

# Vision of Masculinity

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### **Abstract**

*This paper explores masculinity in the eighteenth century by looking at female cross-dressers in the military. It deals with how ideas about gender were disseminated in the eighteenth century, achieving masculinity, (as it was and is the aim of the military) and explores developing proficiency in wearing the uniform and reshaping identity. These were paramount to the success of these cross-dressing women. The paper focuses on women, such as Hannah Snell, who fought as a male in the Royal Navy in India, who entered the military in search of husbands and lovers, for economic reasons or out of a sense of high adventure. Although theorists such as Marcel Mauss, Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault were not writing specifically on cross-dressing, the implications of their discussions on the body, directly relate to the cultural practice of dressing of the body and the way in which the acculturated body is managed in society.*

### **Introduction**

The way in which we dress is fundamental to expression of gender, as is the way in which our bodies animate clothes. The combination of these two elements of the practices of gender is addressed in this paper and it explores achieving the vision of masculinity, particularly in the military, in the eighteenth century, through the case study of Hannah Snell, a young woman who entered the Royal Navy and fought the French off the coast of India in the 1740s. The paper discusses developing proficiency in wearing the uniforms and reshaping identity through sailor's dress. These notions were paramount to the success of cross-dressing women who used the military for various periods in their lives.

A number of scholars from various disciplines are used to explore how the cross-dresser in the military was enabled. In this paper I use the writings of Marcel Mauss, in particular his 'techniques of the body', and I refer to the works of Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault and Judith Butler.

Hannah Snell has been frequently used as an icon of female-cross dressers. However, much of the commentary is based on secondary sources, rather than the original biography by Robert Walker in 1745. This biography also presents problems in that it panders to the eighteenth century mild erotica market rather than providing substantial factual information. Recent works by Mathew Stephen (1997) and Suzanne Stark (1996) go some way to rectifying this deficiency. I use Snell as she represents an ideal of masculinity that required a specific performance of gender.

### **Achieving femininity**

One conduit for gaining information about dress is through what I nominate as animated ways of dressing. The most immediate means was through first hand experience of observing the way family, friends and community wore clothes. Going to church or entertainment outings, such as military spectacles, assisted in the socialisation of gender. Shopping and promenading on the streets, which were new forms of display, came into being through the creation of shops and new architectural spaces in the cities, as well as the basic concept of paving to walk on (McNeill & Riello, 2005). The rise of the new consumer was implicit in the dissemination of ideas on femininity. Travelers and visitors, either strangers or family members returning after working at some distance from home, provided descriptions or examples of dress from perceived centres of fashion. Those employed as servants were also an excellent channel for passing on information. Etiquette manuals provided not only information on the right clothing for the specific time of day, but a context of how to behave in relation to particular architectural spaces and how to animate clothing in the accepted gendered mode. A more indirect way was through print media: magazines, newspapers, novels and fashion plates.

Women of the eighteenth century went to extraordinary lengths to meet the cultural norms of femininity. Daily attention to their anatomy by corseting their bodies, styling their hair in the extreme styles of the eighteenth century, painting their faces in make-up, learning to walk and dance in the appropriate feminine mode, were some of the ways for internalising social norms (Foreman, 1998, Weber 2007, Ribeiro 1984). Why would they not go to the same lengths to achieve masculinity if so motivated? Wearing uniforms and cultivating the required 'techniques of the body', presented an opportunity to distance themselves from the system that subordinated them as females. The rewards for a cross-dressing female could be greater than remaining as the culturally accepted notion of an eighteenth century female as discussed below. Needless to say a male transgressing gender did not and still does not have the same rewards – the activity tends to be derided and seen as mere entertainment by society at large. Being masculine is the preferred default and masculine symbols, such as military uniforms, are more highly valued.

In this period these 'passing' women<sup>1</sup> were not acting as a cohesive group to change the masculinity of the military or to highlight the subordination of women in society in general. Their numbers appear to be too low. Cross-dressers of this period used small individual acts with no obvious effects on the broader system but which may have paved the way for later change in the military two centuries later.

