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Annie Oakley, Gender, and Guns:

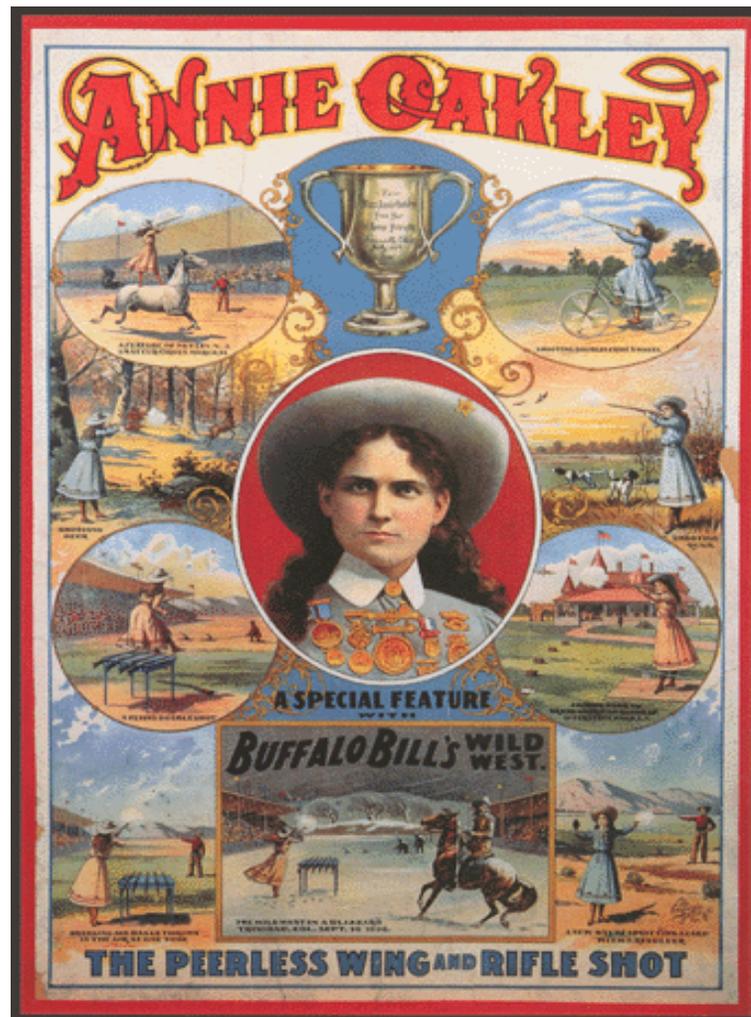
The “Champion Rifle Shot” and Gender Performance, 1860-1926

Sarah Russell

Spring 2013

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Honors Program Director: Dr. Christopher Magra



Promotional poster from Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, 1901.
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/photo-gallery/oakley/>.

Introduction

Annie Oakley is as familiar today in popular culture as she was during her lifetime over a century ago. She was not the only female sharpshooter that performed or toured in the period of her life from 1860 to 1926, but no other female shot enjoyed the same kind of international fame or lasting success. Something about Oakley made her unique and notable and allowed her to garner the attention and acclaim that she did from reporters and commentators as well as from her audiences. She was youthful, talented, entertaining, and feminine, and the combination of those qualities made Annie Oakley into a novel performer and guaranteed her popularity as a celebrity figure.

Annie Oakley's enormous popularity provides a means of understanding how the public, through the viewpoints of reporters and commentators, discussed and understood the connection between gender and celebrity at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Had Oakley not possessed an extraordinary talent, and one that was not expected from a petite and feminine woman, she would not have drawn the crowds or the recognition that she did. However, because she was entering a largely masculine world by joining Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, with its cowboys and Indians, her popular identity as seen by the public also depended upon her maintaining enough femininity as contemporaries understood the concept to not seem overtly masculine herself. Although audiences in Oakley's era no longer saw female performers as behaving inappropriately for putting their bodies on public display, as they had in the mid-nineteenth century, few if any women at this time had achieved great popularity by

renouncing their femininity altogether, which would have been an “unnatural” way for women to behave.¹

As a famous woman in an era rife with discussions about women’s rights and roles in society, Oakley’s popularity was inextricably related to ideas about gender. No discussion about her in newspapers or magazines failed to mention her petite size, feminine attire, or ladylike manners. Yet reporters and commentators did not focus exclusively on her feminine image, because her remarkable talent was just as distinctive and overt as her womanly image and behavior. Oakley uniquely combined her talent at shooting, which many still viewed as a “man’s” sport, with her embodiment of appropriate feminine attributes like her clothing or mannerisms. Unlike other internationally famous female celebrities of the era, like Lillie Langtry or Sarah Bernhardt, Oakley’s fame and legacy continued for decades after her lifetime and were largely the result of a talent that generally only male celebrities, like Buffalo Bill Cody or Doc Carver, possessed. As she would write later, “When I began shooting in public it was considered almost shameful for a woman to shoot. That was a man’s business you see.”²

The current historiographical literature about Oakley seeks to explain her popularity and her gender in simplified terms, often focusing entirely upon how “feminine, ladylike, Victorian, and appealing” she was without giving due deference to her talent, or conversely by overlooking some of her more complicated elements. Although it is tempting to ignore parts of Oakley’s identity in favor of simple and manageable explanations, the primary sources do not generalize but in fact embrace her complexity. After analyzing contemporary newspaper and magazine

¹ Kirsten Pullen, *Actresses and Whores: On Stage and In Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 93; Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 14.

² Annie Oakley, *The Autobiography of Annie Oakley*, ed. by Marilyn Robbins (Greenville, Ohio: The Darke County Historical Society, Inc., 2006), 49.

articles as well as a collection of memoir-style articles that Oakley wrote at the end of her life and were later compiled as her autobiography, the sources clearly indicate the many ways that Oakley used elements of different gender discourses. As a public performer, she did not fit well into the Victorian ideal of the “Cult of True Womanhood,” in which women were expected to remain within the boundaries of the home; as someone vocally against dress reform and women suffrage, she cannot be understood as a turn-of-the-century “New Woman” or as an early twentieth century Progressive, both of whom advocated for reform movements and increased social and political participation for women.³ While these ideals and discourses can be helpful in understanding the historical context of Oakley’s identity, as she understood it and as reporters and audiences understood it, they cannot serve as explanations in their own right without analyzing how her identity contained particular elements of each discourse to create a unique and novel embodiment of popular gender roles.

Judith Butler describes gender as a “performance...the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all.”⁴ Whether deliberately or subconsciously, Oakley’s own performance of gender in the public sphere created her identity based on both her talent and on her femininity. Even though perceptions of gender at the time in many ways followed certain discourses, reporters and audiences did not try to fit Oakley into one discourse or another, as modern historians and biographers are wont to do. They understood and accepted her with all of her complexities, because she put on a performance of gender that made her a non-threatening novelty rather than a woman trying to force her way into and excel in a

³ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 13; Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 16.

⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 178.

sphere not her own. Oakley is worth deeper study than mere biography or simplistic and stereotypical understandings of gender at the time. She reveals ways in which she, as a famous woman, pushed the boundaries of expected gender roles and discourses in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and how reporters and audiences made sense of such a complex, multi-faceted, and public gender performance.

Oakley's Beginnings

Annie Oakley was born in the rural area of Darke County, Ohio on August 13, 1860, and lived on her father's farm until his death in 1866. After his death, Oakley moved from place to place, living away from her family at the county poor farm, working as a maid for a family around 1872, and finally returning to live with her newly remarried mother around 1875.⁵ Oakley claimed that she taught herself how to shoot as a child with her late father's hunting rifle, which she used to shoot small game like rabbits and squirrels. In her autobiography, Oakley reflected years later that her mother "did not think so much of little girls playing with guns" and felt that her "prowess with a gun was just a little tomboyish."⁶ While it was not entirely unusual for young girls, especially rural girls, to play outdoors in the mid-nineteenth century – as historian Lois Banner writes, even "the appellation 'tomboy' was never entirely opprobrious" in the nineteenth century – Oakley evidently disregarded her mother's concern about young women

⁵ Shirl Kasper, *Annie Oakley* (Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 4-6.

⁶ Oakley, *The Autobiography of Annie Oakley*, 5.

shooting.⁷ After moving back in with her mother around 1875, Oakley used her shooting skills to trap and kill game to sell, and she claimed to have “saved enough from [her] trapped game to pay” off her mother and stepfather’s new house because they could not afford to pay for in full themselves.⁸ It was not unusual for poorer girls and women to contribute to their family’s finances; in both urban and rural areas in the 1870s, the earnings of unmarried women were often “crucial supplements to family support.”⁹ Oakley’s role supporting her family, however, was a function of her shooting skills, the independence she experienced as a child living away from home, and the particular situation of her poor, rural family. In a piece she wrote years later promoting DuPont Powder Company, Oakley indicated that when her father was still alive, he had sold game that she had shot in exchange “for ammunition, groceries, etc.,” and she reaffirmed this in her autobiography when she mentioned that she had bought more supplies as a young woman from the “store that had purchased the game I had shot and trapped when a child.”¹⁰ Both personal accounts suggest that she had grown up using her shooting skills to provide for her family and found it perfectly normal to continue to do so.

It was also around the time that she moved back in with her mother that Oakley met the man who would later become her husband, another touring sharpshooter named Frank Butler, who was about twenty-four years old at the time and was traveling through Darke County with a shooting partner in between performances in Ohio. Because Oakley lied about her age early on in her career and adjusted several dates in interviews and reports accordingly, Oakley wrote that

⁷ Lois Banner, *American Beauty* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1983), 101; Oakley, *The Autobiography of Annie Oakley*, 5.

