urged their readers to see the truth about war and judge the people behind the labels "soldier" and "enemy," as well as "man" and "woman" for what they are, not what they are assumed to be.

Many Americans held misconceptions about the war and military life, in part, because soldier-storytellers, contemporary historians, and literary authors romanticized the war and focused mainly on abstractions like politics, economics, or troop numbers and movements. As a result, Edmonds and Velazquez took great pride in presenting what they believed was the truth about what actually happened to people during and between battles. Edmonds devoted a whole chapter to candidly answering rhetorical questions civilian readers might ask about military life, such as why some officers treated privates cruelly, what a battlefield looked like before the dead and wounded had been removed, and whether the men received the care packages their families sent to the hospitals. In her response to the final

question she admitted that some surgeons, officers, nurses, and even chaplains stole these care packages for themselves.

Nurse and Spy portrayed the first battle of Bull Run as loud, chaotic, and terrifying, the type of suffering and dying that was anything but romantic. Edmonds described friends being “mangled” and “torn to pieces,” which forced her to face the reality of her situation and remark: “Oh, what a scene for the bright sun of a holy Sabbath morning to shine upon! Instead of the sweet influences which we associate with the Sabbath—the chiming of church bells calling us to the house of prayer, the Sabbath school, and all the solemn duties of the sanctuary, there was confusion, destruction, and death.”³²

Velazquez also provided the realities of military life, detailing the actual hardships and suffering, the fear and doubt, and the boredom soldiers faced. She asserted in the “Romance and Reality” section of her book:

I was soon disillusioned [. . .] and, after a very brief experience, discovered that actual warfare was far different from what I had supposed it would be. [. . .] [T] here were thousands of disagreeable incidents connected with military life which I had never suspected. [. . .] The inaction of the camp, when one is day after day hoping and half expecting something startling will happen, only to be subjected to perpetual disappointment, and the dull round of camp duties, and the trivial devices adopted to kill time, after a very brief period become most oppressive.³³

She quickly “moves from a romantic to a realist throughout the narrative,”³⁴ admitting by war’s end: “The romance had been pretty well knocked out of me by the rough experience of real life; and although I was better able to appreciate the performances of Joan of Arc at their true value, somehow they did not interest me to the extent they once did.”³⁵

Dashing the Gentleman Soldier Myth

The freedom of joining the military brought Edmonds and Velazquez into several all-male groups at army camps and in taverns, groups which showed that gentlemen soldiers were far from the honorable, sophisticated ideal. These soldier-authors sharply criticized comrades who, thinking no women were around, spoke or behaved in an ungentlemanly fashion. Velazquez, in particular, sneered at the common myth of the gallant, brave, and polite gentlemen soldier, presenting the “masculine character”³⁶ as a swearing, bullying drunkard who carouses late into the night, shirks his duty, and, even worse, acts cowardly and traitorously in battle.

Velazquez wryly concludes, “my experiences in the army will not have been in vain, even if they have taught me nothing more than the utter contemptibleness of some [male] individuals” (60).

These memoirs exposed the romantic image of the “dashing” and manly infantryman. Both authors noted the irony of being able to win the affection of young women and the devotion of young men because of their uniform.³⁷ The superficiality of this infatuation blurred the line between the actuality and the performance of both gender identity and the heroic ideal. Each author argued that the actual results of one’s actions should be much more important than how one appears to others. Velazquez, in particular, satirized society’s infatuation with the image of the male soldier. By disrupting both the traditional male and female roles in the sentimental novel, Velazquez enjoyed being able to flirt with young women and to be considered more of a romantic figure, and more of a man, than actual men: “Miss Sadie’s hand I squeezed a bit as I said farewell, and I fancy that her lover, Bob, had some difficulty after that in obliterating the impression the young officer had made upon her heart.”³⁸ In addition, she wrote that not only did “gentlemen” soldiers often use foul language in all-male groups, but the most

loud-talking, hard-drinking, and blaspheming patriots were not so valiant, after all, as they professed to be [...] that the biggest talkers are not always the best fighters, and that a good many men will say things over a glass of whiskey in a bar-room, who won’t do a tenth part of what they say if they are once placed within smelling distance of gunpowder. (54)

This gap between the soldiers’ posturing among civilians and their cowardly performance on the battlefield annoyed Velazquez even further because her performance was exactly the opposite—courageous on the battlefield and understated at home.

