



The American Hero and His Mechanical Bride: Gender Myths of the *Titanic* Disaster

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The *Titanic* has come down to us as archetype of failed technology and legendary cornucopia of late Edwardian extravagance. In early myth, she is maiden or wanton, luring stoic Victorian men to destruction. Recently, with her rediscovery, she has become a feminine enigma, attracting marine cowboys and deep-sea wilderness men, who armed with light and scientific reason claim to love and loathe her. Marine geologist and *Titanic* explorer Robert Ballard, who found the ship in 1985, explained his obsession and his “curse”: “Before you realize it, you’re married to her. And let me tell you something: *There is no divorcing the Titanic. Ever.*”¹

She is, in sum, the mysterious, mechanical bride, an “image of sex, technology and death” identified by Marshal McLuhan.² In industrial age folklore, the mechanical bride is the car advertised as a “dream date,” the atomic bomb named for Rita Hayworth and the computer described by a math professor as “the perfect wife—it cannot speak, does exactly what it’s told, and works fast.”³ Jane Caputi explains that this conflicting image represents technological man’s desire for a dead, artificial, ultimately male world, where no real women are present.⁴ In this metaphysical realm of opposites, the mechanical bride’s inventor and owner is hyper-masculine: powerful, virile, heroic, individualistic.

The *Titanic* has received most media attention when traditional masculinity has been under reconstruction: in the 1910s, in the wake of the independent, sexually challenging New Woman; and in the 1980s—age of Rambo, Iaccoca and the Gipper—after second-wave feminism and the Vietnam War had eroded

American manhood. At such times, the *Titanic* has provided a symbolic framework for a politically-useful revival of traditional male roles. In the first instance, conservatives upheld the industrial magnate's "male chivalry," supposedly exhibited on the *Titanic*, as a lesson against suffrage. In the second, marine technowits allied with the Defense Department have presented themselves as macho deep-sea explorers to gain support for American technology. The continuity between the *Titanic* myth's invention and reconstruction lies ultimately in the manipulation of gender myths to bolster a power structure heavily invested in a masculine ethos.

The *Titanic*, from its beginnings, was a romantic symbol of the technological achievements of the Industrial Revolution. What fascinated the public was the enormous size of the *Titanic*, possessed of a completely self-contained social system: an industrialist's utopia, purged of Nature, opulent beyond compare and layered with a rigid class structure. Because of the linguistic habit of referring to ships with feminine pronouns, the *Titanic* became in the public imagination an unthinkable gigantic woman. A British journal, *The Shipbuilder*, declared, "So perfect are her proportions that it is well-nigh impossible for the inexperienced to grasp her magnitude except when seen alongside another vessel."⁵ On the ship's launching, the *Southampton Times and Hampshire Gazette* reported, "From the moment she began to move from her berth she was under absolute control, and she passed out of the dock not only majestically, but also smoothly and calmly."⁶ By enhancing the connection between female and machine, male commentators implied the experienced engineer's control over his machine, even one as complicated and overwhelming as the *Titanic*.

But with unexpected disaster on the night of April 15, 1912, the image of the big, beautiful, obedient mechanical bride needed radical revision. She had suddenly become a technological golem, freed from male control.⁷ In his memoirs, surviving *Titanic* officer Charles Lightoller wrote:

It is difficult to describe just exactly where that unity of feeling lies, between a ship and her crew, but it is surely there, in every ship that sails on salt water. It is not always a feeling of affection, either. A man can hate a ship worse than he can a human being, although he sails on her. Likewise a ship can hate her men, then she frequently becomes known as a "killer."⁸

Old fears merged the independent, capricious machine and the rebellious, man-hating woman—both threatening to paternalistic, industrial man. The "female" ship became a figure of wanton destruction, dragging her self-sacrificing men and their "civilization" down into the icy ocean.

But this myth-building was based on more than fear: by animating the machine with a malevolent female spirit, men ducked responsibility for technological failure, shifting the guilt to a culturally resonant symbol. The *Titanic*, because of her human and particularly female flaws, subjected herself to "fate,"

a “combination of circumstances,” or the “mysterious will of God.”⁹ This myth persists in recent accounts; “The fault lay not in her construction,” Ballard wrote “but in *her* failure to avoid hitting an iceberg at almost full speed” (italics added).¹⁰

Following the disaster, supporters of technological progress distanced themselves from the *Titanic*'s creation. Observer Filson Young, in 1912, described the *Titanic*'s “endless, continuous birth agony” from an “awful womb” filled with “pigmy men.”¹¹ Men seemed only present to facilitate Belfast Harbor's free-floating womb and its monstrous offspring. But much later, *Titanic* builders proudly admitted to mothering the ship: chief designer Alexander Carlisle said, “She was my last baby.”¹² In 1986, *Titanic* aficionado and scientist Charles Pellegrino ascribed these sentiments to shipbuilder Thomas Andrews: “He'd watched the *Titanic* grow up, frame by frame, plate by plate, as he'd watched and awaited the birth of Elizabeth. This was *his* ship. *His* child. Born of *his* industrial womb.”¹³

