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“‘Faith, Let Me Not Play a Woman’:
The Wellesley College Shakespeare Society, 1877-1906”

In 1889, the Wellesley College Shakespeare Society performed their first public, open-air production. The young women played all the parts in *As You Like It*, and those with male roles donned male costumes, setting a precedent that continues today.¹ Founded in 1877 by Henry Durant to further the study of Shakespeare, the society gradually began to focus on dramatics, culminating in *As You Like It*. The practice of actresses cross-dressing to play Shakespeare's men was not unheard of in the Victorian era, when many women gained fame (and criticism) by donning doublets and hose to play Romeo and Hamlet. However, early members of the society were not actresses, but middle-class ladies in training. They operated in an environment without arts education, in which professional theatre going was forbidden and dress and leisure were strictly regulated. After Durant's death, however, college administrators began to redefine the ideal Wellesley woman, a process to which society performances were integral. The unique conditions of this transitional period allowed Shakespeare Society members to establish the tradition of female cross-dressing onstage, a practice that enabled them to question gender difference and claim male privilege.

When they wore doublets and beards, the early members of the Shakespeare Society were participating in a tradition of cross-dressing central to the history of Shakespeare. Scholars have used a variety of terms to refer to this practice—drag, transvestism, and male impersonation, while early Society members were described as simply playing “male characters” in “masculine

¹ Florence Converse, *The Story of Wellesley* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1915), 209, <http://repository.wellesley.edu/wellesleyhistories/2>.

dress.”² Judith Halberstam, differentiating actresses from drag kings, states, “the male impersonator attempts to produce a plausible performance of maleness as the whole of her act.”³ Although I agree with this characterization, I prefer Marjorie Garber’s use of the term “cross-dressing,” which “suggests a choice of lifestyle” and encompasses a broad range of motives for “sartorial gender bending”, including, but not limited to, homosexual identity. For Garber, cross-dressing is a “defining and disconcerting” element of society, ancient and modern, and one intrinsically related to theatre. It is unsurprising that the Society members turned to cross-dressing, since “there is no ground of Shakespeare that is not already cross-dressed.”⁴

With the cross-dressing history of the Bard’s plays in mind, many nineteenth-century actresses began to play Shakespeare’s men, especially his tragic heroes, in male costume. This practice was remarkably common in the Victorian theatre, and helped the careers of many well-known actresses, including Sarah Bernhardt, Ellen Tree, Ellen Terry and Charlotte Cushman.⁵ Cushman was particularly notable in these “breeches parts” for her credible male costumes and passionate love scenes with fellow actresses. In a portrait representing Cushman’s performance of the famous balcony scene, “Charlotte is astride the balcony ledge in a position most uncharacteristic for Victorian women, who even rode horses sidesaddle, but acceptable for the sensual, passionate, Romeo.”⁶ Many cross-dressing Victorian actresses regularly treated their audiences to these passionate displays. A similarly erotic scene was recorded at Wellesley

² “The Horrifying (Nit) Spectacle Presented by Good-Looking, Well-Shaped Wellesley Ladies,” *Chicago World*, June 25, 1898, Wellesley College Archives.

³ Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 232.

⁴ Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-dressing & Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 4-5, 40.

⁵ Anne Russell, “Tragedy, Gender, Performance: Women as Tragic Heroes on the Nineteenth Century Stage,” *Comparative Drama* 30, no. 2 (1996): 138, 151.

⁶ Lisa Merrill, *When Romeo Was a Woman: Charlotte Cushman and Her Circle of Female Spectators* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 122.

College in 1897, to commemorate the Shakespeare Society's production of *Love's Labour's Lost*. The photo depicts four couples, including four students in male clothing, lovingly embracing against a woodland backdrop.⁷ Their portrayal of passionate love, like Charlotte's, is realistic and arresting. The Society's commitment to the accurate portrayal of manhood is further evidenced by a portrait of Grace Miller as Orlando, in which the young lady's military uniform and hunter's stance make her an extremely convincing hero. Rather than accentuated or exposed, Miller's female curves are obliterated by the costume.⁸ In 1893, one reviewer noted the importance of this physical masculinity: "Miss Newman is physically adapted for the part, having developed her muscle on the college boat crew and in the gymnasium."⁹ The reviewer's matter of fact assessment of Newman's masculine clothes and physicality points to the proliferation of cross-dressing actresses performing Shakespeare at that time, at Wellesley and elsewhere. These actresses were doing all they could to present an authentic performance of masculinity for their audience. Each Society production during this period featured similar "men," faithful to the tradition established by American celebrities like Cushman.

