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'The Female Marine' and 'Clotel': An Analysis of Female Crossdressing to Escape Coercive Labor Situations in 19th Century American Literature

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Abstract

Although illegal in many U.S. cities, crossdressing was a point of fascination for Americans of the nineteenth century. Stories of real women passing as men to serve in the military—for example, Revolutionary War veteran Deborah Sampson—enchanted readers and inspired writers, such as that of *The Female Marine*. Ostensibly written by its heroine, but most likely written by Nathaniel Hill Wright, *The Female Marine* was a popular story about a young woman who was forced to become a sex worker and cross-dressed to escape her situation, then enlisted in the Navy where she served aboard the U.S.S. *Constitution*. At the same time, several Black people—women and men—used crossdressing as a means to flee from enslavement. In addition to crossdressing, enslaved Blacks with fair skin would temporarily pass as white to liberate themselves. The most famous example of this is the story of William and Ellen Craft: Ellen passed as a white man and her darker-skinned husband William posed as her servant while they traveled. Many Black writers drew inspiration from their story, including William Wells Brown, author of the novel *Clotel* in which the title character utilizes this method to escape. This essay examines how nineteenth century women employed crossdressing as a means to escape coercive labor situations such as forced sex work and enslavement and how this practice is represented in the literature of the era, focusing on the widely read stories of *The Female Marine* and *Clotel*.

Keywords: Crossdressing, coercive labor, chattel slavery, nineteenth century literature, African American literature, Female Warrior narratives