The resistance to the norms of femininity by these women remains open to interpretation. But what is clear was their pursuit of a different life. A number of females, such as Hannah Snell who fought as a male in the Royal Navy in India, entered the military in search of husbands and lovers, for economic reasons or out of a sense of high adventure. When stories of cross-dressers did come to light the women were described as patriotic: putting on the king's uniform to defend the country (Stephens 1997, p17; Wheelwright, 1989: 11-19).

### **Hannah Snell**

Like many young provincial women of the period, Hannah Snell left her home in Worcester at seventeen, and traveled to London in search of a better life. She lived with her married sister, Susannah and brother-in-law, James Gray. She then met and married a Dutch sailor, James Summs, who treated her cruelly; he associated with prostitutes and he appeared to have had criminal tendencies. Snell became pregnant, but seven months into the pregnancy, Summs left taking most of her possessions. Hannah's daughter was born but died in the following months. (Walker, 1989: 6)

Hannah Snell took on the identity of brother-in-law, James Gray, to chase after Summs. Disguising herself as a male was one way for a female of Snell's class to travel alone. Snell was successful in her disguise and was initially impressed into the army and sent north to Coventry<sup>2</sup>. However, a contentious incident occurred and she was supposedly given 500 hundred lashes. Subsequently, Snell deserted the army and headed to Portsmouth to voluntarily enlist in the Royal Navy. She set off on the *Swallow* in 1747 for India (Walker, 1989: 10). Some of these details need to be questioned, as going off in the army to land-locked Coventry would not have found her sailor husband. Stephens warns that often Walker's biography is coloured to appeal to his readers rather than provide factual details (Stephens, 1997: 10-11). As well, the literary and gender conventions of the time seem to prevail in his writings. Stories of female cross-dressers living in close quarters with

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<sup>1</sup> 'Passing' is a term used to denote someone dressing in the opposite gender. See Lynne Friedli, "'Passing Women' - a Study of Gender Boundaries in the Eighteenth Century," in *Sexual Underworlds of the Enlightenment*, ed. G S Rousseau and Roy Porter (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York & London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> During the eighteenth century Britain was continuously involved in warfare. One way of securing manpower was to 'impress' able bodied men to fight. This took the form of virtually kidnapping men who could not prove that they were not of noble birth.

men were written for a male readership and aimed at the lower classes, although her story did make it into the more middlebrow *Gentleman's Magazine* in July 1750. Dekker & Van de Pol (1989: 4) posit that 'autobiographies' were packaging for a primarily fictional story.

The female pursuit of a male lover sent to war was the most common explanation cited in ballads and songs. Dekker and van de Pol (1989: 29) also cite hatred and difficult relationships as a reason to leave home and use cross-dressing as a means of escape. Suzanne Stark, in her study of female tars<sup>3</sup> demands that we go beyond this notion of the lovelorn 'passing' women, as life for the sailor was brutal (Stark 1996: 4). Snell was certainly not lovelorn and it can only be conjecture as to the real reason for her cross-dressing as such thoughts are not recorded.

I believe that economic motivation was very strong for lower class women, such as Snell, who were abandoned, or for those widowed. Institutional charity existed for such women, but this was not as freely available for younger able-bodied women; older women tended to benefit from charity. Prostitution was viewed as a last resort to economic freedom: cross-dressing was seen as an alternative. Although the working conditions of sailors were harsh and their health poor, the economic motivation was very strong. The attraction to joining the navy was that crew members were permitted to bring back goods to trade. It was a profitable privilege and compensatory (Dekker & van de Pol, 1989: 33).

Furthermore I believe that these passing women also persisted beyond the difficult circumstances because they enjoyed physical challenges – they possessed a strong nerve, some intelligence and an awareness of the performance of gender. William Brown, a black woman, quarreled with her husband, joined the navy and served for twelve years. She was captain of the foretop, which was the upper section of the foremast. Brown was agile, unafraid of heights and experienced at working with the sails. She was well respected in her work and despite being found to be female she was granted re-entry with two months advance wages, slop clothes and tobacco (Stark 1996: 86). Dekker and van de Pol also noted that a number of women re-enlisted again after being tried in court (1989: 19). The taste of social freedom, male privileges of the most profitable jobs and recreational activities as well as control of money prolonged the disguise.

