

## Clothing, Identity, and Combat: Sarah Rosetta Wakeman and Cross-Dress in the American Civil War

MARGARET JODLOWSKI

Sarah Rosetta Wakeman is a stunning individual in a war that has become a patchwork of individuals. The soldiers who fought in the American Civil War were more literate than the soldiers in any prior war. This, coupled with the fact that their letters and records did not face the same kind of censorship that hindered letter-writing in more modern wars, has left a great deal of individual memoirs detailing a soldier's personal relationship with the war between the states.<sup>1</sup> Yet even among such a literate group, Wakeman's collection of letters remains unique. Hers are the only letters published to date from a woman who fought in the Civil War dressed as a man.<sup>2</sup> The dearth of primary sources from female soldiers from the Civil War can be explained by lower literacy rates for women in general, and thus women soldiers, along with their obvious need for secrecy and limited records of their service overall. While her letters certainly are, Wakeman's cross-dress certainly is not unique: a conservative estimate places the figure of women like Wakeman at 400.<sup>3</sup> The term "cross-dress" is used differently here to describe these women's actions than it is used to describe Joan of Arc. Joan's vestment in male attire is considered true cross-dressing: that is, wearing the clothes of the opposite sex without specifically attempting to disguise one's identity and biological sex. Wakeman and her female counterparts, especially Jennie Hodgers (referred to by her alias, Albert D.J. Cashier, throughout), on the other hand, did exactly that: they wore male attire specifically to hide their true identities, and used aliases to create alternate identities as well. Thus, this is not cross-dressing in the academic sense of the word, but I will use it here given the charged nature of "transvestism" in the modern sense.

Wakeman's letters come to us thanks to the work of Lauren Cook Burgess, who herself has a personal relationship with cross-dressing and its relationship with the Civil War. As a Civil War reenactor, Burgess was seen coming out of a women's bathroom while in her uniform. This "discovery" led to her being barred from participation by the National Parks Service, who cited historical "authenticity" as the reason she could not participate.<sup>4</sup> Burgess challenged this legally and won. This modern-day episode points to certain glaring omissions in the present understanding of the role female soldiers and their dress played in the Civil War. Often, myths about female combatants, like the Molly Pitcher story, are more widely known than actual female soldiers, demonstrating the need for the truth, even if the details are mundane.<sup>5</sup> Burgess's experience also points to the importance of the "discovery" and the fear of discovery in the discourse by and about women soldiers disguised as men. Discovery was usually the result of a traumatic episode, be it illness and the subsequent need for treatment; capture by the enemy, as was the case with Joan of Arc; or even death.<sup>6</sup> Discovery meant potential damage to a woman's reputation by being labeled a woman of loose morals; avoiding this fate was a strong motivation for secrecy.

Given the distressing nature of discovery and the social repercussions mentioned above, it certainly required strong motivation for these women to disguise themselves and participate in combat. Both James McPherson and Burgess, in the foreword and introduction to the Wakeman letters respectively, cite reasons of allure and practicality for the motivation to cross-dress.<sup>7</sup> However, there is still much debate over the motivation that should be given the primary attention. Richard Hall emphasizes a woman's desire to be with one's lover or husband. Certainly many of these women believed in the cause of their respective side and wished to defend that. Historian Elizabeth Leonard, however, dismisses the "husband motivation" given that many women remained in the army after their husbands were killed. She focuses instead on the monetary reasons, for financial hardship pushed these women to the army,<sup>8</sup> though the "sheer adventure and romance" of military life pulled some women into the service.<sup>9</sup> Both the financial and the adventurous explanations for soldiering describe a need for self-fulfillment, as opposed to soldiering because of external causations like a husband or patriotic fervor.

Cultivating a need for adventure and gaining financial independence each satisfy different parts of one's creat-

<sup>1</sup>James M. McPherson, Foreword. to *An Uncommon Soldier: the Civil War letters of Sarah Rosetta Wakeman, alias Private Lyons Wakeman, 153rd Regiment, New York State Volunteers* by Sarah Rosetta Wakeman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), xi.

