CONJURING the MODERN WOMAN

WOMEN and THEIR REPRESENTATION in the GOLDEN AGE of MAGIC

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I. Introduction

Percy Thomas Tibbles – a thin man with large, pouting lips – is not a name (or a face) readily associated with magic. But laymen can easily recognize the illusions he engineered. Under the alias P.T. Selbit, he devised, presented, and popularized one of the most classic scenes in magic: Sawing through a Lady. In 1921, stuffing a woman into a box where she was sawn in two was not yet a standard trope in magic. Now a century later, audiences are regularly entertained by the stretching, crushing, cremating, twisting, or impaling of women’s bodies on the magic stage.

Selbit’s timing could not have been more appropriate. The 1920s ushered in more vocal demands for women’s equality and political representation. By 1920, women had gained suffrage and comprised nearly a quarter of the workforce.¹ The following year, the backlash to reinforce gender stereotypes responded – the first Miss America was crowned, Betty Crocker, the advertising icon for female domesticity, made her debut, and Sawing through a Lady entered popular magic culture. Until this point, women’s rights had gradually climbed toward gender equality. In 1836, the Seneca Falls Convention in New York produced an early feminist manifesto and by the close of the century women increasingly shied away from the passive, demurred housewife and sought careers that came with the Industrial Age’s economic boom. Even with the United States’ brief participation the First World War, women found a window of opportunity to further their economic independence “with 8.3 million females, aged 15 and up, working outside the home.”² Yet while these changes came in moderation they could not temper the reaction of conventional, male-dominated culture when women gained the right to vote in 1918 in the UK and 1920 in the US. Anti-suffragists movements spurned any notion of the so-called “modern woman” with images promoting the stay-at-home wife, others shackling the female body in chains, and the scene of a woman confined to a box where she is sawn in half.

² Ibid. p. 13
Famous magic illusions are saturated with gendered overtones and expectations of gender roles. For instance, Sawing a Lady in Half invariably places a male magician in the position of power as he saws, buzzes, slices, or hacks through his female assistant in the box. Moreover, any reproduction of this standard illusion which reverses the genders of the performers is invariably received by the audience as “peculiar” or “out of the ordinary.”

In magic, the performer is in the position of absolute power. From the perspective of historical misogyny, a woman in a position of power is a threat; thus, women magicians are more often than not portrayed as wicked witches rather than benign sorcerers as their male counterparts. Understanding nineteenth- to early-twentieth-century magic requires awareness that modern magic maintains an antiquated charm of a different era that has cast an indelible shade to its genre. Today’s image of a magician with his top hat and coattails carries nineteenth-century residue and the sexism of the era still influences the presentation and marketing of magic.

The type of magic that will be discussed in this paper is primarily stage magic. This is because in the time period that is being analyzed grand-scale illusionists are the most recognized among laymen and the general population. With its flurry of broadsides and colorful lithographs, advertisement for magic was akin to that of the modern-day blockbuster movie. Music halls were the places to catch a magic show and, given the dimensions of the music hall, the larger the venue the grander the illusion and the larger the audience. In this way, stage magic appealed to both middle- and working-class populations. As vaudeville groomed itself to family-friendly standards under the vigilance of Tony Pastor (1837-1908), stage magic catered more toward the middle-class. With dapper performers who conjured with expensive hats and lavish costumes, stage magic represented the contemporary perspectives and interests of the mainstream middle-class tastes.

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The role and representation of gender in magic is critical to understanding the expression and imprint upon the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century. At a time when male scientists declared that “the woman’s rights movement is an attempt to rear, by a process of unnatural selection, a race of monstrosities,” the magic stage offered women a space to strive for an empowered identity as a performer who achieves seemingly impossible feats – or at least until 1921. After the creation and popularization of Sawing through a Lady, magic became increasingly gendered, the illusion itself serving as a metaphor for the desire to confine and destroy the modern woman. The illusion is never named the Sawn and Restored Woman like the Torn and Restored Newspaper; rather it is distinctly the act of sawing and variations of the title – Sawing through a Woman, Sawing a Woman in Half, or simply, The Sawing – affirm this violent attachment.

As popular appeal validated the cliché of the damsel in distress, magic tightened its image as a gentlemen’s club. While flappers faded with the 1920s and the women’s rights movement lagged with the onset of economic depression, female magicians grew rarer and the role of the vast majority of women in magic became the assistant. The female assistant – both then and even now – served two purposes: a visual distraction under the license of her sex appeal and she became the subject of violent expression for the magician. She is crammed into a box where she is sawed in half or her limbs are rearranged, or she is impaled in the famous Cabinet of Swords. This paper will cover the periods preceding and following this turning point for women’s history, from 1870 to 1945. The beginning of the 1870s marked an economic transition as the United States dragged itself out of civil war and lurched toward industrialization, while in the United Kingdom the political atmosphere heated in 1871 with the formation of the National Society for Women’s Suffrage. On the end of entertainment, P.T. Barnum commercialized the traveling circus as the latest venue for show business under “P. T. Barnum’s Grand Traveling Museum, Menagerie, Caravan &

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Hippodrome,” and in 1874, a couple who would become the magic world’s powerhouse pairing, Alexander and Adelaide Herrmann, married. The following years see that while female magicians are extremely uncommon – arguably rare – they operate quite well in both the roles of fully fledged magicians who manage their own companies and magicians’ assistants. For the handful who achieved fame, magic allowed women to adopt a dominant role, shrugging off conservative notions of a woman’s subjugated place in the home and providing an unprecedented position of power. Through the popularization of Sawing a Woman in Half, women experienced a social blow and magic became increasingly gendered, rebounding only somewhat with the active role women assumed in World War II. The history of women in magic’s golden age – their representation, influence, and membership – is reflective of the social growth women experienced, the crisis of social consciousness during the women’s movement of the early twentieth century, and the struggle thereafter to establish social equality.

II. Women in Early Magic History

Women were part of magic history well before Barnum posted his first advertisement. The popular idiom that a story “won’t hold water” is actually owed to one of the earliest female illusionists in history. Tutia was a Roman vestal virgin, or a woman who had given up marriage and wifely duties for a life of celibacy dedicated to the goddess of the hearth, Vesta. Her status was called into question when she was charged with violating her oath of chastity. In her defense, Tutia claimed she could prove her innocence if she performed a miracle under Vesta’s protection. She filled a sieve at the Tiber River, held it high, and carried it through the streets to the temple. If the sieve dripped water she would be buried alive, but her journey was successful. Tutia completed this seemingly impossible feat without spilling a drop of water on the way to the temple, safeguarding
her virginity from the doubt of others. Her solution was a trick sieve. Roman sieves were essentially pans with tapering sides and holes at the bottom, so if Tutia’s had a solid surface concealed underneath it, she could have carried the water, then poured it into another receptacle after making the journey and disposed of the solid pan layer during inspection. This instance illustrates the debate and incidental illusion that arises from a woman having to defend her chastity. Had Tutia failed to prove herself a virgin, her virtue would have been tarnished. This connection between a woman’s sexual purity and her personal character defines the long-held underpinnings of historical misogyny; a woman’s power comes from her sexuality. Thus, a woman could theoretically use that sexuality to manipulate men, rendering any woman who is aware of her sexuality (ie. not a virgin) a threat. The emphasis on women’s “moral foundation” – or control over her sexuality by an external social standard – rose in importance as Western civilization became increasingly male-dominated.

Magic endured rocky public reception during the middle ages. As Christianity became the dominant religion, practitioners of pagan cults were persecuted for witchcraft. Magic had developed into a separate genre of entertainment, but the magicians’ ability to make their illusions seem supernaturally influenced fell under the scourge of religious inquisition resulting in persecution, prison, excommunication, or – the highest penalty – death. Many magicians rechristened themselves as sleight-of-hand artists to dodge the religious ire they might incur. Unfortunately, this title spawned different problems. Once it was understood that a magician was fooling the audience, the public stereotyped magicians as con men. By the thirteenth century, Louis IX of France denounced sleight-of-hand performers and jugglers as engendering “many evil habits and tastes.”

In 1584, Reginald Scott published his Discoverie of Witchcraft as an exposé on charlatans and medieval witchcraft. Contemporary magicians often referred to a passage in the book that

6 Ibid. p.16
seems to defend professional illusionists. Scott considered the persecution of those accused of witchcraft as not only senseless but also un-Christian. He therefore sought to demonstrate that the supernatural results that many “witches” – or rather, magicians – achieved was owed to completely logical means and that the greatest deception lay in how well the performer concealed these maneuvers. Magic historians attribute the *Discoverie of Witchcraft* as the turning point of magic into an officially recognized art form distinct from ritual magic that is in fact intended for supernatural rites. However, even with Scott’s published work in circulation, the notion of witchcraft had not fled the Western Hemisphere. The New World colonies would hold their last, most famous witch trial in 1692, and England would not finish theirs until twenty years later in 1712, one hundred and fifty years after Scott’s book. In both cases, women were disproportionately accused of being witches. Although there were several men convicted of witchcraft during the heyday of trials, the vast numbers of the accused were overwhelming female. “Suspicion of witchcraft was sex-related, if not fully sex-determined,” writes John Demos in *The Enemy Within: 2000 Year of Witchcraft.* From this perspective we can understand that there must have been a basic fear or at least disdain toward women, that “witchcraft embodies…a basic impulse of misogyny.” Exactly why this is requires further consideration.

To say that women in pre-Enlightenment Europe and America were powerless would be a gross overstatement. Rather, women played essential roles within their own communities as primary caregivers of the home and as instillers of moral standards. Moreover, the lives of women overlapped with those of men, particularly in the American colonies where everyday survival was dependent upon cooperation. Women also would often create their own social cliques to facilitate decision-making exclusively within their gender, alienating those who fell out of favor. For this

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8 Ibid. p. 41.
reason, droves of women would appear at the center of witch trials – as the accusers of other women. However, this does not answer the basic paradigm of how “witch” became equal to “woman.”

