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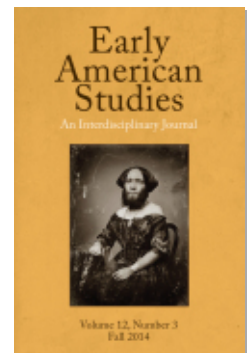
Transgender Identity at a Crossroads: A Close Reading of a  
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Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal, Volume 12, Number  
3, Fall 2014, pp. 652-665 (Article)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/eam.2014.0015>



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# Transgender Identity at a Crossroads

## A Close Reading of a “Queer” Story from 1857

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**ABSTRACT** In 1857 New York’s premier literary magazine, the *Knickerbocker*, published an anonymously written short story, “The Man Who Thought Himself a Woman.” It was surprising that the author depicted what we would call today a transgender identity in a way that implicitly accepted the protagonist’s self-assessment. Though we know that men and women exhibited cross-gender dress and behavior, we have very little documentation—fictional or otherwise—about the attitude of others toward such people or about their own self-understanding. Could this fictional account shed some light on the midcentury view of those who wished to live as the other gender? Despite the singularity of the tale, its presence illuminates a complex and unexpected understanding of transgender identity (at the risk of using an anachronistic label) in mid-nineteenth-century America. I argue that the description and plight of Japhet Colbones, the main character, highlight themes of deceit and secrecy characteristic of earlier portrayals of atypical gender presentation, foretell the labeling of deviant pathology that was just around the corner at the turn of the century, and even portend today’s emphasis on self-determination at any cost. My essay offers a close reading of the story, accompanied here by its reprinting.

In 1857 New York’s premier literary magazine, the *Knickerbocker*, published an anonymously written short story, “The Man Who Thought Himself a Woman.” It was surprising that the author depicted what we would call today a transgender identity in a way that implicitly accepted the protagonist’s self-assessment. Though we know that men and women exhibited cross-gender dress and behavior, we have very little documentation—fictional or otherwise—about the attitude of others toward such people or

*Early American Studies* (Fall 2014)

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about their own self-understanding.<sup>1</sup> Could this fictional account shed some light on the midcentury view of those who wished to live as the other gender?

All those who knew the story's protagonist, Japhet Colbones, perceived him as a "queer freak"—someone odd and unusual—and the fact that the story was written and published at all is just as much a freak for historians.<sup>2</sup> Yet despite the singularity of the tale, its presence illuminates a complex and unexpected understanding of transgender identity (at the risk of using an anachronistic label) in mid-nineteenth-century America. My essay offers a close reading of the story, accompanied here by its reprinting. To experience the plot's full effect, I suggest reading the story before continuing with this essay. I argue that the description and plight of Japhet Colbones highlight themes of deceit and secrecy characteristic of earlier portrayals of atypical gender presentation, foretell the labeling of deviant pathology that was just around the corner at the turn of the century, and even portend today's emphasis on self-determination at any cost. The short story does not reveal the only way that transgender behavior was perceived in midcentury America, as we shall see, but its relatively benign and compassionate portrayal of a person like Japhet suggests that sympathetic views of nonnormative gender performance existed. Though they were probably not dominant, they were at least current enough to appear in print.

Though the story begins, "Japhet Colbones was a very odd individual," I believe that the author did not want readers to think his personality exceptional. Before we hear specifics of Japhet's particular oddity, we learn of his

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1. See, generally, Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley, Calif.: Seal Press, 2008); for an excellent history of cross-dressing in the American West, see Peter Boag, *Re-Dressing America's Frontier Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). Boag argues that we know more about women living as men because the very idea fits in well with the myth of the American West. Though unconventional, a woman living as a man could be perceived positively as entrepreneurial, hardy, a real go-getter taking on the challenges of masculinity and claiming the spirit of Western individualism. The myth made it possible for female-to-male cross-dressers to be tolerated and integrated into the broader picture of Western independence. Men living as women, on the other hand, did not fit the Western ideal of masculinity, which helps explain why their stories have been largely forgotten. We do not know where this short story takes place, but I would argue that Boag's point would be true in most parts of the United States in the mid-nineteenth century.

