

# What's in a Name Anyway?: The Calamity of Calamity Jane

Ona Russell

“Who was that chap?” asked Redburn not a little bewildered.  
“That?—why that’s Calamity Jane!”  
“Calamity Jane?” “*What a name.*”

From *Deadwood Dick, The Prince of the Road* (1877)<sup>1</sup>

In the high saddle, picking flies  
off an oxen’s ear  
four times out of five, stories  
swelling from camp to camp  
and Jane, hands on hips,  
bullwhacking her way to the bars,  
Whoops and fast draws  
up the wooden sidewalks  
Tonight the West has one name  
and no figure but her own.

Kathleen Liguell, “Calamity Jane Sets  
the Whole Town on Its Ear,” from  
*The Calamity Poems* (1977)<sup>2</sup>

Although Martha Jane Canary became a celebrated frontierswoman known as Calamity Jane, no one, including Calamity herself, agrees on how she acquired

her moniker. In an 1880 letter to her daughter, for example, she claims that it was Wild Bill Hickok, who, in response to her daring effort to inform him of approaching enemies, dubbed her Calamity Jane. In her autobiography, however, she gives the credit to Captain Egan, an army commander she supposedly caught in her arms just before he fell from his horse. An article from the *St. Paul Dispatch* in July, 1901, attributes the appellation to “a faculty she has had of producing a ruction at any time and place and on short notice.” Yet biographer Lewis Crawford claims that the name was communally bestowed upon her by the people who witnessed her caring for small pox victims. And the list goes on.<sup>3</sup>

These inconsistencies regarding the origin of the name, as well as the multiple others that occur in the writings by and about Calamity Jane, have prompted many to question not only the credibility of the writings, of the texts through which we have access to this legendary woman, but also of the woman herself; indeed, they have prompted some to doubt her very existence. By contrast, my interest in her name and in her life in general does not center on a desire for biographical accuracy; I do not wish to resolve the inconsistencies even if it were possible. Instead, I am interested in exploring what the name might have signified, what it might have meant in the context of the late nineteenth-century United States, particularly to people of the western region of the country where Calamity lived most of her life. Rather than trying to discover which of the above versions is right, I will attempt to explain why this woman—real or imaginary—may have been associated with disaster, indeed viewed by her contemporaries as a calamity.

Despite the obvious differences, all of the accounts mentioned above indicate that the name arose from a perceived intrepidity, from Calamity’s bravery and penchant for physical danger. Whether or not this is true, it was certainly this quality that received the most public attention; it was what newspaper reporters focused on in their frequent articles about her, why she was invited by an agent of the famous Kohl and Middleton Palace Museum in Minneapolis to exhibit herself, and also one of the reasons she was asked to perform with Buffalo Bill in the Pan American Exposition.<sup>4</sup> It was what motivated many biographers and historians to record her adventures and what inspired dime-novelists to make her a central character of their fiction, particularly Edward L. Wheeler, who cast her as the partner of Deadwood Dick, the popular, Western hero whose perilous exploits required someone of unflinching courage. I will argue, however, that while such behavior may have been the overt reason for acquiring the name, it was what that behavior represented more than the behavior itself that made it seem dangerous; specifically, that it was because her bravery, strength, and independence were traits associated with a masculine ideal and connected with a national identity that she was cast as a threat. More specifically, it was because those traits were combined with other, more “feminine” attributes, because she confounded rather than merely challenged gender norms that the perception of the threat grew to calamitous proportions.

Situating her own writings (both autobiographical and epistolary) and both biographical and fictional accounts of her life within the context of the West in the late nineteenth century makes it possible to read Calamity as a figure for that period's anxiety over the breakdown of gender norms. Before doing so, however, I want to emphasize that I do not view these generic categories—autobiography, epistolography, biography and fiction—as mutually exclusive or in any hierarchical arrangement with respect to a notion of authenticity. As should become clear, the larger goal of this paper will be to problematize the kinds of arbitrary divisions that create such hierarchies, to expose some of the places where those categories converge, to demonstrate that it is there where the most meaningful, if not authentic, picture emerges. In addition, I wish to acknowledge that my assumptions regarding the anxiety that appears to have been so pervasive at this time come of the work of critics such as Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Jane Tompkins, Donna Haraway, Susan Lee Johnson and others. My intent is to augment their conversation, to respond particularly to Susan Lee Johnson's recent appeal to "illuminate female lives" and "mark the category of white, male experience" in the West, through what might be considered a genealogy of one woman who embodied that anxiety in an exemplary fashion and who, until now, has been primarily discussed from a conventional, biographical perspective.<sup>5</sup>

## I. Troubling Gender—East and West

This said, it will nevertheless be helpful to begin by briefly retracing the few details of Calamity's life upon which most biographers and Calamity herself agree. Born in the Midwest in the early 1850s (the exact date and place of her birth is uncertain), Calamity migrated with her family when she was still young to what was then Montana Territory. Her parents, apparently poor farmers, died soon thereafter, leaving her, her two brothers, and three sisters to fend for themselves. Little is known about her siblings, and it is generally believed Calamity soon struck out on her own, pursuing the unconventional life that would eventually make her a celebrity until her death in 1903.