Already distinguished as the weaker sex – in both physical strength and spiritual – women were believed to be more susceptible to demonic influence. The height of witch-hunting fervor that immediately followed the Restoration, a complete religious upheaval in Europe, forced many Puritans to shores of the New World. With tensions high, any religious deviance was heavily scrutinized. Additionally, the patriarchal structure of Christianity promoted ongoing gendered ideologies and “according to this tradition, [men were] simply stronger and better than women: in physique, powers of ‘reason,’ in moral instinct.”9 Thus, with women identified as “the weaker sex” they were believed to lack the moral and mental faculties to resist the Devil’s persuasion.

Contemporary art consistently portrayed the Devil, and his attendants, as male, thus suggesting that even in times of cultural upheaval, women still served a figure of patriarchal authority. Mauss’ writes in his A General Theory of Magic that “it is the men who perform the magic while women are accused of it.”10 As magic and its street performers remained suspect, women also suffered the brunt of a doubt-standard. Pervasive misogyny deemed any magic a woman did as black magic, not a performance art, and consequently women received double the public scorn.

In 1870 a lengthy broadside announced in bold, narrow text the arrival of Miss Zobeidi Luti as “The Only Lady Magician in the World,” as if women in magic were as fantastic as a unicorn. Or that’s how the infamous hard-sell showman P.T. Barnum marketed her. Barnum specialized in marketing the odd, exceptional, and rare. Miss Luti was actually part of a larger group of women who were billed as Circassian beauties, who were tall, with hair teased to stand high on end, “and supposedly from the Caucasus region of western Asia” despite that “Barnum hired local girls.”11

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9 Ibid. pp. 41-42
However, Luti had a broadside of her own because she was a female magician. That her title could qualify her as an anomaly speaks to the rarity of female magicians in the public view and memory.

Broadside courtesy of Tom Ewing, national historian for the Society of American Magicians.

**III. Reception and Self-Reflections: Women in the Cult of Domesticity and Secular Magic**

The Father of Modern Conjuring, Jean Eugene Robert-Houdin (1805-1871) had been born with a logistical mind that was as much adept to clockwork as it was to manufacturing illusions; he was also fortunate to have been born bourgeoisie, white, and – above all – male. From this social position, the respectable Robert-Houdin was able to escort the art of conjuring off the street and into the drawing room. Quite certain that exchanging the gaudy robes of the wizard for the contemporary – and now all too common – coat and tails, Robert-Houdin preferred “the attire civilized society has agreed to accept for evening dress” as he was “always of the opinion that
bizarre accoutrements…cast disfavor upon [the magician].”\textsuperscript{12} Robert-Houdin set the standard of evening dress for magicians. His title as the “Father of Modern Conjuring” assured the patriarchy of magic would continue into gendering magic as part of the male sphere.

For many Victorians, on both sides of the Atlantic, there was the prevalent sense of “separate spheres,” referencing the different social realms in which each gender interacted.\textsuperscript{13} Male forms of recreation regularly involved “the concert saloons, whose bawdy atmosphere contradicted middle-class ideals of self-control and self-improvement.” These entertainment venues were considered “an affront to the middle-class ideal of family-centered leisure, with mother, father, and children gathered comfortably in their over-furnished parlor.”\textsuperscript{14} Traditionally a woman’s space, the parlor was the central room in the home to receive guests. However, as magic assimilated into middle-class entertainment, men pushed for space in the parlor. For instance, while cards may have been used for ladies’ games such as bridge and cribbage, they were generally perceived as the tools for a gambler and not the implements of a sophisticated member of the fairer sex. For a woman to touch cards was considered a sinful matter as she made contact with objects used to bet and swindle. A female magician was then a paradox: she occupied the idealized space of the home while she sullied her hands on playing cards. Even though magic had entered the home it was still questioned as an acceptable pastime. It was into this society – one in which magic had crept into the home, the woman’s domain of propriety and piety – that Adelaide Herrmann was born and met with success.

On August 11, 1853, Adelaide Scarsez was born to middle-class, Belgian parents in London, England. In the midst of a society where an 1867 Saturday Review described “the ideal of womanhood…[as] her husband’s first friend and companion, but never his rival…who would make

\textsuperscript{13} Cooper, Suzanne F. The Victorian Woman. London: V&A Publications. 2001. p. 10
his house his true home and place of rest...a tender mother, an industrious housekeeper,”¹⁵

Herrmann was lucky to have culturally liberal parents. Not only did they endorse her interest in
dance but they also permitted their then-fifteen-year-old daughter to join the dance troupe of Imre
and Bolossy Kiralfy. Not yet a magician, Herrmann gained exposure to many other forms of
nineteenth-century entertainment – not all of which were deemed fit for women – the most notable
being the velocipede. Adelaide observed that this early ancestor of the modern-day bicycle was a
contraption which “was by no means easy to ride.”¹⁶ In spite of terming the velocipede a difficult
machine, Adelaide nonetheless claimed that she had “no difficulty in mastering the vehicle.”¹⁷ This
assurance of mastery, however, did not prevent mishaps from occurring. In Toulouse, the wheel of
Adelaide’s velocipede slipped and down she went clamoring into the orchestra pit, dragging along a
line of fellow performers. Fortunately, she writes that the incident proved more comical than serious.

Not to be boxed in by convention, she showed her mettle as a physically active woman ready for a
challenge. While in Paris Herman Schumann, the American manager for the Transatlantic Novelty
Company, contacted Herrmann. He encouraged her to learn to ride a penny-farthing bicycle.
Herrmann became Schumann’s feature act and is credited as the first woman to ride a bicycle on
stage in the United States when the show came to Boston. The show was a sensation and cycling
reached new heights of popularity. That is not to say that it was met entirely without reproach.

Opposition to the velocipede and other types of bicycles had much to do with the fact that
the cycling wheels may expose a woman’s legs under her skirts. In the pictures of Herrmann as part
of Professor Brown’s troupe, hers and the legs of every one of her coworkers are quite visible. The
modesty protocol may have been different in an environment such as Paris. Still, Herrmann
managed to complete physically demanding performances which were not typical of women at the

¹⁵Cooper, p. 10
¹⁶Herrmann, Adelaide. Adelaite Herrmann, Queen of Magic: Memoirs, Published Writings, Collected Ephemera. Ed.
¹⁷Ibid. p. 24
time. Riding a velocipede became her signature way of demonstrating how a woman could perform a physically demanding task in public. Adelaide Herrmann thus set a precedent for women to attempt what was previously perceived to be out of their capacity. In the nineteenth-century, women were perceived to be deficient in both strength and technique. What exercise and physical feats that were promoted to them – such as walking and croquet – were deemed to involve little of either.\textsuperscript{18} Physical demands were not normally made of women because her proper place was in the confines of the home, and prevalent middle-class ideology dictated the extent of that realm.

A set of virtuous principles that were more ideal than practice, the Cult of Domesticity stressed that women remain sexually pure until marriage, obedient to their husbands, and pious at all times, ideally passing on these virtues to their children and propagating a morally correct citizenry.\textsuperscript{19} Writers such as Josiah Gilbert Holland enforced the notion that, “Men living without [women], by themselves, become savage and sinful. The purer you [women] are, the more are they elevated.”\textsuperscript{20} A woman’s duty toward moral righteousness took priority and anything which may dissuade her from furnishing a home environment reflective of this goal was dismissed. Victorian culture dictated that the ideal woman was pious, never worked, married young, ran her home and cared for her husband and children. The term “the Angel in the House” (1854) was coined after these principles were galvanized in Coventry Patmore’s poem of the same name. This model further presented the social surveillance that the Victorian age fostered, keeping an eye behavior and how that reflected, or failed to reflect, someone else’s social class. At the time “The Angel in the House” was written and into the years following “the ability of a husband to keep his wife out of the workplace signified respectability, or a family’s aspirations towards joining the growing ranks of


\textsuperscript{20} Green, p. 57
the middle classes.” Patmore’s poem ultimately became the foundation for the Cult of Domesticity. Elevating the non-professional woman into a symbol of bourgeois class hegemony reinforced a confining ideology of economic discrimination and “the women who rejected these constraints, or who, pushed by poverty, entered the labor force, were viewed as unnatural.” A woman’s world held no room for self-fulfillment or self-indulgence. For a woman, adornment was only what a father or husband gave her. She wore no makeup or displayed pleasure in anything except her home, children and husband. Her role in society centered on getting married, having children and running a household. Piety and love of the helpless were the sentiments which dominated motherhood and were the corresponding traits that restricted women to the home for their own survival. While she did not have any children, Adelaide Herrmann did have an acute fondness for defenseless animals, sighing about her pets in one interview, “You get attached to them almost like children.” And at the young age of twenty, she did marry. When for most women this would have been a pivotal point for settling down, marriage for Adelaide Herrmann provided the key to celebrity and acclaim.

Adelaide Herrmann’s social class expanded when she met and married world-renowned magician Alexander Herrmann in March 1874. Sporting an imperial goatee and curling mustache, Mo. Herrmann embodied the public’s imagination of a Mephistophelian imp with a Parisian purr, eager to tease its reality into his next trick. Alexander Herrmann possessed a charisma rare even among the best entertainers, his most memorable aphorism being, “Great magicians are born, not made.” Herrmann’s own talent as a performer must have been equally exceptional as her husband would not resign her to the role of magician’s assistant but instead make her so integrated and privy to his show that she would become a full-fledged magician in her own right when the time arose.

21 Cooper, p. 12
23 Green, p. 57.
As the assistant, Adelaide Herrmann fulfilled various jobs and roles as the magician demanded. As a woman onstage in the 1870s, her identity was transformed to suit the needs of the show. For her initial role in her husband’s act, Herrmann donned male attire, dressed as a young boy under the name “Mr. Alexander.” “In this guise,” she writes, “it was my special task to borrow from the audience certain objects which Herrmann needed for his tricks.” At this time, “audiences and critics believed that when a woman usurped a male part in a serious dramatic production (as opposed to a humorous burlesque), it undermined the masculinity of the character.” Clothing made statements of class, gender identity, sexual assertion, and standards of respectability – in this case, not just that Herrmann was a stagehand but a man on stage as well, side-stepping the issue of being a woman in theater entirely. In the later nineteenth century “dress became a cultural terrain of pleasure, expressiveness, romance, and autonomy,” so did Adelaide Herrmann’s masculine attire allow attention to be focused entirely on her husband’s act. Her guise seamless, Herrmann avoided detection as a woman in men’s clothes and thus circumvented any controversy over her gender-bending. By altering her gender identity, a woman on stage found her own autonomy. This action underscores the oppressive sexism of the 1870s, that in order to feel full social liberation a woman needed to become a man. Only on rare occasions were women accepted for their talent and their gender became merely a footnote.