2. In the mid-nineteenth century the words *queer* and *freak* both meant peculiar and eccentric. *Queer* carried a stronger connotation of suspicion, whereas *freak* implied a capriciousness and sense of fancy. *Freak* also came to be synonymous with "lusus naturae," or a freak of nature, by midcentury, which suggests curiosity more than derision toward the subject. See *Oxford English Dictionary* online.

male ancestors, all described as “freaks” of one sort or another, a detail that serves to normalize Japhet’s idiosyncrasies within his family constellation. His great-grandfather, at age seventy-one, left his wife, children, and grandchildren to move far into the woods, severed from all human contact. He refused any visits from family members, and when he came back home from time to time, he demanded to be treated as a stranger, shunning any familial intimacy or even recognition. This recluse’s son, Japhet’s grandfather, was just as peculiar. In addition to dressing in his own distinctive style, wearing a coat of many colors like Joseph’s biblical garb, he refused to kill any animals, forcing his entire family to become “unwilling Grahamites,” or vegetarians. Japhet’s father also had his quirks. An extreme book collector, he traveled extensively to neighboring cities to attend book auctions, where he would buy scores of never-to-be-read books that overflowed his shelves. Like the men before him, Japhet’s father was odd but nonetheless found a way to preserve a family and a life, however marked by unusual habits. By detailing many generations of idiosyncrasy, the author encourages the reader to imagine a man dressing in women’s clothes as unusual but neither debilitating nor perverted. Like his predecessors, Japhet was strange, but, as the story unfolds, we see a person who could nonetheless perform the requirements of a male life and identity. Japhet’s tragedy was his unhappiness at his inability to “be” who he felt himself to be—that is, a woman.<sup>3</sup>

I have found only two scholarly discussions of this anonymously written story since its publication, both of which situate it in the context of American literature rather than in the history of gender nonconformity per se. In his 2009 dissertation, “The Queer Work of Fantasy: The Romance in Antebellum America,” Zachary Neil Lamm briefly analyzes the tale and

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3. In the Bible, Japhet was one of Noah’s three sons; he and his wife were among the eight people saved from the flood who later repopulated the world. Tradition named Japhet as the patriarch of Europe’s people (Shem and Ham played similar roles for Asia and Africa), and the story’s author might have deployed the name ironically, to call attention both to the main character’s patriarchy and to his unconventional masculinity. The Hebrew name Japhet, interestingly, has a feminine cognate, Jaffa or Yaffa, which means pretty. It’s not clear whether the author hoped to evoke this feminized meaning of Japhet among his Bible-versed readers, though the name does express the main character’s aspiration, and it resonates as well with the mid-nineteenth-century convention of naming characters to denote their true qualities. The female characters in the story carry only non-biblical nicknames, and the other characters, including Japhet’s odd male progenitors, are not named at all, which thus distinguishes the main character’s peculiar naming.

arrives at a conclusion entirely different from mine. Lamm reads the story as a “tragicomedy.” He argues, “‘The Man Who Thought Himself a Woman’ makes obvious to modern readers what was acceptable in the discourse of gender non-normativity—that those who find themselves outside the binary sex-gender system are odd or freakish and worthy of our ridicule; as the humorous tone of the story indicates, they are a laughing matter, as is their suffering.”<sup>4</sup> I disagree. In my reading, nineteenth-century no less than modern readers are led only to sympathize with Japhet, even to admire him. Japhet fulfilled his role as a man, even though he did not believe himself to be one. He did the best he could under the circumstances; in the end he died honorably, according to his wishes—as a woman.