Reflecting on her experience as a soldier, Velazquez reported: “I had learned much concerning some of the very weak points of human nature; that all men are not heroes who wish to be considered as such; that self-seeking was more common than patriotism; that mere courage sufficient to face the enemy in battle is not a very rare quality, and is frequently associated with meanness of spirit” (145). She posited that a man “who is only a gentleman by brevet, and whose native blackguardism is only concealed on ordinary occasions by a superficial polish of cultivation, will be apt to show himself a blackguard at the earliest opportunity amidst camp associations” (310). Both Velazquez and Edmonds derided the many blackguards that hid from battle or abused their position in both armies.

They frequently challenged the popular images of the honorable and heroic dead soldier and the brilliant, resourceful commander. For example, after describing the Federal army's defeat at Fredericksburg, a particularly bloody "slaughter," Edmonds bemoaned the folly of war, criticizing her commander's "disastrous" decision to attack an unassailable rebel position and sacrifice "thousands of noble lives" unnecessarily.³⁹ Velazquez also bitterly commented that death does not make a soldier great and that many commanders were less than competent: "that it is easier to meet the enemy bravely in battle, than it is to exercise one's brains so as to meet him most effectively; that great names are not always worthily borne by great men, and that a spirit of petty jealousy is even more prevalent in a camp than it is in a girl's boarding-school."⁴⁰ Her feminization of the gentleman soldier showed her contempt for those who were automatically given respect without having earned it. In addition, she challenged the southern soldiers' sense of invincibility and superiority to their enemies. According to Velazquez, the southerners soon realized that "they had no holiday task to perform [. . .] they had a tough job on their hands, and that if expected to obtain their independence it would be necessary for them to work, and to work hard for it" (108).

Edmonds described one colonel who pretended to be injured in order to leave a particularly deadly "storm of bullets" on the battlefield.⁴¹ The surgeon who examined him demanded that he return to his regiment, and later the colonel attempted to hurt the doctor's career, even asking Edmonds to support his written claim that the doctor had unfairly insulted him. Disgusted, she flatly refused. Velazquez also encountered officers who hid during the most dangerous part of a battle. In response to one such incident, Velazquez revealed:

I have seen a good many officers like this one, who were brave enough when strutting about in the streets of cities and villages, showing themselves off in their uniforms to the women, or when airing their authority in camp, by bullying the soldiers under them, but who were the most arrant cowards under fire, and who ought to have been court-marshalled and shot, instead of being permitted to disgrace their uniforms, and to demoralize their men, by their dastardly behavior when in the face of the enemy. My colored boy Bob was a better soldier than some of the white men who thought themselves immensely his superiors.⁴²

Velazquez took command of a company when its commanding officer slunk away, and she considered her soldiering and leadership abilities equal, if not superior, to

his. She argued that respect should only be given to those who earned it, not to the coward, sycophant, bully, or opportunist just because he wears a uniform.

Few non-soldiers, and even fewer soldiers, wanted to admit that rampant inexperience and incompetence existed in the ranks. *Nurse and Spy* and *The Woman in Battle*, however, exposed the fallacy that only men could be good soldiers and good judges of other people's motives and character. After years of dangerous soldiering and spying, Edmonds began testing "green" sentries and teaching them proper military behavior. She taught one "how to hold his musket when he challenged anyone on his beat, and within how many paces to let them approach him before halting them, etc."³³ Velazquez described using her experience and guile to trick her way past one "green" picket who had strict orders to detain everyone, causing her to remark: "[I] could scarcely help from laughing in his face at his desperate stupidity."³⁴ Velazquez held the rank of lieutenant because she recruited her own men, educated them about army regulations, trained them in military tactics, and led them into battle. She appointed subordinate officers to whom she gave "instructions about drilling the battalion, and maintaining discipline" in her absence (84). She asserted that "notwithstanding the fact that I was a woman, I was as good a soldier as any man around me, and as willing as any to fight valiantly and to the bitter end before yielding" (202). In fact, she proved to be a better soldier, and a better man, than either of her first two husbands—the first dying after the gun he was using as a demonstration for new recruits exploded in his face, and the second dying of an illness brought on by a wound purportedly less severe than either of Velazquez's battle wounds.

