Elsie Janis

“A Comfortable Goofiness”

Lee Alan Morrow

There was no eulogy. Instead, four hundred middle-aged men in old and often ill-fitting military uniforms slowly marched to the flag-draped casket, saluted, and stepped outside the chapel. In odd contrast, the pews were filled with the faces of Old Hollywood: Walter Pidgeon, Ina Claire, Clifton Webb, Pola Negri, Louise Dresser. Carmen Miranda’s husband had arranged the funeral.

In the rain, as the veterans boarded rented school buses, the famous climbed into limousines. A small group of reporters stood by, hoping for a statement. Only Mary Pickford paused.

Elsie Janis was a valiant person, a great trouper, a great soul. She was certainly one of the greatest entertainers of all time. She wanted no ostentation, no fuss. No flowers at her funeral—she’d rather the money went to charity. She was always thinking of others. She would go without things so others might have them.

I remember her when she was sixteen and the rage of New York. And when she sat beside men wounded in battle in World War I. She had a beautiful career—a beautiful life.

This ends the vaudevillian era.¹

In many ways, Elsie Janis (1889–1956) did have a beautiful career. Her impersonations of celebrities, ethnic types, and, most famously, men, gave her wealth and renown. Her front-line entertainment of World War I troops made her an international favorite. Surviving the rigors of war encouraged her to fight the restrictions of her gender and empowered her to compete with men on the highest levels. Before the war, she achieved Broadway stardom at sixteen, appeared in a series of commercially successful musicals, and toured as vaudeville’s highest paid headliner. After the war, she became one of the first women to direct a Broadway musical; one of the first women to write, produce, direct, and star in a motion picture; the first woman to produce a talking picture; the first woman
announcer on nationwide radio. She also became a facile contributor to many areas of writing—plays, novels, poetry, songs and lyrics, a comic strip, and a newspaper gossip column.

The shape of Elsie’s life and career was determined by women, most strongly by her domineering stage mother, Jennie Cockrell Bierbower, who launched Elsie as a child star and functioned as her manager for forty years. For the first half of her life, Elsie appeared to follow her mother in passive obeisance. But during World War I, when she played for the troops on the front lines, Elsie gained a maturity and a greater sense of her own power as a performer, and she began to share in making decisions that previously would have been made exclusively by Jennie. Her mother remained the primary influence in Elsie’s life, however, even after Jennie’s death in 1930. Throughout their long years of collaboration, the two women were primarily committed to each other in a relationship that was mutually nurturing and sustaining but, also, for Elsie, controlling and, at times, suffocating. Insofar as each formed close emotional bonds with other people, these bonds were chiefly with other women. While we cannot know for certain whether either Elsie or Jennie had or consciously desired genital sexual experiences with any of their close female associates, it is clear that they lived most of their lives in a gynocentric world of their own creation, and that homosocial bonds were the chief determinants of their professional success in the male-dominated entertainment industry and the military.

This essay examines the dynamics of Elsie’s homosocial world and how they enabled her unconventional career track, gender-ambiguous role identifications on and off stage, and the inspiration and opportunities she would provide to a younger generation of lesbian and gay theater and film artists.

That Elsie Jane Bierbower would go on the stage was never in doubt: it simply was to be. While pregnant in 1889, Jennie Cockrell Bierbower convinced herself that the child would be the fulfillment of her own stunted theatrical ambitions. Jennie decided that her daughter was going to be a synthesis of the great actresses of that day, having the “dramatic eloquence of Modjeska, the versatility of Maggie Mitchell, the elfin alertness of Lotta.” By the time Elsie was four, Jennie, the budding impresario, had groomed her for small parts in Columbus, Ohio’s Valentine Stock Company. After the Columbus Press-Post referred to her daughter as “the child wonder,” Jennie, against her husband John’s wishes, committed herself to creating a life in the professional theater for “Little Elsie.” Elsie remembered years later, “I think in all honesty that I should have been named co-respondent in [the] divorce of my mother and father,
for had they not disagreed over me, my future, my talent and the development of it, Mother would never have thought of looking for another reason for leaving John and John would probably never have given her the reason, but he did.”

Just as Jennie had been sent away to live with relatives by a step-mother unwilling to cope with an unwanted child, Elsie’s older brother Percy was similarly banished. He had no place in Jennie’s plans. John, recognizing that he was no match for Jennie, submitted to her will and did not contest the divorce. Divorce at the turn of the century was not a commonplace event; it was a socially damning affair. To escape the stigma, Jennie took to telling reporters she was a widow.

After the divorce in 1897, Jennie began to take out advertisements announcing Elsie’s availability for performances at “parlors, churches, schools, societies, lodges and stock companies.” Initially, most of her act—with Jennie at the piano—consisted of such children’s songs as “Little Orphan Annie” and “Won’t You Come to My Tea Party?” But soon Elsie’s imitations became the most popular feature. Jennie would take Elsie to see a performer they wished to imitate. Returning home, the two would practice together in front of mirrors, perfecting the impression bit by bit—“Well, you know, I have four eyes. I have two eyes and mamma has two. What my eyes don’t see, mamma’s do. Then sometimes I see what mamma does not.” Elsie made some money, but not yet enough to free them from dependence on John’s financial contributions. Something extraordinary had to happen to lift Elsie and her career out of the Columbus area.