These women truly were celebrities. Cross-dressing actresses like Cushman were praised and respected by reviewers and audiences, as were the early members of the Shakespeare Society. Among the raves actress Alice Marriot received was a reference to the then well-known Cushman in the Liverpool daily Post: "Miss Marriot has done as much for *Hamlet* as Miss

⁷ "Love's Labour's Lost" (photograph, Boston and Brookline: Partridge Studios, 1897), Wellesley College Archives.

⁸ "Grace Miller '95, Orlando, As You Like it '94" (photograph, Boston and Brookline: Partridge Studios, 1894), Wellesley College Archives.

⁹ "Wellesley Fairies: They Play Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream," *Boston Journal*, May 31, 1893, Wellesley College Archives.

Cushman did for *Romeo*—she has made it a creation—a thing of beauty.”¹⁰ By Marriot’s day, women playing Shakespeare’s heroes had an established history. The idea that feminine qualities like beauty, however hidden, made actresses superior to actors was essential to the success of women like Charlotte.¹¹ These sentiments were echoed by a reviewer who saw *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* at Wellesley in 1898:

It was much more entertaining to hear these feminine lovers and fathers than it was to listen to the men...The really artistic sentiment for effects of speech and posture, feminine though it was; the total abstinence from the drunken fury and bombast of the usual stage tyrant, made the performance of these girls actually a better thing dramatically than the acting of Mr. Daly’s Athenian gentlemen.¹²

Praised for their passion and beauty, nineteenth-century actresses who played Shakespeare’s men were not oddities, but respected public figures that gained praise and acclaim wearing clothing that, offstage, was considered dangerously inappropriate.

Despite their popularity, talent and fame, actresses who presented an accurate performance of masculinity evoked the “cultural anxiety” that Garber associates with cross-dressing. While some actresses used tight, revealing costumes to expose their femininity and please male audiences, many others attempted to erase all traces of their original gender. In the same year that Wellesley presented *As You Like It*, featuring the dashing Grace Miller, a similar professional production raised the ire of progressive reviewer William Archer. Writes Kerry Powell,

In imitating men to the extent of wearing beards, the actresses in *As You Like It* obliterate their own femininity and with it the possibility of expressing either truth or beauty. Becoming too much like men, as Archer would have it, these women performers abandon the possibility of making any ‘sociological’ or ‘artistic’ point, or even appealing to their

¹⁰ Frank W. Wadsworth, “Hamlet and Iago: Nineteenth-Century Breeches Parts,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 17, no. 2 (1966): 132. [Emphasis in original].

¹¹ Merrill, *When Romeo was a Woman*, 115.

¹²“A Midsummer Night’s Dream’ at Wellesley” (newspaper clipping, 1898), Wellesley College Archives.

audience through ‘the comprehensible attraction of burlesque.’¹³

To Archer, the exaggerated and obviously playful drag of burlesque emphasized the differences between genders and was therefore acceptable, while beards blurred the gender lines and were therefore deeply troubling. This lack of male eye-candy also troubled a writer at *The Chicago World*, who received word of Wellesley’s 1898 performance of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and published a slightly satiric exposé that attempted to control and police Society members by reducing their cross-dressing to a joke and a spectacle for men:

We didn’t go to this show, but we are told that it was all right. We are also informed that the male contingent has but a faint recollection of hearing anything, having been so busy looking at the dazzling spectacle before them that they forgot to notice whether anything was being said or not. However, it was a strictly leg-itimate affair... The shades of classic Wellesley are blushing as they never did before. For the first time in the history of the famous straight-laced old Puritanical institution the young lady students appeared the other night before a mixed audience in—how can it be spoken? —in tights, real, genuine, unadulterated tights, the self same wicked garments in which the naughty chorus girls do their high kicking in the ballet.¹⁴

The piece is accompanied by a large drawing of the actresses, wearing revealing doublet, hose and high heels that emphasize their shapes. Instead of addressing the performance, *The Chicago World* addressed the anxiety cross-dressing could have produced in Midwestern readers. Indeed, the depiction of the show is not only inaccurate but also dismisses the performance in the first line of text. By entirely erasing the authentic masculinity performed by the Society members, the paper reveals the intense discomfort the performances invoked for some who heard about them.