I will analyze that life in greater detail later, but suffice it to say that it broadly consisted of taking on a wide array of typically male work, dressing in male attire, performing in the Wild West shows, gambling, drinking, and becoming involved in numerous marriages and love affairs. Yet while Calamity certainly challenged convention by engaging in such activities, she lived in a time when other women were beginning to do so as well. In particular, the Cult of True Womanhood, "which prescribed a female role bounded by kitchen and nursery," was giving way to the more liberatory New Woman—what Carroll-Smith Rosenberg identifies as a "cohort" of educated, white, middle-class women from the East who rejected such a confining role, who "assert[ed] their right to a career, to a public voice [and] to visible power."<sup>6</sup> And she also lived in a time when those challenges were being met with resistance. Partly in response to the attitudes espoused by

the New Woman emerged “the cult of strenuosity,” men of a similar background who embraced conventional male roles and implicitly struggled to keep women from attaining the rights they desired. More precisely, then, Calamity lived in a time when gender norms were being both challenged and reinscribed and in a place where the tension between those two positions was acute.<sup>7</sup>

It was in the West where this tension was particularly striking, because it was there where gendered differences were so overtly exaggerated, where resistance to those differences was implicitly denied. The very appeal of “going West,” in fact, often rested on a magnification of the standard distinctions between men and women. Specifically, the West, and, even more specifically, what Henry Nash Smith calls the “Wild West,” “an exhilarating region of adventure and comradeship in the open air,” was constructed as a place where “men could be men,” and, by extension, where women would *have* to be women; as a place where men went to become strong and independent, to regain the masculinity lost in a supposedly feminized East.<sup>8</sup> More than a physical locale (indeed, the geographic boundaries frequently shifted) it was a psychic space, an imaginative region, inspiring such men as Teddy Roosevelt, who referred to it specifically as the “masculine West”; S. Weir Mitchell, who, though prescribing the rest cure for his female patients, sent his male patients there to recuperate; and Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Herman Melville, all of whom invoke symbols of the West in their writings.<sup>9</sup> In particular, it was the idea of the wilderness, a realm where, as Nash states, “nature loomed larger than civilization,” that signified a place immune from the ongoing challenges to conventional gender categories; it was there where male power would forever be safe.<sup>10</sup> Yet, it is this very assertion of immunity which indicates otherwise, which hints at an underlying vulnerability suggesting that those challenges were actually perceived as a menacing force requiring a fierce defense.

Much of the criticism of Calamity reveals the anxiety that such a sense of vulnerability might produce. Though her minimal, third-grade education, working-class background, and geographic location would technically disqualify her from membership in the exclusive society of New Women, she too rejected conventional female roles and clearly disturbed many for doing so. Indeed, whether targeted at her physical daring or her daring to wear men’s clothing, disparaging comments about Calamity’s behavior reveal an underlying uneasiness implicitly linked to the transgressive nature of that behavior. One of the most compelling signs of this uneasiness is that most people, while never questioning the veracity of her work as a nurse, of work considered inherently female, refused to believe that she had performed the conventionally male tasks attributed to her. They, in effect, avoided the problem or dealt with the uneasiness by denying that it ever existed. As biographer Roberta Beed Sollid asserts, “writers” (including, by the way, Sollid herself) “who usually give no credence to most Calamity tales are more than willing to credit her with at least rough abilities as a nurse.”<sup>11</sup> According to Sollid, though her contemporaries unanimously agreed that Calamity “could be called upon for aid whenever anyone was sick and in need of help”—

that she, in other words, always fulfilled her ascribed nurturing role—they were far more skeptical about her alleged work as a scout, gunwoman, and bullwhacker; in fact, many considered such allegations a “hoax.”<sup>12</sup>

Two more specific examples of the anxiety that Calamity’s transgressive behavior provoked appear in accounts relating to her unconventional appearance. The first is when she is arrested and immediately “placed in improvised female attire,” after being discovered as a woman by employers who, because she wore male clothing to attain a job as a scout, thought she was a man.<sup>13</sup> The second, related by Calamity herself, is an incident in which some of the women of her town tried to cut her hair so she would look “like the fancy women in Paris,” an act that, in its extremity, suggests, as does the reaction of her employers in the first example, more than a desire for fashion correctness. Indeed, this indicates a deeper concern for conformity to a contemporary female standard.<sup>14</sup> This seems particularly true when viewed in relationship to the mandates of the larger culture, to, for example, an 1877 ruling in Cheyenne, Wyoming, forbidding women to appear on the streets in men’s clothing.<sup>15</sup> And it seems truer still when considered in the context of nineteenth-century conduct literature, almost all of which, as in the following example, proclaim a direct correspondence between external appearance and an essential, internal character: “We are free to choose what course we will pursue, and our bodies, our brains, and our features readily adapt themselves and clearly indicate the lives we lead and the characters we form.”<sup>16</sup>

The effort that conduct and advice writers of this time made to establish this correspondence, to make it appear natural, emphasizes the anxiety that must have been experienced over women who, like Calamity, dressed like a man. For what such women proved by doing so is that such a correspondence was arbitrary, that there was nothing natural about it at all. Women might be told to wear dresses and men to wear pants, but there was nothing inherent in the clothing or the person that guaranteed a symmetrical relationship between the two. Why this might have been so disturbing, of course, particularly to men, is that it signaled a possible threat to their power and authority. If women could look like men, then, theoretically, they could act like them as well. Indeed, if, as John Kasson in *Rudeness and Civility* suggests, a symmetrical relationship between an external and internal self was asserted in the service of the status quo, if it “provided standards by which to assess entire social classes, ethnic groups, and cultures (often justifying their subordination),” then a rupture in that symmetry—a woman whose appearance didn’t match the essentialized qualities attributed to her—would be threatening indeed, would make a justification for *her* subordination far more difficult.<sup>17</sup>