Up until the early twentieth century most cases of cross-dressing came to attention through court cases or through serious injury. The passing women who ended up in court were charged with fraud rather than sexual deviation.

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<sup>3</sup> Tars derives from the use of tarpaulin, which was canvas coated in tar for waterproofing. Old canvas was cut up and used for clothing, hence sailors were referred to as tars. Female tars are cross-dressing women. Suzanne J Stark, *Female Tars; Women Aboard Ships in the Age of Sail* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1996).

There may have been a higher incidence of cross-dressing by successful women who were not brought to the attentions of the authorities. One rationalization for cross-dressing given in court cases was patriotism. Britain was at war frequently in the eighteenth century and much of the population was caught up in the excitement of the war, women included. However, we cannot always be sure of the real reasons and motivations as these are generally not recorded.

The tradition of cross-dressing women associated with the military is extensive, from mythological Greek Amazons to Flora Sandes in the early twentieth century (Wheelwright, 1989; Dekker & van de Pol, 1989; Bullough & Bullough, 1993; Garber, 1992, Adie, 2003). Bullough and Bullough (1993: 110) noted that women cross-dressers tended to come from lower classes. Women frequently cross-dressed as an attempt to gain social status, whereas male cross-dressers often came from a higher social class where loss of status would be moderated by the male's stable position as a member of an aristocratic family or a religious group.

### **Achieving Masculinity**

For a lower class woman like Snell she needed to develop a proficiency of wearing masculine clothing. She not only had to know what to wear, but also had to have proficiency in wearing it. Snell's grandfather and her brothers had been in the military. One anecdote described Hannah's love of dressing up as a soldier at the age of ten and parading around the town with her friends (Stephens, 1997: 14). Her familiarity would not only have brought about an awareness of how the male body moved in uniform but Snell also had the motivation of trying to find Summs, and hence eased into a new identity. Her behaviour recalls what Marcel Mauss (1973) called 'techniques of the body'. Soldiers and sailors have a particular gait and demeanor that can be cultivated. Their 'techniques of the body' are also assisted by the cut of clothing affecting the carriage of the body, as well as power structures which determine deferential behaviours to those dominant or subordinate to them. These male occupational behaviours become internalised after years of repetition.

In the cross-disciplinary vein, Mauss adopts a triple viewpoint of the physiological, the psychological and the societal factors to comprehend the total person. Techniques of the body highlights internalised social factors and their manifestation in the body. Mauss, as an anthropologist writing in the early twentieth century, studied cultural differences of the ways in which bodies performed. He proposed that movement is culturally contingent and therefore asserted that the 'natural' body does not exist. His heightened awareness of cultural, and occupational, 'techniques of the body' coloured his observations of human movement in day-to-day activities. According to Mauss these quotidian and unremarkable practices such as walking,

running, eating, and drinking become stylised and can affect the physical shaping of the body. (Mauss, 1973: 73)

Two unrelated examples Mauss uses are illuminating in the context of eighteenth century cross-dressing in this paper. He comments on the way women learn to walk in high heels, a feat that requires training and is a marker of socialisation in that the majority of men do not seek to acquire this skill. This notion can be applied to women learning to walk like soldiers in order to assume a persona within the military. The second example he uses is the way in which soldiers are taught to march. Mauss observed the English Worcester Regiment during the First World War, marching to music played by a French band of drummers and buglers. The combination became problematic. The learned rhythm produced by the French did not match the learned gait of the English march. The unsuccessful marriage of acculturated bodies and music eventually caused the band to be dispensed with (1973: 72).

Pierre Bourdieu, building on Mauss' work, also explored the body as a bearer of embodied history, by analysing how and why the social enters the body (Bourdieu, 1986). He considers how society filters through the body and how the body becomes a carrier and reproducer of the social. Although this exploration highlights how the artificial structures of class and ethnicity are internalised and can in fact hinder the way in which members of society operate, the focus of this paper is the way in which women with a heightened awareness took advantage of these social orderings and were able to operate using an artificial environment such as the military. The eighteenth century cross-dresser illustrates how the wearing of a particular set of clothes and particular 'techniques of the body' allowed a person to operate in a different social world. These women were willing and able to adopt male traits. As noted earlier, women like William Brown, were not only able to perform strong athletic tasks, clambering up rigging, rolling up heavy sails, pulling lines and taking their place at the capstan to heave up the anchor, but also, like Snell, through joining in rough games, partaking in the tough bandinage of ship mates, chewing tobacco, drinking grog, toasting the king and bellowing in the voice of a sailor (Starke 1996, Garber, 1992, Dekker & van de Pol 1989).