Alexander Herrmann, fortunately, had the insight to see a talented performer in his assistant and she benefited from the opportunity. One night Alexander Herrmann announced to the audience that his assistant would finish the silk routine. Caught off guard, Adelaide Herrmann’s nerve broke and in fit of stage fright she fled. Only to be led back by her husband. Adelaide Herrmann’s

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26 Herrmann, p. 32.
29 Glenn, p. 22.
performance of the illusion was not only successful, it provided her with a considerable boost in confidence, and from that point onward she performed that particular silk trick.\textsuperscript{30} Although Herrmann’s role would expand to include serpentine dances, her initial role as a male assistant speaks to the popularity of male assistants during the early vaudeville years, from 1870-1880s. Female assistants would not become more visible until the latter half of the nineteenth century, one reason being that women were still considered far too delicate to be put into situations of peril. Eventually, the dramatic appeal and marketing value of this image would be capitalized upon.

At least for the Herrmann troupe, the primary reason that Adelaide Herrmann fulfilled the role of “assistant” (a role in which responsibilities were ever growing beyond the convenient term) was that she made an exceptionally competent performer. Herrmann’s physical prowess was astounding. Not only a talented dancer, she had the kinesthetic awareness of an athlete – a valuable asset not noted in conventional Victorian society, but necessary for the stage. Herrmann bragged

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\caption{Adelaide Herrmann as “Mr. Alexander.”\textsuperscript{31}}
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\textsuperscript{30} Herrmann, p. 32.
\textsuperscript{31} Images from Magic Circle, digital collection. Academic purposes only, all rights reserved to original owners.
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about being shot out of a cannon – on more than one occasion with her costume aflame. She climbed stage apparatus, occasionally getting into mishaps and emerging unscathed. She dislocated both shoulders during a bad cannon act landing, and fell from the stage into the orchestra pit at least three times. Occasionally, she revived her vaudeville bicycle act, showing off for audiences her ability to zigzag through a row of bottles onstage without knocking over a single one. She was, for all intents, a tomboy.

This not to say, however, that Herrmann acted entirely out of the norm for women of her period. In lithographs featuring her in levitation, she keeps her legs delicately crossed at the ankles. Thus, there was undoubtedly an effort to maintain a sense of respectability. When featured on any of her husband’s lithographs, Herrmann’s image was of a modestly dressed woman. Her clothes were never skimpy and always suggested her status as nothing less than that of a middle-class woman. For many magic shows that were meant to draw a crowd of similar class they would have to “divorce themselves from the image of the concert saloon”32 and cultivate the appearance of a

bourgeoisie entertainer. This conservative aspect of marketing in magic entertainment addressed the basic desires of early vaudeville to mesh fully with everyday society. However, the public still shunned women as magicians on stage, seen as lacking either the dexterity or the intellect to master techniques. Magic often requires not only manual dexterity but brain gymnastics as well, with the performer often aware of “two dialogues,” one with himself as the magician and the other for his audience as the spectators.33 Because magicians have to be conscious of what they are doing as opposed to what their audience is seeing, the mental awareness required to successfully perform magic is high. Women, however, were not supposed to engage in such mentally taxing activities. Around 1872, popular health writer S. Weir Mitchell argued that a young woman’s “future womanly usefulness was endangered by steady use of her brain.”34 For this reason, magic performed by women was greeted with male disapproval. To be intellectually upstaged by a woman represented an emasculating experience, hence the exclusion of women all together. The Cult of Domesticity prescribed that women not mentally tax themselves and instead focus their efforts on maintaining moral example. Thus, women who entered theater were not considered proper ladies. Even with the gentrification of the magic industry, theaters themselves bore a negative reputation as “many middle-class reformers and writers expressed a concern that the nickelodeons, like the dance halls, would quickly become public spaces for undue familiarity between the sexes.”35 The realm of theater, which encompassed garrulous music halls and raunchy burlesque shows, hardly had a place in the domesticated home and clearly separated the ideal woman from anything associated with those environments, including magic shows.

34 Green, p. 117
35 Peiss, p. 151
Herrmann was very much aware of her isolation in the magic fraternity as her “short experience has already taught [her] that [she was] alone in a big field.” Among women, though, female magicians were accepted as talented individuals. They looked forward to receiving recognition, if only among their own sex. In one article, Adelaide Herrmann longed to have a sisterhood in magic.

“I do not wish to stand alone on the unique fact that I am the only prestidigitatrice on the stage today. I shall not be content until I am recognized by the public as a leader in my profession, and entirely irrespective of the question of sex. It is natural that I should feel a pride…in my work.”

Herrmann regularly affirmed that magic was the pursuit of intellectually competent women. As she noted, “Any quick-witted woman or girl can, after but three hours’ practice, perform in her own parlor as many wonderful feats of magic as will make her the astonishment of her family and friends.” She also recognized the lucrative benefits of performing magic as a female magician will “easily become such a remarkable magician that she can with safety offer to perform at church festivals and the like, where, besides making an unusual amount of money for a good cause, she can ever afterward be considerable of a mystery to as many of her acquaintances as she desires.”

This longing for recognition and social acceptance is not limited to Adelaide Herrmann. In an 1890 issue of Lady’s Magazine, Mlle. Patrice hoped that with some time and energy invested in practicing magic “any member of my sex who desired could…acquire perfection in a number of little experiments which would amply repay her for the effort required in their acquisition in the form of admiration and, shall I say, in some cases, the envy of her friend.” There is a strong desire not simply to be admired but also to be envied, to wish that others ardently wanted to be like oneself.

This situation echoes the middle class obsession to maintain a public image or standard – if a

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37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
husband’s financial success was embodied in his housekeeping wife, then a woman’s hobbies became her means of establishing an identity in a class-conscious society. For nineteenth-century middle-class society, conformity was priority. Thus, for women to enter magic would disrupt the status quo. Mlle. Patrice ponders why magic has such a dearth of female performers and concludes that “that it is because they think it too difficult.”\textsuperscript{41} Difficulty here refers to how women were harshly discouraged from any pursuit which required logistics or higher levels of thinking. Magic, because of its multitasking demands with patter, deception, and keeping track of the audience’s awareness/misdirection of the magician’s motions, was too challenging.

Acceptance of magic purely on the grounds of social appropriateness was an idea questioned as well. “The query is sometimes put,” writes Mlle. Patrice, “‘Is conjuring a suitable thing for a lady to do?’ – My answer is: ‘Certainly, or I should have found it out during the twelve years I have been entertaining in society drawing rooms.’”\textsuperscript{42} Mlle. Patrice uses the fact that she practices in the most public space of the home as validation enough of the social appropriateness of magic. Social approbation of magic occurred when the art “entered domestic space most immediately through the medium of specialized how-to conjuring …The father of a middle-class mid-nineteenth-century family might be an amateur conjurer.”\textsuperscript{43} That the setting of the drawing room and any activity done here must be publically appropriate underscores how important social exchange was in the particular room of the home was for women. Moreover, Mlle. Patrice happily points out that even the simplest sleights-of-hand bring as much amusement as feminine social grace.

“A little palming with a ping-pong ball…if gracefully done, is certainly not in bad taste, and lends piquancy to the conversational attractions of the lady magician, whilst I am sure that some slight-of-hand shown by a society woman at a bazaar or another charitable

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
entertainment would draw more money than a mere piece of music or a song – the usual limits of a woman’s entertaining power.”

In the last comment she even (modestly) berates the more usually encouraged fine arts of women. Women were often educated in music and song strictly for home enjoyment and the occupants (i.e. husbands) therein; magic, however, was a talent that stood out because of its uniqueness.

Thus, for the first time, deviation from convention was being encouraged, albeit incrementally. The year of this article coincides with another development in women’s progressive movement as journalists in the 1890s began to discuss the phenomenon of the New Woman, a woman who “smoked, entered boldly into conversation with men and…[had] an unfeminine disdain for marriage.” The New Woman was the antithesis of the Angel in the House, but she was by no means the expected result of women dabbling in magic. What is notable is that this new stereotype’s debut coincides with magic entering the popular culture marketed toward women – such as magic articles appearing in magazine issues. The venturing of what was previously a man’s hobby into the female sphere demonstrates the influence of the New Woman culture. The New Woman was not a dependent, motherly figure but thrived on “independence [that] was enhanced by her work, as she was frequently imaged as a controversial writer or artist, or engaged in political campaigning.”

This suggests that overall women were expanding their social spheres, becoming more civically engaged and more aggressively seeking political representation for themselves. However, influence is not equivalent to acceptance. A woman who adopted New Woman characteristics “was more likely to be presented as unattractive and masculine.” She was berated for her independence and condemned for assuming traits outside of her social sphere. If magic and female magicians were to

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45 Cooper, p. 66
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
have any welcome in the woman’s sphere, then they still had to remain within the appropriate setting – at home and not on the road.

This cultivation of magic as a respected hobby may be tied only to the middle class. Although there was “the rough the willingness of even quite famous performers to teach magic in private house,” the likelihood of affording a tutor was regulated to the middle- and upper-classes. Additionally, women from these classes who took up magic would only use it as a hobby since, under the care of their husbands, they had no reason to have to support themselves on their talents. Magic for middle-class women became much like other hobbies where “professional virtuosi were in demand for private parties and public concerts…[but] were redefined once they were used to earn a living.”

Thus, a woman could learn magic as long as she did not become a professional. If a woman began to earn income from her magic – not side money as Mlle. Patrice encourages, but livable income – then she disrupted the social image her husband worked toward (middle-class) compounded with developing a sense of economic independence for herself. The women who entered the labor for out of necessity to support their families were working-class and their role in the industry “became a matter of controversy,” often regarded as “unnatural.” Only women who were already in strong social standing could afford to bend these rules.