⁸ Oakley, *The Autobiography of Annie Oakley*, 13-14.

⁹ Ellen Carol DuBois and Lynn Dumenil, eds., *Through Women's Eyes: An American History with Documents*, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009), 341.

¹⁰ Annie Oakley, *Powders I Have Used* (Wilmington, Delaware: E. I. du Pont de Nemours Powder Company, 1914), 1; Oakley, *The Autobiography of Annie Oakley*, 12.

they met in 1875, but biographer Shirl Kasper places their meeting in 1881 based on Butler's statements in newspaper articles.¹¹ The story of their meeting, as Butler recalled years later, began when Mr. Frost, an innkeeper who purchased Oakley's game and was currently housing Butler and his partner, invited Butler to shoot a match against a local "unknown." According to Butler, "I almost dropped dead when a little slim girl in short dresses stepped out to the mark with me. I then knew I was to shoot against Annie Oakley, of whose childish prowess I had heard in a faint way. I was a beaten man from the moment she appeared, for I was taken off guard."¹² Oakley did indeed win the match, and Butler ultimately proposed to and married Oakley shortly thereafter. Oakley left Darke County and traveled with Butler, performing as her husband's partner after his original partner became ill.¹³

Oakley and Butler toured together performing shooting exhibitions for a few years after their marriage, performing in variety theaters and later joining the Sells Brothers Circus in 1884. In December 1884, Oakley and Butler saw an advertisement for Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, which was slated to visit New Orleans at the same time as the Sells Brothers Circus. Oakley and Butler met with William "Buffalo Bill" Cody to ask about joining the show, but Cody turned them down because his show already featured several sharpshooters, among them the famous Captain Bogardus. When Bogardus retired from the show in early 1885, Oakley wrote to Cody to ask again about joining the show, despite the fact that he thought the salary she asked for was "a little high." In response, Oakley offered to show off her skills to them for three days, after which they could decide whether or not to keep her on as a part of the show. Nate Salsbury, the show's

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 17; Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 16.

¹² "Annie Oakley, Police Gazette Champion Shot," *The National Police Gazette*, March 7, 1903, accessed April 7, 2012, http://www.policegazette.us/FromTheMorgue_3-7-1903_AnnieOakley.html.

¹³ Oakley, *The Autobiography of Annie Oakley*, 17; Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 22.

business manager, was impressed enough with her performance to meet Oakley's salary demands and invite Oakley, accompanied by her husband, to join the show in March of 1885.¹⁴

Oakley's early years touring with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show were instrumental in promoting her celebrity as an individual act. Before joining the Wild West Show, Oakley appeared sparingly in newspaper articles and advertisements in conjunction with her and Butler's act. Just as the *National Police Gazette* had dubbed Oakley and Butler the "Police Gazette rifle team," advertisements consistently referred to her alongside her husband's name instead of garnering her own individual fame.¹⁵ After joining the Wild West Show, however, Oakley became an act in and of herself, because Butler was serving as her manager rather than as a partner in her act.¹⁶ Butler never explained why he stepped out of the act before joining the Wild West Show, but the show billed Oakley as her own act from her very first season.¹⁷

The Wild West Show had progressively gained popularity since its inception in 1883 because it was "of a novel character," an outdoor spectacle of western entertainment that was more than a horse race or a circus.¹⁸ Before Oakley joined the cast, the show opened with "a grand Wild West march, introducing Buffalo Bill at the head of his army of Indians, Mexicans, and cowboys" and featured horse races, sharpshooting by Buffalo Bill himself, and a reenactment of an attack on a stagecoach by a "murderous red band" of Indians.¹⁹ Men comprised the vast majority of the cast: cowboys, Indians, male horsemen and shooters, and of

¹⁴ Oakley, *The Autobiography of Annie Oakley*, 18-19; Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 32.

¹⁵ Untitled, *The National Polize Gazette*, February 23, 1884; "Advertisements," *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, October 24, 1883; "Amusements," *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, January 27, 1885.

¹⁶ Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 24.

¹⁷ "Photo Gallery," PBS, accessed January 13, 2013,

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/photo-gallery/oakley/>. See Figure 1 in Appendix.

¹⁸ "The Wild West," *Boston Daily Advertiser*, June 27, 1883.

¹⁹ "Wild Western Fun," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, May 4, 1884.

course, Buffalo Bill himself, who became a “model of masculinity in the 1880s.”²⁰ Although Oakley added a sense of feminine “civility” to the Wild West Show, her participation in the show indelibly connected her to the mythology of the American western frontier, “[transforming] the little Ohio girl into one of the most famous western characters of all time.”²¹ The Wild West Show, with its staged battles of cowboys defeating Indians and its representations of how the races could peacefully coexist, was undoubtedly representative of the success of civilization in the wild American frontier: as scholars Robert Rydell and Rob Kroes note, “This drama of triumph of civilization over savagery would be replayed many times during the life of the Wild West.”²² The mythology of America’s Wild West contributed to this concept of American civilization, especially at the end of the nineteenth century. Oakley participated in this “drama of civilization” in several ways, particularly through the costume she wore during her act. The outfits she wore in the arena featured “Indian and western motifs” like fringe and beading, and she usually wore a hat that resembled the hats of Buffalo Bill and the cowboys.²³ Her friendship with Indian chief Sitting Bull also added to her western mythology. She had met Sitting Bull before joining the Wild West Show at a performance she had given while touring with Butler, charming the Indian chief who was best known at the time for his participation in the Battle of Little Bighorn.²⁴ Sitting Bull famously dubbed Oakley “Wytonya Cecelia,” meaning “Little Sure Shot,” and called her his adopted daughter.²⁵ As Ann McGrath notes, her relationship with

²⁰ Banner, *American Beauty*, 236.

²¹ Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 40.

²² Robert W. Rydell and Rob Kroes, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna: The Americanization of the World, 1869-1922* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 32.

²³ McGrath, “Being Annie Oakley,” 211.

²⁴ Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 26.

²⁵ Oakley, *The Autobiography of Annie Oakley*, 22.

Sitting Bull gave Oakley “a more tangible, authentic link with frontier history.”²⁶ The publicity surrounding her and the way she portrayed herself was designed to show deliberate connections to the mythological, uncivilized, and masculine West, while her actions and behavior still showed her to be very much a modern, civilized lady.²⁷

Some sources about Oakley and the Wild West Show comment upon her role as a woman in a show that largely featured “uncivilized” characters like male cowboys, sharpshooters, riders, and Indians, even noting Buffalo Bill’s reticence about hiring a woman.²⁸ Oakley herself commented in her autobiography, “There I was facing the real Wild West, the first white woman to travel with what society might have considered an impossible outfit.”²⁹ However, around the time Oakley joined the show, Buffalo Bill hired another female sharpshooter named Lillian Smith, who received equal billing to Oakley in their first seasons. The program used similar language to promote Smith and Oakley – Smith was “the Champion Girl Rifle Shot,” and Oakley was the “Champion Markswoman.”³⁰ In newspaper articles, however, there are clear differences in the ways that the women are described. Where Lillian Smith was “of medium height [and] plump as a partridge,” Annie Oakley was “short and small, weighing only 110 pounds, and extremely youthful in appearance.”³¹ Aside from their markedly different appearances, Smith was more vocally competitive than Oakley was, saying she was “positive she can outshoot Oakley.”³² Oakley never responded to Smith’s assertions and never referred to their apparent

²⁶ McGrath, “Being Annie Oakley,” 211.

²⁷ Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 174.

²⁸ *Ibid.*; Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 32.

²⁹ Oakley, *The Autobiography of Annie Oakley*, 19.

³⁰ “Photo Gallery.”

³¹ “Lillian Smith,” *The Los Angeles Times*, August 19, 1887; “She’s Little, But She’s a Crack Shot,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 24, 1888; “Death of Annie Oakley,” *St. Paul Daily Globe*, January 4, 1891.

³² “Another Female Rifle Shot,” *The Atchison Daily Globe*, March 7, 1889.

rivalry in a newspaper or interview, although she likely resented Smith's boastfulness, writing later in her autobiography of another woman with the show who bragged "of how Annie Oakley was done for" but whose salary was cut in half once "they saw both her work and her ample figure."³³ Shirl Kasper notes that it was around the time that fourteen-year-old Smith joined the Wild West Show that Oakley began lying about her age to reporters, suggesting that she sought to ensure that she could maintain her "youthful appearance" in the face of her very young competition.³⁴

Aside from Oakley and Smith, the show also featured female riders, including one society woman who Oakley scorned for joining the show on a whim because "she thought it 'would be just too cute' to see [the world] from the back of a horse."³⁵ Oakley's success and lasting fame in the Wild West Show, when compared to how she outshone Smith and the relatively anonymous female riders, is remarkable. While Oakley later seemed to attribute her own popularity to her superior shooting skills and her "honest, hard work," there was something else about her that made her as popular as she was to her audiences and to reporters and commentators.³⁶ She was not just a novelty or a good shot – she was both a novel woman and a great shot among men and women, which became the key elements of her public identity and her gender performance.

Throughout her career, newspaper articles consistently praised Oakley's skill with a gun, remarking upon her "excellent" and "wonderful" shooting and her accomplishment of "novel"

³³ Oakley, *The Autobiography of Annie Oakley*, 24.

³⁴ Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 61.