Titanic engineers and marine scientists would later find the male generation myth useful for resurrecting American technology, but at the time of the disaster men denied the industrial womb, attempting to shore up a beleaguered masculinity. In the wake of revelations about the *Titanic*'s inadequacy, radicals and reformers publicly questioned the honor of the ship's owners and designers. An editorial in John Reed's *The Masses* likened the *Titanic* to a civilization “built and bossed by a few colossi bestriding the multitude,” and threateningly suggested that the iceberg represented the vast working class which might “crystallize overnight, massive and unrelenting.”¹⁴ On the canvas of the *Titanic* disaster, progressives painted the “millionaires” as cowardly, heartless, unmanly and inhuman, “hardened to the consistency of the metal in which they deal.”¹⁵

This criticism was dangerously threatening to the persistent model of the Victorian man, since he was ideally a super-Napoleonic businessman and inventor, proving his masculinity on the economic battlefield.¹⁶ Lewis Mumford, decrying the ruthless exploitation of the world and its peoples by the nineteenth century's “Economic Man,” called him a “walking abstraction” in a “state of neurotic maladjustment.”¹⁷ In 1912, Economic Man was besieged by progressive reforms, a new spirit of social cooperation influenced greatly by politically active women.¹⁸

The *Titanic* disaster could be read as Economic Man's ultimate failure, and his supporters and imitators struggled to prevent his demise. Thus, they created the myth of a brave, first-class *Titanic* man pulled down by a self-destructive, anachronistic female, who was the very image of the New Woman. Thus, in a convoluted way, Economic Man was vindicated, and his most threatening opponent—the educated, sexually adventurous, independent woman—took the fall for errors in technological design.

Emerging from mysterious origins, the *Titanic* became a giantess who, putting on her most seductive and opulent clothes, rushed to her ruin. Writers drew out the metaphor of the *Titanic*'s “maiden voyage” to include sexual union with

an icy phallus. Helen Churchill Candee, a Titanic survivor, wrote in *Collier's* that upon colliding the ship had “shuddered with horror in the embrace of the northern ice. Twice, from bow to stern, she shook with mighty endeavor to crush beneath her the assailant.” Candee added that this killing penetration caused the *Titanic* to groan “as if she, too, were sensate and joined her agony with man’s.”¹⁹ Others saw the *Titanic* as a looming, powerful, and even sexually aggressive, female presence, desiring a destructive consummation. The *Washington Post* described her as the “doomed queen of the ocean” who had “forced her giant bulk far upon a submerged spar of the iceberg.”²⁰ In his poem, “Convergence of the Twain,” Thomas Hardy described a union of the “twin halves”—the *Titanic* and her “sinister mate,” the iceberg—who join in a world-shattering consummation.²¹

Commentators also identified this awesome female presence with a dangerous independence. One of the oddest anecdotes circulated after the disaster was the “vengeance of the hoodoo mummy,” which had supposedly followed William T. Stead, a journalist, reformer and occultist. Stead, before going down with the ship, had related a story to a fellow passenger about the curse of the mummy—an Egyptian priestess from the “College of Amen Ra” who had died in Thebes, 160 B.C. Anyone who owned or apparently even mentioned this mummy was doomed. The priestess’s portrait on the mummy case revealed, said the *Post*, that she was of “strange beauty” with eyes that “stared into vacancy with a cold malignancy of expression.”²² This spirit of a powerful, sexually charged woman was mysteriously responsible for the deaths of men.

The search for a woman to blame for technology’s failure extended to the sea, which also became personified as a malevolent monster. Charles Hanson Towne, in a poem published in *Bookman*, referred to the “jealous Sea” that was “hungry for brave souls.” She especially lusted for children because she liked the feel of their hands about her in the dark, and needed their blood in her “cold loneliness.”²³ The independent woman, portrayed by her detractors as a lonely, shrieking siren, craving the children she would never have, was conflated with the sea and made monstrous and desperate.

Explicitly connecting the destructive, female ocean with the suffragist, *The Woman’s Protest*, published by the National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage, ran this poem as part of its “Lessons That Came From the Sea—What It Means to Suffrage”:

Curse the fawning sea, with her half-bared fangs!
Let her do her treacherous worst!
She can’t conquer the breed
That dies by its creed
Of “Women and Children First!”²⁴

The “Antis” (anti-suffragists) imagined a feminist Godzilla rising from the ocean to wreak vengeance on the male “breed.” Threatened by an apocalyptic

breakdown of the family, they saw in the symbolic language emerging from the disaster, convenient propaganda against suffrage.