Carina D. Pasquesi’s 2012 dissertation, “Cruel Sorority; or, Feminizing Enjoyment in American Romance,” comes closer to my own reading. She argues that Japhet is a sympathetic character who, like the rest of the men in his family, embodies “a patriarchal line at odds with the one we have come to know, representing a desire to live differently in the world, beyond prescribed models of adulthood.” The other men in his line do it successfully; Japhet cannot sustain it, as we shall see. Pasquesi’s analysis of this story helps make her claim regarding feminized figures in American literature. Japhet privately embraces femininity yet is unable to publicly claim his female identity; this, to Pasquesi, reflects the desires as well as the confines of literary characters who rebelled against prescriptive modes of identity in nineteenth-century literature. She argues, “In Japhet, we meet antebellum America’s limit.”<sup>5</sup>

The author of “The Man Who Thought Himself a Woman” provides us with many clues that invite an empathetic, not comedic, reading of Japhet’s predicament. Throughout the story Japhet is portrayed as a decent human being, one who plays the conventional role of a man honorably and thoroughly. Though readers discover that he sadly considers everything about his life a lie, he has sacrificed his own desires for his family. He marries; he fathers two children; and he is independent, personally and economically, as a solid yeoman. Japhet is self-possessed; he is “his own man,” as it were, and he supports his wife, Tiddy, comfortably. In turn, his wife respects him and conforms to nineteenth-century expectations of wives.

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4. Zachary Neil Lamm, “The Queer Work of Fantasy: The Romance in Antebellum America” (Ph.D. diss., Loyola University, 2009), 160–63; quotation on 162.

5. Carina D. Pasquesi, “Cruel Sorority; or, Feminizing Enjoyment in American Romance” (Ph.D. diss., Loyola University, 2012), [http://ecommons.luc.edu/luc\\_diss/377](http://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss/377), 2–3.

Our modern understanding of transgender and cross-dressing behavior (currently labeled gender dysphoria and transvestic disorder, respectively, in the new *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, or DSM-5) may tempt readers of this story to see Japhet as an antihero, a man who failed at nineteenth-century ideals of manhood and who ultimately killed himself because he could not endure the community's negative assessment of his character. That reading would be a mistake, I believe. Japhet is held in obvious respect by the author. His cross-dressing is neither ridiculed nor derided, and his good qualities are lauded repeatedly: fine-looking, bookish, quick in school, manful, determined, hardworking, helpful to his sisters, a genius in making and drawing patterns, unashamed of his needlework skills, a good farmer, a tolerable companion, and a very industrious husband. There is no question that he is the story's tragic hero.

People who identify today as "trans" or "transgender," two common umbrella terms for cross-gender expression, are heirs to a long and often difficult history in America. Generally speaking, there has not been great tolerance for those who have crossed the rigid gender divide. In 1696 Massachusetts adopted a law against cross-dressing, perhaps to thwart same-sex intimacy, or perhaps, troubled by gender masquerading, colonial lawmakers believed that cross-dressing, like homosexuality, belonged in the category of serious offenses against a divinely ordained natural order. The Hebrew Bible states that a woman or man who wears the clothing of the opposite sex is an abomination to the Lord (Deut. 22:5), and it also deplures promiscuous mingling of any sort; one cannot wear linen interwoven with wool; one cannot yoke an ox and a donkey together or sow a field with two kinds of seed (Deut. 22:9–11). The Middlesex County Court, in 1692, highlighted the dangerously disordered character of mingling when it charged a woman named Mary Henly with wearing men's clothes, contending that those were offenses "seeming to confound the course of nature."<sup>6</sup> In Haverhill, Massachusetts, in 1652, Joseph Davis was convicted of "putting on woemen's apparel and goeing about from house to house in the nighte."<sup>7</sup>

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6. Records of the Middlesex County Court, 1691/92, vols. 1689–99, n.p., as cited in Lawrence W. Towner, "The Indentures of Boston's Poor Apprentices: 1734–1805," *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts* 43; *Transactions*, 1956–63 (1966): 417–68.

7. George F. Dow, ed., *Records and Files of the Quarterly Court of Essex County, Massachusetts* (Salem, 1911–21), 6:341, as cited in Mary Beth Norton, "Communal Definitions of Gendered Identity in Seventeenth-Century English America," in Ronald Hoffman, Mechal Sobel, and Fredrika J. Teute, eds., *Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on Personal Identity in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 53.