³⁵ "Buffalo Bill's Wild West Programme," June 7, 1887, Cambridge University Libraries; Oakley, *Autobiography of Annie Oakley*, 23.

³⁶ Oakley, *The Autobiography of Annie Oakley*, 19, 29.

and “daring” shots.³⁷ She could knock a silver dime out from between an assistant’s fingers, hit balls thrown into the air with exceptional accuracy, run to pick up different guns in between shots, and shoot clay pigeons that she had fired off herself seconds before. One 1887 article claimed that “her aim is almost perfect and the dexterity with which she handles firearms makes her a source of admiration and wonder to the marksmen as well as to the uninitiated.”³⁸ In addition to these unusual trick shots, Oakley’s gender performance within her act made her, in the words of press agent Dexter Fellows, “a consummate actress...the sight of this frail girl among the rough plainsmen seldom failed to inspire enthusiastic plaudits.”³⁹ Oakley’s small stature and petite figure undoubtedly made her stand out among the men of the troupe and even in comparison to the other women like Smith. Her costume enhanced her size and figure and likely contributed to the “youthful appearance” that newspapers noted. In promotional posters and photographs for the Wild West Show, Oakley is dressed in boots, a skirt that is fitted at the waist and falls between her ankles and knees, with her long hair down and a wide-brimmed hat on her head. The shirts she wears in these images are long-sleeved and are often adorned with fringe and medals.⁴⁰ While her costume emphasized her feminine features like her small waist, shapely legs, and long hair, it differed from women’s fashionable attire in the late 1880s, blending Western elements like leather and fringe and the style of young girls’ clothing, when historically it was still appropriate for them to wear shorter skirts and to keep their hair down.⁴¹

³⁷ “Amusements”; “The Drama,” *New York Tribune*, October 23, 1888; “She’s Little, But She’s a Crack Shot.”

³⁸ “She’s Little, But She’s a Crack Shot”; “Trap Shooting,” *Turf, Field, and Farm*, July 1, 1887, 7; “Wild West Show,” *The Penny Press*, September 8, 1896.

³⁹ Dexter Fellows and Andrew Freeman, *This Way to the Big Show* (New York: Halcyon House, 1938), 73.

⁴⁰ “Photo Gallery”; “Annie Oakley,” Digital Collections, McCracken Research Library, Buffalo Bill Historical Center, <http://library.bbhc.org/cdm/>. See Figure 2 in Appendix.

⁴¹ Banner, *American Beauty*, 101.

Her costume, while in keeping with the Western theme of the show, also recalled the attire of a young girl, which, when paired with Oakley's small stature, must have made her seem quite young indeed.

Although it might have been unusual for a married woman to dress in this manner, even as a costume, it is possible that neither the reporters nor her audience actually knew that she was married at all. Many newspapers spoke of her as "Miss Annie Oakley" rather than "Mrs. Frank Butler" and without mentioning her husband at all, reflecting that her celebrity was at least in part based upon her identity as her own woman.⁴² Some undoubtedly either did not know she was married or thought it was a rumor, because Oakley wrote in her autobiography of several letters that she received containing "offers of marriage" from fans, and two French authors even wrote in 1890 that "the young girl is still unmarried."⁴³ It was not until around 1888, after she had been shooting on her own for a few years, that some articles referred to her as "Mrs. Butler" or noted that she was married at all, which stood in stark contrast to Smith, who eagerly discussed her marriage with reporters.⁴⁴ Although Oakley revealed in her later writings that Butler had assisted her with her act, loading her shotgun shells and even acting as her partner by releasing the clay birds or wielding a rope over his head tied with glass balls for her to shoot, not

⁴² See "Amusements"; "The Operatic Festival," *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, May 10, 1886; "Skillful Shooting," *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 22, 1887; "Buffalo Bill's Good-Bye," *New York Times*, April 1, 1887; "Trap Shooting"; "She's Little, but She's a Crack Shot"; "Buffalo Bill on French Soil," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 12, 1889; "Girls See the Wild West," *The Sun*, May 20, 1894; "Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show Has New Features," *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, July 28, 1898.

⁴³ Oakley, *The Autobiography of Annie Oakley*, 32; Hugues Le Roux and Jules Garnier, *Acrobats and Mountebanks*, trans. by A. P. Morton (London: Chapman and Hall, Limited, 1890), 207.

⁴⁴ See "A Great Shaggy Mastiff," *St. Paul Daily Globe*, January 16, 1888; "People We Read About," *Detroit Free Press*, April 1, 1888; "The Trap," *Forest and Stream*, August 9, 1888; "Little Sure Shot Dead," *Boston Daily Globe*, December 31, 1890; "Rides a Wheel, Too," *The Daily Inter Ocean*, June 7, 1896; "Lillian Smith."

many reporters or commentators knew that he actually served as her manager.⁴⁵ The fact that reporters largely assumed Oakley was unmarried likely contributed to her overall youthful appearance and demeanor. Those reporters who did learn about Butler later in Oakley's life, though, never spoke much more about him other than to say that he was Oakley's manager and to occasionally note that he was a talented sharpshooter himself, although as one reporter noted, "he rarely touches a rifle nowadays except to clean it for his wife."⁴⁶ Although it seems unusual that reporters did not make more of the fact that Butler had abandoned his own career in order to manage that of his wife, it is notable that if he appeared at all, he played a small part in reports about Oakley or, as in the case of the reporter who noted that he cleaned guns for his wife, was described in a dismissive and almost humorous manner. Her husband was clearly not an important element of Oakley's gender performance, only serving as a means of expounding upon how unusual Oakley was. Rather than to reveal that Oakley showed "dependence upon men," as Glenda Riley asserts (and as Smith's discussions of her own husband possibly did), reporters mentioned Butler either entirely in passing or as a way of demonstrating how unique Oakley really was.

With the quiet assistance and management of her husband, Oakley toured with Buffalo Bill around the United States from 1885 to 1887 as a part of the Wild West Show, achieving billing only two lines beneath Buffalo Bill himself and only one line beneath Con Groner, Buck Taylor, and Dick Johnson, the famous cowboys in the troupe.⁴⁷ Most reporters who wrote about

⁴⁵ Oakley, *Powders I Have Used*, 3; Glenda Riley, "Annie Oakley: Creating the Cowgirl," in *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 45, no. 3 (Summer 1995): 41, <http://jstor.org/stable/4519814>. One newspaper article recognized that Oakley's husband served as her "financial manager," but listed his name as "Thomas Butler" instead of "Frank Butler" ("Little Sure Shot Dead").

⁴⁶ "People We Read About"; "She's Little, But She's a Crack Shot"; "A Great Shaggy Mastiff."

⁴⁷ "Photo Gallery."

the Wild West described Oakley as the “champion rifle shot,” mirroring both the language used in her promotional material as well as the title she earned with Butler by the *National Police Gazette*. Some reporters elaborated a bit upon the details of her act, noting that she would “[break] glass balls and clay pigeons with surprising rapidity...in almost every conceivable position” and do “astonishing” and “wonderful” things with her gun.⁴⁸ Beyond these brief descriptions, however, articles did not contain much information or detail about Oakley’s performances in the first few years of her time with the Wild West Show. Reporters simply referred to her as the “champion rifle shot,” expressed admiration for her skill, and noted that she was “loudly applauded” by the crowd for her performances on stage without yet discussing how she performed her gender.⁴⁹

Transatlantic Fame

It was not until Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show went on its first overseas tour to England that Oakley became a more frequently and broadly discussed figure in newspapers and periodicals, both in England and also in the United States. The troupe set sail for London on March 31, 1887 out of New York City, where a “dense crowd” had gathered on the dock, “shouting and whooping and gesticulating for dear life.” A reporter noted the reactions of several troupe members, including “Miss Annie Oakley, the markswoman” who “bubbled over with

⁴⁸ “Peaceful as a Lamb,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 30, 1885; “The Wild West,” *Detroit Free Press*, June 6, 1885; “The Operatic Festival.”

⁴⁹ “The Wild West,” June 6, 1885.

good spirits.”⁵⁰ The show arrived in London a few days later, where the troupe set up their arena at the grounds at Earl’s Court as part of the American Exhibition, a trade fair established by American businessmen. The Wild West Show attracted a “crush” of “many thousands” of people in its opening weeks of performances, and Oakley in particular was “extremely popular on the opening day.”⁵¹ Aside from noting her acumen with a gun, some British reporters commented upon her learning to shoot at a young age or how she kept a neatly “boarded and carpeted” tent as her living space near the grounds, details about her life outside of the arena that had not appeared in earlier newspaper articles.⁵² American newspapers also began importing news from London about the Wild West Show that discussed Oakley and her act. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* featured an article mentioning how she “did some capital shooting at glass balls thrown from a trap and by hand,” and the periodical *Forest and Stream* noted that she was “meeting with great success” while abroad in England. Each of these articles featured an entire paragraph devoted entirely to Oakley’s participation in the Wild West Show and her time in London, which represented an increase in the amount written about her in American newspapers where she had previously only been mentioned in passing.⁵³

One of the reasons that Oakley appeared more frequently in the press, especially in America, was that she began to participate in shooting tournaments and exhibitions in England when she was not performing with the Wild West Show. Aside from the match that she shot against Frank Butler, Oakley had only shot a handful of competitions in the United States before

⁵⁰ “Buffalo Bill’s Goodbye.”

⁵¹ “The American Exhibition,” *The Newcastle Weekly Courant*, May 13, 1887; “Buffalo Bill at Bromfton,” *Reynolds’s Newspaper*, May 15, 1887; “Notable Events and Prominent Personages,” *The Ipswich Journal*, May 13, 1887.