When William McKinley was governor of Ohio, Elsie often was asked to entertain the invalid Mrs. McKinley. In late 1899, with McKinley now president, Elsie and Jennie traveled from Ohio to Washington during the Christmas holidays in hopes of being received. On Christmas Day Elsie entertained President and Mrs. McKinley and their guests in the Blue Room of the White House. Dressed in a dark velvet Little Lord Fauntleroy suit, Elsie began with a favorite song of Mrs. McKinley’s, “Break the News to Mother.” That was followed by a recitation, “Cease Awhile, Clarion; Clarion, Wild and Shrill.” Elsie finished with two imitations, Anna Held singing “Won’t You Come an’ Play Wiz Me?” and May Irwin singing “If You Ain’t Got No Money, You Needn’t Come ’Round.” After her prepared pieces Elsie tossed off an impromptu imitation of her host. She marched about, the likeness of the president, thrusting her hands between the buttons of her coat, and then took on his tight-lipped smile, rigid bearing, and the orotund tones of his voice. President McKinley
lifted Elsie upon his knee, kissed her, and proclaimed, “You are my little Ohio constituent and I am proud of you.” With the short slogan “Recited for the President” attached to their act, mother and daughter moved into the world of professional vaudeville.

The years 1899 to 1904 were spent in almost constant touring—split weeks in small theaters in small towns playing “continuous” vaudeville, full weeks in larger theaters in bigger towns, playing two shows a day. Their life was bounded by theaters, hotels, and railway cars and stations. Elsie performed daily—perhaps a total of forty minutes on the stage. On Sundays they traveled to the next town. The theaters were interchangeable. The dressing rooms were invariably small and either too cold or too hot, furnished with a small pitcher and bowl, and a few hooks and nails. Sometimes the room was shared with another performer and his or her trunks and traveling companions.

On Monday mornings, each performer would get a chance to speak for a few minutes with the orchestra’s leader. They would go over any difficult sections or pieces of music specially timed to the performer’s act. An orchestra in a large, first-class theater would consist of first and second violins, viola, cornet, clarinet, trombone, bass, piano, and drums and traps. Smaller theaters got by with piano and drums. Each vaudeville act carried its music in a variety of arrangements, suited to different configurations of instruments. (Musicians could tell when an act was first playing “the big time”—the piano part was well worn, while the music for the other instruments was brand-new.)

Jennie’s days were filled tutoring Elsie and tending to the management of the business. Two weeks before arriving in a town she would send Elsie’s photographs for display in the theater lobby. Travel time was given over to mending Elsie’s costumes. Once in town, Jennie would impress her personality on the local newspaper’s writers to secure favorable publicity. She sat through each interview with Elsie and later carefully pasted the articles in leather-bound scrapbooks. Each week Jennie would take out an advertisement in one of the New York theatrical newspapers to tout Little Elsie’s latest achievements. It was important to remind New York of Elsie’s existence.

Whenever in New York, Jennie sought the advice of Elsie de Wolfe and her companion Elisabeth Marbury, both professional theater women, who are discussed by Kim Marra in this volume. Jennie and Elsie often attended all-women dinners hosted by the de Wolfe–Marbury duo. Such women gave her good counsel, empowering her independence by their own example. For Jennie, men, including her own relatives, were either...
hindrances to escape or obstacles to overcome. Whenever possible, she chose to work with women and tolerated male theater professionals only to the extent that they could offer what she believed Elsie’s career needed.

The theater, for Jennie, was both refuge and salvation. It got her out of an uninteresting marriage and into a fascinating life. It enabled her to surround herself with supportive women, women who understood her own new marriage to Elsie’s career. In the culture of the theater Jennie found a niche of the greater society where she could be fully herself; she realized that the Shuberts and Keith-Albee would gladly treat her as an equal in order to get Elsie’s name on a contract.

The theater, for Elsie, was both a proving ground of her love for her mother and a playground for her own very high spirits. Elsie knew that she was the reason her parents divorced. And that knowledge made her feel a great need to satisfy her mother; if her mother were to reject her, to whom would she turn? Significantly, Jennie also understood that without Elsie, she would find herself alone.

Jennie’s single-minded ambition and devotion to her daughter eased Elsie’s arduous years of touring. Jennie decorated each hotel suite and theater dressing room with pictures of friends and family. She brought Elsie breakfast in the morning, lunch each afternoon, and supper after every performance. Skating parties were given, sleigh rides organized, moving-picture theaters bribed to remain open so that Elsie could see a film after her own performance. Jennie fought to pull Elsie from her backstage games to study other performers, fought to keep Elsie’s name in the large type she believed her daughter merited, fought for extra heat in trains and dressing rooms to protect Elsie’s health. During performances, Jennie watched from the wings whenever Elsie was on stage, sat with Elsie in her dressing room when she was not on stage, dressed and undressed her, put on her makeup and took it off. No matter how great the applause Elsie might receive, she would return to the wings where Jennie was always waiting and ask, “Did I please you, mamma?” During the early years, rumors passed that if Jennie was not pleased with Elsie’s performance, she would be spanked. Elsie even remarked once, “My ambition is to keep just one step ahead of mother’s ambition for me.”