<sup>2</sup>McPherson, Foreword, xii.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>4</sup>McPherson, Foreword, xii.

<sup>5</sup>Richard Hall, *Women on the Civil War Battlefield*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 154.

<sup>6</sup>Lauren Cook Burgess, introduction to *An Uncommon Soldier: The Civil War Letters of Sarah Rosetta Wakeman, alias Private Lyons Wakeman, 153rd Regiment, New York State Volunteers* by Sarah Rosetta Wakeman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 4.

<sup>7</sup>McPherson, Foreword, xi.

<sup>8</sup>Elizabeth D. Leonard, *All the Daring of the Soldier: Women of the Civil War Armies*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1999).

<sup>9</sup>Burgess, Introduction, 1.

ed identity, and also function as a protest against the notion of the woman's sphere, which kept women from providing for themselves.<sup>10</sup> Society, on the other hand, as demonstrated in newspaper reports, tended to respond more favorably to female soldiers who cross-dressed in order to faithfully follow a husband.<sup>11</sup> These women had to contend with both proving themselves to be good soldiers, and also proving themselves to be good women as well.<sup>12</sup> Their very private rebellion was against public notions of how a conventional woman should act. They were effectively fighting two wars: one on the literal battlefield and the other against public standards of decency and morality.<sup>13</sup> Becoming a soldier offered some women the opportunity to discard a "disagreeable situation" at home and start a new life, with a new identity.<sup>14</sup> This was the case for Sarah Emma Edmonds, whose confidant Robbins recorded in his diary that she left home to escape her father's harshness and a bad love affair.<sup>15</sup> Regardless of their reception by society, these women's motivations are often no different than the motivations of their male comrades, except for one glaring exception.<sup>16</sup> At least two cross-dressing female soldiers attributed their decision to direct inspiration from Joan of Arc and a desire to impersonate her. One of these women was Loreta Janeta Velazquez, whose highly contested memoir has been labeled pseudofiction on one hand and embraced as an enduring legacy of a female combatant on the other.<sup>17</sup>

Whatever the motivation, women's enlistment required an extra effort beyond that of men, and thus remains significant. There were roles in the army that employed women specifically, and many women served as "vivandieres" or Daughters of the Regiment. The women themselves often created these "paramilitary roles".<sup>18</sup> Women in these positions were morale-boosters and sources of comfort and inspiration. They faced the same hardships as the men in the regiment including camp life, long marches, and occasionally even battle. Much like in Joan's case, these women were often looked on as a sort of mascot for their regiment or company.<sup>19</sup> Though this is not directly applicable to Wakeman, there are even certain cases of women openly serving in the Confederate army.<sup>20</sup> Of course, there was also the opportunity for women to serve as "ministering [angels]," the classic image of women serving as nurses and caretakers in warfare.<sup>21</sup> Thus, women did not necessarily have to dress as men in order to experience war directly, and yet many chose to do so anyway.

The extent to which this clothing choice and the occupation of soldier were parts of their desired sexuality and gender identity is another element to these women's actions that must be examined. The tumultuous nature of war meant that it was an ideal venue for escaping social restrictions and flouting previously firm standards of morality and gender systems.<sup>22</sup> Burgess asserts that the male dress these women wore was simply a "means to an end" rather than an end itself. While the practicality and freedom of pants over skirts cannot be denied, it is important not to dismiss the importance of identity creation and self-fashioning for these women, and the ramifications of the desire to appear male on those created identities given the reception of society at the time. The best way to do so is through analysis of Wakeman's letters, as her record is the only one contemporaneous to the war. Throughout her letters written during the first year of her deployment with the 153<sup>rd</sup> Regiment of the New York State Volunteers, Wakeman reveals her shifting motives, a newfound independence and a fondness for the life of a soldier, and a fascination with her new male identity. In addition to Wakeman's record, the life of Jennie Hodgers, or Albert D.J. Cashier, is extremely important despite her not having left any substantial written record. Cashier lived the vast majority of her life as a man, displaying a strong identification with her male dress and persona.

