



Boy that's the Girl: The Androgynous Nature of WWI Propaganda Posters

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During World War I, propaganda posters played a major role in perpetuating national unity and pride, while simultaneously dictating cultural norms of wartime practices. Martha Banta explains that these propaganda posters were the “single most important visual means for promoting national values during the war” (560). The posters visually represented and structured the rules by which society should function, incorporating themes of nationalistic pride, guilt, and responsibility to coerce citizens to contributing to the war effort either through enlistment, buying government bonds, food conservation, volunteering, monetary donations, etc. These images represented what was culturally acceptable and expected within American society during 1917-1918, and therefore the figures within the posters became emblematic of what was expected from men, women, and children of the era. These figures were an inescapable element of life during the war, and covered all surfaces: glanceable material infiltrating the psyche of all Americans. Carolyn Kitch explains that, “During 1917 and 1918, the two years of American involvement in the war, more than twenty million copies of some 2,500 recruitment and home front-fundraising posters were displayed in stores, at theaters, in train stations, and at post offices” (102). Throughout these posters, gender is simultaneously portrayed as fixed and fluid. With the development of women’s rights and women’s suffrage campaigns, as well as a need to incorporate women within the war effort, these posters create an androgynous approach to gender through visual representation of men and women, as well as shifting the expected roles of men and women at the time.

During this era, gender began taking on new shape as women began entering the workforce and asserting their rights outside of the home. Kitch explains,

At no time did lasting change in gender roles seem more likely than in the 1910s, the final decade of the suffrage drive. The vote was not the only potential gain for women during this era: radicals who called themselves "feminists" pushed for reforms in the institution of marriage, the American popularity of the works of Freud prompted a public acknowledgement of women's sexuality, and a new birth-control movement enabled woman to express that sexuality more freely and safely (1).

Leading up to World War I, women began asserting themselves into the public sphere, creating a shift in the traditional gender roles. This movement was met with resistance by the patriarchal dominant culture, and WWI created an opportunity for the reassertion of traditional gender roles. Michele Shover states that, “In the World War I posters, the combatant governments attempted to expand the feminine role to meet the wartime needs of public policy. At the same time, governments attempted to preserve the traditional passive feminine role. This poses a neat and revealing contradiction to current studies of how government policies affect sex roles” (Shover 460). In other words, the beginning of the women’s rights movements prior to WWI created a shift in the understood roles of men and women. Throughout WWI, these posters both attempted to



reassert strict gender roles while encouraging both men and women to actively engage in the war effort. While these posters often emphasize the traditional role of women as situated solely in the realm of the home, to be protected and defended, they simultaneously defy this traditional categorization of women in the need to encourage them to join in the war effort either by volunteering for the Red Cross, providing supplies, and generally engaging in practices that place them in the direct sphere of warfare. Cléménine Tholas-Disset states that, “The propaganda campaigns portrayed female characters endowed with a double identity, both masculine and feminine” (Tholas-Disset 67). This double identity can be seen through the androgynous nature within many of these posters. Numerous scholars acknowledge an androgynous component to WWI imagery, but it is underthought and often mentioned as an aside or brief observation rather than a point of interest or study (Alonso, Bockting, Banta, Capozzola, Craig, Foreman, Gubar, Havelock, Kitch, Moore, Patterson, Roberts, Schreiber, Segal, Shover, Snider, Tholas-Disset).

In this paper, I first ask the question, “How is androgyny portrayed in these posters?,” and then, “How do these posters portray the shifting gender roles throughout WWI and beyond?” In answering these questions, I will first discuss the definition of androgyny with regard to this paper, and how androgyny was at play in World War I; then I will discuss how the portrayal of androgyny was emblematic of larger cultural shifts. Lastly, I will analyze a number of these posters looking at androgynous representations of men and women, and how they impacted the understanding of national engagement in the war effort. In representing the shifting of gender through androgynous appearance and agency, these posters reinforced and re-instilled androgyny within the quotidian life of World War I.

Androgyny Defined

Images in day to day life inform cultural norms and help create our social reality. WWI posters both reinforced and deconstructed gender norms, as they forcibly placed women within the roles assigned to them, yet due to wartime necessities, these roles became grounded in the grotesque landscape of death and destruction. Carolyn Heilbrum states that androgyny “seeks to liberate the individual from the bounds of the appropriate” (xi). Ellen Lenney explains that,

A very common flaw in androgyny research, . . . is that many researchers and writers make the dubious assumption that androgyny is a single entity with one agreed-upon definition and, further, many tend to fall prey to an ‘overinclusion of meaning’ in that definition. Instead, there are several overlapping, but far from identical, operational definitions currently in use, and each of these definitions has a more limited meaning than is often attributed to it. (708)