As Elsie mastered her craft, Jennie came to realize that touring in vaudeville was not the fullest theatrical education for a future career on the legitimate stage. Elsie’s confidence on stage was marked, and her talent as a mimic was unquestioned. A long career in vaudeville was theirs for the taking, but Jennie believed that it was on the legitimate stage of Broadway, in musical plays, that Elsie’s real fortune and enduring fame...
would be made. So Jennie signed for Elsie to play regional tours of *The Belle of New York*, *The Fortune Teller*, and *The Little Duchess*. When Elsie opened as “Flo Berry, masquerading as the ‘Little Duchess,’” she was for the first time the star of a musical-comedy company. During the final act the plot was suspended while Elsie took center stage to present her imitations. One reviewer said that the “other members of the company were forced to retire in the face of her encores” and that Elsie’s performance was “a series of ovations.”

Vaudeville performers yearned for the legitimate stage for many reasons. The prestige of appearing as the leading player in a Broadway company greatly outshone that of being merely one act on a bill. Even the greatest vaudeville headliners spent only twenty minutes on the stage. Starring in a Broadway musical meant three hours before the public. Vaudevillians often were desperate for relief from the ennui of doing the same act some six hundred times a year.

On New Year’s Eve, 1904, the tour of *The Fortune Teller* ended in St. Catherine’s, Ontario. As her daughter slept, Jennie opened Elsie’s diary and read that night’s entry. Jennie was governor of both the public and private Elsie. In the first minutes of 1905 Jennie wrote on that diary’s final page,

And thus, dear girl, another year is ended! Would that I could always be more and more each year to you! Don’t forget that Mother it was who first gave you thought and Mother it was who first taught you how to use that thought. As you grow older, you will find much that does not please you. When such times come, when you think you know more than I do, just say to yourself, “Well! If I do know more, after all, it was Mother who did most to help me!” Please, dear, Do study and elevate your thoughts and actions. I’m not much help! I’m so anxious, worried, nervous and not always reasonable, but I love you! May God’s choicest blessings be yours every year. Mother.

The ability of children under the age of sixteen to perform in New York was controlled by the Gerry Society—the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children—headed by Commodore Elbridge T. Gerry. Jennie’s efforts to arrange performances for Elsie in New York had been of limited success. Children could “recite” (thus allowing them to perform in plays) but could not sing or dance. Jennie continually tried to circumvent these strictures by scanning the audience to spot a Gerry employee and then signal Elsie how far away from mere recitation she could go.
Jennie’s luck was never perfect, and she was often dragged into court on child endangerment charges. At one trial, Elsie de Wolfe presented herself as a character witness. After Jennie’s acquittal, de Wolfe and Elisabeth Marbury hosted an “acquittal party,” which was attended by Thomas Edison.

Elsie finally made her Broadway debut at age sixteen in *The Vanderbilt Cup*. Although Elsie had toured in vaudeville for ten years and had had her few fleeting performances in New York, she was not well known, and her performance in *The Vanderbilt Cup* captured New York’s fancy. It was a colossal hit. With the average Broadway actor earning forty dollars a week, Elsie’s one thousand dollars a week made her the highest-paid sixteen-year-old in the country.

*The Vanderbilt Cup* was one of 115 shows to open on Broadway that season. Joining it in competition for the audience were such shows as George M. Cohan’s *Forty-Five Minutes from Broadway* and George Washington, Jr. Patrons seeking light, nonmusical entertainment could see J. M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan*, starring Maude Adams or David Belasco’s *The Girl of the Golden West* (made into an opera four years later by Giacomo Puccini). Those looking for more intellectually stimulating material could find it in George Bernard Shaw’s *Man and Superman*.

Broadway theater managers worked to make attending a show a pleasant experience. Box offices now accepted mail orders, doormen and ushers wore evening dress, and newspaper advertisements were de rigueur. Counterweighted lines and electrical lighting made scenic effects such as those featured in *The Vanderbilt Cup* possible. The same electricity lighted the theater lobby, auditorium, and “retiring” rooms.

Broadway’s newest star was eagerly sought for interviews. Jennie always sat in. One writer noted that Jennie would have made a “capital actress, for she has the plastic countenance, the mobility of expression, which is necessary to perfect dissimulation.” Her determination to capitalize on free publicity was combined with loquaciousness: “If Elsie ran short on conversation, her mother ran long. She can tell you more about Elsie in twenty minutes than you would believe it possible for Elsie to have lived in twenty years.”

Stage mothers are a show business institution. To put their children on the stage, most had burned their bridges and could go only forward. They were ferociously protective and fiercely demanding of their child, and all of their energies were directed toward the child’s career. Jennie was an obvious example. Buster Keaton, who had himself been put on stage by his parents, observed about Jennie,
I have seen stage mothers who were furious, hysterical, given to lioness-like rages and ear-bending tantrums, but never another like Mrs. Bierbower for do-or-die energy in putting a daughter over. Even then, when Elsie Janis sang on the stage, Mrs. Bierbower, watching from the wings with a hypnotized look on her face, sang every note with her as though transported.\(^\text{12}\)

One day, Jennie was not present when Elsie was interviewed by Forrest Arden of the *Chicago Examiner*. Elsie, for once unchaperoned, stated,