Wakeman did not initially intend to be a soldier, from what can be determined. When she left her home in central New York state in male dress in August 1862, she originally found work on the Chenango Canal as a coal handler, which paid "20\$ in money."<sup>23</sup> Very soon after starting this work, she met recruiters with the 153<sup>rd</sup> Regiment of the New York State Volunteers. "They wanted I should enlist and so i did," she wrote in the first surviving letter to her family.<sup>24</sup> This reason for joining the army seems lackadaisical, as if she is unconcerned with the perils of battle

<sup>10</sup> Leonard, *All the Daring of the Soldier*, 264.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>12</sup> Leonard, *All the Daring of the Soldier*, 252.

<sup>13</sup> 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.

<sup>14</sup> Hall, *Women on the Civil War Battlefield*, 54.

<sup>15</sup> Leonard, *All the Daring of the Soldier*, 174.

<sup>16</sup> Burgess, Introduction, 2.

<sup>17</sup> Blanton and Cook, *They Fought Like Demons*, 42.

<sup>18</sup> Leonard, *All the Daring of the Soldier*, 101.

<sup>19</sup> Hall, *Women on the Civil War Battlefield*, 27.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>21</sup> Hall, *Women on the Civil War Battlefield*, 27.

<sup>22</sup> Blanton and Cook, *They Fought Like Demons*, 30.

<sup>23</sup> Sarah Rosetta Wakeman, *An Uncommon Soldier: the Civil War letters of Sarah Rosetta Wakeman, alias Private Lyons Wakeman, 153rd Regiment, New York State Volunteers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 18.

<sup>24</sup> Wakeman, *An Uncommon Soldier*, 18.

or army life. This reason also indicates that if she was moved by patriotic concerns, she does not share them with her family. The societal pressure she would have felt dressed as a man to contribute to the cause of the war must also be considered. Men also had to perform their masculinity in warfare, and this would have been extended to someone appearing as a man as well. When encountering recruiters, men were afraid of appearing as “less than men” and female cross-dressers were afraid of being discovered to *actually* not be men if they did not “pitch in” and enlist in the army. Gender rhetoric was used a means of coercing both men and those women who wanted to appear as men equally.<sup>25</sup> However, regardless of whatever pressure Wakeman felt upon enlisting, she is quick to note that she was paid a \$152 signing bonus, which likely allayed some of her concerns about the dangers of wartime. By adopting the clothing and identity of a man, Wakeman gained “economic privileges and social opportunities” far beyond those available to her as a woman.<sup>26</sup>

Many scholars have already documented the ease with which a woman could infiltrate the ranks, and Wakeman, already being dressed and working as a man, would not have had a difficult time with enlistment. Both the Union and the Confederacy were facing a shortage of manpower, and this desperation made it easy for women to slip under the radar.<sup>27</sup> At the very least, the enlistment process would not have required any outrageous display of masculinity, but rather often only included a cursory physical inspection and the presentation of a functioning trigger finger.<sup>28</sup> The presence of young boys in the military made blending in for those women with a higher voice and a beardless face easier.<sup>29</sup> Changing clothes happened rarely, and matters of personal hygiene could be addressed privately without much question.<sup>30</sup> Another important camouflage for disguised female soldiers was the presence of women in various supportive and paramilitary roles. With those roles available to women, an observer would be less likely to look for women disguised among the ranks of soldiers because it would be much easier for women to serve in some other, more invisible way.<sup>31</sup> That soldiers simply did not expect to see a woman in a soldier’s uniform was often cited as a reason for how these women were able to go undetected for so long.<sup>32</sup> From a historiographical perspective, it is fascinating that this question of how these women accomplished their deceit has become more interesting and more discussed than the question of why they did so.

