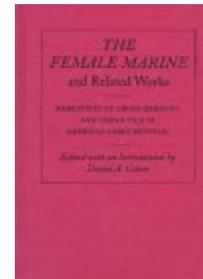




Daniel A. Cohen, ed. *The Female Marine and Related Works: Narratives of Cross-Dressing and Urban Vice in America's Early Republic*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997. xi + 202 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55849-124-3; \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55849-123-6.

Reviewed by Debra M. O'Neal (Department of History, Wingate University)  
Published on H-Urban (October, 1998)



## Urban Vice, Cross-Dressing, and Female Independence in the Early Republic

Editor Daniel A. Cohen's *The Female Marine and Related Works: Narratives of Cross-Dressing and Urban Vice in America's Early Republic* is an important, rich, and surprisingly thought-provoking gem masquerading as a series of short, popular narratives of seafaring adventures in the wake of the War of 1812. Calling upon his research at the American Antiquarian Society, Cohen, associate professor of history at Florida International University, has reproduced five early American narratives first issued by Boston printer, publisher, and bookseller Nathaniel Coverly, Jr. Cohen speculates that they were penned by writer Nathaniel Hill Wright who was in Coverly's employ. Primarily featuring the daring and highly provocative adventures of the young, cross-dressing Lucy Brewer as she travels from rural Massachusetts through the brothels of Boston to the dangerous decks of a naval ship, the stories were originally purchased and read by sailors, prostitutes, and "juveniles." These narratives of cross-dressing now offer a very different audience—scholars and students of the early republic—a glimpse into the culture of a largely hidden sector of nineteenth-century society and provoke speculation on what drew early Americans to these ambiguous tales.

In the first installment of *The Female Marine* trilogy, the *Narrative of Lucy Brewer*, readers are introduced to the heroine's background, fall from virtue, and thrilling (albeit risqué) adventures before she returns to the fold of her grieving mother and father. The daughter of respectable parents residing forty miles outside of Boston,

sixteen-year-old Lucy Brewer is seduced by a trader's son, putting aside filial obedience and, alas, her virginity. Finding herself pregnant and abandoned, Lucy flees to Boston in the hope of obtaining asylum in the anonymity of the urban capital while she awaits the birth of her baby. After her failure to find a position as a domestic servant, Lucy wanders into West-Boston, the infamous district noted for its debauchery, dance halls, prostitution, and "Negro Hill," an African-American neighborhood. Here, she unwittingly accepts lodgings in a brothel. Upon the birth and sudden death of her infant daughter, Lucy is forced, or so she claims, to join the "sisterhood" of prostitutes in order to hide her shame and work off her debt to the madam of the house. In 1812, after three years of such nefarious employment and through a chance conversation regarding the freedom to women made possible by cross-dressing, Lucy is convinced that she can break from prostitution in order to "pursue a course of life less immoral and destructive to my peace and happiness in this life" (p. 71). In rapid fashion, she dons the apparel of a sailor and, after testing her disguise in public and finding herself "highly pleased" with the new-found sensation of "rambling about the town" with complete (that is male) freedom, decides to serve in the defense of her country as a marine (p. 71). After another three years of worldly adventure, now on the high seas aboard a frigate, Lucy decides it is time to resume female dress and return armed with her wages as the "prodigal penitent" to the loving and forgiving arms of her parents.

While safely sequestered once again in the domestic

fold, Lucy Brewer pens her narrative, she claims, so as to warn the youth of both sexes to beware straying from the path of filial duty and virtue. In one of the narrative's first warnings to young women, Lucy states, "I was conscious of having forfeited the only gem that could render me respectable in the eyes of the world" (p. 62). And yet, the experiences which follow her seduction, including the valor and patriotism she displays as a marine of the United States Navy during the War of 1812, as well as the fame she receives upon the success of her narrative, contradict this supposed moral lesson. While this first narrative in the *The Female Marine* series proclaims a didactic purpose, its moral tone is in scant evidence. Rather, the author reveals, and revels in, a life of spirited and audacious female independence based on flaunting female sexuality and flouting proscribed gender roles. This first chapter in the escapades of Lucy Brewer teaches disingenuously that the path from female virtue to vice and return to virtue does not necessitate undue suffering, repentance, and death as taught in most examples of didactic literature of the early republic; instead a young woman, though stripped of her virginity, could take on both the lewd life of the prostitute and autonomous life of the male adventurer with few repercussions.

