“Education should push sex distinctions to their uttermost,” stated prominent turn-of-the-century educator G. Stanley Hall, “[and] make boys more manly and girls more womanly” (589). In an era when men and women were increasingly intermingled, Hall and other conservative educators, such as David Starr Jordan, believed education should function as a bastion of 19th-century conservatism, preserving what Hall regarded as essential differences between the genders. Emphasizing these differences was particularly important because many educators, social scientists, and others concerned with turn-of-the-century education feared that education (particularly higher education) was making women more masculine and men more feminine. Hall was not the only educator to raise questions about whether education was having a masculinizing effect on women; David Starr Jordan also expressed his concerns about what coeducation could do to women. Similarly, Theodore Roosevelt and others worried that higher education was producing increasingly effeminate, foppish males, unfit for leadership or fatherhood. The fears of these men about education blurring gender distinctions seem to be substantiated in college fiction, in which both male and female collegians take an inordinate delight in dressing up as members of the opposite sex, both for theatrical purposes and for playing jokes on fellow students.

Depictions of cross-dressing in turn-of-the-century college stories are a valuable source of information if we are to understand how cross-dressing can be made to seem less of a threat to social norms of acceptable gender behavior by its representation in popular texts designed for a mainstream, heterosexual audience. In college fiction, a safe zone is established for cross-dressing: the texts carefully prescribe certain places and times when cross-dressing is tolerated and when it is not. Thus, cross-dressing is acceptable for college men and women only when they are students. They must conform to the various cultural dictates that prescribe limits to their cross-dressing. Not surprisingly, middle-class men are granted more freedom than women with a similar class background; for instance, males can venture into public areas (streets and buildings outside the college) while cross-dressed women must stay within the college confines. As we shall see, college stories (and other popular, heterosexual-oriented representations of cross-dressing) defuse the threat that cross-dressing poses to gender norms by showing the artificiality of cross-dress for both men and women; cross-dress attire is depicted as a costume that is acceptable for a theatrical stage or for a student prank, but college fiction warns that it is inappropriate elsewhere.

Of course, social fears about the transgressive nature of cross-dressing were not confined to the Progressive Era; there have been negative references to cross-dressing throughout history. The following exhortation appears in the Old Testament: “A woman shall not wear anything that pertains to a man, nor shall a man put on a woman's garment; for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord your God” (Deut. 22:5). In 18th-century England, females were arrested for masquerading as soldiers and sailors. In the same century, Defoe’s fictional Moll Flanders, who dressed as a man in order to better pursue her career as a pickpocket and a petty thief, was indicative of society’s concern about the threat posed by cross-dressers. In 19th-century Paris and Berlin, women had to receive special permission (permission de travestissement) from the police to wear male attire (Casselaer 39). In late 19th-century New York, bars catering to a male, homosexual clientele were periodically raided and their cross-dressed patrons clapped into jail. In that same period, most cities and states in America had laws prohibiting the wearing of clothing of the opposite gender, except inside private homes and on Halloween (Hirschfeld 277). Despite such restrictions, at the turn-of-the-century cross-dressing flourished in private clubs for both men and women. Magnus Hirschfeld, for instance, discusses an exclusive, single-sex club in New York where male attire was obligatory for its women members; he also mentions a women’s group in St. Louis with similar requirements (388).
During the 1890s, cross-dressing gained notoriety in two famous cases involving women. In 1892, newspapers were filled with accounts of Alice Mitchell and Freda Ward, two lesbian lovers from Memphis who sought to escape from the stultifying life of upper-class Southern society with its rigid gender codes. Alice planned to assume male clothing so she could support Freda after they fled from their parents. Unfortunately for the lovers, Freda’s family discovered the plot and put an end to the relationship. Driven insane by depression, Alice slit her former lover’s throat (Smith-Rosenberg 273). In the extensive media coverage that followed this sensational murder, Alice’s male attire was seen as signifying her abnormality and her insanity. Another incident that focused greater public attention on female cross-dressing was Murray Hall’s success in passing as a man for over 30 years in New York City. As Marian West described this case, “Wherever newspapers go, people have been talking of the strange case of Murray Hall, whose death last January revealed the fact that this ugly little citizen of New York, who had been talking politics on the street corners for thirty years, was, in actual fact, a woman” (273). West added, “[women] of the present day do a great many things that were undreamed of by their grandmothers, but dressing up in men’s clothes and going out into the world to seek their fortunes is not one of them” (274). Despite West’s reassurance that women of that era did not dress up in men’s clothing, American society at the turn-of-the-century wondered and worried if more women than only Alice Mitchell and Murray Hall were threatening to assume a man’s socioeconomic status, as well as appropriate his pants and tie.