With the strong tie between social class and social approval, controversy did not stain Adelaide Herrmann’s reputation. As the wife of an internationally beloved magician, Herrmann was never barred from social circles, nor was she shy about asserting her claim as the preemptor for anything – such as one of the first women in magic. While Barnum’s billing of Madame Luti undermines this statement, Adelaide Herrmann remained the most prominent of women in her profession. Ironically, just three years before her husband’s untimely death that she demurred from

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48 Ibid. p. 53
49 Ibid. p. 10
50 Smith-Rosenberg, p. 13
the position of ever holding the title of “magician” rather than “magician’s assistant.” Herrmann publically shirked from the responsibility. “I lack the confidence of the magician, which must be born in one and can never be acquired,” she ardently stated in a *Lippincott Magazine* article. “I verily believe that if I were to attempt the simple rabbit trick…I would scream.” 51 Gradually, however, Adelaide Herrmann did become a magician and one of best known for her time.

On December 17, 1896, Adelaide Herrmann had to assume the role of bread-winner for herself and her company. The magician whom the world hailed over “the Favorite of all Nations” and the man who Herrmann loved as not only her partner on the stage but as her husband, was dead. Passing away from a heart attack en route to their next act, her spouse left behind a company without its lead performer. Alexander Herrmann also had an economically unhealthy taste for the lavish things in life, often taking up pursuits that led to financial dead ends and taking out more exorbitant loans. Not that that was of any trouble to Alexander while he was alive. As the most popular and highly billed performer – as the number one magician in the United States – he was guaranteed to make it back at their next engagement. Adelaide would have to apply everything she had learned about the stage and showmanship in her husband’s absence. This was no mean feat, nor was it a passive role by any stretch. As Herrmann grew into her own, posters of the Herrmann Co. no longer featured simply the devilishly groomed gentleman as the main attraction. Now a dainty woman – for that is how Adelaide represented herself regardless of age – not only occupied many of the lithographs, she dominated the scene, wielding swords and being the one to take on the image of the dreamy enchanter. Herrmann also drew a crowd by attempting a feat few magicians – male or female – ever added to their careers: she performed the Bullet Catch. Standing before a full firing squad, the magician was expected to catch marked bullets on a china plate. One misfire meant death. She had begged Alexander Herrmann to remove the stunt from his act, but after his death Adelaide

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Herrmann now added the potentially deadly Bullet Catch to her own show. Scholars speculate if she may have slipped into depression for a death wish following Alexander’s expiration, but no matter the case she boldly pursued a feat only previously done by male performers. In at least one case, however, her audience continued to treat her as a lady, causing one man to balk on his bet to take a shot at her. Better conscience told him it “would be worse to harm a lady, magician or not.”\textsuperscript{52} Even while performing a dangerous feat, her gender still influenced her audience’s perspective.

As a widow, Herrmann continued to support herself, choosing to remain independent. Beyond her animals and troupe, she had no family to worry about, and with a company in need of a lead, her occupation never reduced its importance. “When a man marries, no one expects him to cease being a commuter and to become a farmer because it would be good for the children…but

\textsuperscript{52} Harvard Theatre Collection, various clippings.
when a woman marries, her occupation becomes an auxiliary activity.”53 As an entertainer, Adelaide Herrmann did not stay in one place. For that matter neither did her husband or the caravan of animals, illusions, and troupe members who traveled with them. From her privileged station, Herrmann enjoyed “luxuries that any queen might envy were showered upon Adelaide; a yacht, a private railway car, hundreds of birds…rats and mice have also been among her pets. One of the latter she used as an ornament for a year, a sight which would send the average woman into hysterics.”54 In going against the norm, Adelaide’s celebrity became a vehicle to redefine the characteristics and behavior of the average woman. Initially, she relied on what claim she had to her husband’s reputation, billing herself under “Herrmann the Great and Co.” with Alexander’s image often appearing in a laurel wreath in the corner of the lithograph. Sentimental value was not the singular purpose of the laurel; Alexander Herrmann died as the best known magician in the United States, his name and legacy held tremendous capital. By displaying her late husband’s image, Herrmann could guarantee herself an audience for a while. The title of “Herrmann the Great” carried enough weight for Adelaide to sue anyone who used it without her approval. Initially, she had requested the assistance of Alexander’s nephew, Leon. However, the personalities of the two clashed hard and frequently. The last straw came when Leon Herrmann attempted to use his uncle’s famous title – Herrmann the Great – without his aunt’s permission. Adelaide Herrmann sought legal action and ultimately the pair split with Herrmann seeking the vaudeville stage.

With the Civil War over and the U.S. surging toward a new industrial age, Americans discovered that they had the time and the financial stability to afford some leisure. Between 1870 and 1900, as healthy birthrates after a blood war promoted population growth from 39 to 76 million,

54 Harvard Theatre Collection; various clippings.
annual income per capita shot up from $779 to $1,164.\textsuperscript{55} Additionally, the work day for most citizens decreased from twelve hours to ten. For many others, Saturday became a semi-holiday, and the “weekend” was coined.\textsuperscript{56} Cash bought time and pleasure, and one of the most pleasant ways to spend time was to attend live entertainment. This mass quest for fun bred a hunger for commercial entertainment. Circuses still traveled by horse-drawn wagon and thus were restricted to regional or local tours. In the theater the producers promoted their shows in the old-fashioned manner, plugging hundreds of forgettable dramas and providing headlines barely bigger than the copyright notice for the crowd-winning actors. This new form of entertainment became vaudeville.

Vaudeville was a broad institution, comprised of both performance acts – from jugglers and comedians to magicians and dancers – as well as company managers and the United Booking Office, which took control of the entire circuit by 1900.\textsuperscript{57} Vaudeville was not confined to a single brand of entertainment as much as it was a business. The mixed variety of vaudeville was meant to appeal to the broad public palette. Each show had to have enough rough fun for workingmen, enough glamour for middle-class women, and enough old-country sentiment for immigrants far from home.\textsuperscript{58} The man to clean up variety acts of music halls and market them became inseparable from American show business: Tony Pastor (1837-1908). Though Pastor was popular with the nearly all-male variety theater audiences, he knew that his ticket sales would double if he attracted a female audience. Eventually Pastor began to produce variety shows, presenting an evening of clean fun that was a distinct alternative to the bawdy shows of the time and more appropriate for middle-class families. In 1865 Pastor opened Tony Pastor’s Opera House on the Bowery in partnership with minstrel show performer, Sam Sharpley. With shows that appealed to women and children as well

\textsuperscript{55} This Fabulous Century, 1900-1910. New York: Time-Life Books. 1969. p.78
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{58} Snyder, p. 12
as the traditional male audience, Pastor’s theater and touring companies quickly became popular
with the middle classes and were soon imitated. George Tilyou of Coney Island posted the
following at Steeplechase Park, “Our audiences are mostly ladies and children, and what we want is
only Polite Vaudeville.”\footnote{Peiss, p. 129} While working-class women avoided concert-halls and male-gearred
saloons, their numbers in vaudeville theaters comprised nearly one-third of the audience in 1910.\footnote{Ibid., p. 143}
B. F. Keith became a crusader for the new “refined vaudeville,” separating the sentimental from the
disreputable and salacious. His screening of shows and acts was so thorough that his theaters were
known as the “Sunday-school Circuit.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 142} The shows were carefully arranged to appeal to everyone,
especially women and children. Any stain of vulgarity was promptly polished out.

On June 26, 1899, vaudeville welcomed Mme. Adelaide Herrmann as she made her first

solo appearance at the Masonic Temple in Chicago with her headlining act “A Night in Japan.” Late
summer in September 1901 met her with a month’s engagement in Berlin’s Wintergarten. Her tours
thereafter continued in the United States. November 2, 1902 kicked off Adelaide’s Orpheum tour
for 1902-03 in New Orleans.\footnote{Harvard Theatre Collection; various clippings.} Her schedule for February-March alone would have made anyone
road weary in the first week. Her itinerary ran: February 2-7, the Grandby Theater in Norfolk, VA;
February 9-14, the Bijou in Richmond, VA; February 16-21, Chase’s in Washington, D.C.;
February 23-28, the Empire in Columbus, OH. March would begin in the Grand Opera House in
Indianapolis and conclude in Shea’s in Toronto, Canada.\footnote{Hamilton, James. “Adelaide Herrmann,” Genii Magazine. August 2000. P. 45} Herrmann carried her own costumes and
sets in addition to overseeing the travel accommodations of her troupe. Herrmann once advised,
“Let no one select stage life as the sphere of idleness and dissipation.”\footnote{Herrmann, Adelaide. “Confessions of an Assistant Magician,” Lippincott Magazine, Philadelphia. Volume 57. October 1893.} Now she was nearly fifty

years old and running the vaudeville gamut hard. The bulk of Adelaide Herrmann’s twenty-eight-

\begin{footnotes}
\item Peiss, p. 129
\item Ibid., p. 143
\item Ibid., p. 142
\item Harvard Theatre Collection; various clippings.
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year career as a solo magician occupied the vaudeville stage. Although times were strenuous – she played two shows a night, six days a week and the seventh day was spent in transit to the next city\textsuperscript{65} – the wife of Herrmann the Great never settled for any less than the Big Time Circuit of vaudeville. In September of 1900, a mere three months after her vaudeville debut in Chicago, George W. Lederer booked Mme. Herrmann to perform for the entire length of the Paris Exposition, for the highest fee ever paid an American artist, woman or otherwise.\textsuperscript{66} After paying off her husband’s debt, Adelaide Herrmann certainly did have the option of retiring from the magic community and simply resting on her husband’s laurels for the rest of her time. She clearly possessed a drive and love for the stage that no obstacle would keep her from it.