This inflation of the originally innocuous imagery associated with the *Titanic* accompanied an increasingly heated debate over “women and children first.” As it developed, this debate came to have less to do with actual events on the *Titanic*, and more to do with deep social divisions over gender. Some suffragists, within a few days of the *Titanic* disaster, had publicly declared that women had often proved themselves in extreme situations just as “chivalrous” and self-sacrificing as men. One suffragist, responding to stories on the bravery and self-sacrifice of first class male passengers, announced that “it was the least that men could do.”²⁵ Eager to discuss men’s responsibility for technological disaster because of a disregard for human life, suffragists found the *Titanic* debate constantly shifting to an attack on an uncontrollable, mythological woman: an attack, in other words, on the suffragists themselves. Thus, when suffragists brought up very real issues, such as the ship owner’s blind irresponsibility, detractors blamed independent women for all disruptions of “civilization.” This reversal was accompanied by a glorification of masculinity; male passengers had sacrificed themselves for ungrateful women. Suppressed was the suffragists’ contention that men, because of greed and callousness, were ultimately responsible not only for the *Titanic* disaster, but also for all technological disasters.

Certainly, short-sighted men were responsible for the loss of life on the *Titanic*. The ship went down in the early morning of April 15, 1912, taking more than 1,500 persons with it. The disaster resulted from one blunder after another: the White Star Line’s decision to include only enough lifeboats for 1,178 persons, whereas 2,210 were aboard; Captain Smith’s lust for speed, despite the danger of collision with icebergs; the bungling lack of organization during rescue attempts; and the ship’s fallible design.

Although many men seemed to have behaved admirably on the sinking ship, their motivations, especially during the first hours of the disaster, are unclear. They may simply have had a cavalier trust in technology, believing that sending the lifeboats off was merely a precaution. By some accounts, as well, “women and children first” was practiced only on one side of the *Titanic*, while on the other side, men were allowed in lifeboats.²⁶ Some did not behave like gentlemen at all, jumping on top of women in the boats, brawling on the decks, and, when in lifeboats, refusing to return to the site of the disaster to save those in the water.

But the mainstream press generally agreed that men had proved themselves heroic beyond all measure. The *Titanic* became a tilted stage upon which the American man demonstrated the “progress of civilization.” Men, because of physical strength, superior grasp of ethics and sense of duty, were willing to sacrifice themselves for “weaker” women. Innate heroism was further defined as belonging specifically to American men, as the *Titanic* disaster was compared, for instance, to the shipwreck of a French liner in 1898, during which women were struck down by the desperate crew.²⁷ The American man—particularly the wealthy and powerful American man—was beyond reproach. Newspapers were filled

UNAFRAID



“Unafraid,” from the *San Francisco Examiner*, April 21, 1912, was a front page tribute to men lost on the *Titanic*.

with stories of his last exploits: magnate Benjamin Guggenheim had remained in his evening clothes, declaring, “No woman shall be left aboard this ship because Benjamin Guggenheim was a coward”; Archie Butt, military aide to President Taft, fought back men with an iron bar to protect women in the lifeboats; John

Adieu



HOW shall we speak of ye! Brothers brave!
In the icy deep, ye sleep the sleep,
Ye who accepted the surging wave.
"Be British!" the Captain's latest breath—
"Women and children first we save."
Smiling farewell from the gates of death,
Ye waved them away from the grave.
In the pride of his race, and the choice he made,
Each was a MAN, and unafraid.

OVER the waiting, starlit sea,
Trembled the song of devotion—
The song of the souls that would soon be free—
"Nearer, My God, My God, to Thee,"
There on the lonely ocean.

TRUE men, Farewell! True hearts, Adieu,
Thy lifeboats are stilled in the deep, deep blue,
But the children saved with their young eyes fond
From hearts that sob, and lips that quiver
Shall hear the tale of the brave men's death,
And women's tears, with the requiem wave
That folds ye around, above, beneath,
Shall shroud ye forever and ever.

GABRIEL FURLONG BUTLER,

April 20, 1912. 828 Thirty-Fourth Avenue, Fruitvale, Cal.

"Adieu," from the *San Francisco Examiner*, April 21, 1912, was one of the many popular, bathetic poems about *Titanic* heroes.

Jacob Astor bravely fought to protect his wife and supposedly disguised a young boy in a girl's hat to get him on a boat.

Both men and women who were invested in traditional sex roles and desperate to shore up a tarnished male image, swooned over this mythical, masculine prowess, or, as one survivor put it, this "virility immortal." Eager to defend chivalry and paternalism, one woman wrote in a letter to the editor of the *New York Sun*: "One great fact stands out against the black background of the *Titanic*'s disaster as the stars stand in their radiance against the dark of the

midnight sky—the American man’s tenderness and care of his women and children.”²⁸ The *Independent* declared that the male passengers had proved their “Christian knightliness which seeks not its own, but the good of others.”²⁹ In a widely publicized effort, a group of wealthy women, including First Lady Nellie Taft, solicited donations for a *Titanic* monument: a statue of a bare-chested man, sculpted by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, later erected in Potomac Park, and dedicated to “the brave men who gave their lives that women and children might be saved.”³⁰