Wakeman’s first letter, dated November 24, 1862, was sent 3 months after she enlisted. In this letter, she already demonstrates remarkable independence, having joined the army during wartime and gone to Virginia without notifying her family until months later. If it was her family who sent her away, they certainly were not doing a good job of being up to date on her whereabouts. This makes it unlikely that her cross-dressing was solely parentally motivated, if at all. It is impossible to tell if this independent streak was a newfound trend for her or if she was accustomed to making such decisions on her own. As the oldest of nine siblings, she likely had some experience with decision-making and leadership.<sup>33</sup> Another reoccurring theme for her in her letters is her ability to share the financial responsibilities with her parents. She states very bluntly that she “can get all the money [she] wants.”<sup>34</sup> In a mixture of independence and self-sacrificing for the sake of her family, she requests that they not save any money for her. Her insistence that she will be able to procure money for the future indicates the resiliency of her male attire. There were few such enduring jobs for women at the time; therefore, if she truly was planning on always being able to get “all the money” she needed, she would have to retain her male attire beyond wartime.

Her motivations at first seem purely financial: joining the Army was a lucrative move for her. Why else would she write home with mention of her \$152 signing bonus and her forthcoming paychecks? However, she makes it clear whom the money belongs to when she writes that she lent “[her] money [meaning the \$152 signing bonus]” to the first lieutenant and sergeant in her regiment.<sup>35</sup> This decision runs contrary to the image she had painted of herself as the family breadwinner: by loaning out the money that could have significantly helped her family, she is able to assert that they do not hold even superficial sway over her and her financial decisions. Her reasons for feeling the need to send money home become more specific in a letter dated March 29, 1863, where she promises her father that she will “make money enough to pay all the debts that [he] owe[s].”<sup>36</sup>

As the oldest child, some of the burden of her father’s financial debts had naturally fallen to her shoulders at

<sup>25</sup> Blanton and Cook, *They Fought Like Demons*, 39.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>27</sup> Hall, *Women on the Civil War Battlefield*, 15.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>29</sup> Hall, *Women on the Civil War Battlefield*, 55.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>31</sup> Leonard, *All the Daring of the Soldier*, 101.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>33</sup> Burgess, Introduction, 8.

<sup>34</sup> Wakeman, *An Uncommon Soldier*, 18.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>36</sup> Wakeman, *An Uncommon Soldier*, 25.

a time when there were few reliable ways for women to support themselves. Wage inequity in the prewar years was captured in the Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions from the Seneca Falls convention of 1848: “He [Man] has monopolized nearly all of the profitable employments, and from those she is permitted to follow, she receives but a scanty remuneration.”<sup>37</sup> Had she been born a man, or if she had had a brother who was older and capable of assisting their father, it is unlikely she would have felt the same financial responsibility or “preoccupation” with sending wages home to her family.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, when she left her home she was nineteen years old, a suitable age to be married. She was not married, however, and there is no mention of any prospects in that regard. Marriage would have meant that her family would no longer have to provide for her; instead, she achieved the same end by choosing to leave home and work on a coal barge.<sup>39</sup> It is unlikely that she still would have wound up leaving home dressed as a man if she had had an older brother who could have shouldered the financial burden her family was under, or if she had had a husband who was providing for her rather than her family.

As time progresses, there are fewer mentions of financial matters, and she does not report her total income in its entirety after March 29, 1863. Her “male social identity” gave her both power over her own money and her own person as well as the independence to use that income how she saw fit.<sup>40</sup> Money is mentioned only in passing and usually in smaller sums than in earlier letters, such as when she tells her mother that she “sent 10\$ to father, one locket to you, one necktie to Robert.”<sup>41</sup> One possible explanation for this shift in how Wakeman discusses money could be that she relished having an income of her own and did not want her family to know how much she was spending, rather than sending home for her family to use. Such financial ambiguities, as well as indications that she is using her money freely are highlighted in statements such as “I have got part of that money I lent but I have spent it.”<sup>42</sup> She reveals neither how much she spent nor what she purchased, indicating either unimportance or a desire for secrecy.