⁵² “The American Exhibition”; Philip, “Our London Letter,” *The Penny Illustrated Paper and Illustrated Times*, May 7, 1887.

⁵³ “Seeing the Yankeeries,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 19, 1887; “American Riflemen Abroad,” *Forest and Stream*, August 25, 1887.

1887.⁵⁴ After arriving in London, however, Oakley competed in many tournaments and private exhibitions, including several at the prestigious London Gun Club. A “welcome visitor” at the Gun Club, Oakley shot so well and impressed the Gun Club members to such an extent that she received the first medal the Club had ever awarded, according to one newspaper.⁵⁵ Her exhibitions and participation in Club tournaments drew “a large and distinguished company of ladies and gentlemen,” and no one else in the Wild West troupe, besides Buffalo Bill himself, was “having a more popular reception” than Oakley.⁵⁶

The discussions in both England and America surrounding Oakley and her participation in these Gun Club events are very gender-specific, even as they celebrate Oakley’s exceptional talent. The American periodical *Forest and Stream* wrote, “it is a great thing to see a lady step up to the trap and kill bluerock [a type of pigeon] after bluerock; it is something that is not often seen [in England].” It went on to say that “Miss Oakley by her ladylike ways has won hosts of friends” in England.⁵⁷ The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported about a notable match between Oakley and the Grand Duke Michael of Russia, who had specifically asked to compete against Oakley and who she roundly defeated. The article commented that “although the Prince made a fairly good score, it showed but poorly in comparison with that of his fair competitor, and he retired from the contest abashed but firmly convinced of the superiority of American markswomen over Russian amateur lady shots.”⁵⁸ Even an article that applauded Oakley’s talent at the Gun Club without any substantive mention of her femininity referred to her as “the little

⁵⁴ Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 67.

⁵⁵ “American Riflemen Abroad.”

⁵⁶ “Trap Shooting.”

⁵⁷ “American Riflemen Abroad.”

⁵⁸ Oakley, *The Autobiography of Annie Oakley*, 38; “Women of the World,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 1, 1887.

woman” on account of her petite figure.⁵⁹ When writing about Oakley’s remarkable successes in competitions and at private exhibitions, including when she had outshot a male competitor, the language that reporters used balanced her skill with her feminine aspects like her size, her dress, or her mannerisms, so that any commendation of her talent was almost always paired with an emphasis on her “feminine” appearance or behavior.

It is unlikely that reporters’ reasons for describing Oakley’s femininity were calculated efforts to reemphasize a gendered hierarchy of shooting, especially in the case of her successes against male shooters. Men did not seem particularly threatened by Oakley’s skill or resent her success, given her popularity among the dominantly male Gun Club members, her willing male opponents like the Russian Grand Duke, and her talent being noted by reporters as impressive but unusual for a woman, at least in England.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, the way that reporters framed Oakley both in terms of her talent and her femininity reflected the importance of both of these elements to her identity and her performance of gender. While her femininity clearly did not detract from the public reception of her talent or her popularity, it was still ever-present and always mentioned by reporters. After all, Oakley had been billed and made famous as the “champion markswoman,” and both British and American reporters reflected that language and understanding of her when they referred to her in articles as an American markswoman or, even more simply, “the Girl Shot.”⁶¹

Reporters, however, were not the only people to comment on both Oakley’s skill and femininity: while touring in England, she met several members of the royal family, all of whom had something to say about the “champion markswoman.” Oakley’s match against the Grand

⁵⁹ “Trap Shooting.”

⁶⁰ Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 81; “American Riflemen Abroad.”

⁶¹ “Women of the World”; “Seeing the Yankeeries.”

Duke of Russia was not her first encounter with royalty on this tour. Within the first week of the Wild West Show opening in London, the Prince and Princess of Wales attended a performance, along with several other members of the British and French nobility.⁶² It would be the Prince of Wales who, several months later, would present Oakley with the award from the London Gun Club, famously saying, “I know of no one more worthy of it.”⁶³ One British reporter noted with some humor that when Oakley was first presented to the Prince and Princess of Wales, she “with charming naivete [*sic*] put out her hand to shake hands with the Princess on the Republican principle, ladies first.”⁶⁴ Writing later in her autobiography about the meeting, Oakley explained, “An English born lady would not have dared to have done as I did.”⁶⁵ Rather than act offended by her behavior or threatened by her disregard for the traditional royal male hierarchy, the Prince apparently said, “What a pity there are not more women in the world like that little one.”⁶⁶

One of Oakley’s most publicized visits with royalty, however, was her meeting with Queen Victoria, whose diamond jubilee occurred on the same year as the American Exhibition. The fact that she made the trip out to Earl’s Court was significant because, in the twenty-five years since her husband Albert’s death in 1861, Victoria had rarely left Windsor palace.⁶⁷ Nonetheless, on May 11, 1887, the Queen along with the Prince and Princess of Battenberg attended a private showing of the Wild West show to see the “peculiar performances” of the troupe members, perhaps drawn by the novelty of the western entertainment.⁶⁸ After the performance, Oakley and Lillian Smith, who had also traveled to England with the show, were

⁶² “Seeing the Yankeeries.”

⁶³ “Trap Shooting”; Oakley, *The Autobiography of Annie Oakley*, 29.

⁶⁴ “Seeing the Yankeeries.”

⁶⁵ Oakley, *The Autobiography of Annie Oakley*, 30.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 80.

⁶⁸ “The Queen and the American Exhibition,” *The Hampshire Advertiser*, May 14, 1887.

introduced to the Queen, who “spoke a few words of praise to each,” and the female shooters “bowed in a matter-of-fact way and then walked off as if they were not overcome by the situation.”⁶⁹ Queen Victoria recorded her visit to the show in her diary, writing, “There were 2 [sic]...girls, who shot with unvarying aim at glass balls.”⁷⁰

Although the newspapers focused on both Smith and Oakley’s meetings with the Queen, Oakley spoke years later about the meeting in her autobiography, writing that the Queen had desired an audience with Oakley after watching her shoot and supposedly told her, “You are a very, very clever little girl,” which Oakley regarded as “the highest compliment.”⁷¹ Oakley did not mention Smith meeting the Queen at all, elaborating only upon her own interactions with the Queen and disregarding her rival altogether. Nonetheless, even if the Queen was equally complimentary to Smith, Oakley’s interactions with Victoria became part of her celebrity, appearing several times in later articles about Oakley to demonstrate her popularity even among royalty. Reporters included that Oakley had “won praise” from Queen Victoria, noted the “prosaic appearance of England’s Queen” at one of her performances, and even asserted that Victoria had supposedly given Oakley a diamond pin.⁷² Queen Victoria never explained why she was so impressed with Oakley, but given her own accomplishments and popularity as a female figure, it is possible that she admired several things in Oakley that she herself possessed: a “little” or petite physique, charisma, and autonomy balanced with seemingly wholesome virtues of womanhood and a petite physique. Twenty years after her death, writer J. Frank Dobie noted that Oakley “was a symbol of the domestic virtues that the popular mind ascribed to Queen

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*; “Queen Victoria,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 12, 1887.

⁷⁰ Queen Victoria’s Journals, Princess Beatrice’s Copies, Vol. 85, Page [218] from 11 May 1887, www.queenvictoriasjournals.org.

⁷¹ Oakley, *The Autobiography of Annie Oakley*, 33.

⁷² “She’s Little, But She’s a Crack Shot”; “Rides a Wheel, Too”; “Fond of Forest Life,” *The Washington Post*, February 7, 1897.

Victoria and to Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show."⁷³ While Oakley was hardly "domestic" in any traditional sense, she exhibited some of the ideals that Victoria and women in the Victorian era with the "Cult of True Womanhood" embodied, such as keeping a neat and decorated tent (in lieu of a home) or dressing in proper clothing for a woman while not performing. Like Queen Victoria, who was well-loved and respected even though she was a female ruler on a traditionally male throne, Oakley performed particular elements of appropriately ladylike behavior to qualify her own success and talent and make her an appealing and popular feminine figure in the predominantly "man's world" of the Wild West Show.

In fact, it was during her time in England that the public began to note how ladylike, modest, and virtuous Oakley appeared when entertaining reporters and guests or giving private exhibitions, showing that she continued her gender performance even outside of the arena. She would invite reporters to her tent and offer them juice or tea, prompting one reporter to note that "It is a pleasure to go to Miss Oakley's tent and spend an hour talking to the little American wonder...Miss Oakley by her ladylike ways has won hosts of friends over here."⁷⁴ Indeed, the tent that she and Butler lived in while touring was decorated in the manner of a respectable woman with carpets, pillows, and knickknacks, alongside displays of the medals she had won.⁷⁵ She hosted teas for her "children friends" each month, while two "daintily befrilled maids" served the guests, giving Oakley's tent an air of domesticity.⁷⁶ Furthermore, when she was not performing in costume, she wore long, elegant dresses with cinched waists, reflecting the appropriate fashions for genteel women of the late 1880s.⁷⁷

⁷³ J. Frank Dobie, "Buffalo Bill on Horseback," *Dallas Morning News*, July 28, 1946.

⁷⁴ Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 76; "American Riflemen Abroad."

⁷⁵ Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 59.

⁷⁶ Oakley, *The Autobiography of Annie Oakley*, 32.

⁷⁷ Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 108; Banner, *American Beauty*, 149.