Magic societies were essential magicians’ careers – from networking to trading secrets to getting their name out. Still one of the most active associations of magicians to date, the Society of American Magicians (SAM) was formed in 1901. During these nascent years which still operated under Victorian protocol SAM might be expected to mirror the sexist sentiments. Rather, it received female members with arms wide open: “We have plenty of room for the ladies.”\textsuperscript{67} In fact, Adelaide Herrmann was not the first female magician to be welcomed into the SAM. The first had been Madam Redan of Boston, inducted in 1903, which was within a year of the SAM’s formation. Even in these early years at least one magic association understood the value of the female constituency. In spite of this progressive attitude fostered by the SAM, the appropriateness of women in magic was under continued examination. On more than one occasion when a magazine would feature an article on magic there would crop up the question if this was a hobby suited or even socially acceptable for women. “Will you kindly tell me,” asked one lady, Gertrude Curtis, “if you think it possible for a woman with average ability to acquire this art?...It seems to me that it requires the

\textsuperscript{65} Steele, Margaret. “Adelaide Herrmann, Queen of Magic.” Self-published. Nov. 2008. p.3
\textsuperscript{66} ibid., p. 3.
subtle force of the man’s brain to become a proficient in magic.”  

The nod to male superiority is clear and conveys how the Cult of Domesticity has psychologically undermined the confidence of women to enter magic. The letter was dated May 1, 1905 and Adelaide’s reply came quickly in the space of just one week. The Queen of Magic addressed the concern directly. “While there are few women who have made the art [of magic] a study, still we must remember that this is the new era for woman, and the field for her work includes almost as much variety, intricacy and study as that of man.” Her reply to Curtis is a clear example of the strength and independence that Adelaide possessed in a male-dominated profession. Moreover, even as far back as 1905, Adelaide noted that the times were changing and that gradually women were finding stronger social representation. Magic altered viewpoints on the issue of gender equality and increased numbers of female magicians was the byproduct of social advances.

IV. The Brunt of Class Status on the Magician’s Assistant

Magicians were always dependent upon their assistants. Dell O’Dell notes, “An intelligent, agile assistant who can act convincingly is essential to the successful performance of stage illusion.” An assist provides needed misdirection to pull the audience’s attention away from the magician as he makes a secret move; she can direct attention back to him during the effect. Adelaide Herrmann’s was the life of a female magician, someone who had absolute power on the stage and directed other cast members. On the opposite end of the spectrum is Dot Robinson, wife of the magician William Robinson, who remained a magician’s assistant and never rose to the position of full magician upon her husband’s death. Rather, Dot’s career was closer to the common experience of a vaudevillian woman in entertainment; not only spectators but also her husband’s

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69 Ibid. p. 47
compatriot magicians repeatedly alluded to her checkered background. For his part, Will Robinson would go on to impersonate a Chinese magician and reap fame under the alias of Chung Ling Soo, with Dot masquerading as Suee Seen. The pair’s race-based disguise demonstrates how the audience who appreciated the “Eastern exotica preferred the performance of foreign otherness to the real thing” and the versatility of assumed identity on the stage.

Similar to Adelaide Herrmann, Dot Robinson’s stage career afforded her a new identity; however, as a woman from a working-class background, Dot’s past haunted her. Born to German immigrants in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1863, Dot Robinson’s birthname was Augusta Pfaff. With nine other siblings, Robinson and her family moved to Elyria, Ohio around 1880 where her father became a saloonkeeper. Robinson’s leap in to show business may have begun in Elyria in her teenage years. Vaudeville was meant to be a clean and wholesome for families. Dot Robinson was not a member of this ideal. In a letter dated April 4, 1918, from Houdini’s rival, Dr. James Elliott, to “King of Koins” T. Nelson Downs, Elliott outright states that Dot had been a prostitute, writing, “Dot was a gutter woman; she supported Rob.” The truth behind these claims is debatable as Robinson’s past remains somewhat scattered. What is known that as Dot Robinson eventually worked her way to New York where she met a magician in desperate need for an assistant. Will Robison would call her from that point “Dot” in reference to her petite size. The features which had previously limited Robinson as a showgirl and a dancer – flat chest, small size – would qualify her as the perfect magician’s assistant, someone who be easily lifted and fit into tight spaces. In magic, a compact build allows assistants to be produced from – to the audience’s knowledge – empty boxes. For an assistant who must be the subject of the magician’s feats, the strain of rehearsals took an additional toll.

71 Glenn, p. 112.
Robinson’s ventures as a professional magician’s assistant involved on-the-job hazards. She endured the many, physically taxing rehearsals of her husband’s illusions, among them the Astarte. Named for the mythical goddess of love, Astarte was a straining performance to which most women would have said no. The assistant was suspended by a corset high overhead and – to the audience’s eyes – “walking” freely in midair. Robinson’s slight build made her the perfect fit for the contraption, but the close contact with all the jostling metal apparatus left her petite frame heavily bruised after each rehearsal. Her dedication, although exemplary, speaks to the determination women had to possess to achieve success in show business of the early twentieth century.

However, when her husband finally achieved fame under the alias of Chung Ling Soo, Dot Robinson’s own role was heavily diminished – scenario which Bess and Harry Houdini would echo. Although assistants complete a great deal of work in order to learn the illusion as well as the magician, but their subdued role on stage convinces the audience that they hold less power, emphasizing the role of the magician. According to Henry Evans who had watched Chung Ling Soo perform, Suee Seen (Dot Robinson) “has nothing more to do with the trick than the people in the audience. She merely holds the bowl and looks cute.” Dot further found herself in no position to object to Bill Robinson’s extramarital affairs. Like many women of the time, Robinson was almost entirely dependent on her husband. Additionally, she unfortunately lacked the showmanship and gusto that Adelaide had developed on her own during the Herrmann show – a trait which had proved invaluable to her own self-sufficiency at the sudden death of Alexander. Adelaide Herrmann had enjoyed the privilege of holding her own act in a portion of her husband’s show, she was groomed to be an independent performer if the need ever arose – which it did when Alexander suddenly died. Robinson, like a woman whose financial stability was linked to her husband’s,

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depended upon Will Robinson to stay in show business. His loss would be hers. Yet, the death of her own spouse would be a trial which Dot would have to face.

On the stage of the Wood Green Empire Theatre in London, Chung Ling Soo performed the stunt which had skyrocketed him to his present fame: the Bullet Catch. How he died is fairly obvious; what went wrong, however, was absolute confusion – and Dot Robinson was caught in the crossfire. When her husband died, Dot Robinson’s identity was erased. As of March 23, 1918, she was no longer Suee Seen, the assistant to the Marvelous Chinese Conjurer, Chung Ling Soo. Nobody knew who she was because magicians’ assistants had next to little identity besides their husbands. Women who were recognized as either independent magicians, such as Adelaide Herrmann, or held their own specific act in a company of magicians, as Mercedes Talma from The Comedians de Mephisto Compagnie, were visible, recognizable performers not bound to the singular identity of their husbands. Robinson, in spite of being an integral part to Bill Robinson’s act and for all her efforts, was swept away. At least until the intrigue behind her husband’s death began to grow. In interviews, fellow magicians – including Adelaide Herrmann – expressed their bewilderment at how someone who had mastered the bullet catch could have died in its performance. Concerns about foul play festered into rumors.

Of all the people who had difficulty with Will Robinson, Dot Robinson may have had fairly justifiable reasons if she had killed him. Not only had he maintained an extramarital affair for ten years, he had also had an outside family with Louise Blatchford, his mistress – producing three children to care for. On March 28, before a jury and a bevy of reporters at Wood Green Town Hall, Dot admitted that her husband had “left Louise Blatchford his sole executrix to his will.” To divulge the secret of her spouse’s most prized illusion would be to give up a lifetime of work from a

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74 Steinmeyer, p. 395
75 Ibid. p. 356
76 Ibid. p. 399
carefully crafted mystery. However, to clear her name and prove her innocence, Dot Robinson was left no other recourse. She was able to fully disclose the trick behind the infamous Bullet Catch, how the rifles were supposed to fire and how the magician was meant to “catch” the bullets. Even after her testimony, suspicion around Robinson continued. She was living with the stage manager, with reports that they had been “rather too friendly.” However, the truth of the matter was that the home of stage manager Frank Kametaro also housed his child and wife, Mabel Kametaro, with whom Robinson was a close friend. After her separation from Bill Robinson, Dot Robinson never had a home of her own. Eventually, the work was left to gun expert Robert Churchill to fully clear Robinson’s name and find out just exactly how Chung Ling Soo had perished performing his own illusion. After the trial, Dot Robinson slipped into obscurity – never contacting close friends such as Adelaide Herrmann or Bess Houdini. She was buried in Woodlawn Cemetery, New York in an unmarked grave – a final blow as a woman whose reputation suffered from her entanglement in show business and whose role, minimized as that of an assistant, was too small to salvage it.

By stark contrast, contemporary women magicians who took power in their roles on the stage were able to unabashedly assert their roles as performers rather than worry about gender identity or credulity. Mercedes Talma (1861-1944), with her dainty fingers and small hands was an unlikely candidate for Queen of Coins or any sort of slight-of-hand. The tools of legerdemain were scaled to men’s hands, prompting men and women to argue that magic was unfit for women. But Talma’s unmatched skill with coins proved that the debates surrounding women’s physical capacity for magic was equally competitive to men. One reviewer marveled, “The few men who are experts in her line have the advantage of bigger hands, but Talma wears a five and a half glove, and can do everything it is possible to do with coins.”