Within this paper, I will focus on androgyny from a socially constructed standpoint meaning that the social environment and depictions of androgyny created the cultural impact of the gender roles and power dynamics of the era. In this respect, personality and identity are made up of different aspects of masculinity and femininity. They are not therefore opposites, but rather parts of a whole. As a practice and discourse, androgyny incorporates, shuffles, and blends gendered attributes commonly associated with masculinity and femininity (Lenney). This is not to say gender identity is entirely socially constructed, but for the purposes of this paper, the definition of androgyny will focus on how cultural depictions influence gender roles and power dynamics, and thereby the simultaneous rejection and reassertion of strict gender roles through androgynous imagery. In this regard, Havelock Ellis states that “human identities are social constructs that are not only defined



differently but also experienced differently, depending on historical and sociological forces. Biological underpinnings may be influential but do not necessarily determine directionality, and they are always mediated within social milieus” (Ellis and Baldwin 115). With regard to the WWI propaganda posters, Bockting asserts, “If challenging gender stereotypes is a major component in theorizing about androgyny, then few events provide a more concrete and historical instance of such need for revisioning than the Great War” (21). In this respect, the propaganda posters of WWI allow us to see the ways in which physical representations of androgyny served ironically to inadvertently undercut strict gender roles of the era while attempting to re-solidify the gender binary.

Gender in Context

By 1910, a crisis in gender identity had reached a fevered pitch as women were beginning to make considerable inroads in places historically reserved for men. Women were attending college, earning wages, receiving access to birth control, and demanding the right to vote. WWI was promoted as a chance to reassert traditional gender norms and elevate the importance of masculinity through combat. Androgyny was one strategy used by modernist authors to subvert traditional representations of gender difference. Bockting makes the point that male violence at the time was rooted in Darwinism. Men were said to be naturally more courageous and powerful than women, and war was a way to encourage these tendencies (Bockting). When early feminists challenged these sentiments, they were widely villainized, as doing so was thought to make victory in war less likely. In many of these discourses, killing was the mark of manhood, and thus, a threshold of exclusion for women. Men had to kill to prove that they were not women. Lynne Segal explains that gender analysis can be an

indispensable tool for critiquing militarism and its endless cycles of war ... Both the rhetorics of domination, and the training in the uses of coercion necessary for producing military cadres, still connect us almost immediately with images of men and masculinity. It is men who are associated with all that is tough, assertive, stoical, obedient and heroic. Moreover, men's traditional monopoly of institutionalized force, whether in the military or the police, has helped secure men's dominance both over women, as well as securing existing hierarchies between nations and differing classes and ethnic groups. (30)

Kitch furthers this understanding in that, “World War I poster imagery presented a rejuvenated American masculinity while naturalizing various ideals for womanhood through exaggerations of them: beckoning beauty, angelic healer, avenging warrior, sacrificing mother, supportive wife” (120). In regard to gender within WWI, Christopher Capozzola asserts that women were essential to the war campaign through their contributions in food conservation and administration, fundraising, and working directly within the differing campaigns, often on the frontlines with the soldiers. Women were themselves warriors on the homefront even if they were not directly able to enlist. And thereby through their contributions, they forced their way into the political sphere (Capozzola).

Before the start of the war, gender roles were beginning to shift and become less rigid through women’s assertions into previously male dominated publics. Prior to the United States entering WWI, women had already begun the fight for equal rights and suffrage. The women’s liberation movement “called into question the role divisions of male and female, stating that the differences between males and females were culturally determined, not bound by either biology or theology.



Feminism embraced the ideas of social leaning theorists and used them as underpinnings to examine the institutionalization of sexism” (Ellis and Baldwin 126). Popular portrayals of women were already beginning to shift. Publications called *Little Magazines* were published in the 1894-1898 to reject mainstream culture and art posters as a rejection of then mainstream literary culture. Disassociated from middle class concerns, the portrayals of women within these magazines were both empowering and demeaning. Women were portrayed as sexually liberated and independent, yet had no real economic or political power. Their sexuality was their power, and the beginning of this empowerment was visually portrayed through the images within the Little Magazines, depicting the independent and liberated woman (Knight). Rachel Schreiber explains that women’s suffrage publishing used representations of men and women as equals and working within the same environments (Schreiber). Images of women’s empowerment often depicted them as larger than men in order to establish a sense of power and dominance (Bockting). Therefore, in advocating for equality, women’s rights advocates depicted women as equal or more powerful than men, often framing them in an androgynous light through physical appearance as well as in action and agency. In response to these depictions of women as strong and independent, anti-suffrage supporters depicted suffragette women as overtly mannish and unattractive, often with Adam’s apples and harsh thuggish features. Those who opposed women’s rights defined suffragettes “in their fundamental challenge to femininity and the traditional ideals of womanhood, [as] socially deviant,” if not sexually suspect: all “...large handed, big-footed, flat-chested and thin-lipped,” as one anti-suffragist declared” (Moore 231). Kitch expounds that “women were drawn to be not only ugly but also unfeminine, as signified by their masculine Adam’s apples and thick necks” (Kitch, 83). President Woodrow Wilson was in direct opposition to women’s suffrage, and used masculinity as a way to undermine their credibility. Capozzola states, “As late as 1913, Woodrow Wilson openly opposed women’s suffrage, and a journalist close to the president recalled that Wilson thought, ‘the only women interested in woman’s suffrage were aggressive and masculine with harsh voices’ (Capozzola 108).