Even so, the unnamed journalist made a valid point. How was the administration at Wellesley—with its history of fiercely regulating food intake, leisure time and especially dress—allowing girls to present a pagan frolic that disrupted the separation of genders so important to

¹³ Kerry Powell, *Women and Victorian Theatre* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 29.

¹⁴ “The Horrifying (Nit) Spectacle,” *Chicago World*.

Victorians?¹⁵ The tradition of female-cross dressing did exist in Shakespearean actresses like Charlotte Cushman, but professionals received certain allowances: “In the mid-nineteenth-century the predominant image of the actress in popular discourse was as an abject character, a woman generally considered ‘impure’ and therefore cut off from polite middle-class society by her ‘unwomanly’ behavior.”¹⁶ By contrast, the Society members were not actresses, but Wellesley women. National headlines containing the phrases “Mortifying Spectacle” and “Well-Shaped Wellesley Ladies” could be nothing short of dangerous for the Society, especially at a college where society disbandment was not out of the question.¹⁷ However, the young women continued to cross-dress, making the practice part of their college identity and integral to campus life, despite Wellesley’s reputation as a “famous Puritanical institution.”

The society began to cross-dress during a period in which the administration’s definition of a Wellesley woman was transitioning. The unique conditions this shift created allowed the Shakespeare Society to institute cross-dressing without, initially, facing significant criticism from the administration. The process began with the ideas of the College’s founder, Henry Fowle Durant. Durant’s religious ideals inadvertently paved the way for the Shakespeare Society’s future sartorial choices, despite his own disapproval of theatre in general. In his 1875 sermon “The Spirit of the College,” Durant outlined to his students the qualities and goals of the ideal Wellesley woman. His aimed to empower women so that they might become religious warriors in the “sacred” war against sin, in which higher education “is but putting on God’s armor for the contest.” For Durant, this was a progressive mission for which he must train the reformers of the future. Creating female warriors (who would fight by teaching the next generation) involved a

¹⁵ “Circular to Parents” (Wellesley, MA: Wellesley College, 1876), Wellesley College Archives.

¹⁶ Merrill, *When Romeo was a Woman*, 20

¹⁷ Converse, *The Story of Wellesley*, 210. All other societies were disbanded for academic reasons from 1881-1889.

disavowal of certain middle class-values, including the ideal of a frail, homebound wife. To accomplish this, Durant rejected Victorian standards of beauty and fashion: “We seek freedom from the physical chains which enslave women,” he told his students,

And the physical ideal of womanhood is a noble, beautiful form, healthful, vigorous, graceful—not ‘pretty,’ not a confused compound of vanity and sentimentality and shame... Trample in the dust forever the old loathsome ideal of the gushing story-paper and silly novel, with the baby face and the small waist and the small brain and the small sentimentalities.¹⁸

Durant’s vision of his students as future reformers, rather than wives, allowed early Wellesley women to escape the expectations of ultra-femininity and domesticity that were expected of college-aged women (and actresses) in the 1870s and 1880s. Indeed, under Durant’s influence, fashionable dress was forbidden. In 1876, a college circular implored parents to heed this regulation, one so contrary to popular practice that it had been ignored: “We ask the hearty co-operation of parents in our efforts to discourage elaborate wardrobes, as in very bad taste for school-girls.”¹⁹ A year later, the regulations were more explicit: “The entire apparel should be made light, loose, and in every way comfortable. Dresses should be short enough for easy walking, and free from heavy trimmings. Great allowance should be made for the increase of size that almost invariably results from life at the College.”²⁰ Durant’s encouragement of loose, clothing made for work and exercise emphasized his commitment to creating religious warriors. However, it also fostered a culture in which extreme shows of femininity were unnecessary and even censored. By including the rejection of feminine dress in his founding statement of the College’s values, Durant ensured that this emphasis lingered after his death. In the absence of corsets and high heels, it is not inconceivable that the members of the Shakespeare society began

¹⁸ Florence Morse Kingsley, *The Life of Henry Fowle Durant, Founder of Wellesley College* (New York: Century Co., 1924), 240.