## II. Individualism: The Forbidden Fruit

The individualism that Calamity’s appearance signified, however, was perhaps the most troubling part of that rupture, since such a trait was not only associated with masculinity but with an essential American character. As Nina

Baym suggests in “Melodramas of Beset Manhood,” and writers from Emerson and Thoreau to the more popular conduct writers implicitly demonstrate, individualism, masculinity, and national identity were often conflated, represented as nearly one and the same thing.<sup>18</sup> Emerson’s call for self-reliance, Thoreau’s to “march to different a drummer,” and the paradoxical advice of many conduct writers to think independently both implicitly and explicitly exclude women while simultaneously (and paradoxically) relating such behavior to the democratic principles upon which the country was supposedly founded. All implicitly invoke—or collectively invent—what Baym identifies as the American myth, “a confrontation of the American individual, the pure American self divorced from specific social circumstances, with the promise offered by the idea of America.”<sup>19</sup> Although, as Gillian Brown has recently argued, that self was, in the nineteenth century, “inflected with the values of interiority, privacy and psychology,” with values that increasingly became associated with the domestic sphere, all code that individual as male since women, who had neither (the same degree of) mobility nor the vote, who were neither free to confront that self nor legally recognized as individuals, were bound to those circumstances.<sup>20</sup>

It becomes particularly easy to see why a woman who embodied these characteristics, who thought and attempted to act as an individual, might be so troubling when one considers that women’s central function within that myth was to passively bolster the male ego. Baym discusses how canonized writers from Cooper to Fitzgerald have symbolically cast women in this role, citing in particular Nick Carraway’s evocation in *The Great Gatsby* of the “fresh green breast” of the New World: a feminized image which bolsters (or, perhaps more precisely, strokes) that ego through its offering of virginity (the “fresh greenness”) and “promise [of] maternal solace and delight” (the breast).<sup>21</sup> But, interestingly enough, even in the dime novels in which Calamity appears, in a genre in which competing discourses often allow women to “skirt the boundaries of genteel codes,” a desire for women to go on serving this function is implicitly present.<sup>22</sup> Take, for example, one of the few novels whose title bears her name: *Deadwood Dick on Deck, or Calamity Jane, Heroine of Whoop-up*. Even though Calamity is portrayed here as aggressively performing the most masculine of tasks, she is also described as possessing the physical characteristics that would associate her with the Carraway image: “rosy, plump lips,” a “faultless waist,” “dainty feet,” and, perhaps not as welcoming as the one Carraway invokes but equally symbolic of a desire for both the virginal and the maternal, “a breast of alabaster purity.”<sup>23</sup> Never mind that Calamity actually bore little resemblance to this description. As Sandy, a character in the novel asserts, despite all her male ability, she is still one of the descendants “o’ thet leetle fruitful scrape in a certain gareden yeers ago, afore ther Antediluve,” and therefore has inscribed upon her, by writers of “high” and “low” culture alike, the ideological markings that accompany that unfortunate position.<sup>24</sup>

As Baym goes on to explain, women, as they had been “from time immemorial,” from the time “o’ thet leetle fruitful scrape,” were associated with nature and “heroes of the American myth turn to nature as sweetheart and nurture, anticipating the satisfactions of all desires through her and including among these the desires for mastery and power.”<sup>25</sup> The land, gendered female, was there (and theirs) for the taking, was there for men to tame and control. A woman like Calamity, who (especially in the West, where this myth held such currency) failed to fulfill this function, who wanted to control herself, would thus be perceived as hazardous to the health of the male ego, and by implication, to the health of the country with which that ego was so intimately linked.

### III. Compatriots in Crime

There were other women like Calamity, “bold, bad women,” who, as biographer Grace Ernestine Ray puts it, “rode across the pages of history.”<sup>26</sup> Though Calamity certainly possessed unique attributes, she was also a type of woman well-known on the frontier, a larger-than-life personality who challenged conventions in a particularly visible and often illegal way. Many of these women, such as Ella Watson (“Cattle Kate”) and Belle Starr (“The Bandit Queen”), became known and were nicknamed for their alleged criminal activity: Watson, for buying stolen cattle, and Starr, for bank and stagecoach robberies. Many of them, including Watson and Starr, were also known for being sexually promiscuous, whether as paid prostitutes or simply, as was the case with Calamity, for having numerous lovers. But as with Calamity, it was the conventionally male traits underpinning such activity that seem to have been most troubling; it was because such women were “bold” that they were considered to be so “bad.” Specifically, there was often more concern about the daring and skill required to commit the crimes than about the crimes themselves; breaking the law of the land might be wrong, but breaking the Law of the Father, in a land where fathers were thought to be losing ground, was considered a sin. Grace Ernestine Ray, for instance, states that a local paper gave Ella Watson the far more sinister and, significantly, unnatural name of “dark devil” because she could sit straight in a saddle, was “expert with a branding iron,” and “handy with a six-shooter and Winchester”; in other words, because she could do the things only a man should have been able to do.<sup>27</sup> And James Horan suggests that Belle Starr acquired the more derogatory name of “Terrible Petticoat” for similar reasons: because she could “outride the best of the bronc riders and outswagger and outshoot most of the gunfighters who pushed their way along the wooden sidewalks of Fort Smith.”<sup>28</sup>