> Now, to tell the truth, when I say I want to be something more than I am, take it that somebody's lied to you. It's mother who takes me wherever I go. As for me, I'd rather sit about and be happy without having to work too hard. But Mamma Svengali—that's what I name her—rings the call bell and I have to respond.\(^\text{13}\)

However, the balance of power in their relationship was in continual flux, as each depended upon the other for success. To the partnership Elsie gave her talent. That talent earned the money. In return, Jennie gave her own very real talents for negotiation and management. While Jennie negotiated all the contracts and arrangements, Elsie could focus chiefly on performing and playing. To the public, Elsie was one of the most unaffected, disarming, genuine performers on the stage; it was Jennie who came across as the pushy, demanding one. Her conversations with managers, producers, and reporters were peppered with phrases such as “Elsie wants,” “Elsie needs,” and “Elsie feels.” Eileen Lamb, Elsie’s longtime maid and housekeeper, remembered an incident that revealed the backstage dynamics of the partnership. Elsie and Jennie arrived at the theater to be told that the star dressing room had mistakenly been given to another performer. With the theater manager, Elsie was all smiles, but under her breath she hissed to Jennie: “Get me that dressing room or I won’t go on.” This threat was always her trump card with her mother. Likewise, if Elsie expressed the thought that a house in the country would be swell, Jennie had one bought and furnished before the week’s end. Yet, others of “Elsie’s demands” originated with Jennie. It was Jennie who decided what salary or billing to ask for, often without telling Elsie what she had demanded in her name.\(^\text{14}\) But mother and daughter both understood that each received more from the partnership than either could have realized alone. Without Elsie, Jennie would have no means of support. Without Jennie, Elsie would have no career.

Elsie’s career was founded in the school of Personality. People came
to see Elsie Janis, not a great feat of Barrymore acting, not a great afternoon of Caruso singing. At this point in her career, she could sleep late, drive her new car (with chauffeur sitting beside her), play her matinee, nap, do the evening performance, dine fashionably late at the most fashionable restaurant, and entertain friends until dawn. Elsie’s crowd-pleasing talents and her open, winning personality gave her the freedom to conduct her life as she pleased, as long as she stayed free of scandal.

Jennie was an ever-vigilant chaperon. She refused to allow Elsie to meet anyone who could not be introduced by a close friend or a member of the family. For all Jennie’s precautions, Elsie, now lionized by the press, was constantly linked romantically with every man seen with her.

For Elsie and Jennie, career and life were as twisted as a double helix. Their mutual dependence forged them into a powerful, independent, female force in the male-dominated theater industry. This unconventional female strength and assertiveness found expression in the gender-ambiguous stage personae that became Elsie’s stock-in-trade. The Broadway musicals and touring opportunities that Jennie arranged for Elsie in 1907–13 capitalized on her emerging “unfeminine” personality.

One vehicle was The Hoyden, a French play, the rights to which had been bought simply because of its name: “Hoyden? Tom-boy? Perfect for Elsie Janis!” Producers and playwrights were learning to capitalize on Elsie’s own nature. For The Fair Co-Ed, the renowned newspaper humorist George Ade was hired to write the book. The coed of the title was Cynthia Bright, the only girl student in the until now all-male Bingham College. At a school dance she dresses as a cadet from a nearby military academy, attracting all the Bingham students’ girlfriends. After many complications, songs, dances, and, of course, interpolated imitations, Cynthia got her man.

In 1914, Elsie, the star of four extremely successful Broadway musicals and countless SRO tours in vaudeville, sailed for Europe to make her London debut—The Passing Show of 1914—in which she would sing three songs, perform in a series of sketches, and do her imitations. One of the songs, “Florrie Was a Flapper,” was meant to be performed by Elsie as Florrie. A few days into rehearsal, Elsie announced her intention to perform “Florrie Was a Flapper” in full male evening dress, playing a man commenting upon a girl he had known. Male impersonation was an extremely popular tradition in British music hall, descending from the “principal boy” in British pantomime. The most successful male impersonators in American vaudeville were British—Vesta Tilley, Ella Shields, and Cissie Loftus. Now, a confident young American was challenging the British, in
London, in a field they considered theirs. Elsie had certainly performed in drag on stage (e.g., *The Fair Co-Ed*), but until this time she had done her vaudeville impersonations of men in her usual female stage dress. The risky choice proved a remarkable success in London. The *Times* reported that “Miss Janis’s success is instantaneous. . . . She has a quaint individuality of her own which quickly established her as a London favourite last night.” \(^{17}\)

Night after night Elsie would be greeted at the stage door of the Palace by well-wishers who mobbed her car and, refusing to let her chauffeur drive, insisted on pushing the car in a triumphant procession to her hotel.

One evening, from out of the stage-door crowd came a low female voice calling, “Ah! Mlle. Janis. Vous étiez épatante aujourd’hui!” Thinking the girl was French, Elsie answered back in that language. The stranger ran up to the car, “Au revoir, Mlle. Janis!” “Why not ask her to come in for a cup of tea in your dressing-room?” Jennie suggested. Elsie called to the girl. She ran across the street, dodging a bus and was invited to come backstage after the upcoming Saturday matinee. When she returned Saturday, Eva Le Gallienne walked into the Janis’s life.\(^{18}\)

Le Gallienne felt that Elsie’s performance in *The Passing Show* was “never-to-be-forgotten,” and she wrote, “All London went mad over this fascinating and bewilderingly talented young American star. Her versatility, her charm, her marvelous dancing—now eccentric, now graceful—her amazing imitations took the town by storm.” \(^{19}\) Le Gallienne was quickly taken into the circle of friends closest to Jennie and Elsie. After the war, Elsie would repeatedly hire Le Gallienne when she was between engagements.