In both memoirs, Edmond and Velazquez revoked the masculinity of those male soldiers and civilians they considered dishonest, cowardly, or overly emotional. They characterized the men who refused to enlist as womanly, and both mentioned that they agreed with the southern women who sent these men "skirts and crinoline, with a note attached, suggesting the appropriateness of such a costume unless they donned the Confederate uniform at once."³⁵ In addition, Velazquez, in her role as a spy, complained that men, not "gossipy" women, are bad secret-keepers, especially if the secret is worth keeping: "I have always found it more difficult to beguile women than men into telling me what I have wanted to know, when they had the slightest reason to suspect that I was not a suitable recipient of their confidence."³⁶ According to Elizabeth Young, the horrors of war and the "unruly femininity"³⁷ of cross-dressing women unmanned and feminized some male soldiers, including Confederate President Jefferson Davis, who, it was widely but erroneously reported, fled Union capture in his wife's dress.

Edmonds and Velazquez feared being feminized themselves during their time as "male" soldiers. While recuperating from a near-fatal wound, Edmonds bemoaned: "All my soldierly qualities seemed to have fled, and I was again a poor, cowardly,

nervous, whining woman” who wept uncontrollably at “the horrid scenes” of war and death she had witnessed.⁴⁸ Velazquez, after her regiment suffered a devastating defeat in battle, wrote: “all my manliness oozed out.”⁴⁹ Both, however, regained their self-assurance, and Edmonds, after she had recovered from her wound, vowed: “I am about to return to the army to offer my services in any capacity which will best promote the interests of the Federal cause—no matter how perilous the position may be.”⁵⁰ A significant part of their sense of self-worth was a result of their ability to overcome the same fears and self-doubt faced by military men and return to the battlefield as soldiers.

Gender Spies

Some men, and women, at the time of the war considered these women’s unsexing as a condemnation of femininity. For example, Confederate General Jubal Early considered Velazquez sex-less, refusing to accept her as either a true man or a “true type of a Southern woman.”⁵¹ However, *Nurse and Spy* and *The Woman in Battle* implicitly argued that only transgendered people, who reject society’s rigid gender roles, deserve to “wear male attire”⁵² and enjoy a male level of freedom and responsibility. Alice Fahs has written that for men this attitude was not unheard of at the time: “During the war the concept of manliness included feminized components,”⁵³ such as weeping for a fallen comrade or missing home and the tender embrace of one’s mother. While most war literature celebrated an exaggerated masculinity, these memoirs argued that the ideal type of American manhood included considerable femininity.

Edmonds and Velazquez wrote that they enjoyed male freedom and agency without losing track of their own sense of self-identity. They refused to accept a female role of self-sacrifice and domestic submission promoted by contemporary “women’s” novels like Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* (1850), in which a wise, elder female character warned her young protégé: “though [proper women] must suffer, we must not rebel.”⁵⁴ However, they did embrace what they considered the best qualities of both their masculinity and femininity, such as self-reliance, courage under fire, compassion, and perceptive intuition. According to Jane Schultz, Edmonds had “the liminal and liberating identity of a sexual go-between—one who defies both gender and sexual categorization.”⁵⁵ Instead of accepting the limiting identity of either a weak, weeping “woman” or a cold, heartless “man,” Edmonds prided herself on being able to balance her “womanly” compassion, “manly” courage, and “American” devotion to duty.

Velazquez also wrote that she refused to deny or compromise what she considered her finer “female” qualities, such as perceptiveness and politeness. She noticed a gender difference in her perceptive ability soon after she joined the army, stating proudly: “officers, who have been in my company for days, and weeks, and months,

have boasted, with very masculine positiveness, that no woman could deceive them, little suspecting that one was even then listening to them.”³⁶ Velazquez claimed to have succeeded as a fighting soldier and spy because she utilized both her masculinity and femininity. She posited: “For certain kinds of secret service work women are, out of all comparison, superior to men. [. . .] One reason for this is, that women, when they undertake a secret service job, are really quicker witted and more wide awake than men [. . . and] as a rule, for an enterprise that requires real finesse, a woman will be likely to accomplish far more than a man” (364). One reason her assertion may be true is that, as Judith Butler has theorized, gender identity, particularly for women, is a series of carefully orchestrated and deceptive performances. Males do little to perform their gender because it is considered standard, universal, human, but females must “become” women as a result of social pressure, not their natural characters. Elizabeth Young writes that Louisa May Alcott’s 1866 novella *Behind a Mask; or, A Woman’s Power* presents “femininity itself [as] a strategic masquerade.”³⁷ Because they acted the part of “proper” women on a daily basis, females were, according to Velazquez, more attuned to performing and detecting espionage than men.