Certainly, there were reasons for social concern. This was the age of the “New Woman”: an image of bourgeois femininity associated with many gender attributes formerly considered the exclusive province of males. The New Woman was athletic, wore masculine-style clothing, and showed little interest in appearing feminine and frilly. As James McGovern suggests, “The new ideal in feminine figure, dress, and hair styles was all semi-masculine” (324). In 1912, young women began to tuck-under their hair with a ribbon; and by 1913-1914, Newport ladies, actresses like Pauline Frederick...and the willowy, popular dancer Irene Castle were wearing short hair.... and even the pure type of woman who advertised Ivory soap appeared to be shorn. (McGovern 325)

When McGovern describes the 1910s as the beginning of 20th-century female adoption of “semi-masculine” fashion, he overlooks the tradition of cross-dressing already in place at Northeastern women’s colleges in the 1890s and 1900s. In that period, both in actual women’s colleges and in women’s college fiction, women were encouraged to admire and desire masculine styles in clothing. Occasionally, college women adopted male garb for subversive purposes, yet cross-dressing was not always intended to challenge established social codes...
of behavior for women. The college woman was allowed certain freedoms with her dress only because she was a college student; after graduation she was expected to conform again to a more traditional feminine appearance.

**Posing as Men: Theatricals and Dances**

If Dr. G. Stanley Hall had visited one of the Northeastern women's colleges and had happened to attend a theatrical performance, his fears about the masculinizing effect of higher education on women would seem to have been confirmed. At Bryn Mawr, Mount Holyoke, Smith, Wellesley, and Vassar, students frequently dressed in men's attire (or masculine-styled women's clothing) to go to dances and to perform male roles in school dramatics, although colleges differed as to the degree of realism that they would allow. "Masculine costumes are forbidden at Vassar plays," Lida Rose McCabe noted in 1893, "that is, legitimate trousers are eschewed; coats and vests are permissible, but the divided skirt marks the limit of realism" (30). In the same year, however, Bryn Mawr and the Harvard Annex permitted their students to wear actual male apparel while acting in plays.

Similarly, schools differed in their requirements as to what was acceptable attire for student dances. At Smith's Freshman Frolic in 1901, the sophomore students, who were assigned the "male" roles, had to content themselves with wearing traditional feminine evening gowns, although in other ways they did assume masculine roles, ordering flowers for their freshman partners, filling out their dance cards, seeing them home, and arranging future dates (Hart 192). At Vassar, however, Lavinia Hart reported, "the girls go a step farther, those who fill men's parts at the dances affecting bloomers, sack-coats disclosing a wide expanse of shirt-front, white lawn ties and buttonhole bouquets" (192). Vassar students were also allowed to dress as men to attend the Tuesday night dances sponsored for the maids, where they could dance with the female servants (Lockwood 82). At Wellesley College, students were permitted to wear actual male clothing to dances. After visiting Wellesley in 1898, Abbe Goodloe was enthusiastic about the students' cross-dressing:

> Among her many good qualities it is to be noticed that the Wellesley College girl is not dependent for her enjoyment on a dress-suit worn by a man. She would just as soon wear it herself, and the cotillions in the gymnasium, where half the young girls impersonate their own brothers, are celebrated for their entire success and brilliancy. (530)

Although Goodloe and Hart praise the skill of the cross-dressing students, their remarks tend to obscure the conflicts over the wearing of male clothing at women's colleges. School authorities were careful to prescribe where male attire could and could not be worn. For instance, Bryn Mawr officials stipulated that students performing male roles in plays should change back into conventional feminine clothing before venturing outside. As Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz informs us:

College authorities experienced acute anxiety about the adoption of male attire and made elaborate rules to limit it to occasions where no men observed. Rules forbid photographs.... Exposure threatened to reveal the most carefully guarded secret of the women's colleges, that in a college composed only of women, students did not remain feminine. (163)

In an era when college women were perceived as being suspiciously masculine, administrators risked public censure if they allowed their cross-dressed students to stroll around the campus.