¹⁹ “Circular to Parents,” 1876.

²⁰ “Circular to Parents” (Wellesley, MA: Wellesley College, 1877), Wellesley College Archives.

to adopt billowy male Elizabethan clothing during performances.

Durant's legacy also contributed another essential element to the Shakespeare Society's survival: his blessing. In 1877 Durant founded the Shakespeare Society to fulfill another aspect of the vision he had outlined in "The Spirit of the College." Although he rejected some middle-class ideals of femininity, the founder did possess a zeal for the "charm of culture" which he thought his students must learn. For Durant, and for many middle-class audiences in the late nineteenth-century, culture meant Shakespeare. In addition to establishing the Society for "the study of Shakespeare as a means of intellectual development," Durant created a 500 volume Shakespeare Library, making it a key part of the Wellesley curriculum.²¹ The value Durant placed on Shakespeare was mirrored by middle class audiences, for whom Shakespeare represented an acceptable site for otherwise transgressive behaviors, simply because of the cultural value of the (heavily edited) works. Citing literary merit, many Victorians were willing to ignore the instances of cross-dressing in many of the comedies. This view of the theatre was one reason female onstage cross-dressing was allowed to exist at all, as Nina Auerbach argues: "Flocking to Shakespeare, the middle class could absorb culture, learn history, escape to richly mounted dream worlds—and, in most of the comedies, see women's legs at the same time."²² The Bard had already included women in male clothes; women like Charlotte Cusham were simply expanding on a theme. Durant's attachment to Shakespeare likely allowed Louise Manning Hodgkins, the faculty sponsor of the Society, to "win Mr. Durant's cooperation" for the performances the Society was quietly presenting at meetings, the pre-cursor to the full-scale

²¹ "The Wellesley Legenda 1906," *The Wellesley Legenda* 16 (1906): 155, <http://repository.wellesley.edu/legenda/16>. Converse, *The Story of Wellesley*, 47.

²² Nina Auerbach, *Ellen Terry: A Player in Her Time* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987), 64.

productions.²³ And although Durant would certainly not have let his Wellesley girls expose their legs during his lifetime, the founder's blessing allowed the Society to later introduce cross-dressing without significant opposition. His assessment of Shakespeare as an essentially non-threatening element of a woman's education led Durant to create a theatre society in the college's first year, despite his passionate appeal to the students months earlier to show "opposition to theatres."²⁴

Shakespeare was even less threatening at Wellesley College than in the outside world. Although a ban remained until 1895 against off-campus theatre going, student performances were common beginning in the 1880s.²⁵ Henry Durant's characterization of the ideal Wellesley woman made her a non-threatening actress. The students were already "white, native-born daughters of the bourgeoisie, the children of educated Protestant evangelical professionals."²⁶ Wellesley would make them religious warriors, directing their passion toward Christ rather than marriage. As Christian, white women, the members of the Shakespeare Society seemed unlikely to corrupt their fellow students with poetry. In addition, Shakespeare was less dangerous for young women in general, because "nineteenth-century 'respectable' women were generally believed to be sexually chaste," especially the religious warriors Durant envisioned at Wellesley. Thus, pious Wellesley girls could temper Shakespeare's most passionate love scenes. Wellesley's young "actresses" even avoided a pitfall of many a professional actress, whose impending marriage meant that she "was expected to look back without regret, even with

²³ Louise Manning Hodgkins (letter, May 27, 1935), Wellesley College Archives.

²⁴ Kingsley, *The Life of Henry Fowle Durant*, 23.

²⁵ Converse, *The Story of Wellesley*, 96.

²⁶ Katherine Cali, "Christian Teachers to Self-Help Girls: Re-Imagining Women on Financial Aid at Wellesley College, 1878-1927 (honors thesis, Wellesley College, 2013), 6, <http://repository.wellesley.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1171&context=thesiscollection>.

loathing, upon her life on stage.”²⁷ Durant’s rejection of a quiet domestic life for Wellesley students paved the way for Society members to take up a practice that was “made to seem irreconcilable” with domestic life.²⁸ As audiences in 1897 watched the couples in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, they could rest easy, knowing that Henry Durant’s vision still lingered over the college. This mission, with its emphasis on casual dress, an academic study of Shakespeare, and a chaste student body who preferred religion to marriage, provided many of the elements necessary for the Shakespeare Society to thrive before Henry Durant’s death, and the lasting legacy of Durant’s ideals allowed the members of the Society he founded to introduce female cross-dressing to their public performances only eight years later.