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77 Ibid. p. 402
78 Ibid. p 436
Her given name was simple – Mary Ann Ford – but Belgian magician Servais LeRoy (1865-1953) decided his English wife would have a more exotic name as Mercedes Talma. Initially, Talma began as an assistant in her husband’s act, but soon with a coin routine of her own she became a full member of the three-magician comedy act, The Comedians de Mephisto Compagnie. But the act was best known as “LeRoy, Talma, & Bosco,” with the woman magician as not the last but the second name in the billing. Following the formerly reigning of King of Koins, T. Nelson Downs, Talma drew in crowds with her skill. When she debuted in at the Oxford Music Hall in London in 1899, the “Queen of Coins” was a hit. One critic even quipped, “A good many women have the faculty of making money fly, but Talma’s art lies in her ability to call it all back again.”80 Debate surrounds Talma’s success – if it was self-made or owed in part to the fact that she traveled with two men. With LeRoy and Bosco bracketing her, Talma’s success was secured and thus audiences were able to see past gender to hone in on her talent. The clothing she wore, fashionable dresses that were occasionally sleeveless, which identified her as a woman, did not hinder her performance either. Her attire worked to her benefit as waist-coated male magicians would have been accused of hiding extra coins up their sleeves, but newspapers noted that “Talma has no sleeves…she depends solely upon the suppleness and dexterity of her arms and hands.”81 Her presence on the stage was magnetic. Magic historian Mike Caveney has commented, “Personality on the stage is three-fourths of the business and Talma may be said to possess that extraordinary magnetism which never fails to attract an audience of any nationality.”82 However, personality is best conveyed when the woman not only puts in equal effort as the partnering magician but is also given an equal role on stage as well. Talma was never backed into a corner and everyone knew of her. On lithographs, she shared

80 Ibid. p. 84
81 Ibid. p. 84
82 Caveney, Mike. Servais LeRoy: Monarch of Mystery.
at least a third of the space. Women who were allowed to develop their own talents and share equal billing as magicians held on to recognition during and even after their careers, unlike assistants.

As a magician’s assistant, Bess Houdini did not maintain much public recognition after her husband gained separate acclaim. Wilhelmina Beatrice Rahner was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1876 to German immigrants Gebhard and Balbina Rahner. Bess worked at Coney Island in a song and dance act called The Floral Sisters when she was first courted by Theo Weiss. Theo’s older brother, Ehrich— the man who would adopt the alias based off Robert-Houdin – was the one who won her affections. In the summer of 1894, when Ehrich had rebranded himself as Harry Houdini, his brother was replaced in the duo with Houdini’s new, spritely eighteen-year-old wife. For the first few months of their ventures into show business, the Houdinis lived on a hand-to-mouth existence, Harry Houdini himself working up to fifteen shows a day and sleeping an average of four hours a night. Nonetheless, with the efforts of both husband and wife, the Houdinis became a stellar team, working on their trademark illusion Metamorphosis.

Metamorphosis is a fairly standard feat that is incorporated in most magic acts today. The magician is bound and locked in a trunk with the female assistant standing on top. The assistant throw ups a curtain and in the eye-blink it takes for the curtain to come down the magician and his assistant have switched places. Metamorphosis is also a rigid display of gender roles. Firstly, the man is bound, and the woman standing in the superior state on top of the trunk. The man is liberated once he and the woman switch places, her own role becoming a captured one. At this point the audience applauds because order has been restored to the situation in the speed of an eyeblink. If only one of the two performers could be free, why is it so much more dramatically satisfying that it is the male performer? Metamorphosis played with boundaries of gender. It seemed to affirm the

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rightness of clear sexual divisions (with man unbound and woman dependent) but simultaneously suggested that such boundaries might collapse at startling speed.\textsuperscript{84}

Bess Houdini’s “disappearing act” from her husband’s show illustrates a desire to remove women from the stage in favor of showcasing male bravado and prowess. As Harry Houdini rose into the public lime light, Bess’ image faded from his posters. By the turn of the century, the “Houdinis” was singularized to one spouse – Harry Houdini. One final publicity stunt at Bess’ expense vaulted Houdini into the position necessary to become a solo act. \textit{The New York World} reported of the horrendous “fiasco” in which Bess Houdini had nearly met an untimely end performing the couple’s famous Metamorphosis illusion. It was the close of 1899 and after five jarring minutes of being locked in a trunk with the key forgotten, Bess Houdini cried out for air. She had to be freed with an axe and emerged in hysterics. There is conjecture as to whether or not this incident could have been fatal within the five minute time limit as a “a person could live for at least half an hour locked in that trunk.”\textsuperscript{85} However, why go to this extreme to make a marketing move? Bess lost equal billing with the newly crowned King of Handcuffs. She became simply his assistant.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.6\textwidth]{houdini_poster}
\caption{Poster for Metamorphosis and broadside of Harry Houdini, Bill Kalush.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{84} Kasson, p. 93
\textsuperscript{85} Kalush, p. 90
By the time they reached Boston, her name was omitted from the posters, bills, and advertisement entirely – a quiet dismissal of the woman who had been forgotten in the box. As a single escape artist, Houdini alone raked in the applause. In this sense, magic mirrored the surrounding atmosphere. Women were literally and figuratively fighting for an equal place on stage and men did not want to be outdone by women. Comedy was another genre of entertainment that had already seen a shift in the line-up of performers. In the past, the public held that “women seldom have a sense of humor,” but by summer 1902 categories like the “girl comedian” and the “funny lady” were entering the American cultural vocabulary. When this happened, women were not praised for their advance in theater, but berated. One theater critic quipped, “Clever women do not hesitate to sacrifice all of the vanities of their sex – looks and grace – to evoke laughter from their audience.”

With magic historically typified as an art dominated by men, it seemed an unbearable loss to concede the field to women. Thus, magic provided the medium for men to act out. Through magic, the fantasy of making a woman disappear from the scene entirely without a trace could be vicariously experienced. Additionally, there were no negative consequences (at least for the magician) for the removal of the woman. She was silenced – onstage and, symbolically, socially and politically. For these reasons, acts featuring vanishing women became a sensation that worked its way into popular literature.

“The nicest husband in all the land is one who lives by sleight-of-hand,” begins a poem which prefaces H.J. Burlingame’s *The Magician’s Handbook*. The author of the poem is unknown, but the verses plainly assert the potency of the magician and his wife’s place in the home. The magician is able to conjure whatever his wife desires. At this time women were becoming increasingly targeted as a major portion of the consumer population in the growing commercial

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86 Glenn, p. 45.
87 Ibid, p. 46.
market. It makes sense then that any man who can produce “fresh toilets of the newest style” (l. 21) is quite possibly the most desirable husband. Moreover, should his wife become disagreeable towards him, the magician’s skill makes him quite capable of settling matters in his favor. “The two will sometimes disagree…in such case, as in others, too, / His sleight-of-hand will help him through” (l. 40). This draws to mind the letter which Adelaide Herrmann received from Gertrude Curtis with regards if magic were truly appropriate for ladies as here it is explicitly something which “requires a man’s brain” for it is the male spouse who is obviously in charge with his magical craft. In the end, the magician is able to use his magic to dispose of his wife as he pleases and peace reigns in his home once more. “If unendurable grows she, / A cloth thrown o’er her – one, two, three – / And silently she disappears; / The household war no more one hears.” Clearly, even though the conjuring husband indulges her initially, his wife exists strictly for his whims. The message of the poem is overwhelmingly one of male dominance.

“The Conjuring Husband” echoes the earlier and culturally influential “The Angel in the House” by Coventry Patmore (1854). This is especially notable in Patmore’s lines, “Man must be pleased; but him to please / Is woman’s pleasure; down the gulf / Of his condoled necessities / She casts her best, she flings her breast” (I: Preludes, l. 1-4). In the nineteenth-century men were meant to come home to women willing to serve and entertain them. In Victorian society, gender roles were defined by “the widely-held belief of ‘separate spheres’: the husband should go out into the world to earn enough to keep his wife at home, and she should be occupied with providing a cheerful domestic environment.”

Women were bound to this second world and failure to please her husband would be a breech in contract. Sex, submission, and complacency were the characteristics expected of women – not unlike those expected of magicians’ assistants. As Victorian society aged into the twentieth century, the popularity of “Vanishing Lady illusions in Victorian England has

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88 Cooper, p.10.
been described as a misogynistic expression of anxieties about women’s social position.”

Bill Robinson’s “How to Get Rid of a Wife,” or “The Divorce Machine,” was “an instant success.”

The illusion involved suspending a seated woman and, at the shot of a pistol, she vanished, the empty chair dramatically crashing to the stage. With a title that expresses the desire to be rid of a woman and the violent resolution – firing a pistol – the festering unease about increasingly independent women worked its way on to the magic stage. Patriarchal-minded members retaliated.

V. Women Progressivism and American Masculinity in the Early Twentieth Century

By 1890, the United States was a regional power of some note, the preeminent country of the two American continents. The U.S. had expanded through the aggressive nationalist philosophy of Manifest Destiny, a shared belief that the U.S. was fated to expand from one end of the continent to the other. Bent on seizing imperial power, the U.S. wrested from Spain the territories Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines in the summer of 1898. President McKinley reflected on this skirmish as “a splendid little war” which asserted that this aggressive behavior was appropriate for a healthy nation. “We admire the man,” wrote Theodore Roosevelt shortly after the war in 1899, “who embodies victorious effort…who has those virile qualities necessary to win in the stern strife of actual life.”

To validate these claims of virility, the image of the male body became a glorified icon. It is no coincidence that Houdini and Edgar Rice Burroughs’s *Tarzan of the Apes* both became sensational pop culture gods within a decade of each other. Nearly naked, both men strutted in an exhibitionist demonstration of invulnerability. Houdini’s compact figure, in particular, was bound in shackles and broke free in spite of seemingly insurmountable odds. We have the image of a man

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80 Christopher, p. 219.
Sanchez

who is captive, but he never owes his freedom to anyone other than himself. The woman the stage always relies on the magician to liberate or restore her. Comfortable in being identified by their bodies and the feats they could perform in the nude, they felt no discrimination and no shame for their sex as women had historically. They were powerful role models with their bodies constantly on display as proof. Contrastingly, a woman’s body never commanded such respect.

In their attempt to navigate society, women were bound by gendered expectation while seeking personal fulfillment and recognition, women developed a dual consciousness, or awareness that they bore two identities – one personal and another publically gendered. Understanding the dual consciousness that many women underwent during this time of flappers and advancement is key to the public’s reception of women in magic. As women gained a louder public voice there is a noticeable increase in the way they were victimized on the magic stage. Magic continued to provide the fantasy realm in which everything still remained as it used to be prior to women’s progressive movements; men held power over what decisions a woman could or could not make. As the male body was continuously glorified, women were increasingly objectified. Magic posters featured women swooning helpless and enthralled with the magician. An 1893 *Cosmopolitan* article frankly stated, “Ours is the country of the Stage Beauty.”