The Gibson Girl became a popular image throughout this era, as an ideal of the new kind of independent woman. This iconic figure embodied many of the dichotomous issues of femininity versus power and independence as she was “one of the first representations of the independent woman, her independence was frequently presented in the form of cold and cruel power over men. Gibson’s beauties quite literally played with men” (Kitch 3). The Gibson Girl was simultaneously an embodiment of women’s fight for independence, while continuing to constrain the independence to that of acceptable femininity. The Gibson Girl fought against the suffragette image of the New Woman as an unattractive and masculine figure. Martha Patterson explains that

As a suffragette, the New Woman might be called unattractive, barren, and manly, doomed to the rank of spinster or shrewish wife. Working as a self-professed artist, the New Woman might be found wanton and a traitor to the delicacies of her sex, or subject to the same criticism as the suffragette. If she advocated female sexual expression and freedom, she might be accused of being licentious and immoral. As a college student, the New Woman might be accused of exercising her mind at the expense of her reproductive capabilities. Active in women's clubs or social reform movements, she could be found guilty of disavowing the heterosexual union by forming lasting alliances with other women... Not only did the "New Woman" risk becoming "unbalanced," she also risked becoming an androgyne, a manly woman continually brow-beating her husband (if she had one) into docile submission. (Patterson 1)



The Gibson girl then became the attractive and feminine response to this masculine figure of the suffragette. Patterson further articulates that the “Gibson Girl images embodied the values necessary to sustain a consumer-based economy--discernment, purchasing power, and insatiable demand--thereby harnessing and transforming the "New Woman's" desire for social and political change into a desire for new goods” (Patterson 3). The Gibson Girl thereby became both a symbol for women’s independence while further confining them to the defined spheres of acceptable for women. Androgyny then appears as a response and symptom of early 20th century gender battle.

Women’s rights advocates of this era “were among the first American women to grapple directly with a central feminist paradox of the twentieth century: how to rationalize the creation of groups that exclude men while simultaneously advocating the removal of gender barriers preventing equality” (Craig 374). In trying to break down gender roles and gain political rights and power, feminists of the era drew upon the traditional roles of mother and nurturing in order to argue for equal rights and peace... while trying to break down their barriers, they were reinforcing traditional gender tropes (Craig). Though women’s rights activists were establishing themselves within this era, they were simultaneously asserting themselves within the confines of traditional gender roles while attempting to break into traditionally male dominated spaces.

Differing factions within the women’s movement created different approaches to feminism and gender fluidity, often working against each other while trying to advocate for similar goals (Alonso). Peace advocacy became one of the primary means for women to enter into the discussion of war. Peace advocacy developed as a form of feminism, allowing women to enter into the national debate on war, arguing that once women have the right to vote, war will no longer exist as women will never choose to send their loved ones to their deaths. In this assertion, there developed a redefining of the mothering image, expanding from that of the single home and mother of one into a mother of society. This imagery both reinforced gender roles while trying to gain more ground and political power for women. During WWI the rhetoric and propaganda of the era reinforced and reiterated this female identity as mother of all. Red cross nurse imagery defined women as the mother of all soldiers and the ideal female embodiment for the wartime campaign. Furthermore, male soldiers were bred and trained to be subservient and obedient to orders, simultaneously reasserting the manly virility in volunteering in the army, while instilling a sense to subordination, servility, and “blind obedience.” Thereby peace advocacy groups argued that becoming a soldier was in fact demasculinizing: “Don’t be a soldier! Be a Man!” (Snider). These cross gendered assertions of masculinity and femininity are portrayed throughout the war campaign, as women worked to assert their strength and independence, while men were forced into roles of fragility and subservience.