It was, moreover, the ability to shoot, or even worse, to “outshoot,” that seems to have been the most anxiety-producing of all the skills these women possessed. This was presumably because the power associated with a gun as well as the obvious sexual connotations of the gun itself made it threatening to men on

both a literal and symbolic level. Since a gun was viewed as a sign of masculinity, as an instrument men used “to bring,” as one writer so aptly put it, “[their] law and order to a lawless land,” women who mastered its technique would understandably make some of those men nervous.<sup>29</sup> Manifestations of this feeling abound in biographical writings about these women, two of the most provocative of which appear in the following anecdotes relayed by Grace Ernestine Ray and Roberta Beed Sollid, respectively. The first is about Pauline Cushman, another western woman of Calamity’s ilk, and the second about Calamity herself. In Cushman’s case, an observer reported that in an attempt to stop a sadistic mule-whacker from brutally beating his mules, Cushman drew a Winchester on him and ordered him to “unhitch those mules.” The observer further stated that the man readily obeyed, but also noted that the whole episode “tended to take the starch out of [the] bully.”<sup>30</sup> Similarly, someone who witnessed Calamity “[pulling] a gun and a volley of language on a bull-whacker because he was belaboring a tired ox,” reported that her order to stop was also quickly obeyed. But as in the incident with Cushman, the observer also added something else: that the man “didn’t even frown at the beast when she [Calamity] got through with him.”<sup>31</sup> What is suggested in both cases is that a woman with a gun was threatening not only because she was physically dangerous, but because she was emasculating, because in taking up arms, she took control of the very object that made a man a “man.” (Especially, one would imagine, when, as in these cases, she used that gun to preserve rather than take innocent life, when she adopted “manly” force in pursuit of “womanly” goals.)

This kind of interaction between a gun-toting woman and a man, usually unscrupulous, is also frequently depicted in the Wheeler novels. In the first of the Deadwood Dick stories, a dishonest gambler, after having Calamity “[thrust] the muzzle of one of her plated revolvers forcibly under [his] prominent nose,” knew that he “dare not reach for his weapon lest the daredevil girl...should salt him on a full ay.”<sup>32</sup> Though the passage is ostensibly about the gambler’s attempt to protect his life, it linguistically suggests that he is far more concerned about protecting his manhood. The image of Calamity “forcibly thrusting” her gun on a man whose “weapon” lay immobile beside him reverses the “normal” sexual (and power) dynamic, leaving the man symbolically impotent and, as “salt[ing] him on full ay” suggests, in immanent danger of castration. Thus, in addition to showing narrative convergences—here between popular fiction and biography—passages such as this also suggest the kind of ideological parallels witnessed in the passage earlier compared to *The Great Gatsby*. Indeed, though the story would appear to possess contestatory potential, as is perhaps most strikingly exemplified by Calamity’s refusal at the end of the narrative to marry Deadwood Dick and by her decision to ride off in the hills instead, it also reinscribes conventional notions about gender and gender relations. In fact, if Phillip Durham, author of *The Negro Cowboys*, is right in asserting that the man who inspired the character of Deadwood Dick was probably a black cowboy named

Nat Love, then one has to wonder, considering typical nineteenth-century attitudes toward miscegenation, just how contestatory even Calamity's refusal of marriage really was.<sup>33</sup>

#### IV. Performing Performances

A further indication of the threat such women were thought to have posed is that their skill with a gun (as well as with a horse and a rope) was often transformed by the Wild West shows into a public spectacle. Coordinators of these shows solicited women who, like Calamity, could shoot, sometimes even giving them a place of prominence within the program. But I would argue that in having them perform their skill, by including it as part of a theatrical production, they implicitly tried to fictionalize it and thereby, as perhaps dime novelists sought to do as well, ameliorate the threat it posed outside the confines of the stage. The deliberate way writers of the programs promoted such women would certainly seem to support such a notion. Notice in the following excerpt, for instance, the effort made to reassure the public that despite their "male" ability, these were still women in the most conventional sense of the word:

[Our women] are not of the new woman class—not of the sort that discards her feminine attributes and tries to ape the man, simply lively, athletic young women with a superfluity of nerve and animal spirits, with a realization that in affairs where skill is the chief qualification she has an equal chance with her brothers.<sup>34</sup>

The rhetorical move of beginning with an affirmation of their femininity relegates the ability to a subservient position, while the casual use of "simply" preceding the description of it attempts to diminish its force. Such women might be able to shoot like their brothers (and "tame the wildest bronc or hang upside down over the hooves of a galloping steed,") but they would never be, nor—as this passage so adamantly asserts—have the desire to be, anything but a sister.

Even when promotional pieces did not explicitly emphasize the femininity of the performers, their aim was clearly the same as those who did: to reassure the public that what they were about to see was something they would only encounter in a theatrical setting. Take the following ad about Calamity, for example, which ran on the theater page of the *Minneapolis Journal*:

KOHL & MIDDLETON  
PALACE MUSEUM  
WEEK BEGINNING MON. JAN. 20

The famous woman scout of the Wild West. Heroine of a thousand thrilling adventures. The Terror of evildoers in the

Black Hills! The comrade of Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill Hickok. See this famous woman and hear her graphic descriptions of her daring exploits.<sup>35</sup>

While the ad actually demonstrates that Calamity's ability originated outside that setting, the sensationalized rhetoric recasts that ability as performance as well; indeed, it suggests that when Calamity is around, even a natural landscape like the Black Hills of South Dakota takes on the function of theatrical props.<sup>36</sup>

It is nevertheless doubtful whether such efforts were entirely successful in convincing spectators that what they were viewing was only make-believe. An anxious audience might, through some kind of Aristotelian catharsis, be temporarily assuaged by seeing unruly behavior theatrically contained, by witnessing a beginning, a middle, and, especially, an end to it all. But because that unruliness was actually "connected with everyday circumstances outside the privileged time [of the shows]," because women like Calamity could shoot in the streets as well as on the stage, it was capable of undermining as well as generating audience comfort.<sup>37</sup>