These examples indicate that the habitual way in which the body moves can be culturally determined through socialisation. This is key to the success of the cross-dresser: learning to perform accepted cultural roles. More recently, feminist scholar, Judith Butler (2004), has also supported these theories through her notion of performativity. She asserts that it is through techniques of the body that gender/sex is reproduced. In other words, there is no prior or 'natural' sex, only performances of male and female which are always cultural (Butler 1993, 1999). Dress is included in the performative. For the soldier, he is removed from his familial setting, ordered how to move and

dress his body; his activities are determined by others and in the eighteenth century his allegiance to the monarch was mandatory. The performative is regulated. This occupational clothing, such as military dress, also brings to mind Foucault's 'docile body': the military body is a blank canvas (Foucault 1973: 135).

## **Navy**

There were a number of masculinities in the eighteenth century. Within the military of that date, the Army, Marines and Navy presented varying images of gender and masculinity. Here in this section attention will turn to the way in which the body animates naval costume, as Hannah Snell spent most of her cross-dressing time aboard ships. As their uniform was not fully regulated until 1857, the sailors' dress differed from the preferred eighteenth century notion of masculinity, that is, the refined fashionable gentleman with connections to the land, who displayed politeness, style and taste. I perceive that this is why Snell, after disclosing her gender on return to England, dressed in a Marines' outfit rather than a sailor's to perform on stage. The Marines' dress, had a closer affinity with the soldier which reflected the contemporary masculine ideal, whereas the stereotype of the sailor who wore looser and more utilitarian clothing, was the one who behaved with rapacity and promiscuity associated with lower classes. Disguised within such dress left no doubt of a form of masculinity displaying virility and contributed to the success of the cross-dresser.

In this section I am looking at the way in which the navy appears to have been a refuge for the cross-dresser, more so than the army. Stark records twenty women went to sea from Britain between the late seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries. Of the ninety three cross-dressers that Dekker & van de Pol (1989: 10) researched in the Netherlands during the same period, twenty two were in the land army the rest went to sea. Although they assert that the land army numbers were an underestimation and they also believe it was easier to hide one's real identity within that group, I argue that because of the style of dress worn by the sailor and the culture of performance elicited from the navy, there was a better chance for success at cross-dressing.

Sailors, as with the general population of Europe at the time, rarely removed their clothes, which would have advantaged the female cross-dresser. Since the sixteenth century linen had been the substitute or perhaps a precursor for cleaning the body<sup>4</sup>. Linen absorbed the sweat, away from the body. The under-shirt was necessary for this process and was hardly ever taken off. In the late eighteenth century there was a shift to changing the shirt a little more frequently as cotton became more broadly available, which had not been the case in previous centuries. The concept of cleanliness in the

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<sup>4</sup> Soap was not produced commercially until the nineteenth century (McLintock, 1995, p124)

eighteenth century differed, however, greatly from modern ideas. Lice and such vermin were seen to be a result of poor 'humours', rather than poor hygiene. 'Humours' were thought to be generated from the body while manners were thought of as 'cleanliness'. Wiping of the hands and face, which in modern thinking is cleanliness, was seen as being well-mannered. Water was not favoured at all; it was thought to be absorbed into the body and cause havoc with 'humours' (Vigarello 1988).

The press-gangers were not looking for the well mannered and many landsmen were press-ganged, as Snell initially was. It was not only the clothing that indicated a sailor's occupation that the 'recruiters' were looking for. His skin could be marked out with tattoos. This was done by pricking the skin and rubbing in either ink or gunpowder (Rediker, 1987: 12). The sailor's skin was tanned and weathered by the sun. His hands were scarred from working with ropes or disfigured by the hard labour of working on a ship. These body markings along with flamboyant details of his dress also made him a target for the press gangs in search of labour. His costumed body was like a passport stamped with his travels.