If Elsie contended, “I'll be a baby as long as Jennie watches over me,” \(^{20}\) her twenty-eight-year adolescence ended with America’s declaration of war with Germany. Jennie received permission for Elsie to become the first American woman to perform at camps outside the immediate Paris region and scheduled the tours to include a return to Paris every few days for rest. When soldiers learned that Elsie Janis was available, the Liberty Theatre Division of the War Department—the bureau in charge of entertainment for the troops—was swamped with requests. Elsie brought the essence of vaudeville: sheer entertainment, with an act that included popular songs and the newly emergent jazz. She was an oasis in the midst of visiting legislators and lecturers.

Elsie and Jennie quickly discovered that there were more troops in more places than she could ever entertain by doing only two shows a day. Hospitalized soldiers were not allowed to attend outdoor performances, so this required additional performances. Of course, once inside, there
were soldiers unable to be moved to a cafeteria or other central location. A passage from Elsie's diary shows how all these circumstances came together to fill the hours.

Got up at nine, still very cold. . . . Went out to the hospital. Gave one show in the hall for about fifteen hundred men, then sang under the window for the fellows in quarantine. Went through the wards singing and telling stories. They got two hundred and sixty wounded in here before yesterday. Went to tea at officers' mess. Came home to
dinner. Went out to same hall. Gave another show to fifteen hun-
dred, then down to the Y.M.C.A. and gave another. Home at mid-
night all in!21

If such a schedule was tiring for the twenty-eight-year-old Elsie, one can
only imagine the fatigue felt by the fifty-three-year-old Jennie. But even
the horrible physical strain would not keep her from accompanying Elsie
at every stop of the journey.

Eddie Hartman was a vaudeville critic for *Variety* when he enlisted.
After one of Elsie’s performances in April 1918 he sent back to the States
a review of her work. As if this were a regular vaudeville performance,
Hartman prefaced his review with the usual information.

Elsie Janis
Songs, Imitations, etc.
50 mins.
Full Stage
Somewhere in France, April 28 [1918]
Wherever she may go Miss Janis scores her usual knockout and
from the soldiers’ point of view is the biggest thing that ever came
down the pike. On this specific occasion the inimitable mimic kept
up a steady run of applause for one hour, interrupted only by convul-
sions of laughter. Miss Janis’ work is one round after another of
clever entertainment, so construed as to be comprehensible to the
boy from the sticks as well as those from the big towns. Every one
feels at home, with both general and buck private equally enter-
tained. It is an apparently carefree Elsie that we have over here, full
of the old pep so necessary and hard to keep so far from home.22

After hundreds of shows, Elsie knew her audience intimately, having
acquired the average soldier’s point of view. She knew what life in the
trenches was really like and how the soldiers felt about it—because she had
walked through the trenches and worn gas masks. She had seen the dangers
and had witnessed her “gang” in all situations—because she had fired
cannon into German-held territory. She used the slang dear to their
hearts—because she had learned the ribald, “manly” words with which
the soldiers addressed their enemies. Elsie understood that men who had
been under fire wanted to be kidded and treated “like pals, not lauded and
treated like heroes.”23 Elsie was so loved that she was given dozens of
nicknames—“The Playgirl of the Western Front,” “The Lady of the
Smiles,” and “The Sweetheart of the A.E.F.”

However, Elsie’s appeal to the troops was not the conventional het-
erosexual female/male matrix. She had never presented herself as a “sex symbol” in her career, preferring to play more in the tomboy/girl-next-door arena. Her daily “costume” while with the troops was a long dark blue skirt, white blouse, dark blue sweater, and a dark blue beret. The beginning of every performance found her sitting on the front lip of the stage and changing from her boots to shoes; she couldn’t dance in boots. And when she brought soldiers from the audience up onto the stage, it was not to dance with her, but to encourage them to sing or dance solo for the enjoyment of their colleagues. Elsie appeared before these men as a beloved kid sister, not as an unattainable sex object.

By consciously unsexing herself—loose, conservative clothing, a beret covering her hair, telling “soldier” stories—Elsie kept any sexual interest the soldiers might have in her at bay. She could have presented an act that would have the men howling like wolves. Instead, she was there to make them howl with laughter—a means of maintaining both physical and emotional distance. It was this dropping of all seeming pretense that had the distinct action of camouflaging Elsie’s personal life. This gal-next-door was neither female or male, simply neuter.

During the war, the relational balance between Elsie and Jennie shifted. While Jennie made all the arrangements and traveled every mile along the front with Elsie, it was Elsie who stood up on stage under the bombardment and conquered thousands of men. Her triumph over adversity and appeal to these soldiers empowered her to take more control over her career. It was a transformation noticed by many. Maurice Chevalier had known Elsie before the war. Then he had considered her “boyish.” After the war, when he joined Elsie in London to make his debut there with her, his feelings changed. Elsie, said Chevalier, “worked with the trained precision of a boxing champion.” He came to consider Elsie “the most independent woman in show business.” With her increased maturity and independence, the “boy” Elsie became a “man.”