In 1920, Broadway choreographer Ned Wayburn said of his own chorus girls, “She is a creation as completely thought out, moved about, wired and flounced…as any automaton designed to please.” Similarly, magicians presented a world where women could be manipulated, moving to the magician’s will and no other’s. When asked his opinion of American women in 1907, George Bernard Shaw simply replied, “The only thing to be said for them is they are usually very well dressed and extraordinarily good looking.”

Most American men wanted their women this way: beautiful, but not so bright and sassy that they wandered from their place in the home. In increasing numbers women went out into the world,

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92 Glenn, p. 47
93 Ibid, p. 179
taking jobs in offices, shops and factories. The feminist movement, agitating vigorously for legal
demands, swept many women into political activity. In business offices, the bursting growth of the
American economy had created an avalanche of paper work. Whereas in 1870 there had been but
seven women stenographers in all the US, by 1900 there were over 100,000 “lady typewriters.”

“Men want a girl,” read Independent Magazine in April 1901, “who has not rubbed off the peach
blossom of innocence by exposure to a rough world.” However, that was not to be realized in a
reality with increasingly aggressive feminist shockwaves.

By the 1920s female social activism had accelerated. Nearly a lifetime ago in 1848, the first
Seneca Falls Women’s Rights Convention discussed the state of women’s affairs, representing the
growing advocacy for women’s suffrage. While it was a hallmark event towards women’s suffrage,
the convention remained fairly demurred, concluding with a tidy Declaration of Sentiments that was
signed by only a third of the attendees.94 With flappers and suffragists causing a political and social
stir, much of the women’s movement which had been so quaint at Seneca Falls adopted a radical air,
dismissing any pretense of innocence. American women were no longer going to hold a peaceful
convention in the New York wilderness, they were going to rally in the city. This radical turn
undoubtedly caused conservative citizens to seek entertainment that validated and preserved their
own perspectives. This demonstrates the success of Houdini’s Metamorphosis illusion. The
entertainment value of watching the man in chains find liberation in the woman’s captivity is
derived from the desire to disenfranchise her and maintain control.

In response, stronger displays of female advocacy continued, but faced reactionary
turbulence after the passage of suffrage. The September 1912 Suffrage Week held at Hammerstein’s
Victoria Theater was the best-publicized theatrical event of the New York State suffrage campaign95
as women’s suffrage was “a theme of ‘universal interest’ to vaudeville audiences…[and] was sure

95 Glenn, p. 143.
to draw a huge audience.” However, not everyone attendance was there to lend support, instead “it would be an audience divided between pro-and anti-suffrage patrons.” On March 24, 1919, the National American Woman Suffrage Association rechristened itself the League of Women Voters (LWV) in celebration of the assured passage of the 19th Amendment. The LWV had its roots in the social reform movements of the Progressive Era, concerned with the rights and social status of women. As he 1920s suffered a backlash against women’s recently gained suffrage, the LWV became “more of a club movement, shifting its emphasis from women’s rights to a civic goals agenda.” With this divide destabilizing the women’s movement, popular entertainment seized the opportunity to express the agitation conservative society felt. In this case, it was embodied in a magic trick.

VI. Suffragists and Sawing through a Woman

Arising from the mental trauma of the First World War, the public had lost much of its innocence and magic reflected that. Charming silk routines and egg bags would no longer do – there was a demand for a fresh, shocking style of magic that would hold the audience’s attention and maintain a grim relevancy to current events. English magician Percy Thomas Tibbles (1881-1938), later going under P.T. Selbit, decided a fresh magic trick would be to saw a woman in half. P.T. Selbit soon became “the most prolific inventor of modern stage illusions, and his diabolic tortures were confined to the vaudeville stage.”

Selbit seemed adept at hitting trends, so when he built and presented Sawing through a Woman in December 1920 – two years after women had been granted suffrage in the U.K. and that same year for the U.S. – he had a wild success. In Selbit’s version a female assistant climbed into a
wooden box that was similar in proportion to a coffin but slightly larger. She was secured there by ropes around her wrists, ankles and neck. The box was then closed, obscuring her from view. After the box was placed in a horizontal position, Selbit sawed through the middle of it with a large handsaw. The audience’s impression was that, because of the restraints and limited room in the box, the assistant’s waist must have been in the path of the saw and she was cut through. When the box opened, the assistant was revealed unharmed, still with ropes attached.99 In January 1921, Selbit publicized his act in England by having assistants carry buckets filled with a murky red liquid to the front of the theatre after a performance and pour the “blood” into the gutter.100 Undertakers even strutted down the sidewalks. Jim Steinmeyer attributes the success and influence of the illusion not just to Selbit’s inventiveness but also to his timing.

The sawing illusion was pivotal to typifying the employment of the pretty female assistant as the subject of the magician’s torture and mutilation. Before Selbit, illusions had used both male and female assistants.101 In Victorian times, bulky women’s clothes often precluded the use of a female assistant in illusions which required a performer to get into a confined space. By 1920, fashions had changed and it became not only acceptable but desirable to have a cast of attractive women. Whether or not a woman had talent did not take as much precedence as “physical appearance, [which] became a kind of capital.”102 Steinmeyer has noted that, “beyond practical concerns, the image of the woman in peril became a specific fashion in entertainment.”103 More sympathy could be held based on the sex appeal of women. Moreover, the audience wanted assurance that the woman was powerless and in need of a rescuer. With suffrage a woman had her own voice, even if she required a savior onstage.

100 Christopher, p. 268
101 Steinmeyer. Art and Artifice. p. 79
102 Glenn, p. 22
103 Steinmeyer, p. 84
With Selbit’s successful box office hit came a countless number of rivals and thieves. American magician, Horace Goldin (1873-1939), presented his sawing for the first time at the annual banquet of the Society of American Magicians in New York on June 3, 1921.104 Where Selbit had slid in panels, Goldin pulled the halves apart, providing the audience with an even more startling visual of a woman in two pieces. At Keith Theatres the illusion was billed as “Sawing a Woman in Two,” no longer “Sawing Through a Woman.” In an attempt to monopolize the market, Goldin had registered every conceivable name for the illusion with the Vaudeville Manager’s Protective Association except “The Divided Woman” – that was Selbit’s last foothold for his act. Sawing fever went rampant. Small-town magicians built boxes, barrels, and crates – all to cash in on the appeal of this new illusion. Magician Bev Bergeron has noted that this was an illusion that “could have made a few magicians millionaires – but they were too busy suing each other.”105 By the middle of the decade it seemed every magician wanted credit to some variety of the Sawing. Even Talma’s husband, Servais Le Roy advertised, “I came, I sawed, I conquered.”106 The appeal of sawing through a woman was as irresistible to the magician as the audience.

Magicians had competed for years of the same effects (ie. end results of illusions), but the stiff competition for Sawing through a Woman may be owed to the fact that – unlike previous illusions – this particular feat held specifically sexist undertones which catered to the audience’s demand for subjugation of women during a time when social consciousness was still uneasy about their growing equality. Whether or not either Goldin or Selbit realized this, both were aware of the high market value, hence the competition to drive the other out. “Sawing a Lady in Half…obscures

104 Christopher, p. 268  
106 Christopher, p.269
the skilled labor of the female assistant placed inside the box”\textsuperscript{107} effectively misdirecting from her labor, which is part of the secret, to the emphasis on the magician as the wonderworker.

In December 1922, almost two years since his first performance for a small, private audience, P.T. Selbit was invited to appear at the Royal Command Variety Performance at the London Hippodrome, performing the Sawing for the Royal Family. In 1923, Selbit produced “four successful illusions, all based on mock sadistic torture.”\textsuperscript{108} The illusions – from The Indestructible Girl and The Elastic Lady to Avoiding the Crush and Through the Eye of the Needle – all demonstrated the magician’s power over his assistant’s body. Selbit devised new and at the center of each illusion was a young woman. For a woman to be handcuffed and escape was of course a metaphor for women’s suffrage. Not coincidentally, anti-suffragette postcards from the turn-of-the-century sometimes depicted women being restrained by handcuffs.

All of these instances suggest the pent-up misogyny of a society against women who were making a clear effort to gain equal status. World War I had provided the opportunity for more women to temporarily enter the workforce and take jobs normally restricted to men, such as welding, oil refineries, and holding essential positions in explosive, armament, and airplane production.\textsuperscript{109} In

\textsuperscript{107} Jones, p. 121
\textsuperscript{108} Christopher, p. 269
\textsuperscript{109} Felder, p. 90
some cases, a woman could displace a man from his job entirely – a frustrating and humiliating position for someone living in a chauvinistic society. By the end of the war, the Department of Labor, established in 1920, “acknowledged that working women deserved the protection of labor laws.” In this manner, women were officially recognized as part of the labor force, and it was no longer unnatural for them to be so. Women were now long detached from the permissive, complacent Angel in the House. They were confrontational, seeking independence whether political, economic, or social. The act of placing a woman in a box is a means of imprisoning her from taking further action; sawing her in half subdues her permanently. The politics of Sawing through a Woman reflects the desire to separate the woman from her new-found independence and keep her at the mercy of the man in her world.