Reports of her happiness and contentment with the life of a soldier appear more frequently as discussion of money wanes. Following a description of her living arrangements and a list of her army issued supplies, including a “tin plate and a tin cup,” in her second letter, dated 23 December of the same year, she closes with “I like to be a soldier very well.”<sup>43</sup> This is her first mention of any sort of positive connection with her military life, and the words she uses to describe her feelings become stronger as time goes on. Sometimes, her happiness is tied to reassurances for her family, as when she says, “You mustn’t trouble you Self about me. I am contented.”<sup>44</sup> However, as the letters progress, her positive feelings are not as conditional: she describes herself as “perfectly happy” on April 13, 1863 and wants her family to know she is “enjoying herself first rate” a few weeks later on April 30.<sup>45</sup> These comments on contentedness, as well as her own detailing of interactions with fellow soldiers, indicate that she was to some degree socially integrated into the regiment life. This counters the assertion made by historian Richard Hall, that “women who enlisted alone [that is, without a male relative or husband for companionship] kept to themselves.”<sup>46</sup> Wakeman’s going out, spending and loaning money, and especially a later report of a fight with a fellow soldier do not indicate that she was keeping to herself. Her confidence in her new, male identity apparently did not lend itself well to shyness or social reservations.

Wakeman’s acceptance of her possible death or injury ran contrary to her previous promises to provide for the family, creating a division between her “perfectly happy” life as a soldier and the financial troubles her family was in.<sup>47</sup> Her father’s debts tied her to her family, which in turn placed limitations on the freedom she experienced as a soldier. In this way, the disconnect between combat as a means to a new identity and combat as a means to financial security become apparent. The idea that being a soldier could be part of a new identity was not unique to Wakeman or female soldiers in her position: male soldiers also felt the pull of freedom that soldiering offered while being reined in by financial needs. The extent to which Wakeman, or any soldier in her position, could create a new identity from the freedom offered by distance from her family was limited by the reliance, perceived or real, of that family on her soldier’s salary.

Along with Wakeman’s reported happiness is stoicism in the face of battle and confidence that any encounter with the enemy will come out in her favor. Much of it is connected with religious devotion and the belief that God will

<sup>37</sup> Blanton and Cook, *They Fought Like Demons*, 4.

<sup>38</sup> Bonnie Tsui, *She Went to the Field: Women Soldiers of the Civil War* (Guilford, Conn.: TwoDot, 2003), 2.

<sup>39</sup> Burgess, Introduction, 9.

<sup>40</sup> Blanton and Cook, *They Fought Like Demons*, 5.

<sup>41</sup> Blanton and Cook, *They Fought Like Demons*, 32. Robert was her oldest brother, who was 12 when this letter was written. Wakeman, *An Uncommon Soldier*, 19 n3.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>43</sup> Blanton and Cook, *They Fought Like Demons*, 21.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>45</sup> Blanton and Cook, *They Fought Like Demons*, 28.

<sup>46</sup> Hall, *Women on the Civil War Battlefield*, 59.

<sup>47</sup> Wakeman, *An Uncommon Soldier*, 28.



“Spare [sic] my life.”<sup>48</sup> Her soldier bravado lends itself to ambivalence about her regiment’s destination: “For my part I don’t care where we go.”<sup>49</sup> Demonstrating courage and reassuring her family, she says that she “[does not] fear rebel bullets nor I don’t fear the cannon.”<sup>50</sup> Her bravery despite being a woman was not unique to her, for many female soldiers’ comrades remarked on the courage, battle-readiness, and “most profound resoluteness” of their female counterparts.<sup>51</sup> It remains to be seen, however, that these comments were made, not because these women were especially brave on an absolute scale, but rather because a woman soldier’s bravery was judged relative to other women. Because women were understood to be somehow less brave, a woman would not have to act quite so brave in order to be celebrated by her fellow soldiers. Acknowledgement of the bravery of female soldiers made after they were revealed to be women must be taken with some reservation, given society’s expectations for women at the time.