The introduction of WWI into American society allowed for the reassertion of gender specific roles of masculinity and femininity. Elizabeth McKillen asserts that it was “the outbreak of World War I that afforded those concerned with deteriorating gender mores their most promising opportunities” (394). Kitch points to the publication of magazines at the time and their shift from pre-war to wartime publishing, explaining “Though suffrage and sex-role-reversal imagery continued to appear in American media through the end of women’s drive for the vote, the more radical messages [disappeared] ... in 1917, the year the United States entered World War I. Throughout popular culture, the emergency of war prompted a return to more traditional images (101). The war then created an environment in which men could reassert their masculinity through



hardship and physical prowess, while preserving women in the home. Conversely, Schreiber explains,

After the US entry into the war in 1917, the most common theme used in the suffrage press to argue for the vote built on the fact that, rhetoric aside, women's wartime roles, both at home and at the front, did sideline the tired dictum that enjoined women to remain in the home and obliged women to take over many male roles (49).

The war called for more than simply male contribution within the fight. Women were called into the war through the need for female dominated roles such as the nurse and care-giver, directly calling them to the frontlines of battle and placing them within the realm of physical hardship and virility. Many of the ideologies behind the images of the WWI propaganda posters began with an attempt at reasserting femininity as a fragility in need of protecting, calling men to enlist and be *manly men*, strong and battle-worthy, yet as the campaign went on, women were called upon as saviors and protectors of men, entering the very same battles as nurses and leaders, while men were placed in situations of fragility and subservience through their need of protection and guidance as well as their training in obedience. These shifts are readily represented through the images portrayed in the war posters as the figures are both feminine and masculine, often interchangeable and undifferentiated at first glance.

Androgyny during this era of gender upheaval is not simply represented through the women's liberation movements and popular images, but through the literature and dress of the era as well. In her war novel, *One of Ours*, Willa Cather depicts a male protagonist (Claude) suffering from a crisis of masculinity due, in large part, to the independence of his female love interest. Cather's character Enid is paradigmatic of the "New Woman," whose independence was understood as threatening to men. Pearl James asks why writers such as Cather were less dismayed by the violence done by men, or the woman who stayed home, than newly independent women, many of whom participated in the war. James states that,

What is most curious... is that her narrative frames the fight against modernity as a war between the sexes, as a fight for sympathy between Claude and the New Woman. *One of Ours* conflates a nostalgia for 'natural' preindustrial frontier life with a nostalgia for traditional femininity and a traditionally heterosexual union and division of labor. (103).

Similar to Cather, Virginia Woolf's work *Orlando* plays with the shifting of gender definition. *Orlando* is celebrated as one of the most important literary works on gender and androgyny. In the book, Orlando experiences a sex change when he wakes up as a she. Woolf states, "Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above" (189).

As it permeated the literature of the time, androgyny was also present within shifting fashions and clothing styles. Because women began to work in previously male-dominated field during the war, "the issue of work, specifically war work, is what first signal[ed] the significance of men's clothing for women" (Gubar 480). Fashion began to shift as raised hemlines, utility wear, and short hair became increasingly common. Due to shortages, color was muted and accessories were distasteful. When the war ended, women were reluctant to return entirely to the former way of dress (Foreman). Androgynous representation allowed for the permeability of traditional gender roles, while also reinforcing them. Androgyny brimmed with emancipatory potential (Heilbrum). It was



a tool for female empowerment as well as a for those fighting to reinforce traditional gender roles. At the end of the war, the discourse focused on these shifts in gender. Mary Louise Roberts states that, “One striking characteristic of this post-war discourse on civilization was the way in which gender was used as a central metaphor for cultural crisis” (52). Shifting gender roles represented through androgynous imagery and agency played a vital role in United States culture during WWI. These shifts allowed for the entrance of women in previously male dominated spheres and ultimately began the fight for the equality of genders that is still at work today.

Propaganda’s Visual Representation

The shifting gender dynamics and attempts to reassert the strict gender binary are nowhere more present than within the WWI Propaganda posters themselves. Recruitment posters “sought to exploit viewers’ feelings of insecurity about sexual identity. A number of posters constructed the war as a male initiation rite or the defense of helpless women and children” (Bockting 25-26). They created images of hyper-masculinity and femininity while also being forced to allow for changes in gender in needing to appeal to both men and women in recruitment to new spheres of work. Given the need for more women nurses within the Red Cross, these posters were tasked with making the position seem both appealing and necessary, while appealing to gender-specific markers. This meant that the images of nurses especially called upon women to both welcome entering into hazardous and strenuous spheres generally reserved for men, while also keeping the women within the role of fragility. Similarly, in recruiting men to join the army, posters spoke as well about women socially pressuring young men to enlist. Tholas-Disset explains, “The image of the ‘she-soldier’ was present in war propaganda... in the United States, enrollment in the Navy or in the Marines was propelled thanks to young women dressed in uniforms, often rather androgynous and resembling young determined soldiers” (67). Both men and women thereby were portrayed as androgynous in order to allow for their recruitment in differing areas and to increase social pressure by questioning the sexual identity and strength of both genders. These posters “were the product of a stereotyping process that had begun in an established mass medium and that was played out against the historical backdrop of first-wave feminism. They were a powerful invocation of visual icons whose meaning was *already* in place” (Kitch 102).