The *Titanic* man—wealthy, white, paternal hero—was a prescriptive image, providing lessons in correct behavior for ordinary men. The Atlanta *Constitution* ran a 1912 Memorial Day speech that compared the *Titanic* men to Confederate soldiers, emphasizing “soldierly bearing” in the face of death and the fall of civilization.³¹ The Traveler’s Insurance Company, taking advantage of the public’s fears, insisted that men should put up with the “little hardships of meeting premium payments” in order to build up the kind of male character exhibited on the *Titanic*.³² The Anti-Saloon League used this 1912 campaign poem:

Women and Children First, ’tis the law of the sea,
But why not make it the rule wherever a man may be?
Let it become the law where roisterers quench their thirst,
Emblazon it over the bar—”Women and Children First.”³³

Progressives had charged Economic Man with callous materialism; now, as first class *Titanic* man, he was the model of honor, courage and benevolence.

Furthermore, the *Titanic* disaster suggested to conservatives that important decisions were best left in wealthy men’s hands. The *Titanic* men had made an exemplary choice, thus preserving social order. Presenting this choice as a sweeping moral dilemma, the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* asked its readers to respond to a picture of a man poised between a ship, where an “unknown” woman came running down the stairs behind him, and a lifeboat, where his new wife held out her arms. Although the question seemed to be whether the man should sacrifice himself for the “unknown” woman, the arrangement of the protagonists suggested a sexual choice between the safe haven of domestic bliss and inevitable destruction through contact with this other woman who was dangerously part of the *Titanic*. Although most readers felt that the hero should “behave like a man,” others speculated about the origins of the “unknown,” apparently *single* woman and suggested that the family should take precedence. In any event, unattached women, with no male protectors, were clearly a liability, and threatened to break up the family. Through this kind of moral “lesson,” the *Post-Dispatch* invited readers to see choice as a male prerogative; both women were dependent on the man’s decision. A very few women readers suggested that the wife join her husband on the sinking ship, but most respondents viewed her position as inconsequential.

THE LAST SEAT—



Should the Bridegroom Take the Last Seat With His Bride, or Surrender It to the Unknown Woman Behind Him, and Make His Bride a Widow?

The Last Seat—Should He Take It?," from the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, April 17, 1912, illustrated a widely-discussed, hypothetical problem of *Titanic* survival.

Women were, in fact, generally shown as completely incapable of making decisions because of innate weaknesses—cowardice, hysteria and vanity. Women became overwrought; women refused to allow lifeboats to return to save drowning men; women cared more about the loss of their jewels than their husbands.³⁴ The New York *Sun* insisted that any supposed bravery of women was nothing compared to the self-sacrifice of men. “Heroes of the Sea,” the *Sun* proclaimed the *Titanic* men, who “met death with calm intrepidity that the weaker ones might be saved.” Men only, said the *Sun*, were capable of such altruism, for female victims thought only of themselves, stayed with husbands only from weakness and fear, were unaware of the danger and had no comprehension of sacrifice.³⁵ Women were as vain and uncontrollable as the ship herself.

The suffragists did not believe for a moment that American men, because of race and sex, were naturally disposed to self-sacrifice on women’s behalf. They agreed, in essence, with George Bernard Shaw, who, responding to the press’s romanticization of American male valor, accused the press of “ghastly, blasphemous, inhuman, braggartly lying,” asserting that the captain’s boat had contained ten men and only two women.³⁶ Glorification of male chivalry after the suffragists’ years of struggle against powerful men made them angry. Suffragists had long claimed that businessmen—not only in liquor, but also in railroad, oil, banking, and general manufacturing—were conspiring against the movement, making secret contributions to anti-suffrage organizations.³⁷ These conservative businessmen feared a new, untested body of voters who might threaten vested interests. After the *Titanic* disaster, these same types of men—slum lord John Jacob Astor, banker and manufacturer Benjamin Guggenheim, railroad magnate George Widener—were extolled as civilization’s moral arbiters.

Suffragists reacted with disdain and dismay. Inspiring American activists, Sylvia Pankhurst, the British radical suffragette, declared that men could in no way claim natural heroism while refusing women the vote. And Mabel L. Rees of the Flatbush Political Equality League unequivocally stated that “no man who tries to prevent woman securing the greatest means of self-protection, the ballot, should complain if he is called upon to offer his life for her whom he has tried to render helpless and dependent.”³⁸

Answering those who claimed that *Titanic* women survivors had proved their unworthiness to vote because of weakness and a need for protection, the suffragists asked whether male chivalry was intended to compensate for women’s lack of the ballot: the voter sacrificing himself for the non-voter. On the other hand, had the *Titanic* disaster really proved that all men were worthy of the vote because of superior ethical conduct? One suffragist speculated that the electorate was made up not of “brave men” and “gallant seamen,” but of men who were prone to panic and whose first law was self-protection.³⁹ Suffragists gravely doubted that justification for denying suffrage could be found among the flotsam and jetsam of the *Titanic*.