C.J. Worthington, editor of *The Woman in Battle* and a Union navy veteran, defended the value of Velazquez’s ability to embody the best traits of both genders. He argued in his “Editor’s Prefatory Notice” to her book that she behaved as the best men did—“there are thousands of officers and soldiers who fought in the Confederate armies who can bear testimony, not only to the valor she displayed in battle, and under many circumstances of difficulty and danger, but to her integrity, her energy, her ability, and her unblemished reputation.”³⁸ He also argued: “she is anything but masculine, either in appearance, manners, or address. She is a shrewd, enterprising, and energetic business woman, and in society is a brilliant and most entertaining conversationalist, abounding in a fund of racy anecdotes” (12). Velazquez defended her transgendered sensibilities in her description of the Battle of Ball’s Bluff. She wrote that she not only fought valiantly, capturing several Union soldiers, but she also expressed relief that a Union colonel, who was out of range of her musket, did not drown as he swam across a river: “He had my best wishes in the attempt at any rate, for I have not a cruel or vindictive nature, and at this time my womanly sympathies were being awakened in the liveliest manner.”³⁹

Edmonds’s *Nurse and Spy* also encouraged readers to celebrate male soldiers who expressed cross-gendered traits. For example, she praised her friend Lieutenant James V. to the point that he seemed to be neither male nor female but an ideal mixture of both: “His heart, though brave, was tender as a woman’s. He was noble and generous, and had the highest regard for truth and law. Although gentle and kind to all, yet he had an indomitable spirit and a peculiar courage and daring, which amounted to recklessness in time of danger.”⁴⁰ This humanization of the

gentleman soldier reminded the public that war had real physical and psychological consequences, and that the soldiers were not the ideal figures of manhood most believed them to be. Although Jefferson Davis was feminized in the North to criticize him, President Lincoln received high praise from Louisa May Alcott and other political commentators for his femininity, specifically his displays of tenderness, compassion, and martyrdom.⁶¹

As military spies both women met many cowardly, corrupt, and unpatriotic male civilians. Edmonds, in her role as a detective officer, exposed several southern sympathizers, collaborators, spies, and saboteurs living as “loyal” northerners in Louisville. In addition, she felt honor-bound to expose “the vindictive spirit manifested by the women of Virginia toward our soldiers,”⁶² criticizing one southern white woman who refused to give wounded northern soldiers either food or sympathy. She sharply contrasted these women with “An old lame Negro woman” who brought provisions and blankets for both sides, causing the men to remark, “God bless you, aunty! You are the only white woman we have seen since we came to [the town of] Winchester” (234). This incident caused Edmonds to debunk one widely held racial stereotype: African Americans are soulless and whites are naturally superior.

Velazquez criticized the profiteers and bounty jumpers for exploiting the war, the Copperheads and blockade-runners for aiding the enemy, and the thieves and counterfeiters within the US Treasury Department itself. She complained that the northern government hid the truth about these men who held positions of great responsibility and power, stating that when such villainous men were finally “detected and brought to bay [they] were able, not only to escape punishment, but to retain their professions, and to find apologists in their official supervisors and in prominent members of Congress.”⁶³ Velazquez’s northern editor appreciated her candor in this area, praising her for exposing the wide-spread illegal and unpatriotic activities in the North.⁶⁴

As spies they also approached their military and gender “enemies” with an “unsexed” fair-mindedness, showing that the “other” was not as bad as most thought. Writing while the war still raged, as did anger in the North against the rebels, Edmonds expressed her awareness that basic human and Christian goodness existed in many southerners. Although her support for the Union never wavered, Edmonds attacked the northerner’s (and the male’s) assumptions about their enemies toward the end of *Nurse and Spy*. At one point, Edmonds captured a “fierce and bloodthirsty” southern woman, but before she could bring the woman to a Union prison, Edmonds learned that the woman, almost insane with grief, merely wanted to avenge the death of her father, husband, and two brothers.⁶⁵ Edmonds sympathized with this woman and decided not to incarcerate her. Instead, Edmonds convinced her to serve the northern army as a nurse, happily stating that

the woman “soon proved the genuineness of her conversion to the Federal faith by her zeal for the cause which she had so recently espoused. As soon as she was well enough to act in the capacity of nurse she commenced in good earnest, and became one of the most faithful and efficient nurses in the Army of the Potomac” (51). Both authors argued that regional and gender stereotypes limit knowledge of who someone is and what she has the capability of becoming.