Furthermore, rather than simply personifying shifting gender relations at the time, the androgyny within these posters, despite their intention, actually worked to further deconstruct gender roles within society itself. Dwight Brooks and Lisa Hébert explain that, “Media are crucial in the construction and dissemination of gender ideologies and, thus, in gender socialization” (298). John Sloop develops this idea, stating that, “Mainstream discourses illustrate the rhetorically material ways that those who do challenge dominant ideology are ideologically disciplined, the ways gender normativity is upheld” (169). Within this understanding of cultural media, it is clear that the gender dichotomy at play within the posters furthered the gender dichotomy of the era. These images reinforced the fluidity of gender while working to re-instill strict gender norms, thereby further confusing the debate. Capozzola explains that within the era, American citizens were inundated with these images:

The visual media environment of 1914-1918 was, like our own, revolutionary in the way it changed and expanded over a short period of time. We live in an era of media saturation in which many previously blank surfaces ...have been transformed into display spaces and in which public screens proliferate..., subjecting us to images out of our direct control. (45)



This led to an inescapable climate of visual patriotism and identity through association with these media. Because of the necessary roles of both women and men within the war effort, the posters propagating American pride and recruitment inherently delved into the necessary shifting representations of gender and androgyny as a means to enforce participation and contribution by all. McKillen furthers this notion stating that “Gendered images ... can be a particularly effective form of propaganda during times of relative gender consensus because they persuade by symbolic association” (393). That being said, these posters create a space for the existence and perpetuation of androgyny within gender identity and gender roles, allowing for the shifting gender binary through physical appearance as well as agency and action.

Gee!! I wish I was a Man: Propaganda’s Androgyny at Work

Within these posters, androgyny was not simply portrayed from the angle of women as men, but as well in the portrayals of men as women. The masculine and the feminine intermix and mingle through both physical representation, action, and environment within these images. The figures within these posters depict a mixing of the gender roles and identifications. As the artists attempt to identify women’s roles within the war, they end up placing women in armor and battlefields, and men as effeminately bright eyed, and rosy cheeked. James explains that “Questions about women’s proper sphere repeatedly find their way into war posters, many of which provide far from simplistic messages.”

For example, in Howard Chandler Christy’s poster, “Gee!! I Wish I Were a Man,” there is the figure of a young woman wearing a naval uniform, exclaiming that she wishes she was a man so that she could join the navy (Christy). Ann Heinrichs describes this image as “a boyish, playful young lady in a sailor outfit with plunging neckline wishes she could enlist. She seems to challenge men with her androgynous, cross-dressing look and the hint that she might take a military role” (8). Not only is the woman dressed as a man, her cropped haircut and noticeably flat figure imply that she is more than able to join the navy herself. Kitch explains, “By putting young women into men’s clothes, the artist *suggested* the boldness of the modern woman, while also making reference to the gender-identity anxieties in popular culture of the years just before the war. Yet these images did nothing to contradict the wartime norms that placed women in inspirational or supporting roles” (113). The young woman in this figure shifts from a sexual recruitment tactic for men to join the navy to that of questioning her own identity as female as she physically represents the short hair, flat figure, and confident stance of a young man joining the navy. This shift further questions not only the agency of the woman in the picture, but the sexuality of the men being recruited, as Gubar explains, “Such seductive cross-dressers can function as sex symbols for men, reflecting masculine attitudes that range from an attempt to eroticize (and thereby possess) the independent woman to only slightly submerged homosexual fantasies” (482). She becomes a symbol of both sexuality and androgyny as she characterizes the desires and agency of gender fluidity. James explains that, “Christy’s female figures flirt with androgyny. Christy’s posters work primarily through an erotic charge generated by woman-as-object, but they also allude to female independence. This contradiction generates the posters’ success” (James).

One of the most important elements in the analysis of these posters is the importance of the *first-glance* factor. These posters were designed to be eye-catching and informative, but the majority of the time, passersby would merely experience the posters at a glance, rather than focusing on them in the same manner that a scholar might in trying to find new elements within them. This is



significant as many of the images become recognizably male or female upon closer inspection, but many of them are androgynous and discernable from the first glance. Going back to Christy's image, from a distance or from first glance, the short-cropped hair, lack of curves, and naval uniform would indicate that the figure is in fact a young man, and it is only through inspection of her posture that the viewer is able to see that it is in fact a young woman. The text itself could further imply that the figure is a young boy wishing he was old enough to join the Navy like his father. In attempting to create an essence of sexual appeal to naval enlistment, this image creates an all-encompassing androgynous figure whose sole desire is to enlist in the navy. Furthering the idea of the *first-glance* is the *double-take*, as the viewer then turns something familiar in passing into something different and new. These posters would be images seen over and over again, becoming part of the norm and cultural psyche. Accordingly, the *double-take* is the realization of something new that was previously unrealized or unrecognized.