Roberta Beed Sollid's following account of an article that ran in the *Miles City Daily Star* in 1934 is a case in point. It refers to a man, who, thirty-three years earlier, had witnessed Calamity performing on the Midway at the Buffalo Exposition:

After a great fan-fare and bugle calls, Calamity "came tearing into the ring on horseback, buckskins, boots and guns, and stole the show." Mr. Newcom attended this exhibition with some pious eastern relatives. Learning that the cowgirl was a former Montana acquaintance of his, they insisted upon meeting her. Worried and trembling at what this western character might do and say to startle his sedate relatives, Newcom led them back stage for an introduction. All ended well for Calamity *put on a most lady-like act* (italics mine).<sup>38</sup>

What is implied in this passage is that the "worried and trembling" Mr. Newcom was afraid that Calamity's stage performance would spill over into "real" life. Her "masculine" prowess, symbolized by her aggressive movements, conventional male clothing, and gun were acceptable in the ring, but not "back stage." Yet what is also implied is that Mr. Newcom knew Calamity was more like her stage persona than his "pious eastern relatives" would have liked; that the real performance—putting on the "most lady-like act"—would actually occur in that non-theatrical space behind the stage. "All ended well" for this particular spectator, not because he believed the threat to be over, but because Calamity performed even better after the performance than she did while it was taking place. Had he seen her later in town, things might have been different. For it was

there that she purportedly “knocked out a policeman, and was arrested”; it was there that art and life collided in precisely the manner he had feared.<sup>39</sup>

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler argues that there is “no gender identity behind the expressions of gender,” that such identity is “performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results.” If Butler is right, then the possibility of the shows undermining the comfort they sought to produce seems even more likely.<sup>40</sup> For what these shows did by featuring performances which emphasized masculine skill and prowess is implicitly emphasize the performance of gender that was (always already) occurring. Indeed, if one also agrees with Butler’s contention that a “deregulated play of attributes” conditions the exposure of this fictive production (of gender), then it is almost certain that a conventionally-minded audience would experience some degree of discomfort, since what the shows foregrounded (within an admittedly regulated format) is just this kind of play.<sup>41</sup> Female performers can be said to have operated under “deregulated” conditions because even though they were performing—“playing” at being masculine—they nevertheless demonstrated that they could actually do those things that, theoretically, they were only pretending to do. And male performers can be said to have done so as well because even though they performed acts considered natural to their gender, they did so alongside women who could do them too, sometimes with greater competence. In both cases, that traits associated with masculinity were presented in as exaggerated a manner as they were in the Wild West shows hint at both an awareness and uneasiness that “all the figures onstage [were] impersonators,” that the “lived experience” of gender was often contradictory to the essentialized condition it was hypothesized to be.<sup>42</sup>

That some of the women were, as previously mentioned, known for being sexually promiscuous no doubt contributed to that awareness (and uneasiness). This is because such behavior was also one of the definitive features of being a “man”; “the masculine ethos that allotted respect to the hearty drinker and sexual athlete” was strongly adhered to, despite efforts by reformers in the early part of the century to combat it.<sup>43</sup> Because promiscuity in men was nearly synonymous with masculinity, women whose “male” skills were accompanied by it must have been seen as a particularly serious force to be reckoned with. And although it is beyond the scope of this paper to address this issue in depth, I want to suggest that it was not only men that might have felt this way; some women too (recall the hair-cutting incident mentioned earlier) must have been threatened by such behavior, particularly white, middle-class women who, as Nancy Armstrong, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and others have argued, positioned themselves as the moral guardians of society, as the ones to uphold the values of family and home by regulating (especially sexual) behavior and denying altogether the existence of female desire.

There were, of course, western, female celebrities who were not so socially daring, and whose lives seemed to actually match the promotional propaganda.

Annie Oakley, for example, although a crack shot and one of the first female Wild West stars, was married to the same man for years and was, according to most accounts, “always girlish,” someone who actually did “help ease audience concern about the role of women in the Wild West.”<sup>44</sup> That she was innocuously nicknamed “Little Missy” certainly reflects such ease, especially if we recall the names bestowed upon the women mentioned above. Even more provocatively, however, it is an ease which has been extraordinarily enduring. Because, unlike Calamity, who was certainly as well-known, Oakley was considered a role model for many girls in the latter part of this century, with clothes, handbags, lunch boxes, and quite recently (no doubt due to the current country-western craze), a perfume, all created in her honor. Manufacturers, like the curators of the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyoming, who devote an entire exhibit to Oakley but omit any mention of Calamity, apparently found her a more acceptable—and more marketable figure.<sup>45</sup> So too, it would seem, did a good many of the biographers cited in this paper, since they rarely include her in anthologies with Calamity: anthologies such as *Wily Women of the West*, *Wild Women*, *Desperate Women* and *Shady Ladies of the West* continue to construct the women to whom they refer as dangerous, unnatural, and as Duncan Aikman makes explicit by dedicating *Calamity Jane and the Lady Wildcats* “to various uncontrollable ladies,” beyond the forces of control.<sup>46</sup>

## V. Writing (by) Herself

If strategically acting on one’s own behalf means that one is uncontrollable, however, then perhaps Aikman was right; because what Calamity demonstrates, especially in her writings, is that this is exactly what she attempted to do. This is particularly true of some of the letters she wrote to her daughter. Indeed, in some of the explanations she gives her daughter for her transgressive behavior, one observes a conscious defiance and manipulation of convention. In referring to her wearing of men’s clothing, for instance, she states, “I wear pants so I can get around while these petticoated females yell for help.” To explain her gambling, she claims that she did it to “pay for her daughter’s education,” a conventional excuse but one which allowed her to participate in an activity she is known to have enjoyed. And in accounting for her refusal to re-marry quickly, she asserts, “Think I’ll be married again, but the thought of being tied to a man’s shirt tail sickens me.”<sup>47</sup> What all these comments indicate is that she was at least temporarily able, as Butler claims everyone is if they were to reconceptualize gender in performative terms, to control the discourse that attempted to control her, that she defied those codes of proper female behavior to get what she did or did not want. As she herself asserts, rather than being tied to a man’s shirt, she wore one to “get around.”