After the Armistice, Elsie and Jennie returned to America to re-create their wartime entertainments, to show those who had stayed behind what had become so popular with the troops. News of Elsie’s personal heroics and her unselfish performing at the front had made her a national heroine in America. Everyone now wanted to see what “their boys” had seen. An additional selling point of the show, Elsie Janis and Her Gang, was that the cast consisted primarily of men and women who had been overseas in the war effort. While Jennie and Elsie had always been intimately involved in the direction of their productions, now for the first time Elsie...
billed herself as director. Eva Le Gallienne, a cast member, remembered how Elsie conducted rehearsals.

[Elsie would] direct in one corner of the hall a sketch, in another corner a specialty number, while in another corner she would try to initiate me into the mystery of “turns.” In the meantime she would be jotting something down on a piece of paper. At the end of an hour the sketch, the specialty and the turns would be pretty well set and she would produce on the piece of paper a corking set of lyrics for the composer’s latest tune. What a worker!26

One day she stopped the chorus and roared, “Where’s that fellow I told to stand on that bench?” He finally appeared from backstage.

“Didn’t I tell you to stand on that left bench?”
He stood at attention. “Yes, sir.”
“Well, cut out the ‘sir’ and stay on that bench until I tell you to come down.”27

In the second act, Le Gallienne and Elsie, dressed as a French soldier, danced a “potpourri number.” It began with a fox-trot, became a tango, then a waltz, and finally ended with the then-popular Castle walk. At another point, Elsie, still dressed as the soldier, sang to four maidens (dressed to represent the Allied nations) “I Love Them All a Little Bit.” What today would be camp and more than tinged with lesbian overtones was then thought by Alexander Woollcott to be a great moment “not to be forgotten in a year of theatre-going.”28

By the midtwenties the popularity of Elsie’s “gang” shows had run its course and her career stagnated. She headed the Los Angeles production of Gershwin’s Oh, Kay!—a rare performance without interpolated imitations—but she dropped out of the show after a few months, citing “fatigue.”29 She made her Paris debut, in French, in a revue that featured a scene set on the Isle of Lesbos. Elsie did not appear in this scene, perhaps because she feared it was too risqué and would jeopardize her reputation for providing “clean entertainment.” In the final number, however, Elsie did, as was now her custom, appear in male dress.

Realizing that because of her age and changing audience tastes she could no longer sustain a viable stage career, Elsie announced her retirement from performing in 1928. She settled in Beverly Hills and channeled her talents and ambitions primarily into the even more masculine-identified enterprises of writing, directing, and producing for stage and screen. She wrote music and lyrics, scripts and dialogue and, with Paramount on Parade, became the first woman to produce a talking picture.
Elsie Janis as World War I soldier in one of her "Gang" shows

(Collection of the author.)
In late June 1930, she directed the musical numbers for Cecil B. DeMille’s first musical, *Madam Satan*.

This new career path, however, was soon interrupted by Jenny’s death from pneumonia in mid-July 1930. During the days that followed Jennie’s funeral, Elsie began to sort through Jennie’s belongings and discovered a sealed envelope containing a letter written seven months earlier on New Year’s Eve.

We have lived fifty-fifty and I leave content if you will just carry on and not grieve. I shall always be near you. I know we could not have lived as we have and not still be close to each other. Don’t get hard. Love and give as we have always done. Don’t weaken. You will have hard times. God tries our fortitude to make us see Him and know Him better. Right or wrong, He will be near you as I will. You should be a rich woman, dear, but we have lived without thought of riches and if you will try to be happy, I’ll carry on Somewhere, Somehow! My prayers, my love and all I have is yours, Mother.30

Even after death, Jennie continued to be a major determinant of her daughter’s life course, whether Elsie lived in concert with her mother’s desires or in reaction against them. In her 1932 autobiography, *So Far, So Good*, Elsie wrote of the announcement she made after the funeral,

I have made the decision not to marry . . . and that is only a continuation of a resolve that I made while [my mother] was alive. And now that she is gone, I do not believe that conditions are changed greatly . . . and I believe that my work will give me all the companionship that I want.31

Elsewhere in the autobiography, however, Elsie contradicted this credo. When published, the text began, with “For the first time in my life I have lost my sense of humor over a man!” and concluded,

I have fallen in love with one young enough to be my son had I been as precocious in the home as in the theatre. I know that it couldn’t last. I know that the joy thereof will be overbalanced by the misery, but if I am at last to marry, I don’t see why I should not have the experience I would have had at seventeen with someone young and not over-experienced.

On December 31, 1931, Elsie married Gilbert Wilson. At Elsie’s specific request, the “obey” clause was omitted from their vows. Wilson, sixteen years Elsie’s junior, had been born in Chicago and played semi-professional football there before moving to Los Angeles hoping for a
motion-picture career. When the marriage was announced, the reporters’ first questions, naturally, dealt with the difference in their ages. Wilson responded, “If Mrs. Wilson were not a famous woman no one would ever guess it. I’m a lot older than she is in many ways. We do not feel there is a year’s difference in our ages.” Elsie’s answer was more revealing.