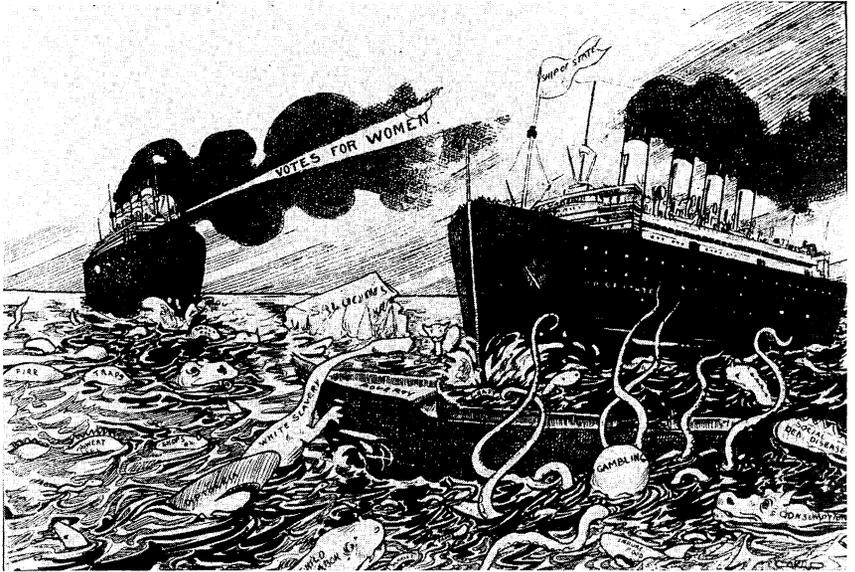
Suffragists claimed that women had not really been given the choice to sacrifice themselves, just as they had never been allowed decision-making power

in the world at large. They pointed out that when women did choose, their bravery was, for the most part, overlooked or dismissed. One possible exception was the legendary Mrs. Isidor Straus. Straus gave her lifeboat seat to her maid, and stayed behind with her husband, a wealthy philanthropist and owner of Macy's department store, declaring, "I will not leave my husband. We have been together all these years and I'll not leave him now." She immediately became one of the most popular and valorized figures of the *Titanic* disaster, appearing on the front pages of newspaper after newspaper as survivors testified to her story. Traditionalists worshipped Ida Straus as an icon of the wife who stands by her man, while suffragists insisted that she had courageously asserted independent choice; she had, according to Maud Malone of the Harlem Equal Rights League, exercised her "vote."⁴⁰ Thus, suffragists asserted that women were capable of making moral decisions, just as they were capable of exercising political decisions.

To allow women a choice, prominent suffragists agreed, life-saving decisions on board the *Titanic* should not have been made according to gender, but according to strength, in which case many women would have been saved anyway. Astute feminist thinkers worked hard to distance women from belittling association with children in the "women and children first" equation. Echoing long-standing feminist arguments against male chivalry, they insisted that both men and women must sacrifice for the young and the infirm. The *Woman's Journal*, organ of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, asked for a sweeping "New Chivalry" on the part of both men and women, which would include not only grand sacrifice, but everyday "reverence of strength for weakness": giving old age pensions and protection to immigrants, fighting "white slavery" and ending child labor. Suffragists, battling against the Anti's damaging myth-making, insisted that the disaster raised practical issues about power and social responsibility.

The suffragists' stand on these issues provoked a vicious response. Using familiar rhetoric, the Antis accused their enemies of abandoning their "birth-right," the privilege of being protected. One Anti, harassing suffragists who were recruiting marchers for their 1912 May parade, asked, "If we had suffrage we women wouldn't want to be saved like on the *Titanic*, would we?" One minister preached that "those women who go about shrieking for their rights" did not want men's noble self-sacrifice.⁴¹ In Congress, where representatives debated giving territorial Alaska its own legislature and suffrage for women, one member, after joking that if women were not "better" they were at least "better looking," declared that he would have gone down with the ship "whether women enjoyed the suffrage or not."⁴² And the St. Louis *Dispatch* printed this poem:

"Votes for women!"
Was the cry,
Reaching upward
To the sky.



“Votes for Women to the Rescue” appeared on April, 27, 1912 in the *Woman’s Journal*, an organ of the National Woman Suffrage Association.

Crashing glass,
And flashing eye—
“Votes for women”
Was the cry.

“Boats for women!”
Was the cry.
When the brave
Were come to die.
When the end
Was drawing nigh—
“Boats for women”
Was the cry.⁴³

Although the *Titanic* disaster had nothing to do with the vote, the two had become inextricably tangled, with each side accusing the other of having politicized the disaster first.