However much Durant’s ideals facilitated later Shakespeare Society performances, he was actively against the theatre in his lifetime. The Society came of age in the two decades after Durant’s death in 1881. The public performances began in 1886, and the first confirmed production featuring male roles happened just two years later with 1889’s open-air performance of *As You Like It*.²⁹ During this period, the Society benefited from a restructuring of the College’s goals in the wake of new leadership, including a redefinition of the Wellesley woman. Florence Converse, a Society member who actively participated in the Shakespeare Society’s early cross-dressed productions, notably by playing an apparently rather famous Puck in 1893, writes of the changes occurring in the college during the period (1881-1894) in which the Society began producing plays: “The Wellesley that Miss Freeman inherited was already straining at its leading strings and impatient of its boarding-school horizons; the Wellesley that

²⁷Powell, *Women and Victorian Theatre*, 21.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Louise Manning Hodgkins (letter, date unknown), Wellesley College Archives.

Miss Shafer left was a college in every modern acceptance of the term.”³⁰ That modern college chose Julia Irvine as its new president, a Quaker with strong ideas about reform. Her term saw the gradual elimination of regulations—in 1895 the ban on theatre going was removed.³² That same year, arts education was given equal weight with other courses, further legitimizing the work of the Society.³³ The Society’s popular performances must have played a role in the administration’s decision to recognize the cultural value of live performance. As the wave of liberalization swept across campus, the improbable cross-dressed performances at Commencement were allowed to flourish. But even as Society members adopted loose tunics for performance, Durant’s ideals of a campus removed from the fashionable world gradually fell by the wayside. In Irvine’s 1896 circular to parents, the former condemnation of fashionable clothes was gone, leaving the simple instructions: “The entire apparel should be made light, loose, and in every way comfortable. Dresses should be short enough for easy walking.”³⁴ And by 1900, the call for loose, comfortable clothes was eliminated entirely.³⁵ Two photos of the Society, taken before and during Irvine’s tenure, illustrate the subtle changes in college dress. In the first photo from 1890, the members wear entirely dark clothing that, although fitted, is morose and utilitarian. Lounging on the floor and in chairs, the ladies seem unaware of their appearance—many are not even looking at the camera.³⁶ By 1897, the members have adopted the fashionable cinched waists and bright sailor tops of the turn of the century. They stand posed and put

³⁰ Cali, “Christian Teachers to Self-Help Girls,” 55. Converse, *The Story of Wellesley*, 51.

³² *Ibid.*, 95.

³³ *Ibid.*, 90.

³⁴ Julia Irvine, “Circular to Parents” (Wellesley, MA: Wellesley College, 10 Jul. 1896), Wellesley College Archives.

³⁵ President’s Office, “Circular to Parents” (Wellesley, MA: Wellesley College, 16 Jul. 1900), Wellesley College Archives.

³⁶ “Shakespeare Society 1890” (photograph, Boston and Brookline: Partridge Studios, 1890), Wellesley College Archives.

together, with perhaps a hint of the vanity Mr. Durant so warned against.³⁷ However, these hyper-feminine women had a secret no casual viewer of the photograph would guess. Every year they dispensed with their fashionable skirts and donned doublet, hose and beard, prompting a scandalized article in *The Chicago World* just a year later. These women and their friends had not lost the casual appearance of the earlier members—it is evidenced by their portrayal of the lounging couples in *Love's Labour's Lost* preserved on film that same year. Thus, while Society members benefitted from the reduction of regulations, they also maintained some essential traditions of dress from the Durant years.

The era after Durant's death brought into power a group of young faculty, administration and alumnae who were responsive to student reform and hospitable to the Shakespeare Society's male costumes. As students began to request more freedoms and individual responsibility, the faculty, administration and recent alumnae granted many of those requests because they “increasingly recognized students as rights-bearing individuals destined to participate in the life of the nation and the mind.”³⁸ The all-female faculty saw themselves in their students, and therefore was instrumental in the establishment of many practices opposed by Henry Durant, including cross-dressing. The environment of powerful women may have bolstered that practice in particular. Charlotte Cushman's biographer, Lisa Merrill, notes that while some men found Cushman's credible male performances threatening or disturbing, women responded enthusiastically to her masculine performances.³⁹ Faye Dudden argues that the growing number of women coming to the theatre in the mid nineteenth-century “helps to explain Cushman's

³⁷ “Shakespeare Society 1897” (photograph, 1897), Wellesley College Archives.