Even outside Puritan New England, colonists lived in a world dominated by Christian belief, in which women and men had their respective places in the divine scheme and crossing from one category to the other violated providential order.

Throughout the early American period, those who straddled the gender divide were sometimes conflated with hermaphrodites (as intersex people were then known) in the medical literature. In fact, some of the people who switched genders might have done so because their anatomical bodies were ambiguous, and they lived some of their lives as male and some as female. In exposing them, medical or legal authorities often considered their boldness a charade at best and deception at worst. Though doctors debated whether “true” hermaphrodites existed (people with two perfect sets of genitals), they tried to determine every patient’s true, singular sex with certainty, even though the bodies they saw manifested ambiguity. “Undecided” was the one medical conclusion physicians refused to reach, no matter how equivocal the body they scrutinized. Just as in colonial times, when a biblical understanding of a strict gender binary prevailed, nineteenth-century observers sought scientific certainty in determining gender identity.<sup>8</sup>

In fact, laws against cross-dressing multiplied in the mid-nineteenth century. Beginning in the 1840s, cities of every size and in every region of the country enacted gender-normative rules regarding behavior.<sup>9</sup> These laws notwithstanding, nineteenth-century Americans adopted paradoxical attitudes regarding stories of gender crossing, particularly those of women who passed as men. Though women who failed to conform to feminine prescriptions were generally deplored, they were also admired as tricksters, and the public eagerly circulated tales of their supposed exploits.<sup>10</sup> Among the most

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8. Elizabeth Reis, *Bodies in Doubt: An American History of Intersex* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 30–36.

9. See William N. Eskridge Jr., *Gaylaw: Challenging the Apartheid of the Closet* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 24–30, 338–41. Columbus, Ohio; Chicago; Wilmington, Del.; and Springfield, Ill., had enacted anti-cross-dressing laws before 1857. After this short story’s publication, another ten cities would pass similar legislation before the turn of the century. See Stryker, *Transgender History*, 32 and Clare Sears, “A Dress Not Belonging to His or Her Sex: Cross-Dressing Law in San Francisco, 1860–1900” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Santa Cruz, 2005).

10. Jen Manion is currently working on a book about the changing meanings of gender transgression and expression in the nineteenth century, focusing on women who lived as men. By examining a variety of narratives—fictive, real, and those embellished in literary representation—Manion explores how difference between women and men was marked in the body and how relationships between sex and

popular accounts was an often-republished novel, *The Female Marine*, about a woman pretending to be a man, written by a man pretending to be a woman. In the book, Lucy Brewer goes off to fight in the War of 1812, serving as a sailor aboard the U.S.S. *Constitution*. She displays resourcefulness, self-reliance, and mobility—characteristics commonly deemed male but that this female marine appropriates to deal with her extraordinary predicament. After scenes of danger, suspense, and near discovery, Lucy returns to acceptable female dress and sensibility and marries an appropriate suitor, whom she met during her masquerade. All's well that ends well in *The Female Marine*, as characters revert to their “true” natures, aligned with prescribed categories of gender and sex. The chaotic world of gender impersonation settles into one of blissful morality, and Lucy accepts the conventions of the cult of true womanhood.<sup>11</sup>

We know that in real life, too, women dressed and lived as men and men dressed and lived as women in the nineteenth century, but we don't always know their motivations.<sup>12</sup> In the 1860s, three years after this story appeared, the German author Karl Heinrich Ulrichs explored the concept of a female soul in a male body, which might have captured the cross-dressing experience but instead was meant to explain and validate same-sex erotic desire between men. If some men who desired other men were actually women inside, then their “opposite” sex attraction became more understandable. Beginning in the late 1860s, American physicians adopted the terms “contrary sexual feeling” and “inversion” to describe homosexual desire, since it was “contrary” to what was typically understood to be “normal.”<sup>13</sup>

At the end of the nineteenth century, the emerging scientific explanation of homosexuality conflated same-sex desire, cross-gender expression, and hermaphroditism, which was then considered either physical or mental.