Once engaged in work and on board the ship, as Snell managed to do, sailors were neither fashionable nor noticed by the casual contemporary observer. The sailor actively working as a subject is rarely found, in the eighteenth century painting and prints, as the men were from the lower working class. The 'slops'<sup>5</sup> they wore were plain workmen's clothes. The fashion for imagery was for 'the heroic' as exemplified by Reynolds, Northcote and West. Most images show sailors on land, either at leisure or in the pursuit of pleasure (Quilley, 2007). Rowlandson did make a number of prints but these were made while the ships were docked and maintenance work was carried out; work was done at a slower pace. Lower class dress made an ideal candidate and suitable technology for the cross-dresser as it was not the subject of the gaze. Cross-dressers became part of the background; they pursued a mundane routine and avoided attention.

The numbers of women who were successful at cross-dressing at this time may well be far greater as living out the ordinary and mundane life was the aim of the cross-dresser. Not all of Snell's feminine skills had been masked. With her skills in preparing food in the mess where she was initially assigned, Snell ended up working in the officers' mess and became the cabin boy for Lieutenant Wyegate. She was also skilled at sewing as most sailors were expected to be. It was not as gendered an occupation as might be thought.

Within the sailors' ranks there was room for a more individualised dress. Many sailors made their own clothes on board; clothing could be made from old sail cloth. This was traditionally carried out on Thursday afternoons and

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<sup>5</sup> Clothes supplied by the navy.

'Rope Yarn Sundays' in naval parlance. Dickens (1957: 7) refers to the bo'sun's mate piping *Hands Make and Mend Clothes* while the men sewed. Robinson collected an extract from *Marine Society (1759)* which included a list of supplies for ordinary seamen. Stated, in both the boy's and the men's clothing list, the 'Bounty of Clothing' included: one paper containing seven needles, two ounces of thread and five balls of worsted (wool thread). The footnote for the men's list states:

*A true seaman will be in a whole garment, though it be laced over the seams with bits of sailcloth and packthread; and to encourage these men to do themselves justice, these materials are given.* (Robinson n.d, n.p)

A number of sources mentioned the lacing of the leg seams or silk or canvas piping on sailors' pants and jackets which added a touch of individuality (Dickens, 1957: 5; Robinson n.d, n.p). A cutting from Robinson's collection, although much later, in 1845, is a recollection in regard to naval uniforms at the time:

*I would particularly note the pride Jack had at this time in showing off his deftness with his needle by embroidery on his frocks, trousers, centerpiece of the crown of his white hat, etc, in all kinds of colours which had a gorgeous effect.* (ibid.)

I mentioned sewing and embroidery not as female gendered pursuit, but as a vehicle for decorating dress. It was a utilitarian skill for sailors. Snell was not considered unusual to have such skills.

Seamen wore their own dress until wages were earned and garments could be traded from the ship's chest. This meant that, at times, there was a diversity of utilitarian clothing available (Quilley 2007, Rediker 1987: 156). Along with clothing there was a great variation of bodies to be dressed aboard. The disguised female body was one amongst a multitude of backgrounds and ethnicities. The press-gangers were only interested in labour. There was a broad range of masculinities within the navy, which Snell took advantage of.

It was not only the individuality of the sailor's body which contributed to this breadth. Another source of variation was that it was possible for a captain to design his own uniforms and that of his men. He could select a portion of the crew and standardise their clothing, out of his own pocket. This allowed him to outfit his gig or barge that would bring him to shore in masterly and theatrical style. Butler's theory on performativity is recalled through this notion of the theatre. The captain of the *Harlequin* dressed his crew in harlequin costumes, an image that supports the notion of the ship as a theatre (Allon, 2004: 16; Dickens, 1957). In Robinson's unpublished work, a magazine

cutting noted that the HMS Tulip dressed the ship's company in green with an imitation flower reversed on their caps (Robinson, n.d.: 508).