Androgyny representation in these posters can be placed in two main categories: women as masculine and men as feminine. Within the category of women as masculine, this masculinity is portrayed through agency, physicality, and environment, as women are inserted into spheres previously reserved for men. The artists attempt to both empower and restrict the women within these spheres in making them both appealing to women in order to encourage them to contribute, while also placing them in masculine spheres of agency and power. Within the category of men as feminine, this femininity is portrayed through physical personification as well as a lack of agency in relation to the female figures. In placing these themes in dialogue, androgyny is personified through the simultaneous masculinization of women and feminization of men.

Woman as Man

Within many of these propaganda posters, the female becomes a figure of independence and strength as she enters into the war campaign. Tholas-Disset states that "Far from defeminizing women, the propaganda campaigns portrayed female characters endowed with a double identity, both masculine and feminine" (67). In this dichotomy of masculinity and femininity, physical representations of these genders manifest themselves through the feminine figures. In becoming masculine-esque warriors, these women defy the elements of seduction that may have been their original intent and rather become military images of honor and strength (Tholas-Disset). In general, women were often portrayed in these posters as broad shouldered with larger hands, short-cropped or hidden hair and stern angular features, dressed in male attire, armor, and weaponry. These figures are often placed within the environment of battlegrounds and darkness. Women are often drawn as larger than the men in the figures, dominating the frame and indicating the action and agency within the image.

These figures of female masculinity were frequently portrayed in the Red Cross propaganda posters geared towards recruiting women to become Red Cross nurses. James states that, "During the war, the profession of female nursing confounded gender difference by merging categories of soldiers and civilians and by reversing its opposite, the other popular plotline in propaganda: women in need of male rescue." In Milton Herbert Bancroft's poster, "WANTED- 25,000 Student Nurses," the poster is taken up completely by the image of a nurse. This nurse has large hands, broad shoulders, a strong brow and nose, and can be conceived at *first glance* as having an Adam's apple, based on the shading of the image. This figure is surrounded by the silhouette of bayonets and soldiers, presumably rushing right into battle, as the nurse looks calmly at the viewer. The



black and white shading of the image creates a dichotomy of action in the poster, as the nurse stands strong, calling to the viewer, and the background moves onwards into battle.

The jawline, hands, shoulders, and neck of this image, paired with close-cropped, largely hidden hair, indicate strength and masculinity in its composure, while the background of war implies that this figure is indeed on the frontline and in the midst of battle (Bancroft). Without the habit of the nurse, this figure could easily be construed as male by both physical attributes as well as placement in battle. It is only at the very base of this image, in small hidden text that there is any reference to woman or femininity at all. Even within this text, “Enroll at the nearest recruiting station of the Woman’s Committee of the Council of National Defense,” there is little reference to the need for the volunteer to identify as female. Nursing was a definitively female role within this era, yet this poster portrays the nurse as a strong masculine warrior on the forefront of battle.

Similarly, Albert Sterner’s poster, “We need you,” also focuses on women as nurses for the Red Cross (Sterner). As in Bancroft’s image, the nurses in this poster are depicted in black and white androgyny. The image shows one nurse sitting over a wounded soldier in the forefront, and another nurse standing, pointing down to the soldier while directing a young woman into the frame, presumably as a new recruit. The two nurses tower over the other two figures, of both the wounded male soldier and the young woman new recruit. The attire of the standing nurse erases all features of femininity in her figure and face, hiding her hair and any curves she would presumably have as a woman. Further, the standing nurse holds her arms open at her sides in a welcoming, Christ-like image of acceptance and grace, bringing the new recruit into the fold. This tall figure is the director of the image as her gestures indicate the direction of the viewer’s eye in first looking towards her, and then down to the nurse and wounded soldier at the base of the frame. Both of the nurses share the same heavy brow and sharp nose of the wounded soldier, with large strong hands directing and protecting the other two figures in the frame. The nurses are framed by a dark and smoky background, where the flames of battle can be seen between the two of them. Susan Zeigler expounds upon this idea of the woman in the battlefield stating, “Women’s work at the front was much more than a simple extension of their participation in the civilian labor force. It was also military or quasi-military service and therefore had profound implications for a society grappling with questions about the nature of women and their place in the public life of the nation, in war and peacetime” (3-4). In framing the nurses as the larger and directive figures, Sterner places them in the position of strength and power. He names them as the protectors and saviors in battle, as they stave off the darkness and smoke of war.