In the second part, *Continuation of the Narrative of Lucy Brewer*, our uncommon roving heroine recounts with added detail her adventures in the first part. The author states that this second installment serves two purposes—to avert unsuspecting youth from the hidden evils of Boston and to add further detail of her experiences, thereby fending off rumors that her tale is false. She then picks up her story, describing her boredom with the domestic rural life and her decision to resume male dress—this time an officer's uniform—for a limited, last fling with forbidden male freedom. Before her reluctant return to her family, she cannot resist the temptation to revisit West-Boston in the safety of her military disguise, where she delights in visiting her old haunts, particularly her former residence, where she is treated to wine by the unsuspecting madam of the house. After coming full circle, revisiting the original scene of her life of debauchery, but now with the safety and distance made possible by male dress, Lucy returns to her waiting parents. It is only at the close of her story, however, that the author adopts the overtly moral voice which opened the narrative. While offering "sincere repentance" of her three-year career as a prostitute, Lucy Brewer curiously does not request forgiveness for her three-year disguise as a man.

*An Awful Beacon* completes the trilogy of *The Female*

*Marine*. The narrative opens with the image of a now properly penitent and feminine Lucy Brewer, content to spend the remainder of her days assisting her mother in domestic matters. It is only in this final part of the series that the author not only maintains female dress throughout, but also consistently adopts the emotional sentimentalism and moral tone conventional to the didactic literature of the period. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that it is in this conclusion to the adventures of *The Female Marine* that the heroine is rewarded with two proposals of marriage, finally marrying in respectable fashion. On this note, Mrs. Lucy West, formerly Brewer, closes her story by offering a farewell address to her audience. In an openly moralistic and conventionally sentimental tone intended as a dire warning to both a female and male audience, *An Awful Beacon* ends with a variety of examples of virtuous lives laid to waste by the corrupting dangers of Boston.

Editor Daniel A. Cohen includes three additional brief, but highly entertaining and revealing works with this edition of *The Female Marine*. The first two, *A Brief Reply to the Late Writings of Louisa Baker* and *The Surprising Adventures of Almira Paul* were also originally produced by publisher Nathaniel Coverly in his on-going attempt to cash in on the lucrative popularity of the Brewer stories. *A Brief Reply* is a supposed self-defense of the woman identified by Lucy Brewer as the brothel madam who had forced her into prostitution for three years. This narrative is particularly interesting for its argument for the utility of bawdy houses and additional descriptions of urban neighborhoods of the "lower sort." It is followed by the brief tale of Almira Paul, another picaresque narrative of cross-dressing much in the mode of *The Female Marine*, but even more "curious" and "surprising." Throughout her narrative, Paul displays a very unusual degree of proto-feminist spirit, proclaiming a sense of sexual equality in her comparable abilities, endurance, and knowledge of ship life. Safely disguised as a man and empowered by the possession of hard-earned wages, Paul swaggers with the best of them, "like a real bred tar" (p. 158) along the docks and urban streets of her portso-call, flirting with prostitutes and even proposing to a widow.

*A Brief Account of . . . The Boston Female Society for Missionary Purposes* (1818) is the final work included in this volume and the only non-literary piece. The selection from the Society's publication published here includes statements regarding its purpose in reforming West-Boston neighborhoods and reports from ministers describing their relative success. This collection of-

fers additional insight into the deplorable conditions of the incipient urban squalor of early nineteenth-century lower-class neighborhoods, offering historical verification of much of the descriptions in *The Female Marine* narratives. The ministers' accounts, in particular, reveal the oftentimes arduous and thankless task of bringing middle-class Christian morality to the lower sorts.

Daniel A. Cohen provides a highly insightful, scholarly introduction in addition to his masterful collection of provocative cross-dressing narratives. While billing *The Female Marine* series and the ancillary narratives as relevant to the issue of cross-dressing, "one of the hottest topics in the academic hothouse of 'cultural studies'" (p. ix), Cohen convincingly argues their connection to a broader array of literary genres and historical issues. He proceeds in his introductory essay to provide a detailed overview of the narratives' publication history and to place them in their historical context, bringing alive in a new, fresh way the backdrop of the United States during the War of 1812. Cohen then outlines concisely the manner in which the narratives, in their playful blend of genres, offer much to historians, as well as literary scholars, with a wide array of interests. His detailed notes for the introduction will refer readers to the relevant secondary literature in each of these areas as well as the titles of many other narratives in the tradition of *The Female Marine*.