Reporters also noted her ladylike appearance and decorum when she competed or performed outside of the arena. Oakley's first time shooting at the English pigeons called "bluerocks" occurred at the London Gun Club, where Oakley discovered how strong and fast these birds were. She struggled during her first time shooting at a string of twenty-four pigeons and later wrote that after her unsuccessful attempt she "could have been led home easily by a lingerie ribbon." Despite her failure, though, just as earlier reporters described her both in terms of her talent and her femininity, the observers at the Gun Club did not focus solely on her talent. One elderly newspaper editor, who Shirl Kasper believes was J. J. Walsh of the London *Field*, told Oakley, "I expected to find a better shot but not so much of a lady."⁷⁸ Oakley quickly proved herself "no mean adept" at shooting bluerocks at another London Gun Club exhibition, where the reporter called her "the little American" and noted her petite size several other times in the article, noting both her talent and her celebrity as many others in England, including the Queen herself, did.⁷⁹

The kind of popularity that Oakley cultivated in England stayed with her after she and Butler returned to the United States in November of 1887, citing illness as a reason for leaving when the Wild West Show had completed its run in London and departed to tour other European countries.⁸⁰ The *St. Paul Daily Globe* featured an interview with Oakley shortly after her return to the United States that opened by saying that "Making tea and toasting muffins was the occupation of the best lady rifle shot in the world" when the reporter arrived at her apartment in New York.⁸¹ Evidently, Oakley's ability to perform domestic tasks and still maintain her identity as a talented shooter had not disappeared after she left England. This interview, however, also

⁷⁸ Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 82-83; Oakley, *The Autobiography of Annie Oakley*, 29.

⁷⁹ "Trap Shooting."

⁸⁰ Oakley, *The Autobiography of Annie Oakley*, 33.

⁸¹ "A Great Shaggy Mastiff."

provided insight into how Oakley saw her celebrity and popularity, and it indeed seemed to use the talent-femininity duality of her gender performance that the Wild West Show and reporters had used to describe her. Oakley told the interviewer that her British audiences had treated her so well because, as she supposed, “a crack shot in petticoats was a novelty and a curiosity to them.”⁸² Oakley’s own use of the word “novelty” is largely indicative of the result of the combination of her shooting skills and her ladylike behavior that comprised her celebrity identity, and several reporters also referred to Oakley as a novelty throughout her career.⁸³ Oakley’s size, manners, and talent made her unique as a famous female sharpshooter and drew attention from audiences curious to observe such a “muscular yet girlish woman” who could hold her own against less feminine shooters like Lillian Smith, prominent members of the famous London Gun Club, and even “sharing honors with Mr. Cody,” or Buffalo Bill himself.⁸⁴

“A Consummate Actress”

Although Oakley never mentioned why, writing that the “reasons for so doing take too long to tell,” she and Butler severed their contract with Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show after returning to the United States.⁸⁵ Despite the level of popularity that the Wild West Show had provided Oakley, she and Butler began to pursue other outlets for Oakley’s talents, perhaps seeking to capitalize on her former association with the show in other areas. Oakley did

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ See “Shooting,” *The Daily Picayune*, February 24, 1889; “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show Has New Features.”

⁸⁴ “A Great Shaggy Mastiff”; “Trap Shooting.”

⁸⁵ Oakley, *The Autobiography of Annie Oakley*, 33.

participate in other shows, tours, and exhibitions in 1888, but she quickly discovered that none of these other enterprises were as successful as the Wild West Show. Nonetheless, her year away from Cody's outfit helped to further develop her identity through her gender performance and ultimately resulted in her rejoining the Wild West Show the following year.

In April of 1888, Oakley joined a touring show organized by Tony Pastor, an important man in show business in New York who ran a theater next door to Tammany Hall. Pastor's shows were known for their "neatness, good taste, and the respectability of [their] clientele," as one reporter wrote, and this by association placed Oakley's act into that framework of wholesome entertainment.⁸⁶ Although Oakley would return to Pastor's tour in the fall of that year, she left the spring tour after only a few months in order to join a different Wild West Show run by Pawnee Bill, writing in her autobiography that he was willing to "put her on special."⁸⁷ Oakley never indicated that she joined Pawnee Bill's show out of spite for Buffalo Bill, but whatever her reasons for joining, they did not last long. Oakley left after only a month with the show to return to touring with Tony Pastor.⁸⁸ She would later claim that Pawnee Bill had tried to keep her but failed, saying "You can't keep Annie Oakley at any price," a quote which Oakley likely included as a means of demonstrating her desirability as a performer at the time.⁸⁹ Just as she had quickly left Pawnee Bill's show, however, Oakley stayed with Pastor's fall tour only until December, when she began a stint as an actress with a show called *Deadwood Dick*, marketed as an "interesting and thrilling border drama."⁹⁰ The show apparently received poor reviews despite Oakley's onstage shooting during the show (Oakley later wrote that even though

⁸⁶ "Amusements," *The Sun*, November 23, 1888.

⁸⁷ Oakley, *The Autobiography of Annie Oakley*, 35.

⁸⁸ Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 99.

⁸⁹ Oakley, *The Autobiography of Annie Oakley*, 36.

⁹⁰ "Kelly's Front Street Theatre," *The Sun*, January 14, 1889.

the money was good, “I never quite understood just why the press abstained from vegetable throwing”), and it closed about a month after opening.⁹¹

It is unclear why Oakley changed engagements as she did in 1888, though perhaps she was seeking higher salaries and diverse opportunities and simply got involved in multiple failing ventures. Nonetheless, her participation with Pastor, Pawnee Bill, and *Deadwood Dick* still contributed to the gender performance that she had cultivated with Buffalo Bill. Her association with Pastor helped brand her and her act as “family friendly,” because the acts that Pastor employed and would continue to employ were, in his own words, “a family entertainment for ladies and children, fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers. Pure, chaste, merry, and perfect.”⁹² Despite her apparently modest and virtuous appeal, Pastor still billed Oakley as “The Unequaled and Original Sensation,” emphasizing the novelty of her act that had already been established with Buffalo Bill’s show.⁹³ Pawnee Bill’s advertisement called Oakley the “Champion Lady Rifle Shot of the World,” and *Deadwood Dick* billed her as the “acknowledged queen of the rifle.”⁹⁴ The language used to describe Oakley even during her short stints with these shows reflected the same ways that reporters and Buffalo Bill’s show had identified her, by emphasizing the gender performance of her talent and her femininity which combined to make her act into a novelty, “unequaled” and “original.”

Notably, after completing her run with *Deadwood Dick*, Oakley and Butler rejoined Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show as it left for yet another European tour in 1889, this time staying abroad for three years and visiting several countries including France, Spain, Germany, Italy, and

⁹¹ Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 100-101; Oakley, *The Autobiography of Annie Oakley*, 37.

⁹² “Tony Pastor’s,” *The Evening World*, February 7, 1893.

⁹³ “Kernan’s Monumental Theatre,” *The Sun*, October 16, 1888.

⁹⁴ “Pawnee Bill’s Historical Wild West,” *The North American*, June 28, 1888; “Kelly’s Front Street Theatre.”

also returning to England. Oakley claimed in her autobiography that the Wild West Show had asked for her to return after learning of her time with Pawnee Bill, saying that they “would fight any company” she joined, and after renegotiating whatever issues had caused her to initially cancel her contract, she traveled with them to Paris.⁹⁵ She did not describe the changes made to her contract, but, as Shirl Kasper notes, Lillian Smith left the Wild West Show the same year that Oakley rejoined and did not travel to Paris with them, indicating the possibility that Oakley had asked for Smith to leave or for top female billing if she was to return.⁹⁶ If Smith had indeed left because of Oakley, it suggests that Oakley’s more overtly feminine approach ultimately beat out Smith’s equal or perhaps greater skill.

Reports about Oakley’s time in France indicate that she was well received by Parisian audiences just as she had been by British and American audiences, in part as a result of her feminine demeanor. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* mentioned that Oakley “held quite a little court of her own and was much admired by the French press men for her simple and modest bearing,” and a French book published in 1889 called Oakley “[une] étoile féminine,” or a “feminine star.”⁹⁷ Oakley remembered her time in France similarly, writing in her autobiography, “All the French papers were very generous to me.”⁹⁸ As in England, Oakley was introduced to several important people while in Paris, including the French President Sadi Carnot and Dain Salifour, the King of Senegal, both of whom apparently requested Oakley’s shooting services in a political context. Carnot told Oakley, as reported in her autobiography, “When you feel like changing your nationality and profession there is a commission awaiting you in the French Army.” The

⁹⁵ Oakley, *The Autobiography of Annie Oakley*, 37.

⁹⁶ Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 101.

⁹⁷ “Buffalo Bill on French Soil”; Hugues le Roux, *Les jeux du cirque et la vie foraine* (Paris: E. Plon Nourrit & Co., 1889), 20.

⁹⁸ Oakley, *The Autobiography of Annie Oakley*, 37.

King of Senegal begged to take Oakley back to his country to defend his villages from tigers, an offer that Oakley politely refused.⁹⁹ Not only did Oakley garner praise for her femininity, but she was also lauded for her skill, even being offered “masculine” positions as a soldier or as a defender of African villages. That reporters could view her as feminine and well mannered, and that politicians could simultaneously view her as skilled and capable of performing masculine duties, indicates the influence of Oakley’s gender performance on her public identity. Even though she did not fit neatly into a defined gendered category, she did not pose a threat to men because her talent balanced with her femininity allowed her to continue to develop as a novelty act while abroad with the Wild West Show.