In addition to demonstrating their bravery on the battlefield, female soldiers also performed their masculine identities in a variety of interesting ways. They began to partake in activities that had long been reserved for men, including drinking, gambling, and smoking.<sup>52</sup> Perhaps one of the most inspirational and legally forbidden of nineteenth century male activities that these women were allowed to participate in was voting. There are records of at least one female soldier being able to exercise her masculine identity’s right to vote while in the army.<sup>53</sup> These activities gave them a measure of freedom that they had likely never before experienced, especially sexual freedom. In her memoir, Velazquez recounts how she courted women in order to make her performance as a man more believable, to the extent that she went on three dates and found her skill with women to be “tolerably successful.”<sup>54</sup> Letters to Albert Cashier from friends throughout the war inquire about her “sweetheart,” though due to lost sources it is unknown whether this sweetheart actually existed or was just fabricated to further her masculine performance.<sup>55</sup> An anachronistic reading of the term “intimate,” to mean sexual rather than merely close, as used to describe the relationship between Ella Reno and Sarah Bradbury, two female soldiers, has caused at least one historian to label them lesbians. Any speculation on the sexual orientation of these women is not supported in any of the primary sources available to modern readers.<sup>56</sup>

In some cases, it was the female soldiers’ inability to perform their masculinity that led to their discovery, though never on the battlefield. Because women on the frontier had more experience with horseback riding, shooting, and the hard work associated with being outdoors, they often had an easier time keeping up their disguises. This notion introduces an element of class into the discussion, for it asserts that working-class or frontier women were closer to men along a spectrum of masculinity than upper-class women were. However, it was never overt displays of traditional or expected femininity that betrayed these women’s sex. The keys to gender performance for these women were in the details. For example, two women were discovered when an officer tossed them apples and they instinctually grabbed for their non-existent aprons in order to catch them. Apples were the undoing of another female soldier, who gave a “woman’s squeal” when hit on the head with a club thrown at the apples in the tree she was sitting under.<sup>57</sup>

Given these examples of the obviousness of many women’s biological sex, and the nature of letter writing and the postal system during the Civil War, Wakeman seems unconcerned with or unaware of the need for secrecy in her letters. The postal service was not nearly as regulated as it is today, and modern qualms about reading another person’s mail were less prevalent. Letters home from soldiers were often used as the most reliable, or in some cases the only, source of news from the warfront. Though they may not have been intended to be used this way, they often were seen as records for public consumption. Wakeman certainly does not acknowledge this lack of privacy, and actually goes quite far in the opposite direction. She informs her father in a postscript in her first letter, dated November 24, 1862 that he “needn’t be a feard to write any[thing] private to me.”<sup>58</sup> She assumes that he misjudged her reading ability and would need “to get Somebody to read it for [her].” When she asserts her ability to “read it all my self,” she first assumes that her father would have private matters to discuss with her; she also assumes that these private matters would stay that way.<sup>59</sup> There is also a sense that she is asserting her intellectual independence and self-reliance. We know from census data taken when Wakeman was seven and seventeen that she had received at least some schooling

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Wakeman, *An Uncommon Soldier*, 25.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Blanton and Cook, *They Fought Like Demons*, 24.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 52-53.

<sup>53</sup> Blanton and Cook, *They Fought Like Demons*, 40.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 53-54.

<sup>55</sup> Blanton and Cook, *They Fought Like Demons*, 54.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>57</sup> Blanton and Cook, *They Fought Like Demons*, 109.

<sup>58</sup> Wakeman, *An Uncommon Soldier*, 18.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

in both years prior to the census.<sup>60</sup> Being able to read her own letters, which not all soldiers would have been able to do, is thematically connected with her assertion that appears throughout her letters that “I will look out for my Self”.<sup>61</sup> Perhaps the greatest indication that she trusts the postal service system to keep the contents of her letters private is that in the eleven letters she sends home during her first year of service, she only signs one of them with the initials of her alias, R.L. Wakeman, though she signs a postscript to that letter “Rosetta Wakeman.”<sup>62</sup> She even includes closings that would make her true sex obvious were anyone to read it, such as “from you Affectionate Daughter”<sup>63</sup> or “This is from you Affectionate Sister.”<sup>64</sup>