That these comments were expressed only in her most private writings, however, suggests that she was not, as one can never be, entirely exempt from that

discourse, particularly from the part which divided the public and private along gender lines. Her official, seven-page autobiography, for example, is a far less open and critical account. There, she briefly records her life in a chronological and neutral rhetorical fashion, skimming over or omitting some of the controversial points that she emphasizes in the letters. For instance, in the autobiography, she simply calls William Hickok (“Wild Bill”) her friend, while in the letters she claims to have married him and, in fact, claims that he is the legitimate father of her daughter. Though marriage and a desire for legitimacy would seem to be acceptable enough, she avoids the public controversy that such a statement would provoke (since most people doubted that Hickok returned her affections), and thereby appears to conform to rather than defy a contemporary female standard. In the autobiography as well, she shows no sympathy whatsoever for the Sioux, the tribe against whom she claims to have been hired to protect white miners and settlers. But in the privacy of the letters, in a feminized space removed from the public gaze, she demonstrates sympathy for another group of Indians by acknowledging the origins of their hostility: “Custer had molested an Indian village, running the squaws and children from their camps, so one can’t blame them for getting even in their own way.”<sup>48</sup> Though, admittedly, the actions of the two tribes may have warranted different responses, the relationship of those responses to the discursive medium in which they are contained cannot be overlooked; that Calamity attempts to justify the retaliation of a people oppressed by the dominant ideology in private but says nothing whatsoever in public reveals how she herself was oppressed by that ideology.

Nevertheless, Calamity’s relationship to the public and private, to these two supposedly separate spheres was, as everything else in her life, anything but clear-cut. Recall, for instance, that the highly public performances of the Wild West shows were not that dissimilar from her more private (although frequently publicized) acts of daring and skill. Nor was her wearing of men’s clothing an exclusively private or public act; indeed, the reasons she provides for wearing them—personal comfort and public access—reveal that it was both. And even here in the writings, where the line between the public and private is more discernable, Calamity proves what critics such as Mary Kelly, Christine Stansell, and others have recently argued: that such a line was, in reality, frequently crossed, that it existed more in theory than in practice.<sup>49</sup>

For instance, even though Calamity does say things in the letters that might be considered controversial, she also reveals a more conventional side there, a maternal side that, while meant for only her daughter to see, would presumably hold up well under public scrutiny. This is especially true of her desire to give her daughter legitimacy; as I previously suggested, those troubled by her guns, clothes, and promiscuity would no doubt have been comforted as well as surprised to hear that she did not have a child out of wedlock. Conversely, even though Calamity does edit out controversial statements in the autobiography, what remains, what she leaves in, is potentially just as controversial. Because all

that she really mentions there are her acts of daring, acts that again were thought to be inherently male, the autobiography is a document that should have been kept private, shielded from public view. For unlike the more overt fictionality of the Wild West shows, shows in which those acts were also foregrounded, an autobiography (although now understood to be both performative and fictional) was conventionally conceived of as a “truth of the essential self” and therefore, in this case, could serve to exacerbate rather than ameliorate the fears of an anxious public.<sup>50</sup>

Moreover, simply by writing an autobiography, as brief as it might be, Calamity crosses that line once again because she enters a discursive (and public) terrain traditionally forbidden to women (one might even say that the brevity of the work itself, especially combined with its frequent, fragmented sentences—”Father and mother natives of Ohio”; “Remained around Fort Bridges during 1868..”<sup>51</sup>—denotes such a crossing, since it resembles the speech writers of [particularly] western fiction ascribe to their male characters).<sup>52</sup> As Sidonie Smith asserts in *A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography*:

Because the “normative” definition of autobiography and the criteria used to evaluate the success of any particular autobiography lie in the relationship of the autobiographer to the arena of public life and discourse, and because “patriarchal notions of woman’s inherent nature and consequent social role have denied or severely proscribed her access to the public space; and male distrust and consequent repression of female speech have either condemned her to public silence or profoundly contaminated her relationship to the pen as an instrument of power,” women’s “autobiographies remain unwritten or, when written and read, are “misread and labeled inferior...”<sup>53</sup>

To therefore even identify her writing (or, better yet, have it identified by her publishers) as an autobiography and to further assert, as she does in the title, that it was written “by herself,” is to indeed do something that, as Smith says, “challenged the supposedly private nature of woman.”<sup>54</sup>

## **VI. The Calamity of De-Classified Information**

Thus, what appears to have intensified the perception of Calamity as a calamity is the fact that her transgression of gender lines was not absolute. As I have tried to demonstrate, Calamity confounded rather than inverted gender classifications and did so at a time when, as Donna Haraway, Allan Sekula, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, and others have pointed out, classification was becoming the conceptual *modus operandi*, when systematic ordering of information became the preoccupation of most disciplines, and when the notion of a discipline

itself was being invented.<sup>55</sup> Again, though Calamity dressed, shot, and had the courage attributed to a man, she had long, flowing hair and confessed to numerous heterosexual affairs and marriages. Though she performed the typically male tasks of bullwhacking and scouting, she was also a nurse and, as her letters indicate, a loving mother. She could not, therefore, be easily classified, not, for instance, as a lesbian (for it was in the late 1800s that the category emerged, when male sexologists and psychologists invented it by “initiat[ing] a public attack upon women’s love for one another”), since her well-known heterosexual encounters and nurturing behavior challenged the lesbian stereotype.<sup>56</sup> And though she was categorized by some as a “fallen woman,” her clothing and “male” behavior served to displace her from that category as well, since such women were often understood to both dress and behave in an especially seductive manner.