While Oakley was abroad, newspapers picked up on a story out of Buenos Aires, Argentina that Oakley had died of congestion of the lungs. The story was false – Oakley was alive and well in London at the time – but the articles reporting her death mourned the loss of the “champion woman wingshot” who was “small in stature” and “youthful in appearance,” and whose “novel” feats would draw “a great crowd of witnesses.”¹⁰⁰ Oakley wrote in to a few magazines to correct the error, but her obituaries reveal that reporters sought to honor and commemorate her novelty, a critical element of her gender performance.¹⁰¹

After completing the three-year European tour, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show returned to the United States, and in 1893 it began preparation for its involvement with the famous World’s Fair in Chicago that year. The fair was wildly popular, drawing around twenty-five million visitors in all, and the Wild West Show was one of the most popular attractions at the

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁰⁰ “Little Sure Shot Dead”; “Death of Annie Oakley.”

¹⁰¹ Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 113.

fair.¹⁰² Oakley, as usual, received high praise from reporters for her “wonderful rifle act” and for having “pleased the guests mightily.”¹⁰³ After the World’s Fair, the Wild West Show began an extensive tour of the United States in 1895 launched by its success in Chicago, and Oakley and Butler traveled with them while she continued to perform with the show until 1902.

During these years on the road, Oakley added to and developed her act, continuing to emphasize her gender performance as a novelty act. One of the stunts that she added during this time that attracted attention was shooting at clay pigeons and glass balls while riding her new safety bicycle. Cycling had rapidly gained popularity in America in the 1890s, especially for women. Women reformers had begun advocating for female exercise in the second half of the nineteenth century as a means of keeping women healthy, but they promoted activities that were “in keeping with the prevailing belief in women’s weaker physique.”¹⁰⁴ Cycling, at least on the “safety bicycle” designed specifically for women, was one such activity that did not “make too great demands on the muscles” and was thus an appropriate physical activity for women.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, women did not have to adapt their dress to ride a safety bicycle. Although some women chose to wear bloomers or a divided skirt while riding a bike, many, including Oakley, continued to wear traditional skirts.¹⁰⁶ Oakley was vocally against female dress reform and was quoted saying, “I don’t like bloomers or bloomer women, but I think that sport and healthful exercise make women better, healthier, and happier.”¹⁰⁷ Indeed, Oakley always wore what she

¹⁰² “The World’s Columbian Exhibition,” The Chicago Historical Society, accessed April 1, 2013, <http://www.chicagohs.org/history/expo.html>; Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 123.

¹⁰³ “Closed on Sunday,” *Boston Investigator*, May 17, 1893; “Had a Jolly Time,” *Daily Inter Ocean*, July 28, 1893.

¹⁰⁴ Banner, *American Beauty*, 90.

¹⁰⁵ “Out-Door Dresses,” *The Daily Inter Ocean*, April 27, 1890.

¹⁰⁶ “Ladies Who Ride Wheels,” *The Daily Inter Ocean*, June 15, 1890.

¹⁰⁷ Catherine Smith and Cynthia Greig, *Women in Pants: Manly Maidens, Cowgirls, and Other Renegades* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2003), 75.

called “woman’s proper garb” when cycling, shooting, and riding, continuing to emphasize her femininity even while engaging in sports and light physical activity (just as the exercise reformers advocated, she ensured that never allowed herself “to become tired” while riding her bicycle).¹⁰⁸

Although not aligning herself with dress reformers, Oakley’s bicycle riding was reminiscent of famous women reformers of the era like Frances Willard, the president of the WCTU and another avid cyclist. Oakley hardly fits into the discourse of the “New Woman” or Progressive reformer in the same sense as Willard or other contemporaries like Jane Addams, but she supported women’s exercise and participation in sports, of which cycling was but one example. Historian Lois Banner describes the importance of the bicycle to female participation in sports: “Had the bicycle not appeared, women eventually would have taken up sports and exercise anyway. By the 1890s the general cultural pressures for women to be active were too great to be avoided....[Female sports figures] made public women’s previously private athletic participation and paved the way for other women to follow.”¹⁰⁹ Certainly, shooting a rifle while riding a bicycle was an unusual and novel element of Oakley’s act, but her participation in the women’s cycling movement was hardly unusual, despite the misconception that “bicycle riding is essentially a man’s sport and pastime,” which many reporters refuted by discussing women like Oakley and Willard and how popular cycling had become for women at the end of the nineteenth century.¹¹⁰ Her cycling stunt added to Oakley’s novel performance, allowing her to perform her gender using both her talent and her femininity from an entirely new angle: the back of a safety bicycle.

¹⁰⁸ “Rides a Wheel, Too.”

¹⁰⁹ Banner, *American Beauty*, 145.

¹¹⁰ “Ladies Who Ride Wheels.”

After completing the United States tour with Buffalo Bill, Oakley once again left the Wild West Show at the end of 1902 to try her hand at acting, this time in a traveling play called *The Western Girl* written especially for her. The play, which ran from November 1902 to March 1903 and performed in several states across the Northeast, fared slightly better than *Deadwood Dick* and generally reporters felt that Oakley had “good dramatic ability.”¹¹¹ Her role in *The Western Girl*, however, did not differ greatly from her act in Buffalo Bill’s show, because she wore a similar costume of a skirt and leggings and performed similar feats such as shooting at glass balls.¹¹² Although it did not necessarily add new elements to Oakley’s gender performance or public identity, it is likely that the show succeeded because of the pre-established fame of its star, and Oakley continued to unquestionably embody the persona of the talented female rifle shot that she had cultivated throughout her entire career.

In fact, perhaps the only time that her reputation was called into question was in August of 1903, when a story appeared in a Chicago newspaper describing the arrest of a woman who had stolen “the trousers of a negro in order to get money with which to buy cocaine.” Newspapers reported that the woman was none other than Annie Oakley.¹¹³ Evidently, the woman was actually a burlesque performer named Maude Fontenella who had performed in a show under the name “Any Oakley,” but the damage had already been done as several other newspapers across the country published the story about how Annie Oakley of the Wild West Show had been “ruined” by cocaine use.¹¹⁴ Oakley launched into action in order to ensure that the papers corrected the error, ultimately suing fifty-five newspapers for libel and winning or

¹¹¹ “Hartford Opera House,” *The Hartford Courant*, December 2, 1902.

¹¹² “Entertainments,” *The Hartford Courant*, December 5, 1902; “The Stage,” *Detroit Free Press*, August 3, 1902.

¹¹³ “Gone to the Dogs,” *The Nashville American*, August 12, 1903.

¹¹⁴ Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 174; “Gone to the Dogs”; “Annie Oakley in Prison,” *The Sun*, August 11, 1903.

settling all but one of them. She wrote in to several newspapers, asking them to contradict the articles that used her name and saying that the woman posing as her was a “fraud” and that “someone will pay for this dreadful mistake.”¹¹⁵ She also told one newspaper during the trials that because of the false report, “she was permanently injured in her good name and credit.”¹¹⁶ Even her talent had been called into question during this case, because the arrested woman had claimed that she had taken cocaine while on tour, meaning, as one reporter wrote, that “her head [did] not appear as steady as her hand” and that some of her performances might have been influenced by the drug.¹¹⁷

Some commentators showed their support for Oakley during her extensive libel suits, because of her “pleasing face and...fine soft voice” and because “Oakley, the champion woman shot of the world, is, in private life, a gentle, tender woman.”¹¹⁸ Others were less sympathetic: one reporter, though noting that if the suits succeeded they would be a “salve for her injured reputation,” also wondered if “quite a few people could not be found, willing...to submit to being charged in the public prints” for such a sum.¹¹⁹ Whether or not they saw the libel suits as a valid defense or an opportunity for fame and payment, these reporters all noted the important role that Oakley’s identity and reputation played in these suits. Not only did Oakley vocally dissociate herself from the crimes of theft and cocaine use, but she also actively sought retribution in several public trials, apparently feeling that her words were not enough to renew her reputation in the face of these accusations. Theft and cocaine use were certainly not insignificant crimes, but the reason that they prompted such a strong defense from Oakley

¹¹⁵ Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 175.

¹¹⁶ “Annie Oakley Wants Damages of \$10,000,” *The Hartford Courant*, October 25, 1905.

¹¹⁷ “Annie Oakley Wants Damages of \$10,000.”

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*; “A Woman Wronged,” *The Spokane Press*, September 4, 1903.

¹¹⁹ “Those Annie Oakley Libel Suits,” *The Hartford Courant*, November 7, 1905.

reveals how important it was to her to maintain her identity as talented but also feminine and, consequently, moral and upright. Women at the turn of the twentieth century were still generally assumed to possess a certain level of inherent morality, and because Oakley's femininity was such a critical part of her novel gender performance, she worked to maintain at least a certain level of expected feminine roles even if she largely remained separate from dominant feminine discourses of her time.¹²⁰ In order to defend her femininity and her talent, Oakley in effect turned the courtroom into a new "arena" or stage for her gender performance, demonstrating on a highly public level how the "champion woman rifle shot of the world" could retain her novelty as a talented but still moral and feminine individual.

As further demonstrations of her talent, Oakley continued to participate in trapshooting tournaments and exhibitions after she left the Wild West Show. By the first decade of the twentieth century, trapshooting had become an extremely popular sport for women for the same reasons that bicycling had become popular. Articles commented upon the "more than...usual amount of interest" of women in trapshooting competitions: one article from the *Idaho Daily Statesman* wrote about a trapshooting tournament in St. Louis that for the first time allowed "trapshooters of the fair sex [to] have their place in the sun."¹²¹ Because newspapers and magazines encouraged women to learn trapshooting "as a healthful exercise without any strenuous endeavor," rhetoric similar to that used decades earlier to advocate for women cycling, trapshooting organizations that held tournaments opened up special events and trophies for women shooters.¹²² Nonetheless, women at trapshooting competitions still attracted attention,

¹²⁰ Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, 15, 19.