For the suffragists, however, the issues went beyond the ballot; their arguments became a far-reaching critique of the male-controlled economic and political systems. Like many other progressive commentators on the disaster, suffragists were keenly aware of class issues in the debate over who should have survived. They felt that the enormous loss of life went beyond mere technological

ineptitude. Although it was true that most First and Second Class female passengers were saved (94 percent), fewer than half of Third Class women survived. While only one child in First Class drowned, 52 of 79 Third Class children were lost. Of the men, almost a third of First Class survived; nearly all of Third Class drowned.⁴⁴ The reasons for the extraordinary loss of Third Class passengers were shocking. Third Class passengers had not been given adequate instructions until far too late. Locked and closed gates had barred them from reaching the lifeboats. They had been evacuated last, after most lifeboats, not even filled to capacity, were gone. Although the media struggled mightily to prove that “women and children first” was the masculine ethos that night, decisions about who would survive were based at least as much on class as on gender.

Some commentators, apparently ignoring the evidence, claimed that wealthy men had nobly died for female steerage passengers: women who, as one minister pointed out, could “speak no language you or I can understand,” and who would “inevitably become public charges.”⁴⁵ The *Washington Post* went even farther, calling them “sabot-shod, shawl-enshrouded, illiterate, and penniless peasant women of Europe.”⁴⁶ Although most Americans found the disproportionate loss of third class passengers appalling, some made the case that rich men, who could supposedly contribute more to society, should have been saved before these poor women. Some insisted that suffragists should have been grateful that men of “high birth and ideals threw away their lives so that women whom they had never seen—women of the steerage—might be saved.”⁴⁷

Suffragists argued that the highly overrated chivalry of the *Titanic* men was nothing compared to immigrant women’s everyday acts of self-sacrifice, in working themselves to death in factories and devoting their lives to their families. Annie Kenney, of the Woman’s Social and Political Union, argued, “Women cheerfully starve for their husbands and children, and starving is much slower and more painful than drowning.”⁴⁸ One popular magazine, *Collier’s*, echoed these sentiments, suggesting that all women proved their valor every time they risked their lives in childbirth, and that wealth and power bestowed upon some men the *privilege* to be “self-forgetful and to die.”⁴⁹

The Boston *Woman’s Journal*, edited by Alice Stone Blackwell, devoted several articles to defending poor women in the context of the *Titanic* disaster, noting that working class women and children were most often victims of irresponsible uses of technology. Decrying exploitation of women and children in mills and factories, Blackwell wrote, “The chivalry shown to a few hundred women on the *Titanic* does not alter the fact that in New York City 15,000 people—largely women and children—have to sleep in dark rooms with no windows . . .”⁵⁰ In a remarkable piece, journalist Rheta Childe Dorr compared a Brooklyn sweatshop, where she worked, to the *Titanic*. She described the sweatshop’s class system, where aged Italian and Syrian women worked at rag-picking and bailing, “sorting over the debris of civilization” on the lower floors, while younger, English-speaking women worked above on sewing machines.

The shop was a dangerous place with heaps of fabric and unguarded gas jets. Because of locked doors, one woman, wishing to nurse her baby, had died attempting to climb down the fire escape. Dorr ended: “The law of the sea: women and children first. The law of the land—that’s different.”⁵¹ For the suffragists, the *Titanic* was not an independent woman on her way to an illicit encounter, but a symbol of all patriarchal institutions that valued profits over people.

Like Dorr, Agnes E. Ryan in the *Woman’s Journal* compared the *Titanic* to the factory, proclaiming that loss of life in the unusual sea collision and common sweatshop fires were both products of the same greed: “while the laws and the enforcement of laws are entirely in men’s hands, these wholesale, life-taking disasters must almost be expected.”⁵² Other suffragists, too, blamed self-serving patriarchy, which was “monopolizing the planet.” Anna Howard Shaw, president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, argued that women certainly did not cause the disaster, and that therefore men must pay “the debt which was made by men.”⁵³

Many suffragists who thought that men had been responsible for their own destruction also believed that women with power would be more humane and farsighted when making legal and technological decisions. They compared the *Titanic* to the American Ship of State, foundering in a sea of social ills, which could be saved by a rescue ship bearing the standard: “Votes for Women.” Some suffragists, like Blackwell, believed that a woman’s capacity to mother would make her far more responsible in preventing technological accidents if only she had the vote. Blackwell declared that

the Votes for Women movement seeks to bring humaneness, the valuation of human life, into the commerce and transportation and business of the world and establish things on a new basis: a basis in which the unit of measurement is life, nothing but life!⁵⁴

Suffragists insisted that women should influence maritime safety laws, and Dr. Sophie G. Klenk, President of the Anna Shaw League of Brooklyn, asserted that if women had built the *Titanic*, they would have provided lifeboats “for every human soul.”⁵⁵ With women in control of technology, sweatshop fires and deaths at sea would end.