Beyond Red Cross images of nurses as physically masculine, the iconic forms of Columbia and Joan of Arc present the viewers with a new element of female androgyny through both their masculine dress, as well as their placement as warriors and leaders in battle. Images of Columbia in particular are often hyper-feminine verging on the sexual. Columbia may be framed as an enfeebled woman in need of protection by the strong efforts of her soldiers, but she is also portrayed as an inspiration for strength and direction as she sounds the war-cry and calls upon American soldiers to join her on the battlefield. Schreiber claims, “In keeping with the ways that the socialist press tended to use normative gender roles in its arguments against capitalism, here we see a world turned upside down, where skeletons are reaped from the earth, and woman must perform men’s work” (52). These figures took on not only the appearance and attire of men, but the roles generally reserved for men of leader and warrior in battle.



In “Over There,” another poster by Albert Steiner, Columbia directs a young man in a navy uniform to battle. At the center of the image, in a white uniform, a young man stands holding an American Flag that billows darkly behind the two figures. To his right, and leaning over his shoulder is the figure Columbia pointing, sword drawn in her right hand, her left hand pointing him towards the battle. These two figures are surrounded by smoke and fire, as a battleship smokes ominously on the horizon. At the bottom of the image are the large words “OVER THERE” indicating Columbia’s direction and voice guiding the man into battle. The image of Columbia is dark and foreboding with a heavy brow shielding her eyes and strong muscular arms engaging in the fight at hand. She towers over the man, dressed in armor, with feet that dominate the bottom right corner of the image (Sterner). At first glance, she is portrayed as a male soldier, through her armor, agency, and the sword in her muscular hand, but on closer inspection she has a slight feminine figure and is clearly the iconic female character Columbia. Each of her features engulfs the features of the man, as he stands at the forefront of the image, small in comparison to her presence. Her large hands direct the movement and eyeline of the frame, as she holds a giant sword in her right hand and points towards battle with the other. This figure is clearly dominant within the image, both physically imposing as well as giving direction and portraying agency. Columbia moves both the eyeline of the soldier as well as the eyeline of the viewer with her left hand, creating the movement of the image and harkening to battle. She takes on the masculine qualities of strength and physical prowess, as well as the masculine role of leader and commander within this battleground.

On the other hand, the figure of Joan of Arc brings together softer boyish qualities within her role as soldier and guide. In Haskell Coffin’s poster, “Joan of Arc Saved France,” Joan of Arc is depicted front and center in her armor, raising her sword up in front of her towards the heavens. Helmeted and depicted on a vibrant blue backdrop, Joan of Arc’s head is framed in a beam of light descending from above (Coffin). Unlike the Red Cross nurses and Columbia, Joan of Arc is portrayed with a distinctly female figure, however the softness of her face and short cropped hair are marked by armor and framed by her sword. Joan of Arc in and of herself inherently represents androgyny in her history and action, as she died for the right to dress and fight like a man (Wilchins, Bowen and Ellis). At *first-glance*, this figure of Joan of Arc can be seen as a young boy in armor raising his sword high, calling others to join him in the fight. Joan creates an androgyny of agency and action as she fought alongside men in battle and the depiction of this figure implores women and men of the United States to similarly join in the fight, in this case by buying U.S. savings bonds. Her action and warrior imagery are intrinsically androgynous in their strength and direction.

Although these are by no means the only images portraying female androgyny, these specific propaganda poster figures illustrate an array of androgynous elements within the posters. Placing women into previously defined male environments and roles and developing them as images of strength, command, and virility, depict the shifts in gender roles and expectations of the period.

Man as Woman

Although androgyny is strongly depicted through the female figures within these posters, potentially more important are the ways in which these posters depict the male as feminine. Although women were beginning to enter into the spheres of men, the male was still dominant and directing the rules of society. This is referenced in the fact that almost all of these propaganda posters, even the ones meant to appeal to and recruit women, were designed and created by male



artists. Therefore, the femininity and androgyny within the male figures becomes more significant as it represents the ways in which androgyny and shifting gender roles was becoming an inherent and subversive element of the era's psyche.

Men were largely depicted as feminine in two ways: 1) through their fragility and lack of agency and 2) through soft feminine features. Male fragility and subservience are often clear within the Red Cross nurse images. In contrast to the large, strong masculinized female nurses, the men are pictured as enfeebled and in need of protection, aid, and guidance. As previously stated in Sterner's "We Need You" poster, the female figures are all large protectors of the wounded soldier in the image. The male is seen as unconscious, with his features almost completely obscured by bandages and the kneeling nurses' arms and hands (Sterner). Similarly, Gordon Grant's "What Are You Doing to Help?," a young nurse leads a heavily bandaged man by the hand. The soldier's head is completely ensconced in bandages, wrapping around his eyes and head, leaving only his nose and mouth open. Further, his arm is in a sling and bandage that covers the majority of his body. The soldier in this image fades into the background behind the young nurse leading him forward and imploring the viewer. He is clearly unable to conduct himself and has lost all agency and direction without the aid of the female. These soldier figures, along with other images of wounded soldiers, shift the masculine role from that of strength, action, and leadership, to that of the feminine attributes of fragility, seeking guidance, and in need of direction. One of the major themes of these propaganda posters as a whole is the effort to save those serving overseas, as they are the damsels in the distress of war.