This being my debut on the stage of matrimony some may wonder why I took a husband 16 years younger than myself. Well, I’ve never had a child. Now I have a husband and he can be my child, too. . . . and I don’t see why I should start in the great gamble with someone of my own age who knows all about it when I am an absolute beginner. Anyway, we are happy for the moment and sufficient unto the day is the joy thereof.32

Elsie also mentioned that Wilson filled the “great companionship need” that had been a part of her life since the death of Jennie.

Because of Elsie’s gender-ambivalent persona and the fact that her primary emotional relationships had always been with other women, chiefly her mother, Elsie’s friends were as confused as the public about this life choice. Rather than a conventional marriage, however, this union represented a complex response to Jennie’s stifling influence over Elsie’s life. The marriage expressly reversed the power dynamics of the mother-child relationship, placing Elsie in the dominant role. Although with far less success than Jennie, Elsie even tried to mold her “child’s” career by arranging screen tests for him at Paramount and MGM. In Wilson, Elsie embraced the husband and son Jennie had rejected to devote herself to her daughter’s career.

Besides these relational dynamics, there is some evidence to suggest that the marriage served as a “beard” enabling both partners to participate in the same-sex subculture of Hollywood. In 1934 Elsie was asked by Leonard Sillman to serve as production supervisor for a new revue featuring a cast of unknowns. Elsie was to provide her expertise as a variety artist, but also to help raise funds from her Hollywood friends. The New Faces of 1934 introduced to New York audiences Imogene Coca and Henry Fonda. Also in the cast was Nancy Hamilton, Katharine Cornell’s lesbian companion.33 Elsie attended parties at which same-sex desire was not masked. At one such party she arrived, dressed in men’s clothes, carrying a riding crop, and accompanied by Marilyn Miller, a major Broadway star.34 Elsie’s husband, also in New York at the time, had originally been cast in New Faces as a condition of Elsie’s participation. She was forced to fire him two weeks before opening. He landed a
spot in the chorus of Noël Coward’s *Set to Music* and after that often accompanied Coward to parties.

Life had been simple while Jennie was alive. Elsie did not have to think about her career or her life. She certainly did not have to think about dating or sex. Now, on her own, Elsie bounced from job to job, from point to point on the social compass. It is not difficult to see why Elsie tried on so many different personae. After all, she was an impersonator and was probably more comfortable being anyone but her own self. It is not surprising that Elsie eventually chose nothingness: living in sexless seclusion with her housekeeper and chauffeur.

If Elsie attempted to forge new personal and professional relationships in Hollywood, her mother’s memory continued to intercede. One day Elsie came into rehearsal announcing that she had the perfect opening for the show. She said she had a long talk with Jennie, and Jennie suggested beginning the show in heaven with angels looking down on the young performers. Jennie remained such a part of Elsie’s life that at all script conferences Elsie always set an extra chair in the circle for her. At one point Elsie freely admitted that her life was not perfectly normal by anyone’s standards. “All my life things have happened to me that made people talk—I know they say I am goofy now. Well, let me tell you, it’s a very comfortable goofiness.”

Having been intimately involved with a show rekindled in Elsie a desire to perform. In December, Elsie was introduced in a special program as the first woman staff announcer on NBC radio. Once Elsie was allowed to read news bulletins, but listeners complained that a woman’s voice was inappropriate for such serious matter. Staff announcers had to operate the switchboard that controlled on-the-air programs, check copyright credits on songs, and write department reports on various programs. Worst of all for Elsie, staff announcers were expected to remain anonymous. Within weeks Elsie left. Her only means of employment was performing, yet she was unwilling to work as anything less than a star.

A year later, on July 5, 1936, the *Tarrytown (New York) News* published a letter addressed to “My dear Boss.” Following a car accident, Elsie said that she had experienced a kind of religious conversion or reawakening and had gotten the “orders” for which she had been waiting: she was auctioning everything “except the talent, personality, pep, or whatever it was that put me in the money as Little Elsie and kept me there for 30 years.” Elsie had come to think of God in military terms—a commander in chief issuing his inexorable orders from HQ. Divine inspira-
tion started Elsie on a plan to devote the remainder of her life to charity. It is hard not to read into this conversion the simple idea that Elsie was merely replacing Jennie’s missing guidance with that of another omnipotent being. Elsie told friends she would not have been spared if God had not had some purpose in mind. Therefore, she was devoting the rest of her life to helping other people and “making people happy.”

For the next several years, Elsie worked intermittently as a Hollywood writer and attempted to return as a performer on stage and screen without lasting success. These efforts included a stint with old friend Eva Le Gallienne in Frank Fay’s Vaudeville. Elsie’s imitations served as the draw in the first act, Le Gallienne’s balcony scene from Romeo and Juliet was the second-half draw, the “class” act. The bill also featured Smith and Dale with their “Dr. Kronkheit” sketch, a high-wire walker, and one “Maxine de Shone,” a striptease artiste. The show was well received, but the audiences were small. Fay prevailed upon Elsie and Le Gallienne to accept less than their full salaries to keep the show going. The second week they got half salary, a token salary the third, and nothing for the next four weeks. The women laughed over the situation, wondering whose bank account could endure the longest. Fay wanted to tour the show, and it took solemnly delivered promises to convince Elsie and Le Gallienne to continue. After two weeks in Boston with only small cash gifts to the stars, Frank Fay’s Vaudeville closed.