Titanic historians have oversimplified the suffragists’ response to the disaster, and have asserted that the *Titanic* debate damaged the women’s suffrage movement.⁵⁶ Actually, the movement experienced a revival in 1912 for a number of reasons, including an endorsement from the Progressive party. Suffragists worked to capture media attention, and certainly the *Titanic* disaster provided a convenient, highly-visible forum for presenting a sophisticated feminist analysis of wealthy white men’s social, political and industrial monopoly. Such an analysis surely did not hurt the cause; if anything, it gained liberal sympathies.

And the energy generated in these early years of the decade would be sustained until the vote was won in 1921.

But cultural memory of the *Titanic* disaster does not include this sweeping analysis of patriarchy. *Titanic* historians (almost exclusively male) have often identified hubris, blind faith in technology and conspicuous waste as lessons from the *Titanic*, but have blamed a gender-generic “Western man” for these “human follies.” Western man, they claim, must learn to contain his technological arrogance or be subject to nuclear annihilation.⁵⁷ Accompanying this general cultural critique is the recurrent image of the mechanical bride and her heroic discoverer who in his quest restores masculinity and technology. Although the Edwardian businessman may have failed to control his technological golem, the modern American scientist/adventurer is able to resurrect and tame her through demonstrations of masculine prowess. “Raising the *Titanic*,” a recurrent dream of sea adventurers, would mean a massive display of technological force. Several serious proposals have been made, including salvage engineer Tony Wakefield’s “Vaseline scheme,” a plan to pack the ship’s hull with 180,000 tons of petroleum jelly which would presumably make the ship buoyant.⁵⁸ In any event, raising the *Titanic* would prove American technological superiority over this relic, a cultural symbol of engineering’s defeat.

In Clive Cussler’s best selling novel, *Raise the Titanic* (1976), the U. S. military, interested in radioactive cargo, uses explosives to loft the ship two miles to the ocean’s surface. Explicitly placing this project in the tradition of American technological chest-pounding, a government official remarks, “If we can put men on the moon we can bring the *Titanic* up to sunlight again.”⁵⁹ Cussler’s book revolves around a secret government project to reclaim the *Titanic*’s cargo of the fictional radioactive element, byzantium, which is needed to power a Star Wars-like shield of soundwaves. Job pressures almost destroy several weak team members, one of whom desperately asserts, “I created this project from nothing. My gray matter was its sperm. I must see it through to completion.”⁶⁰

Cussler’s heroes are the hands-on men, engineers, preferably with combat experience. One of the manned submersible operators declares, “The first men on the moon weren’t intellectuals either. It takes the nuts and bolts mechanics to perfect the equipment.”⁶¹ These undersea engineers scrupulously shun emotional involvement with real women. Their emotions are saved for their machines and for the *Titanic* herself, a “gorgeous bucket of bolts.”⁶² The project director whispers, “Strange thing about the *Titanic*. Once her spell strikes you, you can think of nothing else.”⁶³ The consummation of this metaphysical desire occurs when the *Titanic* rises like a technological Venus from the waves, shrouded in “billowing rainbowed clouds of vapor.” Stunned, mesmerized, even tearful, the engineers murmur, “She’s up. She’s up.”⁶⁴

Because of an intense, hostile confusion over shifting gender roles, Cussler’s novel places masculinity at a jarring intersection between nostalgia and high tech desire. Cussler desperately wants to return to an imaginary age when men were men (as so sublimely exhibited in *Titanic* legend), but his heroes must prove their

manliness in a new arena of high technology. The engineers not only raise the *Titanic*, but a new masculinity (“She’s up!”).⁶⁵

The *Titanic*’s new, real-life technological hero is Dr. Robert D. Ballard—a marine geologist who, under the auspices of the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute, rediscovered the ship in 1985. Ostensibly, Ballard has used the *Titanic* in a public-relations campaign for science. Insisting that science is a “contact sport,” he has said many times that he wants to change the cultural stereotype of the “nerd” scientist. Thus, Ballard presents himself as a very masculine adventurer/scientist, an image quickly adopted by male journalists.⁶⁶ A recent national newspaper dubbed him “Indiana Jones of the Oceans,” and *Oceanus* described him thus: “Ballard is a distant relative of ‘Bat’ Masterson, the Wichita marshal and gunfighter, and like his famous ancestor he is something of a loner, and is not afraid of taking risks.”⁶⁷ Ballard’s narrative of the *Titanic*’s discovery, which he calls an “epic journey,” is replete with signs of a technologically demonstrated masculinity. At the beginning of his quest, Ballard feared that “the *Titanic* really was a cursed ship and our expedition, despite its high-tech excellence, would be only the latest to fall victim to her spell.”⁶⁸ But after providing “an ending to her unfinished maiden voyage,” he “felt like a high-school senior saying goodbye to his steady girlfriend before heading off to college.”⁶⁹ Explicitly associating himself with American technological progress and machismo, Ballard recounts that he was reading Chuck Yeager’s biography when the *Titanic* was discovered. (Of the “Right Stuff,” Yeager was the first pilot to break the sound barrier.)