When Edmonds disguised herself as a female Irish peddler to spy behind enemy lines, she befriended and nursed a wounded rebel soldier. Her compassion for him was the result of her ability to connect with him on a human level, temporarily accepting the roles of “sister” and “mother” to make his dying more comfortable. She spoke directly to her “Reb-hating” reader when she described praying with the dying soldier, noting that his prayer were “almost the very words I heard a dying Federal soldier say, a few days before, at the hospital in Williamsburg. [. . .] A few weeks previous these two men had been arrayed against each other in deadly strife; yet they were brethren; their faith and hope were the same” (89). Edmonds explained that good human beings are the same no matter what social or ideological mask they wear, and, therefore, even a rebel deserves kindness and respect. She even protected “enemy” women she discovered passing as male soldiers. During one particularly bloody battle, she realized that a female soldier she was fighting had also “enlisted from the purest motives, [. . .] performed the duties of a soldier faithfully, and was willing to die for the cause of truth and freedom” (162). She wrote that they both wanted to be judged on their actions and abilities, what’s on the inside not the outside.

On the Confederate side, Velazquez learned to respect an old friend who was a patriotic northerner during an undercover mission to Washington, DC. She also admired those northerners who fought for a cause instead of profiteering from the war as others did. While in Washington, she claimed to have gained an audience with President Lincoln, about whom she remarked: “my interview, brief as it was, induced me to believe, not only that he was not a bad man, but that he was an honest and well-meaning one, who thought that he was doing his duty in attempting to conquer the South. [. . .] I left the White House, if not with a genuine liking for him, at least with many of my prejudices dispelled.”⁶⁶ In another section of her book, Velazquez claimed to have refused to ambush General Grant and shoot him in the back because she had too much respect for his courage, patriotism, and military skill (214). Regardless of whether these experiences actually happened or not, her message was the importance of recognizing and respecting good people: “I loved the South and its people with a greater intensity than ever, while at the same time many of my prejudices against the North had been beaten down by my intercourse with its people” (517). Revealing the humanity of the enemy was a way to teach readers to understand and respect the “other,” including themselves.

In the end, both authors concluded that an all-male environment, the army or the tavern, is both less *and* more moral than their readers realized. When Edmonds was not spying on the South for the Federal army, she spied on the Federal camp for her readers, stating, "Oh, what a place the army is for the study of human nature! As I looked around upon that mass of busy men, I thought I could discover almost every trait in the human character depicted upon their countenances."⁶⁷ She saw selfish, arrogant, despondent, insensitive, and cowardly men, but she also witnessed uncommon selflessness, cheerfulness, generosity, and courage that she argued the war had unexpectedly brought out of some men. Since both authors were fair-minded, they did describe positive characteristics of male soldiers and defended the moral and honorable mentality that existed in the army in general. For example, Edmonds wrote:

Some persons have tried very hard to get up the general belief that the army is terribly demoralized in its best estate, and all who go there must inevitably plunge into vice; but a greater slander was never propagated. There is, undoubtedly, vice in the army; but where is there a city or community throughout the North where vice is not to be found? notwithstanding the tide of moral and religious influence which is daily brought to bear against it. Although the outer man appears rough, and much drunkenness and other evils exist in the army, yet there is much that is pure, lovely, and of good report in the character of both officers and men. [. . .] It is true many have backslidden since they left home; but is equally true that very many have been reformed, and are now better men than when they enlisted. (41)

Velazquez also asserted that the army cannot corrupt a truly good man since "[a] man who is instinctively a gentleman will be one always, and in spite of the demoralizing influences of warfare."⁶⁸ While she considered herself to be this type of "gentleman" and soldier, someone valiant and devoted to the cause, both she and Edmonds ultimately rejected the romantic notions about war and soldiers to which many of their readers clung.