The punishment for a student who adopted masculine clothing and behavior other than at dramatics or dances was sometimes stiff, and students themselves policed the behavior of their peers. The *Ladies' Home Journal*, in an article entitled "College Girls' Larks and Pranks," described one example of such student policing. A women's college student who "went about in bloomers, had her hair cut short, and who doffed her fore-and-aft cap like a man when she met her classmates" is openly ridiculed as a "freak" (8). She is scared into being "more like a girl" (8) by her classmates when, late at night, they dress up as men and pretend to mistake the bloomer-clad woman for a man. Needless to say, the "freak" is "cured" of her man-like behavior. Thus, although the cross-dressing allowed at women's colleges for both dramatics and dances appears liberating for women, we cannot conclude that these colleges were necessarily rescripting ideas of acceptable gender behavior.

In contrast, an example of the approval given to cross-dressing in women's college fiction occurs in Margaret Warde's novel, *Betty Wales, Sophomore*, when a student expresses a common sentiment as she remarks that she has always been "'wild to do men's parts [in theatricals]'" (75). Similarly, in *Jean Cabot at Ashton* (Scott), students show an ardent interest in the cross-dressed girls in a French play: "Of course the most interesting parts were those where the girls took the parts of men. As the masculine element were
not invited to attend the performance, the girls felt free to dress as fancy prompted them and, as Nathalie had said, 'did make perfectly stunning men'” (174). Peggy’s cross-dressing is so effective that her classmates are reluctant to have her change back to her own clothes. A student sighs over boyish Peggy, “I'd be only too glad to let her make love to me!” (176). These episodes might seem transgressive at first, but by attaching so many prohibitions to cross-dressing (it must be confined to theatrics performed by college students, with no male observers), it loses much of its potential for subversion.

In *Betty Wales, Freshman*, the text also emphasizes the need to keep gender-shifting practices within bounds. Betty shocks her fellow students by appearing in a dormitory room dressed as "a young gentleman in correct evening dress" (104). Only after Betty discloses that she is dressed for a play do her friends admire her. One student remarks, "I wish I could act... I should love to be a man. But my mother wouldn't let me!" (107). Betty tells the girls: "Roberta's father wouldn't let her [dress up] either...but mother didn't mind, as long as it's only before a few girls" (107-08). Betty is careful to again dress as a "demure little maiden" before leaving (109).

Betty’s cross-dressing can be better understood in light of Julie Wheelwright’s analysis of the social functions of sexual inversion. "Sexual inversion as a widespread form of cultural play in literature, in art, and in festivity," Wheelwright observes, "has served to disrupt and ultimately to clarify often fluid or evolving concepts of sexual difference" (7). This process of disruption and clarification, however, does not necessarily result in a less restricted view of gender differences. Quite on the contrary, Betty’s transformation from girl to boy and back again to girl assures the audience that college women recognize that such gender-crossing behavior must be both spatially and temporally restricted; cross-dressing must be limited to an audience of "a few girls," and must only be acted out within the privacy of college rooms, where males dare not intrude. Moreover, the cross-dressing girl must not deceive her audience; she must never seem actually to violate gender divisions or threaten the patriarchal power structure.

College fiction, however, does allow women some freedom to challenge, to question, and to debate changing attitudes towards feminine cross-dressing. For example, in Helen Leah Reed’s *Brenda’s Cousin at Radcliffe*, Radcliffe students and graduates watching a play enter into an extended discussion about wearing men’s clothing in dramatic performances:

"The costumes are harmless enough, compared with what they were in my day," said the graduate. A junior replies: "But in *your* day the girls who played men's parts used to wear real clothes, didn't they?"

"Yes, real clothes," and all laughed at the under-slip.

"Yes, men's real clothes," the graduate added, "borrowed usually from some brother or cousin at the University. Really, some girls made up wonderfully like Harvard men."

"I should like to have seen them. I hate our present stage dress for men; it is neither ancient nor modern."