Wakeman directly expresses her firm belief that her mail will not be opened when requesting that her family send her a “Box of stuff from home.”<sup>65</sup> “The express office has no business to open any box,” she writes with a trace of indignation.<sup>66</sup> She also believes that her soldier status affords her mail a special status: “the government is willing that the box be sent through to the soldiers.”<sup>67</sup> This lack of secrecy with regards to her true identity, even with an apparently strong belief that her mail would not be tampered with indicates that the punishment for discovery as a woman was not a primary concern of Wakeman’s. She was aware enough, though, to give her return address as “R.L. Wakeman” in Company H of the 153<sup>rd</sup> Regiment.<sup>68</sup> It is unlikely that the idea she could be discovered never occurred to her, but rather she felt a sense of complacency and belonging that was strong enough to convince her the risks were worth taking. It is reasonable to assume that close calls with discovery would have made her more cautious; her lack of discretion in her letter-writing perhaps means that the culture at the time was reserved enough to accept a soldier who acted secretive. She may have also not been as threatened by the loss of reputation and the label of having loose morals that Burgess cites as the primary societal repercussion that female soldiers faced.<sup>69</sup>

It is almost certain that being discovered to be a woman would certainly have led to being discharged from the army; Wakeman must have known this at least in a general sense even if she had never heard any specific regulation. In fact, Wakeman records in one of her letters that while on guard duty at Carroll Prison, she saw a female Union army major, imprisoned presumably for impersonating a man. This encounter should have at the very least given her some grasp of the consequences of discovery and represents a warning she continued to ignore.<sup>70</sup> This leads to questions of the degree of her complacency about discovery and the veracity of her statements of having a “first rate” time. If she was enjoying herself as much as she claimed, why would she not go to greater lengths to be more discreet about her identity? Her casual attitude towards discovery is, on the other hand, potentially explained by the response of officers to finding women in their ranks. Her casualness is not so unique, though: two female soldiers, Sarah Bradbury and Ella Reno were discovered to be women through their own carelessness after they got drunk on apple cider and fell into a river.<sup>71</sup> Often, the presence of a woman was not quite so scandalous, such as when a certain “Captain Cox learned her [an unnamed woman] sex but allowed her to remain.”<sup>72</sup> However, it is impossible to know if Wakeman had any knowledge of such relaxed reactions; if she did, they are not mentioned. One must assume, therefore, that she was comfortable enough with the consequences of discovery to flout the standards of secrecy by signing her own name. She could very well have believed, as Hall and other modern scholars have asserted, that the “bonds of shared combat were stronger than mere matters of gender.”<sup>73</sup>

Besides her signatures and the personal pronoun I, Wakeman references herself directly only two other times in the eleven letters from her first year at war. The first comes in her second letter, when she describes the care packages the soldiers have been receiving and she requests one of her own. There is a feeling somewhat like resentment from Wakeman, who gripes that “the rest of the Boys” have all been receiving boxes.<sup>74</sup> Her self-inclusion as one of “the Boys” is profound. It indicates a perceived cohesion of the military unit that is not based on their occupation of soldier but on their sex. She does not shy away from including herself in that group, either. What separates her from them is not her sex, but rather her lack of a box from home, which she eagerly requests and is “disappointed” not to

<sup>60</sup> Burgess, Introduction, 9.

<sup>61</sup> Wakeman, *An Uncommon Soldier*, 22.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>63</sup> Wakeman, *An Uncommon Soldier*, 21.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>65</sup> Wakeman, *An Uncommon Soldier*, 21.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>67</sup> Wakeman, *An Uncommon Soldier*, 22.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>69</sup> Burgess, Introduction, 5.