These cross-dressing soldier-authors confounded social expectations by crossing over the social battle lines separating women from men, the home front from the battlefield, passivity from activity, and silence from authorship. Velazquez's defiance of her husband's command to remain home when the war began was a microcosm of both authors' attacks on gender inequality and male ego. Her bitter statement, "He ought to have known me better,"⁶⁹ was directed as much at her

readers as at her husband.⁷⁰ *Nurse and Spy* and *The Woman in Battle* presented contemporary readers with the realities of war and soldiering, challenging the myth that the Civil War was a romantic and glorious activity, in which male soldiers always behaved honorably and heroically. Ignoring their society's assumptions about womanhood and contradicting the absolute connection between male and masculinity, Edmonds and Velazquez argued that they became good soldiers and good "men" not by acting exactly like the men around them, but by fostering a transgendered self-identity.

Notes

1. DeAnne Blanton and Lauren M. Cook, *They Fought Like Demons: Women Soldiers in the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 5.
2. Loreta Janeta Velazquez, *The Woman in Battle*, ed. C.J. Worthington (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1876, 2003), 53. The idea of "unsexing" was also part of the title of an 1864 printing of Edmonds's memoir: *Unsexed; or, the Female Soldier: The Thrilling Adventures, Experiences and Escapes of a Woman, as Nurse, Spy and Scout, in Hospitals, Camp and Battlefields*.
3. When Edmonds went to a reunion years later, the male soldiers who served closely with her were genuinely surprised to learn she was a woman. Edmonds also received a pension as a male soldier and was formally inducted into the Grand Army of the Republic. Velazquez wrote that often the best disguise was "none at all" (137), indicating that her success as a soldier and spy was due to her personal abilities, not playacting.
4. Edmonds's *Memoirs of a Soldier, Nurse, and Spy: A Woman's Adventures in the Union Army* was "an instant best seller," selling 175,000 copies, according to Richard Hall, *Patriots in Disguise* (New York: Paragon House, 1993), 83.
5. The war also empowered women on the home front. These women experienced emotional and psychological "wartime wounds" that were often "deeper and more profound than those of men," states Alice Fahs, *The Imagined Civil War: Popular Literature of the North & South, 1861-1865* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 137-138.
6. Elizabeth Young, *Disarming the Nation: Women's Writing and the American Civil War* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), frequently refers to both texts as memoirs. Recent scholars have defended both texts' historical accuracy. Jesse Alemán states in "Authenticity, Autobiography, and Identity: *The Woman in Battle* as a Civil War Narrative," in *The Woman in Battle* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003) that nineteenth-century critics only attacked the authenticity of Velazquez's text because it "challenged the supposed gentility of Southern gender codes" (ix).
7. Young, 70.
8. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 115.