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gender were navigated by the people themselves and by their chroniclers. See Manion, “19th Century Narratives of Transgender Experience and the History of Possibility,” paper presented at the American Antiquarian Society Regional Academic Seminar (April 26, 2013).

11. Daniel A. Cohen, ed., *The Female Marine and Related Works: Narratives of Cross-Dressing and Urban Vice in America's Early Republic* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997). Other stories of deception circulated in popular literature. See, for example, “A Male Abbess,” *Harper's Weekly*, June 12, 1858, 375.

12. For some examples of men who dressed and lived as women, see Boag, *Reddressing America's Frontier Past*, esp. chap. 2.

13. On the early scientific conceptualization of homosexuality, see Jennifer Terry, *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 42–55.



Doctors often equated hermaphrodites and homosexuals. For example, they might ask: If hermaphrodites' genitals are ambiguous, masking their true sex, does their sexual intercourse constitute homosexuality? And since homosexuals prefer intimacy with members of the same sex, then might they suffer from a "mental" or "psychical" hermaphroditism, a deformity centered in the brain, which is also an organ?<sup>14</sup> Those patients who had behavioral characteristics and sexual inclinations that caused physicians to think they were living as the "wrong" sex came under close scrutiny.<sup>15</sup> As the historian Joanne Meyerowitz has pointed out, early sexologists considered cross-gender identification to be a category of inversion; it wasn't until the mid-twentieth century that "transsexualism," the term for sex change through hormones and surgery, was coined.<sup>16</sup> And so, confronted with patients' aberrant mental and sometimes physical presentation, some physicians adopted a new term, "psychical hermaphroditism," or "mental hermaphroditism," to describe men like Japhet who believed they were meant to be—or actually were—women.<sup>17</sup>

Japhet started out "normal" enough, and the author describes his early days as a youth by emphasizing his masculinity. As a young boy, his only strange feature seemed to be his enormous head. But this turned out to be a positive sign, as Japhet was uncommonly bright. An itinerant phrenologist had examined his cranium and determined that he was college material; in fact, he suggested that Japhet might even end up as president of the United States. "Manfully," Japhet "mastered" his schoolwork. His father, the book lover, was thrilled to have a son who might "absorb the sciences and ologies that could be crammed into that capacious brain" (601).<sup>18</sup> All hoped that despite the size of his head, Japhet, the only boy among seven sisters, "would be free from all singularities, queerities, quips, quirks, and oddities" (600). But this was not to be the case.

14. Reis, *Bodies in Doubt*, 62–66.

15. See, for example, C. W. Allen, "Report of a Case of Psychosexual Hermaphroditism," *Medical Record* 51, no. 9 (May 1897): 653–55.

16. Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 4–5.

17. It is important to keep in mind that I am not suggesting that a medicalized interpretation of transgender identity is the "right" one; the recent shift in the DSM-5 from "gender identity disorder" to "gender dysphoria" suggests an ongoing evolution and struggle to understand the endless varieties of human approaches to gender identity, expression, and embodiment.

18. "The Man Who Thought Himself a Woman," *Knickerbocker*, December 1857, 599–610; quote on 601. Further quotations from the story cite page numbers parenthetically in the text.

When he was fourteen, Japhet's own brand of peculiarity began to surface. First, he quit school. Fourteen was a common age for farm boys to leave school and commit themselves fully to agricultural labor, as it was for many girls who would devote themselves to household duties. Perhaps at puberty, the author might be suggesting, Japhet became aware of what we could call his gender identity. Yet quitting school was an odd choice for Japhet because he showed such scholastic promise. This was only the beginning. Veering from the academic path, Japhet took up "women's work." Again, readers are guided to interpret this unconventional vocation through Japhet's eyes; unapologetic about his inclination and talents, he exhibited pride in his prowess with the knitting and embroidery needles, and even his family did not tease him. He was "something of a genius, in his way, in devising patterns and drawing them." Indeed, Japhet displayed his needlework, made money from it, and looked on his aptitude "with as much satisfaction as a first-rate machinist gazes at his complicated cogs and wheels, shafts and pulleys" (601). The author compares Japhet's pride in his accomplishment on an equal basis with the pride other men would take in the excellence of their more appropriately gendered work.