"Yet it's very proper!" interposed Clarissa sarcastically.

In order to understand how the feminine or masculine subject is constructed differently through clothing in the above passage, it is helpful to elaborate upon Sandra M. Gilbert’s discussion of how male and female modernists have manipulated transvestism for different purposes. “[M]any literary women,” Gilbert writes, “from Woolf to Plath see what literary men call ‘selves’ as costumes and costumes as ‘selves’” (72). Furthermore, "costumes [for women] are selves and thus easily, fluidly interchangeable" (81).

Although Gilbert is discussing the importance of cross-dressing to modernist writers, her remarks can also help elucidate the way cross-dressing operates in Progressive Era college fiction. Certainly, the college women describing male garments as "real clothes" do privilege cross-dressing as offering access to a version of self and a sense of agency that are not so easily available to women in traditional feminine garb. Yet, one should question whether such costumes/selves are always "easily, fluidly interchangeable." Such fluidity of self-construction can operate in a phantasmagorical modernist work, such as Djuna Barnes’ *Nightwood* or Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*, but fluidity in dressing is a male privilege in *Brenda’s Cousin at Radcliffe*. While Harvard men may wear "ballet costumes or any dress that a woman might or mightn't wear." (146-48)
may not wear "real" male clothing and her coat must have a "skirt effect." Woman's cross-dress must mitigate the cultural fear that women will both dress as men and pass as men, assuming male privilege as well as male clothing.

Even when a college story, such as Josephine Dodge Daskam's "At Commencement" (Smith College Stories), seems to suggest that college women are more suited for masculine than feminine social roles, the text ultimately refutes this fear. In Daskam's short story, members of the audience at a college drama are amazed at the ability of students to play men. "It's amazing," comments the head of a college department, "but as a matter of fact their men's parts are...much better than their women's.... [T]hey're very artificial women, as a rule. Overtrained, perhaps" (281). A watching alumna gushes that the acting students "make such wonderful men! Would you ever know that Sir Toby was a girl?" (289). The transgressive nature of the cross-dressing, however, is lessened by the way Daskam frames the play in her story. After the performance, the actors reappear in dresses, confirming that indeed their male attire was only a costume. Also, one student remarks, "Did you know Orsino’s fiancé was there? She said she felt like such an idiot" (298). This is a revealing line. The woman playing Orsino could not imagine herself breaching gender boundaries in real life; the idea was so far-fetched, so ludicrous, that she was even embarrassed about having her fiancé see her in male clothing.

Women’s desire for and appreciation of cross-dressed women is typically construed in college fiction as being subordinate to a woman’s desire for a man. In Jean Cabot in Cap and Gown (Scott), for example, two cross-dressed women are poor substitutes for men. For a prank, while dressed as men, they visit their friend Jean. She admires their clothing, but also qualifies their appeal: "You're the best-looking men I ever saw, I mean, of course, considering the fact that you're only girls" (110). As "only girls," these cross-dressed women pose little threat to "real" men. We shall see, however, that a curious inversion occurs in male college fiction; while cross-dressed girls cannot compete in physical appeal with real men, cross-dressed boys are more than a match for real women.

**Male Cross-Dressing: Male Homoeroticism**

Cross-dressed males are often extremely successful in their charades. For instance, in Jesse Williams’ short story “The Hazing of Valliant” (Princeton Stories), Valliant, who is “small and dainty” (69) with a “young and beautiful” face (78), dresses as a woman to fool an upper-class man intent on hazing him. When Buckley climbs into the window of Valliant’s room to kidnap him, he discovers a woman in a nightgown, prepared for bed. Buckley, certain he has entered the wrong room, is appalled when the woman puts her arms around his neck. (Later, Valliant confesses to his prank.) Similarly, cross-dressing males are depicted as successful in imitating women in College Days or Harry's Career at Yale (Wood). A fellow student tells Harry about the social life of their fraternity (Delta Kap): "Ladies, to be sure, never enter here, but very good, manly imitations of them are often found in D.K., tripping the light fantastic, and whispering soft nothings in the dance" (57).