What such indeterminability indeed suggests is that more than challenging the categories of male and female, Calamity, who occupied multifarious subject positions and “exposed the fiction of a cohesive notion of [the self],” put into question the idea of a category itself.<sup>57</sup> And in this regard, it is worth noting that, according to Marjorie Garber, she resembles many others who have also been known for their cross-dressing practices. In her recent work, *Vested Interests*, Garber traces the long and diverse cultural history of the transvestite to formulate a provocative argument about the ideological significance of cross-dressing. I cannot describe that argument in detail here, but it should be mentioned that Garber identifies Calamity as “a lifelong transvestite,” and while I do not entirely agree with this assessment, there are aspects of Garber’s definition of the transvestite that strikingly correspond to the unusual way Calamity was allowed to conduct herself.<sup>58</sup> Specifically, Garber’s description of the transvestite as a “disruptive element that intervenes,” that permits “a borderline to become permeable,” and permits border crossings from one apparently distinct category to another, is particularly applicable because Calamity actually did permeate borders and gained access into places and spaces that would have normally been forbidden.<sup>59</sup> As a character in one of the Deadwood Dick stories puts it, she seemed to be “here, there and everywhere all at the same time.”<sup>60</sup>

Despite some of the limitations imposed on her textually, Calamity had a mobility that most women, and even some men did not. According to historian James Horan, for instance, Calamity was the only woman to be admitted to “Russell’s,” a famous saloon in her hometown of Deadwood, South Dakota. She was also permitted to ride “the cars,” “always sitting in the men’s smoker puffing away at a cigar.”<sup>61</sup> Moreover, in one of her letters to her daughter, Calamity tells of how the combination of her long hair and scouting attire—how, in other words, a juxtaposition of supposedly female and male attributes—allowed her to safely enter hostile Indian territory (her term, of course), how when she took off her cap and let her hair blow in the breeze, the Indians, who would have presumably attacked a man for the same intrusion, thought she was crazy and left her alone.

Whether the Indians themselves associated craziness with this juxtaposition is unknown, although it would be a worthy question to pursue. As historian Joan Scott notes, "Entry alone does not solve all the questions of discrimination," particularly, when as in Calamity's case, the space one enters is occupied by another oppressed group.<sup>62</sup> But her ability to penetrate borders, to go places where even men could not go, might have indeed been cause for alarm, particularly at a time when new borders were being established—Wyoming, Idaho, Utah, and Montana were all admitted to the Union in the late 1800s—and male authority was thought to be in jeopardy.

Such inability to pin down Calamity Jane may also explain why she is generative of so many stories, why there are so many versions of her name and her life. It may be because she permeated the boundaries and slipped through the frames that sought to contain her that she was repeatedly framed by others (myself, of course, included). I want to end, however, by suggesting that it was also this identity instability that makes Calamity a particularly fitting representative of the region in which she lived, more fitting than many who have come to occupy that position. For as many critics have recently demonstrated, the West was itself a kind of shifting signifier, a far more diverse and ambiguous place than it has often been portrayed. In fact, if we return to Liguell's poem which prefaced this essay, specifically to the penultimate line, "Tonight the West has one name," we can see that it depicts Calamity serving precisely this function; indeed, here, person and place are identical. But even more insightfully, while it sets up this correspondence, it does not, as most representations of (white) men in the West have done, fix it; the woman and the region are united for only one night, leaving other nights free for those who were also there, who also had names and lives worthy of exploring.

## Notes

1. Edward Wheeler, *Deadwood Dick, The Prince of the Road* (New York, 1877), 4.
2. Kathleen Liguell, *The Calamity Poems* (Berkeley, 1979).
3. Roberta Beed Sollid, *Calamity Jane: A study in Historical Criticism* (Helena, 1958), 33-39. Sollid lists at least five different versions of the origin of the name, including both the one from the *St. Paul Dispatch* and that of Lewis Crawford.
4. From the late 1800s until Calamity's death in 1903, papers such as *Livingston, Montana's The Livingston Enterprise* and *The Livingston Post* recorded Calamity's adventures on nearly a weekly basis. Many others such as *Bozeman's The Avant Courier* and *The Miles City Daily Star* also did stories on Calamity but not with the same degree of regularity. In almost all cases, Calamity's bravery was either explicitly or implicitly invoked.
5. Susan Lee Johnson, "A memory sweet to soldiers": The Significance of Gender in the History of the American West," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 4 (November, 1990), 499.
6. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York and Oxford, 1985), 176.
7. For more on The New Woman and The Cult of Strenuousness, see Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*; Gerald D. Nash, *Creating the West: Historical Interpretations 1890-1990* (Albuquerque, 1992); Kent Ladd Steckmesser, *The Western Hero in History and Legend* (Norman, 1965); Elizabeth Ammons, "The Engineer as Cultural Hero and Willa Cather's First Novel, *Alexander's Bridge*," *American Quarterly* 38 (Winter, 1986), 746-760.
8. Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge and

London, 1978), 52.