Historians of the urban early republic will find much of value in this collection of brief narratives. Particularly for those scholars interested in uncovering the elusive life of the "lower sort," the tales of Lucy Brewer house a treasure of descriptive detail of early Boston. Stroll, if you will, with Lucy Brewer on one of her nocturnal walks through the Hill, the "infamous seat of riot and dissipation" to witness "The terrific yells of the blacks—the vile imprecations of the sailors, and their intoxicated strumpets—the discordant and jarring sounds of violins, clarionets and tambourines, issuing from their stenchified 'dancing halls,'—and the perpetual howlings of their affright dogs..." (p. 91). Cohen correctly points out that, in addition to providing oftentimes hidden details of urban geography, the writings collected here, as urban expose, are invaluable for their revelations of American society's ambivalence toward urbanization, as it tried, even as early as 1815, to rectify the economic and cultural opportunities symbolized by cities like Boston with their moral decay and dangers. *The Female Marine*, moreover, provides an important early example of the mounting anxiety concerning single women afoot in urban America, anxiety which was quite abundant by the ante-bellum era, as revealed by Amy Gilman Srebnick's

study of New York society's relentless fascination with a sensationalized criminal case involving sex and death, *The Mysterious Death of Mary Rogers: Sex and Culture in Nineteenth-Century New York* (New York, 1995).

Though a historian, Cohen is equally comfortable with literary issues, as he rounds out his scholarly discussion of the merits of the narratives for a number of genres of literature popular to early nineteenth-century audiences, supporting well his contention that such writings are difficult to place in modern, convenient categories. In the tradition of the Female Warrior ballads and narratives, as well as the picaresque, the Lucy Brewer adventures also have much in common with the highly popular sentimental novels of seduction, such as Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* and Hannah Foster's *The Coquette*. And yet, argues Cohen, these marine narratives playfully subvert much of the moralizing message of the seduction novels, as female autonomy is given rather full rein with heroines escaping the requisite penitential death.

A growing area of historical inquiry addressed briefly by Cohen is that of the intersection of gender, culture, and seafaring specifically, which resonates particularly well with *The Female Marine*. That more historians are looking at the sea through the scope of gender analysis is indicated by publications such as the recent *Iron Men, Wooden Women: Gender and Seafaring in the Atlantic World, 1700-1920*, edited by Margaret S. Creighton and Lisa Norling (Baltimore, 1996). Although they do not draw on the Lucy Brewer tales (we are now indebted to Cohen for bringing them to our attention), several of the essays included in *Iron Men, Wooden Women*, particularly Marcus Rediker's study of women pirates and Dianne Dugaw's on transvestite heroines in the Female Warrior genre, explore in more detail early America's fascination with cross-dressing women on the high seas. Scholars with a mind for seafaring will want not only to grapple with the cultural insights afforded by the adventures of Lucy Brewer and Almira Paul, but also to ascertain the attraction of these tales for their original audience.

In the final analysis, Daniel A. Cohen's compilation and edition of *The Female Marine and Related Works: Narratives of Cross-Dressing and Urban Vice in America's Early Republic* has broad appeal and application for both the scholarly and teaching forums. For historians and scholars of early American literature alike, each of the narratives offers a fascinating glimpse into the typically hidden facets of the young republic, yielding up a variety of venues for understanding the dynamic but still little understood decades of the country's infancy. For both

graduate and undergraduate students, the narratives provide a surprisingly readable, highly entertaining, and yet rich vehicle for comprehending the complexities of early American history and culture. It is only wished that explanatory notes might have been included in addition to the text notes. Daniel Cohen concludes his essential introduction by pointing to what surely must be one of the most valuable aspects of these examples of popular reading culture. In returning to his opening remark regarding current academic interest in the culture of cross-dressing and citing literary critic Marjorie Garber, Cohen reminds us that "the appearance of cross-dressing as a cultural motif typically suggests the presence within the culture of some other source of "crisis" or "dissonance," not always directly related to issues of gender and sexuality" (p. 28). As he rightly points out, *The Female Marine* was not only apparently very popular, but also quite emblem-

atic of the society and culture which produced it. In the immediate aftermath of the War of 1812, Americans were a complicated lot, full of new-found confidence and patriotism, yet ironically also full of self-doubt, plagued with uncertainty regarding their identity as members of a new nation. Would citizens abide by traditional gender roles and sexual norms? Would the now virtuous people become an urban people breeding vice and disorder? *The Female Marine* and the other narratives included in this edition teasingly play with these pressing issues to the delight of both an early nineteenth-century as well as a late twentieth-century reading audience.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

**Citation:** Debra M. O'Neal. Review of Cohen, Daniel A., ed., *The Female Marine and Related Works: Narratives of Cross-Dressing and Urban Vice in America's Early Republic*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. October, 1998.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2413>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).