Japhet's feminine behavior was unusual enough that some of the village women did not consider him a suitable marriage partner. Even though Japhet was known to be prosperous, Nanny Halliday, a young woman and likely prospect, dismissed him: "Good laws! Ketch me to have a woman for a husband when there are plenty of men about" (601-2). But Tiddy Grant, a woman five years older than nineteen-year-old Japhet, believed otherwise. Tiddy thought that Japhet would make a fine husband; he was a good-looking, successful farmer, and she preferred his eccentric needleworking to the vices of some men, "lounging in the bar-rooms and making their wives miserable" (602). As a slightly older woman of lesser means, Tiddy seems an unlikely match for Japhet, but she knew as much about his "oddities" as anyone and was ultimately willing to accept his surprise proposal. Indeed, the author encourages us to identify with the more admirable Tiddy, rather than with the derisive Nanny, and to see Japhet positively as a good match. The union of a "spinster" with the anomalous Japhet relieves both gender-transgressive characters of their unfortunate positions.

Throughout the story the author uses the word *freak* eight times, though not once to describe Japhet himself. Each usage denotes not an individual but a harmless eccentricity. Japhet's great-grandfather's freak was to live as a hermit, for example. When Japhet wants a friend to probe Tiddy's opinion of him before he proposes, he is described as having "indulged in another odd freak." The eccentricities of Japhet's forefathers are described, and we

are told, “The women were . . . willing to put up with the queer freaks of the masculines” (600). Indeed, the author describes the proposal and marriage itself as “only one of his odd freaks” (602). The word *queer* is also used without sexually transgressive connotations. Of the five times it is used in the story, three of its occurrences are in reference to Tiddy, Japhet’s father and mother, and his sister Drusy. One instance is the aforementioned “queer freaks of the masculines,” and the last is listed as a descriptive of eccentricity: “singularities, queerities, quips, quirks, and oddities.”

I believe that the author urges the reader to think of Japhet’s cross-gendered behavior while he is still a single man as unusual but acceptable, even commendable. Once Japhet marries, however, circumstances change and the familiar trope of deceit takes over the story. In early America and throughout the nineteenth century, people who shifted back and forth between the genders risked punishment if they were caught. As the historians Peter Boag, Jen Manion, and others have demonstrated, though some managed to live in a gender that they were not assigned at birth, they did so at great risk of being accused of deliberate deception and fraud. And as Japhet’s story progresses through his early years of marriage, readers are plunged into a mysterious narrative filled with secrecy and concealment, unexplained thefts and inexplicable behavior.

Japhet’s marriage to Tiddy Grant was quick—he demanded it be on the very day he proposed. Readers are led to wonder about the reasons for such haste. Does Japhet hope that marriage (in this case to the only local woman who will have him) might render him safe, not merely from gossip and ridicule, but perhaps from his own growing peculiarities as well? Does Japhet marry in order to deflect suspicion from himself and onto his wife when his sisters’ clothing goes missing? Almost immediately, distrust is aroused in the cramped household as items of women’s clothing begin to disappear. Japhet’s sisters, who disapprove of his bride, are quick to assume that Tiddy probably pilfered them, given that she comes from a poor family and her motives for marrying Japhet seem to them suspect. Tiddy overcomes Japhet’s sisters’ misgivings, however, when their covert searches exonerate her, and they accept her as their sister-in-law. Tiddy, for her part, is more than satisfied with her marriage. A hard worker, Japhet builds them a “pretty little cottage,” a “fine garden,” and fathers two daughters, “the delight of their parents” (604). Ironically, though Japhet was considered the one unlikely to marry, none of his seven sisters finds a marriage partner, and the two oldest come to share his cottage, at Tiddy’s kind invitation.