Sailors' clothing was not fitted or tailored, nor did it enhance the masculine shape of the body as the tailored officers' dress did. The female body shape could be disguised. The variety of sailors' dress continued until 1857 when sailors had their uniforms regulated (Nice, 2004: 7). Until that time the government ordered clothing from contractors, slop sellers. Through these orders, such as the one for Richard Harnage in 1706, the variety of clothing can be seen:

*Shrunk grey Kersey jacket, lined with red cotton with Fourteen brass buttons and two Pockets of Linnen, the Button-holes stitched with Gold coloured Thread, at Ten Shillings and Six Pence. Waistcoat of Welsh Red plain unlined with Eighteen Brass Buttons, the holes stitched with Gold coloured Thread at Five Shillings and Sixpence. Red Kersy Breeches ... Three Leather Pockets and Thirteen White tin Buttons at Five Shillings and Sixpence.* (Dickens, 1957: 4)

Another order shows:

*Redflowered Shag breeches (5/6d); Strip'd Breeches, Blew and White Chequer'd Linnen Shirts (3/3d). Ditto Drawers (2/3d); Leather Cap faced with Red Cotton (1/2d); Grey Woolen Stockings (1/9d); Double Sold Shoes.* (ibid: 5)

The manner in which the clothing was worn was not regulated. For example, in contrast to the sailors, the officers' dress caused their bodies to perform in a different way. The tricorne was to be worn at an angle over the left brow<sup>6</sup>. Wearing a hat like this caused the head to be held erect, so it didn't slip. The dress of sailors' bodies was utilitarian and allowed a great range of freedom in movement which the cross-dresser could benefit by.

The performance of gender for the sailor was greater during shore leave. Even Snell participated in such adventures and managed to perform the expected gender traits of sailors: visiting a brothel in Lisbon with mates (Walker, 1989: 19-20). They were able to display quite a different masculinity through flamboyant clothing. Using their 'circular mirror inside the hat, wearing extravagant bell bottoms, twice the usual width, and blue flannel shirts embroidered with flowers' (Dickens, 1957: 7) they were able to keep up appearances ready for casual sex and association with prostitutes.

Snell managed to go undetected despite being wounded in battle and hospitalised near Pondicherry. She was released to a ship, the *Tartar*, served as a seaman while waiting to be assigned to a larger vessel. On 2<sup>nd</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Dudley Jarrett, *British Naval Dress* (London: JM Dent and Sons Ltd, 1960). p39.

August 1749, Snell signed up for the *Eltham*, which left India. Once back on board the ship, recovered from fighting wounds, Snell returned to ship life and worked as hard as her fellow sailors. On the way back to England she received news via sailors assigned to another boat, that Summs, had died at sea. Her motivation for living the life of a sailor dissipated. (Walker, 1989: 18)

The *Eltham* reached Spithead 25<sup>th</sup> May 1750. After she visited her sister's home and was welcomed back, she set out to collect her pay and she confessed her birth gender to her fellow seamen. (Walker, 1989: 32) She was still economically disadvantaged. Subsequently Snell returned to performance: this time on the stage to earn some money. Here she was touted as a curiosity. The troupe she performed with was made up of tumblers and tightrope walkers. She led a group of actresses dressed as marines in regimental marches and songs much to her audiences' delight. The audience may not have been admiring her gun handling skills as she went through her paces, but the uniform and the body within, indicated that she was an object to be viewed: this brave woman dressing as a man and fighting for her country. (Stephens 1997: 37-43)

Her end was not as glorious as the stage performance illustrated. There are records that she married twice and had two sons. Unfortunately Snell ended up in the asylum, Bedlam, with symptoms indicating tertiary syphilis (Stark, 1996 p.107).

## **Conclusion**

The vision of masculinity that Snell presented through the process of imitation is too readily divorced from the realities of warfare but it is the cross-dresser's skill at transgression that holds fascination. The display, or vision, of virility by the sailors was performed by cross-dressing women and enabled them to transgress worlds that were not generally available to them in the eighteenth century. The technology of their dress practice described assists us in the exploration of different femininities which in turn opens up a broader range of masculinities in the eighteenth century.

I doubt that Hannah Snell learnt her masculinity through courtesy books, conduct guides, essay periodicals, academic papers or treatises. She learnt to animate the dress through direct observation and an awareness of the gendered body. Snell was clearly a master in manipulation techniques of the body.

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