VII. Women on the Rebound: Post-Suffrage with Dell O’Dell and Geri Larsen

After regulating women to the role of assistants and subdued distractions on stage, there was a woman who proved to be stronger than the two-dimensional propaganda that surrounded her: a sassy, redheaded Irish-American girl who performed with her father’s traveling circus. Born Nell Newton (1902-1962), Dell O’Dell’s entrance into magic was met with the typical lackluster encouragement. “A female wizard? Preposterous!” her father snorted. “You’ll never make a go of it!” Even the magician from her father’s troupe whom she idolized bluntly told her, “You’ve got a real knack [for magic], but you’re a woman!” As the immediate disqualification attached to gender demonstrates by the time Dell had reached adulthood (about the 1920s) sexism in magic had risen. The restrictions brought with being a woman limited Dell at first, but she moved into related entertainment venues. When the male body was glorified in entertainment and showcased in public,

\[10\] Ibid.
\[11\] Dell O’Dell. Self-promotional brochure. ca. 1942. See Appendix B.
Dell O’Dell was learning to hoist divans and balance them on her chin.\(^{112}\) Demonstrations of strength moved Dell toward promoting exercise programs and educational health lectures. Her advocacy for physical education “was great news to a nation of women who considered their bodies something almost to be ashamed of.”\(^{113}\) Dell O’Dell broke the social taboo and in doing so may have reinforced her own self-confidence to pursue an “out of her gender” career in magic. To keep her audience’s attention, Dell O’Dell peppered her programs with magic acts, falling back into show business. However, true to the vaudeville one-size-fits-all philosophy, Dell’s acts were geared toward broad audiences, her shows often defined as being “clean and wholesome.”\(^{114}\) Nonetheless, she marketed herself aggressively with “a vast stock of advertising novelties, giveaways, and gadgets.”\(^{115}\) Dell O’Dell doggedly pursued her career in spite of social stereotypes.

Dell O’Dell entered the world of magic as a distinctly feminine magician. There was rarely an opportunity she did not optimize to highlight that she was a woman first and a magician second. All of her advertisement and interviews underscore her sex and all the traits of softness and class associated with “femininity.” The cover of her publicity booklet, “Both Sides of the Footlights,” illustrates the dichotomy of the female magician’s consciousness. The cover shows two cartoon images of her – one in an evening gown in the spotlight on stage, the other in an apron in the kitchen. On one side, her professional life, but on the opposing side her expected societal role as a homemaker. That Dell balanced both demonstrates how she was able to maintain her own prestige with public approval.

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\(^{112}\) Marshall, p. 32
\(^{113}\) Ibid., p. 32
\(^{115}\) Marshall, p.32
Nonetheless, she expressed her own dissonance with the confined role of women in magic.

“As a woman, I always feel a twinge of pain whenever I watch a magician’s assistant climb into her coffin-like box. The pain has nothing to do with the injury the woman appears to suffer while her body is cut in two; rather it is a sympathetic emotional hurt. Once again, woman is being put on display as the victim of a male-dominated torture fantasy.”

When her father asked her to be his assistant and to become the “woman in the box,” Dell accepted it but her “heart was never really in it.” “I wanted to be all-powerful,” she said, which of course meant being the magician. That the magician is associated with being the “all-powerful” member of the act demonstrates how deeply rooted the notion had become. The person wielding the wand was in control and invariably at this point that was a male authority figure.

One of the most common theories for the dearth of women magicians is that their attire is inherently unable to accommodate the apparatus involved with performing magic. Dell, however, wore sleeveless – sometimes shockingly backless – dresses, demonstrating she had nothing to hide.

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116 Marshall, p. 41.
117 Ibid.
Sanchez 50

and astounding her audiences with her virtuosity. Audiences were surprised to see “a comely young lady perform difficult feats of magic hitherto considered to be the special attainments of magicians like Kellar, Thurston, or Houdini.” Impressions included, “You forgot the performer’s sex and saw only a masterly exhibition of Magic.” Much like Talma before her, Dell O’Dell’s skill separated her from her gender. This raises the question as to whether female magicians, in order to establish respect for themselves in their profession, actually have to be better performers than men as a whole.

Dell was certainly one of the most successful female magicians of her day, performing in vaudeville, theatres, night clubs, charity shows, magicians’ conventions, and on television with her own series in the early 50s. She played swank New York hotels and humble county fairs, and had an official fan club consisting of thousands of members. The captioned photograph of Dell below demonstrates the extent to which she became inseparable with vaudeville, her success between 30s to the early 60s unduplicated.

They said vaudeville wouldn't die till Dell froze over.

119 Marshall, p.34.
At the height of Dell O’Dell’s career, American women had taken a more active role in society. By the mid-1940s, women had entered the work force in greater numbers with the onset of World War II, going from 11.9 million to 18.6 million. Thus, women in previously unconventional occupations – whether as riveters or as magicians – became a more acceptable idea. Geri Larsen (1906-1998) was wife to Bill Larsen, Sr. and mother to the founders of the Hollywood Magic Castle, Milt and Bill Larsen, Jr. She unflinchingly carved out a place for herself in the magic community. Dell O’Dell may have had a television series, but Geri Larsen was the first female magician to pioneer one in San Francisco 1939. In the 1940s she was known as “The Magic Lady” on KTLA and starred in her own children’s magic show on ABC. She cofounded Genii Magazine with Bill Larsen, Sr., now of the leading independent magicians’ publications, and took over as publisher after his death. Geri Larsen’s initiative combined with the appropriate timing for a debut provided her with a secure position in magic.

After the 1940s, perspectives shifted once more. When World War II ended, society attempted to resume its traditional patriarchy and women in magic and entertainment came under criticism again. Adele Rhindress (1929- ) was the assistant to Harry Blackstone, Sr. from his 1947-48 season and observed that prejudices had not affected her until after she had left the show and settled down as a mother in the early 1950s. In an interview, she stated, “As soon as [other women and community members] found out I was in Show Business, they made sure I was not included in neighborhood activities, and a few years later in school functions.” After World War II, perspectives again had shifted dramatically toward women, with the average female’s wages dropping by 26%, from $50 per week to $37. There was increasing pressure that a woman’s place remain in the home rather than the work force. Feeling ostracized, when Rhindress moved she

120 Sarget, p.54.
121 Price, p.388.
123 Sarget, p.54.
“never said a word about [her] dancing/magic life” until her 75th birthday in November 2004 when perspectives had changed.

VIII. Conclusion

The social construct of gender during the golden age of magic (1870-1950) has hindered women in magic from achieving equivalent notoriety as compared to their male counterparts. As the nineteenth century transitioned into the twentieth, many female magicians and even magazine editorials encouraged women to pursue magic, blending their advocacy with the social graces that were expected of women. When magic did not promote poise, good humor, or an engaging hostess, it provided women with a space to break social expectation. As “the period from the 1880s to the early 1920s was an era of unprecedented cultural visibility and voice for women,” women in magic had the opportunity to establish themselves in a male-dominated sphere. However, the greatest obstacle was that as a performing art, magic attempted to maintain traditional gender roles in the midst of a rapidly changing society. The gender divides, which have haunted magic since its association with the supernatural, continue to deter women because of “the unforgotten history of early modern witchcraft panics perpetuated the fear that females who practiced magic would enter into dangerous alliances and acquire powers that might upset the gender hierarchy.” Thus, the representation of women in magic is reflective of vanishing societal norms and the crisis of gender consciousness in the twentieth century.

Magic still stands as one of the remaining vestiges of patriarchal society with apparatus and stock illusions which visually mangle a woman’s body – Sawing Through a Woman, the Mis-Made Woman, Impaling the Assistant, Cabinet of Swords, Cremation – as well as feats which put the

124 Glenn, p. 216.
125 Ibid. p. 121
woman at the mercy of the male performer – Levitation, trances, and Metamorphosis. Magic has managed to avoid becoming fully modern. In order to assert her position as the magician the woman still often dons the “traditional” top hat and coattails – male evening attire. If this has become the uniform for magicians, then the apparel has already been gendered for a long time. As early as 1839, magic was imbued with gendered roles when a clipping from New York’s Daily Democrat advertises that Miss Hayden “respectfully informs the Ladies and Gentlemen of Rochester that she will present to them…polite magic,” as if to define the sort of magic that is fit for a woman rather than a man to present. Vaudeville had not yet been introduced and so family-friendly shows could not be guaranteed; yet when a woman performed magic it could almost vouchsafe a clean, wholesome performance.

Women magicians of this time still do not readily come to mind for many laymen. Magic history is rich with examples of women who have surmounted gender prejudices. After her husband’s untimely, Adelaide Herrmann assumed the title Queen of Magic for thirty years. Even before then, Adelaide demonstrated the independence and ingenuity suited for a career in magic – allowing herself to be shot out of cannons and composing her own routines. Her contemporary, Mercedes Talma, was a reigning Queen of Coins, besting even the most prodigious male magicians in coin manipulation despite her exceptionally small hands. Magicians’ assistants such as Bess Houdini, Dot Robinson, and Adele Rhindress, where heavily integrated into the routine, they often knew a good deal of magic themselves, enough to become magicians in their own right. However, none of these women’s names roll readily off the tongue of laymen or have even their faces come to mind with the mention of the word “magician.”

The women during the golden age are especially noteworthy as they lived through major war eras, witnessed feats in technological advancement, survived economic depression, and social reform. Historically speaking, women seeking careers in entertainment magic have found
themselves denied time and again because of gender stereotypes. That is never to say that female magicians could not earn the respect of their male coworkers; for instance, Adelaide Herrmann was “consistently praised in the magic press during the first two decades of the twentieth century...[and] received kudos without the condescending qualifier of being called ‘good, for a woman.’”126 Nowadays, although women have made incredible strides toward gender equality the glass ceiling in the field of magic still persists. Because of historical discrimination, there are fewer female role models for aspiring girls in magic. Finally, magic – with illusions that regularly victimize women – continues to possess a streak of misogyny residual from the last century. It is the “continuing predominance of masculine images and themes...[that] makes it especially difficult for women to credibly enact the role of the magician.”127 By studying the history of women in magic we are able to have a lens for understanding these particular periods of history. The Cult of Domesticity which was so prevalent during the Victorian era ebbed as the New Woman took an assertive stance. Women in magic broke these social constraints, often acting out of the norm. Expectations could be bent on the stage, especially one which already set the audience with preparation to be deceived.

Although they have risen to greater prominence than the previous century, women in magic continue to be a minority rather than an integrated segment of the magician community. Membership for women in most magic clubs and organizations hovers around five percent. In testimony to the continued gender prejudices, London’s prestigious Magic Circle refused to admit any women until a policy change in 1991. While certain magicians may maintain their prejudices this is never to deny the influence and history of women in magic. Much like understanding a conjuring act, women in magic were never brought simply out of thin air. They were always present since the beginning and now public attention is no longer being misdirected.

127 Jones, p. 122
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