Within the realm of the physical, men in these images were often depicted with soft figures and features, curly showy hair, round faces, and full lips. These physical elements were often synonymous with the female figures featured in similar posters. Whether this points to a lack of ability to differentiate figures by the artist or it was an intentional action is unknown, but regardless it points to male femininity and shifts of gender dynamics. One of the most notable examples of this gender shifting is George M. Richards' poster, "Oh, Boy! That's the Girl!" (Richards). Within this image, a young man takes up the forefront of the image, smiling and holding a donut in one hand, while the other hand points behind him at a young woman holding a plate of the donuts. The young man in the forefront, helmeted and dressed in his green army uniform, looks directly out at the audience while gesturing back to the girl. The girl is similarly helmeted and wearing a green army uniform, with a very similar large smile on her face. The two visages mirror each other as they both look out at the audience from dark eyes and shadowed, but happy facial features. Their large rosy-lipped smiles invite the viewer to share in their happiness and cheer. One of the only differences in the depiction of the two visages is the short-cropped hair peeking out from underneath the female's helmet. At first glance, it would likely be unclear as to which character was the "boy" and which was the "girl." This physical androgyny is further confused by the text itself, as the phrase "Oh, boy! That's the girl!" can easily be read as a statement of disgust or confusion at which figure represents the female. The next text of the image, "The Salvation Army Lassie – Keep her on the job" continues the gender confusion as it frames the face of the male figure, either implying that he is the lassie needing to stay in work, or that he is the speaker asking the audience to keep the other figure employed. From a distance, the only text of the poster that would be easily read would be the phrase, "Oh, Boy! *that's* the Girl!," placing the term boy on top of the term girl, lining up the identification with boy as the higher figure in the image and the word boy with the lower figure in the image. The colors and figures themselves become completely



incongruous with one another from this distance, as the colors and markings meld in the blurred shapes of two people, clearly smiling from large rosy lips. James draws upon this gender equivocation as becoming a game of interpretation for the viewer to discern the masculine from the feminine (James). Within this image, both female and male become fluid and interjoined as neither figure necessarily portrays one gender or the other, rather drawing and confounding gender identification through the text in relation to the image.

Looking Forward

In focusing on specific World War I propaganda posters, a clear theme of androgynous visual rhetoric appears throughout the images. Many of these posters were originally designed to make clear individual gender roles within the war, but through the androgynous imagery of physical representation as well as agency and action, these gender roles become further confused and intertwined. Within female representations, clear elements of masculine physical appearance including strength and rigidity become apparent. Women were by necessity placed within roles upon the battle field, directing and leading the soldiers into war, or otherwise caring for and saving fallen soldiers. Within male representations, there are clear elements of feminine appearance and fragility, both through the portrayals of softness and weakness, as well as a loss of agency and power through military service and by extension subservience. Through the pervasiveness of these posters, these images became ensconced within the dominant psyche of the era, forcing a representational shift of gender dynamics and identity within hegemonic culture. The pervasive androgyny of these posters becomes apparent in the literature, styles, and actions of the time, as women continued to figure out their fight for equal rights and reinforce their place in male-dominated spheres.

These propaganda posters became emblematic of shifting gender roles and the ways in which androgyny is used as a tool to both break down as well as reinforce a gender binary both then and now. McKillen asserts that, for the era,

The debate over gender and citizenship also helped lay the intellectual groundwork for labor party activists and Socialists to develop alternative visions of how to make diplomacy more democratic, which competed with Wilson's international reform agenda during the postwar period. The successes and failures of labor and Socialist dissidents in counteracting the gendered propaganda of pro-war activists and in developing alternative models of citizenship offer a rich intellectual legacy for today's peace activists. (418)

World War I created an environment for the war over gender rights and identity that is still manifested in our society today. Androgyny continues to represent the ways in which gender can be rejected and redefined as incorporating all gender markers or none. The androgyny of WWI thereby opened the doors to gender fluidity within American culture, pulling it out of the closet, as it were. In relating the images as either masculine or feminine, we are inherently reinforcing the gender binary as the overall construct, yet in placing these gender roles within the realm of androgyny of the era, we are able to reject that binary as androgyny breaks free of the confines at work within the period culture. We must thereby encourage the incorporation of androgyny as a tool for deconstructing societal definitions of gender in order to develop a more equal and encompassing understanding of gender identification and fluidity.



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