³⁸ Cali, “Christian Teachers to Self-Help Girls,” 56.

³⁹ Merrill, *When Romeo Was a Woman*, 129.

remarkable fame and influence,” as Charlotte was loved by these female audiences.⁴⁰ Louise Manning Hodgkin’s subtle gain of Durant’s permission to perform is an early example of the faculty’s influence and support for similar performances at Wellesley. A treasured Society history tells of the Society’s dramatic choice to institute male costume in the new, female, environment. The story speaks to the influence of the young female faculty, the rapidly changing rules of the College after Durant’s death, and the relatively risky nature of the performance:

There was a College rule forbidding students to perform in male costume, so the first plays were all done in female dress. However, Shakespeare members had a high regard for authenticity, and they decided to risk expulsion to do the play in male costume. They took the precaution of planting a sympathetic faculty member next to the College president, who always attended the plays. When the play began, she exclaimed, “ Oh, I’m so glad they got rid of that silly rule about performing in male costume!” The President said nothing, but the rule was changed, and no one was expelled.⁴¹

Whether or not this story is absolutely true, it points to a moment in which both Society and College identity were in flux. As the College rapidly changed its rules, things like plays featuring cross-dressing were allowed to slip through the cracks. Meanwhile the Society, recalling Henry Durant’s call for Wellesley students to become reformers, established an identity as a group of students who were committing to changing the College environment by pushing, but never exceeding, boundaries, all in the name of Shakespeare.

The reforms during President Irvine’s tenure also reconstructed the Wellesley woman to share many characteristics previously reserved for men. As discussed above, the lessening of regulations rested on the idea that students were autonomous and individual. Irvine also believed they could be ambitious and competitive—ideals she encouraged by instituting ranked grades in

⁴⁰ Faye E. Dudden, *Women in the American Theatre: Actresses and Audiences, 1790-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 7.

⁴¹ Mary Hurd, “History of Shakespeare Society,” (notes, 1984), Wellesley College Archives.

1897.⁴² These traditionally masculine characteristics made Irvine unpopular to some, as they perceived her to be operating outside of the feminine sphere. Even Florence Converse, a beneficiary of Irvine's reforms, states that, "Her handling of situations and individuals was what we are accustomed to call masculine."⁴³ Irvine's emphasis on ambition and competition, characteristics still considered inherently male, meant she was crossing the boundaries of gender, and her reforms meant she was encouraging her students to follow her. As Lisa Merrill explains, this manipulation of gender was essential to the unsettling power of female cross-dressing: "For their most virulent critics women like Charlotte who played male roles were not imitating or even parodying masculinity (and therefore heterosexuality); they were, in effect, transforming their sex. The possibility that gender was in fact a *performance* continued to haunt the edges of the generally positive reactions Charlotte received as Romeo."⁴⁴ The Shakespearian performances in Wellesley's rhododendron hollow therefore echoed the changes, troubling to some, that were emanating from President Irvine's office.

Society members, for their part, were enthusiastic in their attempts to temporarily "transform" their sex. What the society history refers to as "a high regard for authenticity" meant that every performance featured actresses trying their best to erase all their female markers. For some this involved evoking powerfully convincing emotion. "Miss Callaway, herself a hero, interpreted her part with such remarkable feeling and power as to make the audience quite forget the woman's voice," wrote a viewer.⁴⁵ She does not write that Miss Callaway portrayed, played or imitated a hero—she *was* the hero. For others, like Caroline Newman, whose "stentorian tones were something for gods and men to wonder at," acting offered an opportunity to explore the full

⁴² Cali, "Christian Teachers to Self-Help Girls," 67.

⁴³ Converse, *The Story of Wellesley*, 90.

⁴⁴ Merrill, *When Romeo Was a Woman*, 127.