<sup>70</sup> Hall, *Women on the Civil War Battlefield*, 147.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>72</sup> Hall, *Women on the Civil War Battlefield*, 52.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>74</sup> Wakeman, *An Uncommon Soldier*, 21.

have received.<sup>75</sup>

It is likely, given what Wakeman says about her future and plans to move west and farm, that had she survived the war her life would have been very similar to that of Albert Cashier.<sup>76</sup> Cashier, who served a full enlistment of three years with the 95<sup>th</sup> Illinois Infantry was not discovered to be a woman until fifty years after the end of the Civil War, and then only by accident. She had grown “accustomed” to wearing boy’s clothes before the war began, and possibly even as a child in Ireland.<sup>77</sup> Throughout the duration of the war, and despite being the smallest member of her regiment, Cashier was never suspected of being a woman; she was able to return peacefully to the life of a male laborer in Northern Illinois.<sup>78</sup>

Cashier’s identification with her male costume and the identity it allowed her to have was incredibly pervasive. After visiting her in the insane asylum where she was housed following her obviously very traumatic discovery, a fellow veteran described that he “found... a frail woman, broken... because she was compelled to put on skirts.”<sup>79</sup> Cashier lost a fundamental part of who she was when she was obligated by social convention to wear female clothes; her identity had been firmly rooted in her self-image as someone in masculine dress.

Echoing Joan of Arc’s refusal to remove her male costume, even under duress, an unnamed drummer girl was recorded as having said “they may do what they please [with me] but [I would] never wear women’s clothes again,” after being wounded at Gettysburg.<sup>80</sup> One anonymous woman was actually jailed by her own side for wearing men’s clothes, which was still punishable by imprisonment, though not execution, four centuries after the death of Joan of Arc.<sup>81</sup> Other women were not so attached to their costume, as can be expected. Sarah Emma Edmonds, the only other woman who served as a distaff soldier to publish her memoirs besides Velazquez, completely downplayed her cross-dressing in her work, originally tellingly titled “Unsexed.” It never reveals that she served in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Michigan Infantry as Pvt. Franklin Thompson, and downplays her costume change to “adopting male disguise to pursue spying missions on unsuspecting Confederates.”<sup>82</sup> Her reticence on the subject could be because Pvt. Thompson was officially a deserter from the Union Army, or because of fear of social reprisal from society for her cross-dressing.<sup>83</sup> In an upsetting parallel to modern female combatants who have difficulty getting medical expenses paid, Edmonds was for a long time not given any pension money to help with her disabilities because there was no official record of her being injured as a soldier. Modern women in the U.S. Army often face the same issue because they were not supposed to be in active combat duty and thus could not have sustained injuries therein. Shifting gender roles and shifting definitions of where the front line is (or if there is even a front line) have made this to be patently false at every level.

Less so than Cashier, but still relevant, female Civil War soldiers such as the Widow McDonald or Harriet Brown, who were found to be repeat offenders of wearing a soldier’s uniform and attempting to join the army, point to a devotion to not only the cause of their respective sides, but also to their fashioned male identities.<sup>84</sup> One of these unnamed women was even quoted as saying she was “bound to be a soldier or die.”<sup>85</sup> Indeed, another soldier embodied this sentiment when she took her own life after having been discovered to be a woman by her regiment’s officer.<sup>86</sup> The importance of a woman’s soldier identity is clear in such dramatic statements. Some of these lesser-known women, like Katie Hanson, who served in an Ohio regiment, were even noted by their contemporaries for having a “predilection for masculine ways” before the war even began. It would be impossible to completely characterize Hanson from this one short statement, but it is important to note that her era did not have an appropriate means of qualifying how her identity was different than that of a “regular” woman’s, or even how it was different than that of a man. War, however, gave her the opportunity to break out of these previously established gender roles and perform a service to her country that would later be celebrated. The transgressive nature of war across political boundaries therefore extends to transgressions across social and gender boundaries as well.<sup>87</sup>

---

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>76</sup> Leonard, *All the Daring of the Soldier*, 192.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>78</sup> Leonard, *All the Daring of the Soldier*, 187.

<sup>79</sup> Hall, *Women on the Civil War Battlefield*, 69.

<sup>80</sup> Blanton and Cook, *They Fought Like Demons*, 57.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>82</sup> Blanton and Cook, *They Fought Like Demons*, 157.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> Hall, *Women on the Civil War Battlefield*, 128.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>86</sup> Hall, *Women on the Civil War Battlefield*, 132.

<sup>87</sup> Blanton and Cook, *They Fought Like Demons*, 39.