9. These women wanted the same rights and opportunities as men, but neither considered herself a transsexual or a radical feminist. Velazquez's editor, C.J. Worthington, emphasized that she was merely "a typical Southern woman of the war period" (10) in his "Editor's Prefatory Notice" to *The Woman in Battle*.
10. Velazquez, 58.
11. Theo Davis, "'Out of the Medium in which Books Breathe': The Contours of Formalism and the Golden Bowl," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 34 (2001): 414.
12. Fahs, 12.
13. Jane E. Schultz, *Women at the Front: Hospital Workers in Civil War America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 5.
14. Alan T. Nolan, "The Anatomy of the Myth," in *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History*, eds. Gary W. Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 12.
15. Sarah Emma Edmonds, *Memoirs of a Soldier, Nurse, and Spy: A Woman's Adventures in the Union Army*, ed. Elizabeth D. Leonard (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1863, 1999), 3.
16. Elizabeth D. Leonard, "Introduction" to Edmonds's *Memoirs of a Soldier, Nurse, and Spy*, xiv.
17. Velazquez, 42.
18. Dianne Dugaw writes in *Warrior Women and Popular Balladry, 1650-1850* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989) that the female warrior motif has appeared in Western folklore and literature for centuries. Caroline Woodward writes in "'My Heart So Wrapt': Lesbian Disruptions in 18th-century Fiction." *Signs* 18, no. 4 (1993): 838-865, that a number of eighteenth-century cross-dressing British women wrote about usurping the privileges of men without denying their own femininity.
19. Jane E. Schultz, "Performing Genres: Sarah Edmonds's *Nurse and Spy* and the Case of the Cross-Dressed Text," in *Dressing Up for War: Transformations of Gender and Genre in the Discourse and Literature of War*, eds. Aranzazu Usandizaga and Andrew Monnickendam (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), 76.
20. Alemán, xi.
21. Eliza Allen fought as a male soldier in the Mexican War (1846-1848). Allen was inspired by Lucy Brewer's fictional memoir about serving as a male marine during the War of 1812, *The Female Marine* (1816). Other nineteenth-century novels about cross-dressing soldiers include Leonora Siddons's *The Female Warrior* (New York: Barclay, 1843), Madeline Moore-Albert's *The Lady Lieutenant* (Philadelphia: Barclay, 1862), Edward Edgeville's *Castine* (Raleigh: Wm. B. Smith, 1865), and Justin Jones's *Virginia Graham: Spy of the Grand Army* (Boston: Loring, 1867). Published memoirs of cross-dressing Civil War soldiers include Anna Holstein, *Three Years in the Field Hospitals of the Army of the Potomac* (Philadelphia: Barclay 1867); Sophronia Bucklin, *In Hospital and Camp* (1868; rpt. in Harrisburg: Stackpole P, 1993); and Lauren Cook Burgess, ed., *An Uncommon Soldier: The Civil War Letters of Sarah Rosetta Wakeman, alias Private Lyons Wakeman, 153rd Regiment, New York State Volunteers* (Pasadena: Minerva Center, 1994).

22. Young, 74.
23. Walt Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Literary Classics, 1982), 778.
24. Schultz, *Women at the Front*, 46.
25. Castle Thunder, a Confederate prison in Richmond, had a wing for women caught participating in the war as male soldiers or spies, according to Priscilla Rhoades, "The Women of Castle Thunder," *The Kudzu Monthly* 2, no. 8 (Aug. 2002): <http://www.kudzumonthly.com> (accessed September 22, 2005). Velazquez, an inmate of Castle Thunder, states that prison commander Captain G.W. Alexander was so impressed with her bravery and devotion to duty that he advised her to join the Confederacy's secret service corps as a female spy (278-279).
26. Velazquez, 47.
27. Edmonds, 3.
28. Fahs, 143.
29. Edmonds, 52.
30. Velazquez, 195.
31. Viola in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* masquerades as a man and publicly un.masks herself to teach the audience not to judge people by their appearances and to afford capable women the dignity and respect they deserve, according to Jonathan Crewe, "In the Field of Dreams: Transvestism in *Twelfth Night* and *The Crying Game*," *Representations* 50 (Spring 1995): 101.
32. Edmonds, 16-17.
33. Velazquez, 127.
34. Alemán, xxiv.
35. Velazquez, 525.
36. *Ibid*, 311.
37. This "see the uniform, not the man" mentality is also critiqued in works like African American Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* (1952) and American Indian Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Ceremony* (1977).
38. Velazquez, 85.
39. Edmonds, 182.
40. Velazquez, 146.
41. Edmonds, 69.
42. Velazquez, 121.
43. Edmonds, 175.

44. Velazquez, 282.
45. Edmonds, 200.
46. Velazquez, 364.
47. Young, 289.
48. Edmonds, 219.
49. Velazquez, 225.
50. Edmonds, 235.
51. Young, 158.
52. Velazquez, 288.
53. Fahs, 106.
54. Susan Warner, *The Wide, Wide World* (New York: First Feminist Press, 1850, 1987), 12.
55. Schultz, "Performing Genres," 83.
56. Velazquez, 60.
57. Young, 73.
58. Worthington, 10.
59. Velazquez, 124.
60. Edmonds, 52.
61. Young, 91.
62. Edmonds, 233.
63. Velazquez, 466.
64. Worthington, 9.
65. Edmonds, 47.
66. Velazquez, 141-142.
67. Edmonds, 43.
68. Velazquez, 310.
69. Ibid, 56.
70. This message and these memoirs remain relevant. In 1993 Lauren Cook Burgess won a sexual discrimination suit against the National Park Service after being removed from a reenactment of the Civil War battle of Antietam for dressing as a male soldier.

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