⁴⁵ "The Wellesley Legenda 1906," 209.

range of their vocal instrument, a source of power not always available to women.⁴⁶ And many others became the hero by consistently donning the beards and masculine clothing so dreaded by the London reviewer William Archer, and so fiercely regulated by Henry Durant. A 1906 cast photo of *Romeo and Juliet* features three extremely realistic bearded men, surrounded by many other ladies in male garb.⁴⁷ An audience member would hardly be able to recognize these young ladies' identities, let alone their genders. By attempting to play Shakespeare's men as *men*, and not as androgynous or feminine actresses, the members of the Shakespeare Society began to redefine gender as performative, in contrast to the essentialist doctrine of the first administration, which was constructed on gender difference.⁴⁸

Although actresses like Charlotte Cushman influenced them, members of the Shakespeare Society did more to claim male privilege than professionals. By taking on all of the Bard's roles, not just those considered appropriately feminine, their performances contained more opportunities to stretch gender roles. Professional actresses like Cushman and Sarah Bernhardt usually played Romeo and Hamlet, two characters often deemed too feminine to be played by male actors. Italians like Romeo "were considered by Americans to be as romantic and emotional as women."⁴⁹ Indeed, as Romeo feels unable to kill his enemy he laments, "O sweet Juliet, thy beauty hath made me effeminate."⁵⁰ The indecisive Hamlet was also popular for actresses, although "Hamlet's nobility was enhanced by promptbooks and acting scripts which cut bawdy language and suppressed any hint of his sexual interest."⁵¹ Unlike these softened performances, which failed to fully represent masculinity, the members of the Shakespeare

⁴⁶ "'A Midsummer Night's Dream' at Wellesley."

⁴⁷ "Romeo and Juliet" (photograph, 1904), Wellesley College Archives.

⁴⁸ Cali, "Christian Teachers to Self-Help Girls," 67.

⁴⁹ Merrill, *When Romeo Was a Woman*, 128.

⁵⁰ William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, III, i, 113-114.

⁵¹ Russell, "Women as Tragic Heroes on the Nineteenth Century Stage," 141.

Society undertook all the roles in the canon, including those that required them to portray violence and power. These “strong and heroic parts” allowed Society members to portray more than the limited emotions of love or loyalty.⁵² In 1887, the society produced *The Taming of the Shrew*, which paints a horrifying picture of the effects of misogyny. One student would have taken on the role of Petruchio, a man so handsome, smart and manipulative that audiences love him despite his cruelty. By transforming herself physically into a manipulative, intelligent, powerful man who uses his patriarchal advantages to control others, the actress playing Petruchio not only claimed those male privileges, but also became an example to the audience of female power, “expanding their vocabulary of possibilities” for actual women.⁵³ Within the Society’s tradition of exploring the wealth of male roles in Shakespeare’s canon, the possibilities for empowerment are stronger than for the Victorian actresses limited to Hamlet and Romeo.

The members of the Shakespeare Society were able to produce these particularly subversive all-female productions because of the unique conditions at Wellesley College at the turn of the century. Merrill attributes the broad success of professional cross-dressing actress Charlotte Cushman to the conditions in which she was performing. “Because Charlotte lived in an age when the prescribed expectations of gender display were in flux, a time both of rigid Victorian notions of acceptable female behavior and of theatrical conventions that afforded a few women the ability to transcend traditional mores and portray male characters,” she was praised around the world.⁵⁴ At Wellesley College the definition of “acceptable female behavior” was also changing in the wake of Henry Durant’s death. As Society members introduced cross-dressing to their performances, they drew on feminine ideals from the early days of the College

⁵² Powell, *Women and Victorian Theatre*, 27.

⁵³ Merrill, *When Romeo Was a Woman*, 137.

⁵⁴ Merrill, *When Romeo Was a Woman*, 24.

in addition to newer ideals introduced in the ongoing movement to modernize, a process their performances also influenced. In their loose, archaic clothing, the cross-dressing Society members reflected elements of Henry Durant's ideal woman: healthy, educated in Shakespeare, unmarried and lacking in feminine vanity. They also embodied newer feminist doctrines that came about after Durant's death. They actively transformed themselves into men and thereby claimed male privilege, including the rights to freedom, ambition and artistry advocated by President Julia Irvine. As a staple of campus life during Irvine's tenure, Society performances likely influenced her decision to reform, as well as benefitted from the increasingly liberal atmosphere as they fought to establish cross-dressed performances as a Wellesley tradition. Since it represented aspects of both definitions of the ideal Wellesley woman, the Society was able to thrive during the period when that definition was still in flux. As the College community tried to define womanhood, it was accepting of a practice that publicly challenged Victorian ideas about gender, despite Wellesley's reputation of middle-class respectability.