To understand the appeal of cross-dressing for Valliant and the Delta Kap men, it is important to recognize that the Ivy League schools have a long tradition of cross-dressing. As early as 1712, a Harvard undergraduate was reprimanded for wearing women’s clothing (Garber 61). By 1734, the college laws were revised to state that if any student wore women’s apparel, he would be subject to “publick admonition, degradation or Expulsion” (qtd. in Garber 62). Despite such regulations, in the 19th-century cross-dressing flourished in the elite environment of the Ivy League schools, particularly in the theatricals staged by clubs such as Princeton’s Triangle or Harvard’s Hasty Pudding Club. As Marjorie Garber points out in Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety, as early as 1854 Hasty Pudding Club members were impersonating women in theatrical shows (62), a form of entertainment not always appreciated by college administrators, who feared that cross-dressing would make men effeminate. By 1915, theatrical cross-dressing had become enough of a concern to result in a Yale dean ruling that members of the Yale Dramatic Association could not impersonate women for more than one year in succession (Garber 63). Harvard considered passing a regulation similar to Yale’s, but vetoed the idea (Garber 64).

Given the centuries-old antagonism of school administrators to cross-dressing, it becomes clear that cross-dressing, whether in fiction or in reality, had the subversive potential to cohere the student body in opposition to the college’s faculty and administrators. Ultimately, however, the Hasty Pudding and other clubs proved so successful that they “mainstreamed and ‘legitimized’ female impersonation, establishing it as a class act to be acted out, and acted up, by the members of a certain class” (Garber 60). Moreover,
mass-marketed boys' college novels further mainstreamed cross-dressing, depicting it as an activity that would not interfere with a man's masculinity.

Explaining the allure of female clothing for males, Richard F. Docter in his recent work, Transvestites and Transsexuals: Toward a Theory of Cross-Gender Behavior, adopts a cognitive scientific approach to cross-dressing. He argues that classifying women's clothing as "forbidden fruit" tempts males to cross-dress since men are socialized to wear gender-appropriate attire (115). Certainly, in the Progressive Era, both male and female cross-dressing was influenced by the taboo associated with wearing garments of the other gender. Women appropriated top hats, ties, and pants because of their forbidden nature, and for the same reason men were attracted to bustles, dresses, and make-up. Cross-dressing, however, involves far more than merely a change of clothing; it is an attempt to undermine the socially constructed codes of gender difference.

By cross-dressing, males reassure other males that femininity is only a costume that men can manipulate as effectively and easily as women can. As Sandra Gilbert perceptively suggests:

Those to whom the social order has traditionally given power...will inevitably use ceremonies of transvestite misrule to recapture rule; they seek not a third sex but a way of subordinating the second sex, and in their anxiety they play with costumes to show that costumes are merely plays, seeking reassurance in what they hope is the reality behind appearances. (90)

Thus, male cross-dressing, rather than suggesting a society turned upside-down, merely shows that men can manage a woman's costume as dexterously as she can herself. There is no secret to femininity; instead, femininity can be engendered by anyone, male or female.

Although reassurance about gender roles plays a part in male cross-dressing, there is also a clear homoerotic element in such masculine play. For instance, in College Days or Harry's Career at Yale, a man dressed as a woman is considered more enticing than an actual female. Harry meets his friend, Jack, who is dressed up as a woman:

A really handsome girl [entered the room]... What a dear girl [Jack] made! His features were very regular, and his eyes were large and handsome. Little Nevers fell in love with him forthwith, and declared that he should never be allowed to reassume his "original and only sex." (118-19)

Similarly, in "A Violent Remedy" (Wood, Yale Yarns: Sketches of Life at Yale University), a student, Austin, is cured of lovesickness when one of his friends dresses up as a beautiful woman and Austin falls in love with him/her. Keith is more than a match for any woman: "Keith made the prettiest girl in college by all odds. His oval face, straight features, clear blue eyes and nicely penciled eyebrows, and small hands and feet, gave him enormous advantages" (252). Austin completely loses his heart, and confesses his love to this femme fatale. When Austin discovers Keith's deception, he remarks bitterly, "I am cured of ever wanting to speak to another girl as long as I live" (271). It is interesting to note that Austin is cured of wanting to speak to women, while not being cured of wanting to speak to men (cross-dressed or not). In this single-sex community, the male needs to be discouraged from desiring relationships with women, which, he must learn, are of lesser significance than male bonding.

