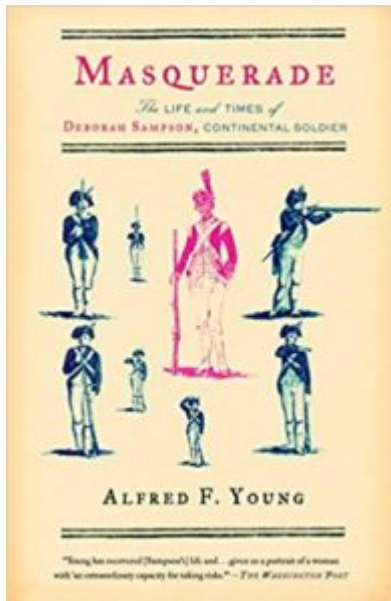


# Revealing the Many Faces of the Woman behind the Mask



Masquerade: The Life and Times of Deborah Sampson, Continental Soldier

With an abiding interest in the ordinary person caught up in extraordinary circumstances, Alfred F. Young is well suited to tackle the opaque life of one of the American Revolution's lesser-known figures, Deborah Sampson. Sampson, whose fame has undergone a resurgence of late, is best remembered for managing to hide her identity during a seventeen-month stint as a cross-dressing soldier in the Continental Army. At first consideration, her ability to pass as male defies credulity. Yet Young, as detective and storyteller, reconstructs her wartime duties in a way that makes the success of Sampson's masquerade altogether plausible.

In this biography, Young offers a compelling portrait of a woman who transgressed boundaries, not just in her military disguise but in other realms as well. As a single woman who fell afoul of religious authorities, as a soldier who impressed her superiors with her vigilance, and as a married mother of four who left her family to go on a speaking tour, Sampson challenged social norms. As Young dissects these roles, he uncovers a figure alternately honored and maligned for her army exploits, subject to curiosity, speculation, and gossip. Sampson's contemporaries and descendants alike were undecided as to whether they should celebrate or censure a woman who so clearly challenged gender constraints.

Young invites the reader on a treasure hunt as he searches for clues of

Sampson's life in the records of the time and in the memories of her descendants, breaking up her history and her legacy into five parts. In Part One: "Deborah Sampson," he traces her early years of hardship, with a father who deserted his family and a mother who lied about his absence, and the need for her to go into service at a young age. During a youth of dependence and poverty, Sampson struggled to acquire an education, learning to read and write, despite her master's displeasure. As a young adult, she supported herself as a weaver and a teacher, occupations practiced at the time by both men and women.

The taste of independence Sampson experienced as a "masterless woman," according to Young, may have contributed to her willingness to seek her fortunes as Robert Shurtliff in May 1782. Interestingly, that masquerade was not her first. Earlier that spring, the five-foot, seven-inch Sampson had donned men's apparel, signed up for the army as Timothy Thayer, and received an enlistment bounty. Apparently, she had no intention of actually joining the troops. When her criminal act of cross-dressing and her fraudulent enlistment were discovered, Sampson found herself at odds with the Baptist congregation she had joined as a young adult. Soon thereafter, she left town dressed as a man, thereby getting around many of the inconveniences and scrutiny she would have encountered traveling as a woman.

A critical source for this period of Sampson's life is Herman Mann's *The Female Review: or, Memoirs of an American Young Lady*, published in 1797. Sampson collaborated with Mann, a young and inexperienced writer, who used her experiences and then embellished, fabricated, and plagiarized to create "'a novel based on fact'" (14). To deal with the problems such a deeply flawed source presents, Young researched the religious, social, and economic landscape. Then, taking apart Mann's highly fictionalized memoir, Young evaluates apparently fanciful adventures against other evidence and rates the episodes as likely, possible, or improbable. This weighing of the evidence reveals the scholar at work: imaginative in approach and meticulous in execution.

One of the more lurid episodes surrounds a sexually charged dream that Sampson told Mann she had in early 1775. Calling on God's aid as a giant serpent approached her bed, followed by an ox that sought to gore him, Sampson bludgeoned the beasts with the violence and heroism of her biblical namesake. Young believes the dream to be Sampson's own, rather than a product of Mann's imagination, and interprets it as expressing fear of aggression as well as an early indication of the future soldier's ability to fight for herself.

Sampson's career in the army receives close examination in Part Two: "Robert Shurtliff." Young argues that Sampson was able to escape discovery partly because she excelled at her duties. A model soldier, and a prize at her height late in the war, Sampson was selected for the light infantry, a dangerous assignment that came with a special uniform. Her skills as a seamstress likely enabled her to alter it herself and thereby avoid a visit to the army's tailor. She lowered her age when she enlisted to make her lack of facial hair less

remarkable and refrained from drinking throughout her service, a wise strategy for one who needed to maintain control. Furthermore, as Young notes, “[A]rmy standards on sanitation worked in her favor” (107).

Detection was always a threat, however. Involved in several skirmishes, Sampson was wounded and may have carried a musket ball in her body for the rest of her life. When serious illness landed her in a military hospital and her identity was discovered, Sampson escaped punishment for her fraud, having earned her superiors’ appreciation for her zeal and skill in the light infantry and then as a general’s orderly.

Marriage and children followed Sampson’s discharge, but the former soldier, now the wife of Benjamin Gannet Jr., remained restless. In Part Three: “The Celebrated Mrs. Gannett” and Part Four: “Old Soldier,” Young evokes the struggles that defined Sampson’s life after the war. Money was always short, and the trappings of gentility she sought remained elusive. Alternately angry, entrepreneurial, and supplicating, Sampson devoted much of her energy and time over the next few decades to seeking recognition and reward for her military service. In the 1790s, she successfully petitioned the state government for back pay and participated in the creation of her memoirs. In 1802-03, she traveled on her own in a path-breaking public-speaking tour. Subsequent efforts to secure a pension and compensation as an invalid veteran preoccupied her for many years. The ebb and flow of her fame is the subject of Part Five: “Passing into History.”

A brief review can only hint at Young’s dazzling scholarship and the range of subjects he addresses. There are really two stories here. Foregrounded is the painstaking reconstruction of the life of a woman whose decision to disguise herself to achieve her goals led her on a remarkable journey; her path, in Young’s hands, reveals the shifting economic, religious, political, and social contours of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The constraints of gender and the politics of memory are equally intriguing. Simultaneously, this study works as a fascinating mystery, with Young as detective and the reader as collaborator. Sampson might have appreciated such an elegantly written tale, ambivalent about the exposure it brought to some corners of her life yet grateful for the recognition she felt she deserved.

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