This unique period of transition did not last forever. As the college became more well-known, and the history of loose, active clothing faded into the past, articles like the one in the *The Chicago World* could not be allowed to continue. The article's reference to the shocking nature of the tights worn by Society members reflects the powerful messages mapped onto women's bodies at the time. Nina Auerbach argues that revealing tights, while fascinating, also deeply unsettled many audiences:

In society, women displayed their upper bodies freely, but their legs were tabooed; a woman's legs onstage made women as well as men aware of embarrassing desires for which public life had no provision and no name...in a segregated society, a woman's leg was a dangerous fact...Women could display their differences from men, but not those things their bodies had in common. The very existence of female legs was unnerving because it presumed on the male sphere of activity, mobility and power."⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Auerbach, *Ellen Terry: A Player in Her Time*, 62.

More than any other part of the body, exposed legs revealed just how much the two genders had in common. After the departure of President Irvine, the College settled into a reformist, but still respectable, public image. By 1905, the wishes of the students were evidently not as important in administrative rule making. That year an unpopular dress regulation was put into effect, despite the complaints of students like one author in the 1906 *Legenda*. In her history of Wellesley theatre, she highlights the most recent dramatic event: “And then an awful blow fell. No longer could the college rave over perfect gentlemen. Henceforth the gentlemen must wear bloomers. Their acting must rise above environment. They must inspire the audience to forget—the bloomers—and to see the manly soul!”⁵⁶ The College had seen fit to abolish the revealing tights, with all their unsettling possibilities. No longer in a period of changing definitions of femininity, the administration would no longer allow such blatant performances of non-traditional womanhood. Although the students continued to do their best to claim equality with men by exposing their “manly souls” through cross-dressing, the “humiliating bloomers” were a serious hindrance to this goal.⁵⁷ The clothes themselves had been essential to their project, as they allowed students mobility and power that was quickly understood by both the actresses and their audiences. As Auerbach notes, “Feelings could be ignored; words could fall unheard, but clothes bore unmistakable meanings... The assumption of male clothes was an immediate appropriation of male prerogatives.”⁵⁸ The effects of this rule change seem to have been felt long after it occurred. In 1912 the Society lessened their cross-dressed performances, restricting them to every other year.⁵⁹ Photos from much later (between 1940-60) show Society members

⁵⁶ "The Wellesley Legenda 1906," 207.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁵⁸ Auerbach, *Ellen Terry: A Player in Her Time*, 63.

⁵⁹ Converse, *The Story of Wellesley*, 209.

continuing to dress in male costume. However, they lack the beards and masculine makeup to truly conjure the male appearance achieved by their predecessors. Instead they reveal their given gender with arched eyebrows and lipstick.⁶⁰ These performances of gender, in which the students' femininity was not in question, were much less powerful than the performances at the turn of the century. After the College assumed a fixed set of ideals for Wellesley women, the practice of cross-dressing within the Shakespeare Society was censored by the administration, a decision that influenced the way the Society presented gender for years to come.

Despite the censorship they faced, the early members of Wellesley College Shakespeare Society established a practice of playing Shakespeare's men in masculine costume that is still practiced today. Although it was founded in 1877, a period of strict regulation of gender norms, the unique environment of Wellesley College during the 1880s and 90s allowed the practice of cross-dressing to flourish. As the leaders of the College struggled to define the ideal Wellesley woman, they created a culture of reform that allowed the Shakespeare Society to continue to perform its plays in male costume. By appropriating beards and loose, masculine clothing, Society members laid claim to male privileges including mobility, speech, power and violence. This blurring of gender lines concerned many audience members; it still does so today. The College's early leaders, the student body, and most of all the early Society members themselves, took seriously their goal of stretching the acceptable performances of femininity. This early commitment allowed the Shakespeare Society to flourish and continue its work of expanding female possibilities, a project that continues in the minds of audiences to this day.

⁶⁰ "3 Students in Costume at Tea Party. Date Unknown" (image wca0033, 1940-1960), Wellesley Colleges Archives Image Gallery.

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