When women appear at all in male college fiction, they are frequently depicted as a hindrance to male camaraderie and unity. For instance, in Richard Holbrook's Boys & Men: A Story of Life at Yale, a student sighs, "What a pity it is that the liking of man for man should ever be blighted or marred—even by love of women" (244). Examples of male homoeroticism and male bonding appear repeatedly in Progressive Era boys' college novels. In the short story, "College Men" (Williams, Princeton Stories), a homoaffectionate atmosphere is established when the college men loll about after a large meal: "One man rested his head on another fellow's shoulder and asked him to muss his hair. The legs of the one having his hair mussed stretched out over the legs of two other fellows and intertwined with those of a third" (274). This physical display of male affection reflects a college culture in which homoaffectionate relationships were not merely tolerated but were actively encouraged. A fictional example of a crush appears in "Hero Worship" (Williams, Princeton Stories). In this story, a freshman, Darnell, is smitten with a popular senior, Lawrence, and follows his every move:

From the last year's "Bric-a-Brac" he had learned Lawrence's club and what committees he was on, and the book opened up now, of its own accord, to the picture of the Glee Club. He could have told you Lawrence's middle name and his street and number at home, and his campus address as well. (94)

Rather than condemning Darnell's infatuation, his classmates accept it as a normal experience for a
fears that institutions of higher learning were turning out many women and manly men. In these works, gender inversion is revealed to be only play, and its danger reduced by a recognition of its artificiality. Even today, when cross-dressing theatrical performances remain popular at colleges and universities across the United States, these plays function to reassure actors and spectators that gender differences are not actually transgressed at institutions of higher education.

One can extrapolate from this argument that any popular depiction of cross-dressing works in a very different fashion from a high-cultural representation of cross-dressing, such as Djuna Barnes’ Nightwood, a modernist work that one can reasonably assume does subvert gender roles. Betty Wales, Freshman, Tootsie, Harry’s Career at Yale, Charlie’s Aunt, or Victor/ Victoria serve far more conservative purposes, showing cross-dressing as a staged spectacle that represents little danger to traditional gender divisions. It is this paradoxical nature of cross-dressing—its ability to reaffirm the very gender boundaries that it seems to contest—that makes it such an intriguing field of study for both the popular culture critic and the gender theorist. Analyzing cross-dressing in its many historical guises reveals its multifaceted nature, as well as its continuing importance as a site for both gender construction and deconstruction.

**Notes**

1 Many other cases of women cross-dressing as men are described in Hirschfeld 95-102, 151-54, 290, 306-09, 393-415.

2 For a detailed study of the New Woman in both the U.S. and British popular media, see Marks.

3 Eaton is relieved to report that the days are gone “when it was smart to stride around the campus looking as much like a college boy as possible” (7). The vogue for masculine fashions did not last, and gave way to more feminine styles after World War I.

4 A turn-of-the-century etiquette book, Practical Etiquette (1899), was even more severe in its condemnation of cross-dressing than the college authorities, informing its readers: “It is very bad taste, even for a frolic, for a young girl to assume boy’s clothes, or get herself up in any way that will tend to make herself look masculine” (qtd. in Banta 726-27n11).

5 An article of clothing loses its significance as cross-dress as well as its transgressive character when it is no longer considered “forbidden fruit.” Thus, today, a woman wearing pants is not classified as cross-dressed, while a
man wearing a skirt is still definitely categorized as cross-dressed.

Stephen Orgel provides a more elaborate discussion of theatrical male cross-dressing in his essay about the Renaissance stage.

Even Frank Merriwell, the most popular and most "all American" of boys' college story heroes, is described in a tone that does not try to conceal homoerotic desire. For instance, in Frank Merriwell at Yale (1903), Frank is described after he has just received a post-game athletic rubdown:

Frank's delicate pink skin glazed, and he looked a perfect Apollo, with a splendid head poised upon a white, shapely neck. Never had he looked handsomer in all his life than he did at that moment, stripped to the buff, his brown hair frownsed, his body glowing from the rubbing. (Standish 54-55)

Remember, this is an account that is addressed to a mainstream, heterosexual male audience. Men are encouraged to consider the male form as the epiphany of physical beauty.

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