Questions mount, however, and Japhet’s secret life begins to unravel when his sisters Drusy and Fanny discover the disappearance of some of

their finest clothes: a black silk dress, a shawl, a bonnet, nightdresses. Everyone searches in vain for the missing items, and now that Tiddy is no longer suspected, the family speculates about witchcraft or robbers to explain the anomalies. The women begin to believe Japhet culpable when a neighbor asks if he has taken up peddling. He had been seen carrying around a large tin box. Now Tiddy and Japhet's sisters begin the task of uncovering what he is up to. Late at night they awake and spy on a "ludicrous" and disturbing scene in the downstairs hall:

Japhet was standing before the looking-glass, his box open beside him. He was arrayed in woman's clothes almost from head to foot, and was just then pulling and straightening out the ruffles on a cap which Drusy recognized as the one her mother had lost some years before. The gown, with its bright blue and white pattern, was familiar to her; and now he was throwing over the pelerine that they had missed so lately. Every thing he had on seemed to have undergone a change—to have been widened, enlarged, and otherwise altered. After he had sufficiently admired himself, he spread out his gown, took his handkerchief in his hand, and began to walk back and forth with as much of the air and gait of a woman as he could assume. Then he would take out his knitting, smile amicably, sit down with finikin niceness, and knit, holding his head affectedly now this way, now that, with many an accomplished smirk. (607)

Japhet's preening evokes sympathy, not laughter. Secrecy, embarrassment, frustration, longing: these are the sentiments the author stresses as Japhet's predicament is described. "The imaginary woman kept on knitting, smirking, and smiling, till the two hours he had allotted himself were over" (607).<sup>19</sup> Night after night Tiddy and his sisters watch him, transfixed but not laughing or mocking, while conspiring to find a way to get back their missing clothes, to no avail. Even if they were to succeed, Japhet has transformed them dramatically with his needlework skills, tailoring them to fit his larger frame. For two hours each night he walks back and forth dressed in his altered creations, the author poignantly explains, "with as much of the air and gait of a woman as he could assume."

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19. The word *smirking* did not connote the haughtiness and disdain it does today. In the nineteenth century *smirk* meant *smile* and came to mean smiling in an affected or self-conscious way. The self-conscious, abashed smirk was a favorable, not unfavorable, attribute. Sir Walter Scott, in his novel *Waverley*, wrote, for example, "Fortunately, the bride, all smirk and blush, had just entered the room" (Scott, *Waverley; or, 'Tis Sixty Years Since* [Edinburgh: Archibald Constable, 1814], 151).

Japhet reasserts conventional ideals of manhood in preparation for his final act. First, he demands that everyone leave the cottage for the entire day. As a “man of few words,” he insists that Tiddy, his sisters, and the children spend the day at his father’s house. Tiddy objects, but as nineteenth-century prescriptions for female behavior suggest, she “had never dreamed of having a way of her own,” and so she complies with the concise directive of a patriarchal Japhet. A sense of foreboding makes Tiddy uncharacteristically offer a revision of Japhet’s instruction, telling him she would return by five o’clock that afternoon if she hadn’t heard from him by then, even though he had said they needn’t bother returning under these circumstances. The author heightens the drama as Tiddy and the sisters wait anxiously for Japhet to call for them. A feeling of dread increasingly overcomes the women; Tiddy gets up from the table at the midday meal feeling a choking sensation, while her sister-in-law Drusy feels dizzy and “queer.” When Japhet fails to retrieve them by five o’clock, they return, search the quiet house, and shriek at what they find: the parlor is arranged for a funeral, and Japhet, exquisitely dressed as a woman, is found sitting in the garret “stone dead” (609).