¹²¹ "Women to Vie for Title," *The Oregonian*, August 7, 1919; "Women Trapshooters To Vie Against Male Experts in Great Tournament at St. Louis," *The Idaho Daily Statesman*, August 13, 1916.

¹²² "Women Trapshooters."

Oakley especially so because of her popularity as a public figure. One tournament in 1902 featured three female shots including Oakley, who were all, according to the reporter, all the “object of much attention from the crowd.”¹²³ Another paper in 1908 reported how Oakley’s “nerves are still steady and her eye accurate” as she “made some very marvelous shot and sustained the reputation that she has so long enjoyed.”¹²⁴ Even though Oakley was over forty years old and had a head full of white hair, these articles demonstrate that she successfully maintained a gender performance combining her talent and skill. Coupled with her active defense of her moral reputation during the libel suits, Oakley was still very much the talented and feminine novelty that she had been, even as she aged.

Oakley’s final stint as a traveling performer occurred between 1911 and 1913, when she joined yet another Wild West Show called the Young Buffalo Wild West that, despite similarities in name, was not affiliated with Buffalo Bill’s enterprise. Reporters still called Oakley “the world’s greatest woman rifle shot,” even at fifty years old, and the “bright particular star” of the show.¹²⁵ Notwithstanding the increasing popularity of women as shooters, one reporter wrote, “The fact that [Oakley] is a woman and in the ordinary course of events would not be expected to attain unusual skill in this particular line, makes even more remarkable the distinction that is hers.”¹²⁶ Whether or not others shared this reporter’s view of the unlikelihood of female shooters, the reporter’s comment does reveal the extent to which Oakley’s gender performance continued to play an important role in how she was perceived, even in her final years touring with a show.

¹²³ “Old Champions Are Losers,” *Omaha Daily Bee*, April 4, 1902.

¹²⁴ “An Interesting Shooting Exhibition,” *The Ocala Banner*, February 28, 1908.

¹²⁵ “Daring Deed,” *Hopkinsville Kentuckian*, October 31, 1911; “Vivid Demonstration,” *Hopkinsville Kentuckian*, October 28, 1911.

¹²⁶ “Annie Oakley with Young Buffalo Wild West,” *The Citizen*, July 22, 1913.

Her Years in Retirement

At age fifty-three, Oakley finally retired from performing and touring when the Young Buffalo show completed its season in 1913. After leaving the show, she and Butler moved to Pinehurst, North Carolina, a town known for its resorts that supported sporting enterprises like horseback riding, golf, and of course, trapshooting.¹²⁷ At Pinehurst, Oakley began regularly teaching women how to shoot, and her lessons attracted the attention of many wealthier women who were also vacationing there. An image of her teaching “society women” at Pinehurst appeared in several newspapers, including the *San Jose Mercury Herald* and *The Pueblo Chieftain*.¹²⁸ According to her biographer Shirl Kasper, Oakley first started teaching at Pinehurst after overhearing a wealthy woman bemoan the fact that she wasn’t a man because she wanted to learn to shoot. Oakley informed her that “Your sex does not prevent you from learning to shoot,” and in a matter of months after inviting the woman to the range for a lesson, she had over seven hundred students.¹²⁹

This was not the first time that Oakley had taught women to shoot. She wrote in her autobiography that when she was touring in London in 1887 with the Wild West Show, she “gave lessons there...when a class of five ladies asked for lessons, saying they would pay any price asked.”¹³⁰ Although it is unclear whether or not the women actually paid for their lessons, Oakley claimed that she taught without compensation because she had an “ideal for her sex.”

¹²⁷ Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 203-204.

¹²⁸ “Society Women Become Sharpshooters,” *San Jose Mercury Herald*, July 27, 1919; “World Champ Teaches Society Women to Shoot,” *The Pueblo Chieftain*, July 27, 1919. See Figure 3.

¹²⁹ Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 207.

¹³⁰ Oakley, *The Autobiography of Annie Oakley*, 29.

This ideal, as Oakley described it, was actually made up of two separate goals: to enable women to enjoy the sport of sharpshooting, and to provide women with a way to defend themselves and their families.¹³¹

Up until her retirement, Oakley had had little to say in regards to her personal feelings about women's general roles and abilities in society. Despite the fact that women's movements that had been steadily increasing in popularity since her youth, she had not commented about how women could and should behave, aside from the occasional remark about bloomers.

Towards the end of her life, however, Oakley began to verbalize her thoughts about women and femininity for herself, rather than reporters and commentators doing so for her. Using the example of women learning to shoot, Oakley noted how women were not only capable of excelling at sports and athletic activities, but also how they would benefit from such activities physically by providing exercise and emotionally by providing a means of protection.

In 1925, Oakley wrote, "I have often been asked if women, as a class, can shoot a rifle or shotgun as well as men. My reply has been: Sex makes no difference."¹³² Although this statement on the surface seems to be an endorsement of gender equality, Oakley, like many other female reformers of the time, was not necessarily saying that women were equal to men. In fact, this rhetoric of equal participation but not equality between the sexes evolved in the years after 1900, in which women intensified their activism in the social sphere and continued to push for more political involvement, resulting in the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920.¹³³ Historian Nancy Cott notes that despite these advances, advocates of women's rights in the Progressive era still "frequently weighted the end of the see-saw stressing women's gender differences from men,

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 49.

¹³³ DuBois and Dumenil, *Through Women's Eyes*, 454-455.

women's need to protect their established interests, women's duties owed and services to be offered to society.”¹³⁴ This mentality even extended to sports and athletics, where the predominant view about women in athletics emphasized differences in biology between men and women and discouraged “masculine” competitiveness in female athletes.¹³⁵

Oakley clearly did not view the sexes as completely equal. She wrote that “outside of heavy, manual labor, anything a man can do a woman can do practically as well.”¹³⁶ While Oakley did not deny that women’s *abilities* are, at least in most cases, equivalent to men’s, the *reasons* that women should learn to shoot for sport were unique and gender-specific: “above all, [shooting] would teach them grace and poise. You cannot imagine how shooting demands perfect balance, and how shooting vanishes carelessness and slovenly ways.”¹³⁷ Shooting for sport, as with other forms of athletics or exercise for women, was only beneficial inasmuch as it improved the female body in distinctly feminine ways – providing light, healthful exercise, or adding to its womanly grace and poise. As one article noted in a similar vein, “Trapshooting isn’t a strenuous pastime. It is the ideal sport for the fair sex.”¹³⁸

Even Oakley’s assertion that women should also learn to shoot for protection reinforces the fact that she did not find inherent equality between genders. Along with shooting for sport, Oakley wanted women to learn how to “defend themselves” and “to be capable of protecting their homes.” She gave an example of a woman who, because of “the training she had” with Oakley, defended her home from a burglar by brandishing her gun. As Oakley carefully points out, though, the woman’s “thoughtful husband had removed the cartridges to obviate all danger.

¹³⁴ Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, 21.

¹³⁵ Susan Cahn, *Coming On Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women’s Sport* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 24.

¹³⁶ Oakley, *The Autobiography of Annie Oakley*, 50.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹³⁸ “Women Coming to the Front at the Traps,” *The Idaho Daily Statesman*, January 16, 1916.

However, as neither the lady nor the burglar knew that the weapon was not loaded, the result was just as satisfactory.”¹³⁹ It is clear from this story that despite her proclamations about the benefits of shooting as self-protection, Oakley was not advocating that women replace men as the primary protector of the family: she considered the husband “thoughtful” for having removed the bullets in his wife’s gun, not trusting his wife to handle the gun despite her having taken lessons. Oakley seems to be implying that she simply wished for women to be able to defend their homes alongside their husbands, especially if their husbands were not available to assist them.

This concept of female self-protection was heavily gendered in the early twentieth century. Although Oakley herself did not discuss the idea of guns as protection for women until later in her life, the idea that women needed to protect themselves largely originated in reform movements of the late 1800s. The movement of women’s reform advanced into the Progressive Era of the early 1900s, becoming known as “public” or “municipal” housekeeping. This movement sought to build upon women’s supposedly natural tendencies towards morality by using women to “[press] upon the municipal authorities the need of public prevention from the ills from which the people suffer,” especially ills that affected other women like theft, burglary, or sexual immorality.¹⁴⁰ As more women began to move to industrialized cities to live and work together, the fear of working women’s sexual indecency became more prevalent, especially among the middle class female reformers. As historian Sarah Deutsch writes, reformers focused on keeping working women “safe,” but that “Safety here meant moral safety, not physical safety.”¹⁴¹ Oakley herself said that women could be spared “shame” (presumably meaning rape)

¹³⁹ Oakley, *The Autobiography of Annie Oakley*, 50.

¹⁴⁰ Mary Beard, *Women’s Work in Municipalities* (New York: National Municipal League, 1915), 221-22, in DuBois and Dumenil, *Through Women’s Eyes*, 464.

¹⁴¹ Sarah Deutsch, *Women and the City: Gender, Space, and Power in Boston, 1870-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 57.

by learning how to use a gun.¹⁴² The issues that women faced that merited gun use for protection, according to Oakley and others, were uniquely female issues, whether they were defending their homes and families to assist their husbands or defending their moral and sexual virtue.

