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Sexual Healing: Nurses, Gender, and Victorian Era Intimacy

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Abstract

In the first episode of the new PBS series *Mercy Street*, nurse Anne Hastings is seen applying a plaster cast to a wounded soldier's bare legs before a captivated audience of surgeons and hospital workers. This action seems trivial today, even unquestionable, but as the show progressed and more scenes portrayed this seemingly insignificant concept of touch, of intimacy between a female nurse and her male patients, its true magnitude became apparent. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, Dorothea Dix, Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation, Army nurses, Walt Whitman, sexuality

Disciplines

History | History of Science, Technology, and Medicine | Military History | Social History | United States History

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Sexual Healing: Nurses, Gender, and Victorian Era Intimacy

January 25, 2016

By Annika Jensen '18

In the first episode of the new PBS series *Mercy Street*, nurse Anne Hastings is seen applying a plaster cast to a wounded soldier's bare legs before a captivated audience of surgeons and hospital workers. This action seems trivial today, even unquestionable, but as the show progressed and more scenes portrayed this seemingly insignificant concept of touch, of intimacy between a female nurse and her male patients, its true magnitude became apparent.

Sex was not a popular topic of discussion in Civil War Era America; Victorian society shunned intimacy between men and women and regarded intercourse solely as a means of reproducing and building families, a convention that led to the establishment of separate spheres. Women were expected to remain pure and chaste, while men were responsible for fighting off their intrinsic sexual instincts (both of these standards are sexist, of course, but that's a story for another blog post), and interactions between the genders were meant to be courteous and, frankly, prudish. The publication of *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850 did not help this case as women became more apprehensive and fearful of the reactions they might receive; no woman wanted to be the subject of public scorn.

Thus nurse Hastings' treatment of her male patients, which seems insignificant in a contemporary context, becomes a pretty big deal. This intimacy was often intimidating and unusual for young female nurses, many of whom were expected only to maintain close relations with male family members or husbands; for many, touching the male body was taboo. However, the sense of prudishness perpetuated by long skirts and separate spheres was made irrelevant when it came to saving soldiers' lives, as Phoebe Pember articulated: "A woman *must* soar beyond the conventional modesty considered correct under different circumstances." In justifying their "improper" actions, female nurses often appealed to religion, nation, and ethics.

But there were restrictions: Dorothea Dix, superintendent of female nurses in the Union, was adamant about appointing only the most appropriate women to work alongside male patients and set aside criteria for those she hired. According to the Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation, "Contract nurses were required to be over 30 years old, matronly in appearance, able to pay their own way, have two letters of recommendation, wear brown or black garments and to be sober and self-sacrificing." Additionally, Dix discouraged single women from becoming nurses, as the stigma associated with the job could likely jeopardize their reputations.



Dorothea Dix, Superintendent of Union Army Nurses. Photograph via Wikimedia Commons.

While women were chided by Victorian society for intimate interactions with the opposite sex (their chastity being valued over their character), relationships between men were designated by a physical closeness bordering on homoeroticism that has today grown uncommon due to prejudice and notions of masculinity (but that's another story for another time). This could be seen in army hospitals as well, as male nurses strove to provide comfort and assurance to the sick and injured. For some soldiers more accustomed to Victorian social standards, male nurses would even have been preferable. Perhaps the most famous example is the poet Walt Whitman who not only nursed but brought food and money to soldiers in need, penned letters for the debilitated, and befriended his patients. Whitman wrote extensively about the relationships he formed in letters as well as his collection of war poetry, *Drum-Taps*, where it can be seen that [he developed feelings that were more than platonic](#).

It is interesting, then, to compare the reputation of the male and female nurse, while Whitman's sexuality adds another whole level of complexity. The discrepancies are due, of course, to the separate gender spheres of the Victorian Era derived from prudish sexual practices, and though female nurses may have been scrutinized for their "improper" practices, their motivations were ultimately unselfish. Therein lies the complexities of nurse Hastings' scene: though her physical closeness with her male patient seems pretty kosher today, it reveals a plethora of Civil War Era gender expectations.

Starting this week, the Gettysburg Compiler will be releasing weekly posts as part of a "Mercy Monday" feature that will cover issues of medical history, gender and race relations, historical memory, and other themes depicted in the new PBS series Mercy Street.

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