On April 19, 1941, just over a month past Elsie’s fifty-second birthday, Gilbert Wilson enlisted in the United States Army. Elsie recognized the irony of the situation by saying that “having sent everybody else’s husband into the 1st war, it is the least I can do to have my own go into the Army.” Wilson would be gone for over five years—six months and the duration. For a while after Wilson’s return he and Elsie attempted to continue their life together. Elsie was fifty-two and Wilson thirty-six—she had reverted to her “old maid” habits and “snuggled back into my old groove.” They separated but never divorced. He never remarried.

During this war Elsie traveled every day—driven by Frank Reme, her World War I army chauffeur—to the Veterans Hospital at Sawtelle, California, where she would read to the soldiers, help them to write letters, or, especially for those veterans of World War I, tell a few jokes or even sing a song. Several times, for the benefit of the war effort, Elsie gave public performances. She appeared as a special guest on Dinah Shore’s radio program—the sweetheart of the “war to end all wars” alongside one of her successors. In April 1942, Elsie joined Bob Hope and Jerry Colonna to perform before four thousand soldiers at the Long Beach,
California, naval base. Elsie Janis was singing songs for the sons of fighting fathers.

On August 16, 1949, Elsie gave her final performance. That day marked Ethel Barrymore’s seventieth birthday, and ABC radio had prepared a nationwide tribute to the actress. Among those offering congratulations were Lionel and John Barrymore, the Lunts, Spencer Tracy, Cary Grant, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Presidents Truman and Hoover. Elsie contributed an imitation of the honoree.

Elsie’s remaining years until her death from cancer in 1956 were spent in quiet routine. She would visit the VA hospital, spend an hour daily praying in the All Saints Episcopal Church in Beverly Hills, entertain a few friends, and write in her diary. She lived in virtual seclusion, shunning publicity, and hoped that her death would receive as little notice as her life had in recent years. However, although Elsie had not performed in decades and her career’s peak was forty years past, the New York Times paid her due tribute on the front page. Newspapers in London and Paris also gave wide coverage to her death, which occurred just nineteen days short of her sixty-seventh birthday. She had an amazing career, touching all the forms of popular entertainment of her time, save circuses and Wild West shows. Her life had taken her all over the world and, during World War I, she had become one of the most famous women in the world. Her lasting legacy has proven not to be in her own shows, or songs or books, but in those women who followed the paths blazed by Elsie. Some women—Eva Le Gallienne and Nancy Hamilton, especially—knew firsthand of her pioneering work and followed in her path as directors and producers.

Elsie left specific instructions that the funeral be as “private and unostentatious as possible,” that only close friends attend, that there be no eulogy and “No flowers! This by special request, as I hate seeing them wilted and I would like folks to send the money they would cost to some charity.” On Thursday, March 1 at 2:30 in the afternoon, Elsie’s casket was interred in a crypt just above Jennie’s in the Forest Lawn Mausoleum. The Daughters of the American Revolution later placed a plaque upon Elsie’s crypt. It reads, “ELSIE JANIS, 1889–1956, ‘Sweetheart of the A.E.F.’”

NOTES

1. Los Angeles Times, February 28, 1956, i.
2. Elsie Janis, So Far, So Good! (New York: Dutton, 1932), i.
3. “All Unconscious of the Gaze of Admiring Spectators Was This Little Danseuse,” Columbus Press-Post, n.p., Elsie Janis Scrapbook, 1:5. The scrapbooks, hereafter cited as EJS, followed by volume and page numbers, are in the author’s possession. Kept by Jennie, the volumes are numbered sequentially and cover the years 1894–1900 (vol. 1), 1901–4 (vol. 2), 1905–6 (vol. 3), 1907–11 (vol. 4), 1912–17 (vol. 5), 1918–19 (vol. 6), 1919–20 (vol. 7), and 1920–27 (vol. 8). As the clippings are closely cropped, many are difficult to identify, especially dates and page numbers.

4. Janis, So Far, So Good! 16.


6. “‘Little Elsie’—The Protegee of the President,” unidentified newspaper (1901?), 12, EJS 1:74.

7. Jennie would soon follow suit in finding a more “adult” name—“Little Elsie” becoming “Elsie Janis,” a surname derived from Elsie’s middle name, Jane.


10. Janis, So Far, So Good! 35.


15. “Miss Elsie Janis the 18 Year Old Star Says She Is Abundantly Satisfied with Her Quick Success in Musical Comedy and Never Intends to Inflict Upon the Public Another Juliet,” New York Herald, January 21, 1906, 14.

16. The first incarnation of the “flapper” character on stage.


21. Janis, So Far, So Good! 188.


29. The cause of her fatigue was the much better reviews Elsie’s understudy received when Elsie was forced to miss several performances due to vocal distress.
31. Ibid., 343.
33. Hamilton and Elsie had known each other for years, as Hamilton had been the Smith College roommate of Elsie’s cousin, Mary Loren Jeffrey. It had been Elsie who suggested Hamilton to Sillman.
34. Richard Hecht, interview by the author, July 22, 1983.
39. Elsie Janis, Last Will and Testament, 1955, Record Department, Los Angeles County Surrogate Court.