Ballard was able to overcome obstacles to his team’s consummation (or “hard contact”) with the ship through technologies which extended masculine abilities. He points out, for instance, that the plastic urine bottle used in manned submersibles is called HERE: human endurance range extender. A remote-control underwater robot, *Jason Jr.*, or *JJ*, allowed the team to penetrate the *Titanic*’s dangerous black holes. *JJ*, a “proud little robot soldier” complete with an “emergency decoupling switch,” was operated by team member Martin Bowen: “The *JJ* control box sat on Martin’s lap. With his right hand he operated the joystick. . . .”⁷⁰ Ballard describes *JJ* as an extension of the body, a projection of man’s mind and spirit into hostile Nature. Inferring from the sexualized language surrounding the robot, it seems a fantasy phallus as well. Ultimately, *JJ* represents a masculinized technical mastery.

Furthermore, technological man takes complete control over reproduction. Ballard proudly and affectionately treats *Jason Jr.* as a cute, erratic son, occasionally given to bad behavior: “After performing beautifully in our early dives, *Jason Jr.* was becoming a problem child.”⁷¹ Scientist Charles Pellegrino, who accompanied Ballard on one of his *Titanic* expeditions, explained the crew’s sentiments:

We have come to love our machines. We who know them. We who have touched them. And Thomas Andrews [*Titanic* ship-builder] would have understood us. Andrew’s affection for his

creation could not have been very different, seventy-four years ago.⁷²

In this ideology, women are not needed even for their reproductive capacities, since masculinity has become self-perpetuating through miracle technologies. And the *Titanic*, rather than proving this ideology's failure, becomes an historical precedent for the ultimate union of man and machine.

The nihilism underlying the sexualized rhetoric of technological enterprise has very real consequences. Although Ballard overtly declared his *Titanic* expedition a part of an educational campaign, it was actually funded by the Navy, interested in testing devices for anti-submarine warfare. Ballard admits that deep-sea exploration has military significance, and sees unmanned submersibles, armed with fiber optic cables, microprocessors and digital imaging equipment, as high-tech aids to the country's defense. Strangely, he believes that his recently developed "telepresence technology"—"projecting man's mind and spirit to places without his having to be there physically"—will help the military "remove humans from the risks of combat."⁷³ Since advanced weaponry only increases human risk, this statement is an absurdity. But it reveals a longing to turn the asexual "nerd" scientist into an artificial being: a masculinized, omnipotent "telepresence."

The myth of resurrected masculinity played out in the *Titanic*'s rediscovery is now firmly embedded in America's patriarchal ideology. In a recent ad for *Fortune*, a businessman gloomily declares, "The good news is they've made me captain. The bad news is I've come aboard the *Titanic*." But the accompanying text reassures:

An outsider is brought in at the eleventh hour to save a sinking ship. Turmoil turns to intrigue, as fast and furious changes ensue. Tough times call for tough managers who can rise to the occasion. And their tactics are logged in the ledger of *Fortune*.⁷⁴

Unlike the original *Titanic* hero who sinks into the sea, the new American capitalist "rises to the occasion" and saves the ship. Thus the *Titanic* myth is again logged in the ledger of history, as American masculinity reconstitutes itself in an even more virulent form.

Notes

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4. Jane Caputi, "Seeing Elephants: The Myths of Phallotechnology," *Feminist Studies* 14 (Fall 1988), 487-524.

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 6. Cited in Walter Lord, *The Night Lives On* (New York, 1986), 37.
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 9. Geoffrey Marcus, *The Maiden Voyage* (New York, 1969), 287
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25. "Not Chivalry, Say Women," *New York Sun*, April 18, 1912, 1, col. 6.
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 28. Elizabeth L. Seward Madden, Editorial, *New York Sun*, April 19, 1912, 12, col. 5.
 29. "Law of the Sea," *Independent*, April 25, 1912, 900.
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 31. "Women of South Praised by Dr. Clarence J. Owens," *Atlantic Constitution*, April 27, 1912.
 32. Advertisement, *Collier's*, May 25, 1912, 28.
 33. *American Issues*, Oklahoma ed., June 1912, quoted in Peter H. Odegard, *Pressure Politics: The Story of the Anti-Saloon League* (New York, 1928), 42.
 34. "Widows on Board Rescue Ship Mourned Gems More than Husbands," *Washington Post*, April 28, 1912, 12:4.
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 39. "Suffragist," Editorial, *New York Sun*, April 28, 1912, 10, col.6.
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 54. Ryan, "Lives Against Life," 136.
 55. Quoted in "'Women First,'" 6.
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60. *Ibid.*, 20.
61. *Ibid.*, 98.
62. *Ibid.*, 192.
63. *Ibid.*, 139.
64. *Ibid.*, 195.
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70. *Ibid.*, 132. For a discussion of "joysticks" as phallic image see Jan Zimmerman, *Once Upon the Future* (New York, 1986), 117; Caputi, 504.
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74. *Fortune*, April 4, 1989, 334-335.