Japhet’s suicide note is surprising. He did not end his life because he considered his cross-dressing sinful or deceitful, as one might expect in the colonial period or early nineteenth century; nor, according to the note, did he think of his desires as sexually perverse, as the late nineteenth-century notion of “inversion” would later classify them. Instead, the note finally reveals a person deeply committed to a sense of self that could no longer be kept hidden. Trans people today, if they have the right combination of means, family support, and determination, have access to a wide array of medical and social resources—hormones, surgery, support groups, Internet communications—to allow them to live the lives they want to live, with the bodies they choose or create.<sup>20</sup> Of course, the vast majority of trans-identified people do not have access to medical resources, and even those who do still commit suicide at alarming rates. Japhet was not able to achieve such congruence between mind and body, except in a partial, secret fashion, with the women’s clothes he illicitly acquired, altered, and covertly wore

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20. Despite the wider availability of the means to fashion one’s body and gender presentation, the transgender suicide rate remains strikingly high, particularly among trans youth. For explanations and possible solutions that go beyond the recognition and inclusion paradigms, see Dean Spade, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: South End Press, 2011).

during the silent time he spent sitting and sewing. Nonetheless, in his final act Japhet asserted his identity and orchestrated his memory as a tragic figure unable to overcome his time and circumstances but also perhaps as a critic of oppressive social conventions.

Japhet's note of explanation highlights shame, but it is not the shame readers might suppose. The disgrace is not that he cross-dressed and felt at odds with his physical body but, rather, that he could not bring himself to live truly and publicly as the person he believed himself to be: a woman. "As I have passed so long, falsely, for a man, I am ashamed to show myself in my true colors; therefore, I hang myself" (609). Japhet thus ultimately condemned himself because he lacked the extraordinary energy, strength, or courage required to live honestly and fully. Some might believe that my reading of Japhet's suicide is overly optimistic and that Japhet's shame in fact refers to his cross-dressing. I would rather take his suicide note at its word and not infer an inconsistent notion of disgrace. After all, Japhet is shown to be both proud and unusually self-aware; he was unashamed to exhibit his needlework at the county fair "with his name attached" (601). And when Tiddy's mother asks him what his sisters will think of his sudden marriage to Tiddy, he says "quite coolly," "I never ask them what they think, or any body else" (603). Japhet is a person who knows his mind, and his suicide note clearly expresses his self-perception and desires. I suggest a reading that is consistent with and does justice to the author's characterization of Japhet and that avoids the presentism of a possible modern-day interpretation of the shame in Japhet's note.<sup>21</sup>

Though Japhet could not forgive himself, those around him—and the story's sympathetic author—seem willing to do so. Ironically, if Japhet had been recognized as the woman he believed himself to be, he could not have been married to Tiddy. Yet the law and social convention recognized their union, and Japhet himself, though we know little about the nature of his feeling toward Tiddy or anyone else, exhibited a close family connection with his partner. In his will Japhet left Tiddy all his property, designating her (in a way that expresses the impossibility of their relationship) as simply "the woman I have called my wife."

Japhet Colbone's story—of a secret life, incongruous marriage, and carefully planned suicide—straddled social discourses, which first emphasized deceit, later stressed deviance, and today increasingly accepts and values the

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21. On the meanings and understandings of suicide in early America, see Richard Bell, *We Shall Be No More: Suicide and Self-Government in the Newly United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

self-expression of trans identity. Japhet, in a final act, asked to be laid out and remembered as female, a bold move that evoked no more judgment than any of the other odd freaks that characterized the Colbone family. Crowds came to see “the strange sight,” and neighbors murmured about the fortunate lack of a male heir, but only to emphasize that the peculiar male line would end with Japhet. The intergenerational oddness of the Colbone men paradoxically served to normalize the transgressive behavior of Japhet, the last of the Colbones. The family name might expire, but of course the family itself would live on through the daughters of Japhet and Tiddy, perhaps in time overcoming the patriarchy that the conflicted and troubled Japhet so fitfully embodied—and then escaped in a death mourned and remembered according to her wishes.<sup>22</sup>

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22. Pronouns speak volumes. I decided to use the female pronoun “her” for Japhet at the end of my essay because by the end of her life, Japhet had come out, as it were, as a woman. I debated using “she” and “her” throughout the essay, but decided not to, since Japhet did not choose to live as female until the end, poignantly, at her death.