Oakley also articulated another reason that women should learn to shoot, one that she had been hinting at it in various ways for decades: so that they could be not only defend themselves but could also be “ready for extreme emergencies in war time.”¹⁴³ This was not the first time that Oakley had made an argument for female shooters to participate in war efforts, especially in the years after both the French President and the Senegalese King had asked her to assist them in a military or political capacity. In 1898, just before the Spanish-American War broke out, Oakley famously wrote a letter to President William McKinley offering to “place a company of fifty lady sharpshooters at your disposal” in the case of war.¹⁴⁴ McKinley never wrote back or acknowledged the receipt of the letter, but Oakley did not stop seeking participation in war efforts. In 1918, towards the end of the First World War, Oakley traveled to the “Eastern cantonments” to give shooting exhibitions and instructions to soldiers.¹⁴⁵ She also apparently telegraphed the Secretary of War, once again offering to form a regiment of female shooters for home defense to no reply.¹⁴⁶ Oakley felt that women shooting to defend their country should be an option in wartime and could be of great use; as she wrote later, “surely the great war has revealed many instances when a woman with a pistol and no fear of using it might have been

¹⁴² Oakley, *The Autobiography of Annie Oakley*, 50.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ Annie Oakley, letter to President William McKinley, April 5, 1898, National Archives, <http://www.archives.gov/research/recover/example-02.html>, accessed September 28, 2012.

¹⁴⁵ See “Meade Soldiers Try to Emulate Annie Oakley,” *The Washington Times*, April 28, 1918; “Annie Oakley Giving Men in Army Camps Big Treat,” *New York Tribune*, August 19, 1918.

¹⁴⁶ “Women Seeking Shooting Jobs,” *The Washington Herald*, April 21, 1918; “Women Sharpshooters Corps,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, March 10, 1917.

spared torture, shame and death.”¹⁴⁷ Because a designated army corps for women would not be established until World War II, the fact that Oakley had publically advocated for one as early as 1898 demonstrates one area in which she was ahead of her time.¹⁴⁸ Even though she rejected some of the more radical or forward-thinking ideas aspects of women’s reform, like dress reform or even suffrage (Oakley never indicated any support for suffrage, saying she would agree to it “if only the good women voted”), the fairly radical idea of female participation in the military merited Oakley’s advocacy.¹⁴⁹

At the end of her life, the ways that Oakley articulated and discussed gender roles served as a means of reflecting upon her life and the way that she embodied a novel perception of gender. Oakley’s novelty throughout her career relied upon her gendered performance of both her talent and her femininity. After she retired, however, she began to expand upon her own novelty by further complicating what she perceived as appropriate feminine behavior. By denying any proscribed discourses of femininity, either based on tradition or on reform, Oakley remained a multi-faceted and uniquely fashioned woman. In an era when women were trying to find a place for themselves in society, Oakley had found hers through a unique and unexpected performance of gender, which made her both a novelty and a legend.

¹⁴⁷ Oakley, *The Autobiography of Annie Oakley*, 50.

¹⁴⁸ U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Science, *Special Report: Women in the US Army, An Annotated Bibliography*, May 2002, <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA407786&Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf>, 14.

¹⁴⁹ Kasper, *Annie Oakley*, 213.

Conclusion

When Annie Oakley died in 1926, newspapers mourned the loss of the “Champion Rifle Shot” and her husband, who died shortly after his wife and whose “broken heart hastened the end.”¹⁵⁰ Oakley did not disappear from the media after her death, however: newspapers continued to publish articles about her and about her participation in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show for years after she died.¹⁵¹ She became a popular figure in movies and television as the subject of films like Barbara Stanwyck’s *Annie Oakley* (1935) and the television show *The Adventures of Annie Oakley* (1954-1956) starring Gail Davis. In 1946, Oakley became the subject of an enormously popular Broadway musical called *Annie Get Your Gun*, starring Ethel Merman originally and later Bernadette Peters and Reba McEntyre in revival performances.

The various versions of Oakley’s own gender performance in many ways oversimplified her complexities. In the 1935 film, for example, Barbara Stanwyck’s Oakley deliberately loses her match against her future husband in an ultimately successful attempt to make him fall in love with her, and the film ends with him sweeping her off her feet.¹⁵² Oakley also throws the famous match in *Annie Get Your Gun*, despite her musical assertion to her husband that “Anything You Can Do, I Can Do Better,” and the show closes with the announcement of their marriage.¹⁵³ The television show with Gail Davis, by contrast, depicted Oakley as an unmarried town sheriff who

¹⁵⁰ See “Annie Oakley, Champion Rifle Shot, Is Dead,” *Boston Daily Globe*, November 4, 1926; “Annie Oakley Death Recalls Gun Feats,” *The Sun*, November 5, 1926; “Little Sureshot Annie Oakley is Dead,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 5, 1926; Allyene Sumner, “Annie Oakley’s Husband Follows Wife to Grave,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, November 24, 1926.

¹⁵¹ See Dobie, “Buffalo Bill on Horseback”; Herb Michelson, “Women You Can’t Forget,” *Daily Boston Globe*, July 27, 1958; Kenneth Turan, “Little Sure Shot,” *The Washington Post*, January 3, 1977; Frank Daniels, “The Lady Was a Sharpshooter,” *The Tennessean*, August 13, 2012.

¹⁵² *Annie Oakley*, directed by George Stevens (1935; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2007), DVD.

¹⁵³ Riley, “Annie Oakley: Creating the Cowgirl,” 46.

defeated male bandits and who, while still youthful and feminine in appearance, wore fringed pants instead of skirts and eschewed overt suggestions of romance.¹⁵⁴ In recent years, Oakley has been the subject of several children's books, fashioning her into a role model for athletic young girls and for "girl power."¹⁵⁵

The popular media depictions of Oakley after her death were more than inaccurate historical portrayals but instead enhanced particular elements of Oakley's gender performances to create new legends and myths about her. Although those depictions served to perpetuate Oakley's fame long after her death, they clouded the complicated aspects of the identity that she crafted and that the public accepted as part of her novelty. The real Oakley did not have to fall into her husband's arms to appear feminine, nor did she have to be a crime-fighting sheriff to assert her talent. Her performance of gender did not follow any one standard ideal of femininity or talent, but took elements of several ideals to create her own unique public identity. While each media representation of Oakley served to demonstrate its own understanding of Oakley's identity in keeping with its own contemporary context, they collectively indicate the complexity of the gender performance she exhibited in her own lifetime. She was a fascinating woman whose novel public persona made her all the more appealing, and she deserves a more critical analysis than basic gendered discourses or popular media depictions can provide.

¹⁵⁴ McGrath, "Being Annie Oakley," 213.

¹⁵⁵ See Stephanie Spinner, *Who Was Annie Oakley?* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 2002); Lisa Greathouse, *Annie Oakley* (California: Teacher Created Materials, 2009); Ellen Wilson, *Annie Oakley: Young Markswoman* (New York: Aladdin, 1989).

Appendix: Visual Images

Figure 1

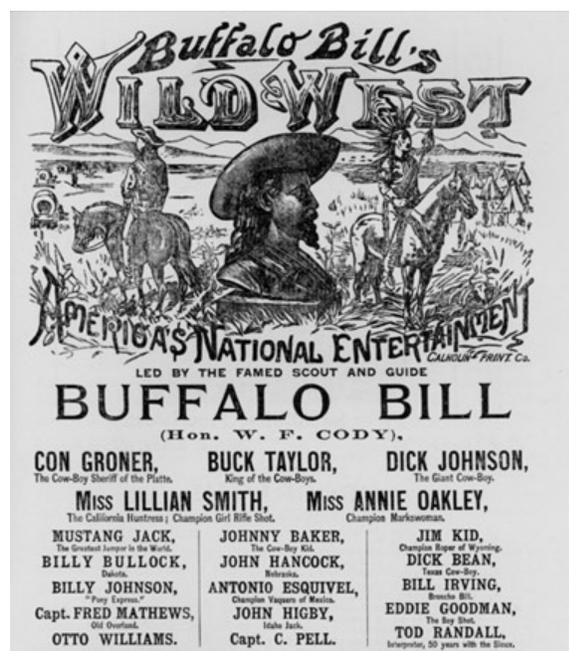


Image from <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/photo-gallery/oakley/>

Figure 2



Image from <http://library.bbhc.org/cdm/landingpage/collection/BBOA>.

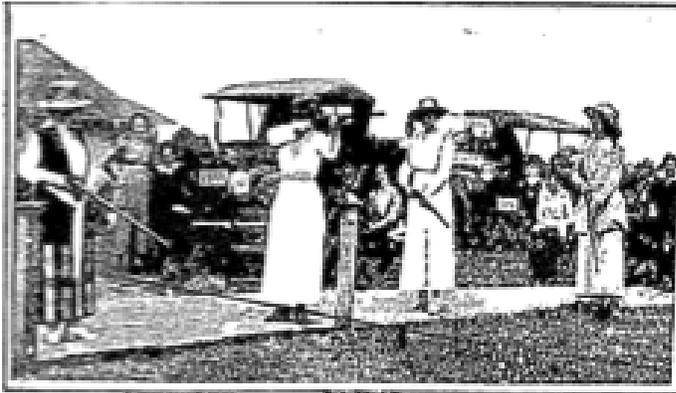
Figure 3

Image from *The Pueblo Chieftain*, July 27, 1919. America's Historical Newspapers.

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