9. Roosevelt's masculine vision of the West has been widely discussed but I believe most provocatively by Donna Haraway in "Teddy Bear Patriarchy: Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York City, 1908-1936," *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York, 1989), 26-58. The Mitchell to whom I am referring is the physician Charlotte Perkins Gilman infamously represented in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Both Henry Nash Smith in *Virgin Land* and Richard Slotkin in *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier* (Hanover, 1973) discuss the influence of the West on the writings of Emerson, Thoreau, Melville and others of their ilk.

10. Henry Nash Smith, 78.

11. Sollid, 65.

12. Sollid, 63.

13. Sollid, 29.

14. Martha Canary Hickok, *Calamity Jane's Letters to Her Daughter* (San Lorenzo, 1976).

15. Sollid, 20.

16. John Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth Century Urban America* (New York, 1990), 149.

17. Kasson, 7.

18. By individualism I mean something like E.P. McPherson's definition of the right to "manage [oneself] as [one] wishes." Although this fails to reflect the actual complexity of the term, it accurately describes the aspect of individualism with which I am concerned here. See Gillian Brown, *Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley, 1990), 2.

19. Nina Baym, "Melodramas of Beset Manhood," *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory* ed., Elaine Showalter (New York, 1985), 71.

20. Brown, 1.

21. Baym, 75.

22. Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (London and New York, 1987), 194.

23. Edward L. Wheeler, *Deadwood Dick on Deck; or Calamity Jane, The Heroine of Whoop-Up* (New York, 1877), 19.

24. Wheeler, 34.

25. Baym, 75.

26. Grace Ernestine Ray, *Wily Women of the West* (San Antonio, 1972), 10.

27. Ray, 22-6.

28. James Horan, *Desperate Women* (New York, 1952), 174.

29. Steckmesser, 136.

30. Ray, 122.

31. Sollid, 96.

32. Wheeler, 8.

33. In *The Negro Cowboys* (New York, 1956), 191-206. Phillip Durham acknowledges that this is only one version among many, but believes it to be the most plausible.

34. Sarah Wood Clark, *Women of The Wild West Shows* (Billings, 1991), 8.

35. Sollid, 78.

36. For more on some of the ideological implications of the Wild West Shows, see John F. Sears, *Sacred Spaces: American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century* (New York and Oxford, 1986), 156-181. Sears points out that one of the objectives of Wild West Shows was to transform both the "participants in the settling of the West into actors" and "turn contemporary events of Western history into theater" (156).

37. Here, I am quoting Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, 1975), 130. Davis makes this point with respect to the frequent performances of gender inversion that occurred in festivals of early modern Europe 130.

38. Sollid, 80.

39. Ray, 88.

40. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London, 1990), 25.

41. Butler, 24.

42. Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York, 1992), 40.

43. Smith-Rosenberg, 115.

44. Clark, 17.

45. In a museum that houses some of the most well-known Western art and memorabilia, this absence was really quite startling. Even in the gift shop, there was only one small pamphlet on Calamity.

46. Autumn Stephens, *Wild Women* (Berkeley, 1992); Ronald Dean Miller, *Shady Ladies of the*

*West* (Louisiana, 1964); Duncan Aikman, *Calamity Jane and the Lady Wildcats*, (New York, 1927); *Wily Women of the West* and *Desperate Women* have already been cited. Though considered by many to not be “serious” biographies, these works, which span sixty-five years, nevertheless reveal a good deal about the attitudes of Calamity’s contemporaries; indeed, they express those attitudes themselves. Moreover, I think the fact that these women supposedly did not inspire “serious” biographies, that works about them are usually considered to be sensationalized, is telling in and of itself.

47. Hickock, letters.

48. Hickock, letters.

49. In *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York and Oxford, 1984), Mary Kelly argues this point with respect to the Domestic Novelists, who while writing of the private sphere published and earned a reputation in the public. See also Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (Urbana and Chicago, 1987). Stansell argues something similar through an analysis of the lives of working-class women, who by definition put that dichotomy into question.

50. Felicity A. Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject: Gender and Ideology in Eighteenth Century England* (Baltimore and London, 1989), 7.

51. Martha J. Burk, *Life and Adventures of Calamity Jane: by Herself* (Fairfield, 1969). The first edition was published in 1896, but neither the date nor the publisher and place of publication are mentioned.

52. Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (New York and Oxford, 1992), 58.

53. Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1990), 8.

54. Sidonie Smith, 8.

55. For more on this see Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*; Alan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” 39 *October* (Winter 1986), 3-64; Donna Haraway, “Teddy Bear Patriarchy,” 26-59; Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago and London, 1987).

56. Smith-Rosenberg, 40.

57. Paul Smith, “Discerning the Subject,” 55 *Theory and History of Literature* (Minneapolis, 1988) xxxv.

58. What specifically troubles me is that Garber’s comments about Calamity seem to be based only on secondary sources. First, Calamity did not cross-dress her entire life. Secondly, to make the point that transvestism is usually attributed to necessity and not desire, Garber inaccurately suggests that Calamity’s reasons for wearing men’s clothes had nothing to do with necessity. And this suggests more generally that despite her efforts to explain the transvestite as that which is uncategorizable, she, herself, is guilty of such categorizing.

59. Garber, 16-17.

60. Wheeler, *Deadwood Dick on Deck*, 18.

61. Horan, 172.

62. Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988), 178.