

The Woman in Peril and the Ruined Woman: Representations of Female Soldiers in the Iraq War

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ABSTRACT. If the principle of equality is central to contemporary liberal feminism, then demonstrating that women and men have similar capacities—whether physical, intellectual, or moral—is a predominant concern. Given the importance attributed to military service, women in the military have long been drawn upon by liberal feminists and their opponents to provide empirical examples of women’s abilities or lack thereof. Two such instances occurred with Pfc. Jessica Lynch and Pfc. Lynndie England, young female soldiers thrust into the limelight the United States’ 2003 invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq. Liberal feminists made the case that Lynch and England demonstrated that women are no less capable of heroism or depravity than men, but these potentially subversive counternarratives were largely absent from media representations of the two soldiers. I argue that the predominant female gender images reproduced in the media during and after the Iraq War have been of the *Woman in Peril* (Lynch) and the *Ruined Woman* (England). Rather than undermining stereotypes of women, as some feminists had hoped, the dominant narratives of Lynch and England worked instead to reinforce existing gender norms.

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Two young working-class women from opposite ends of West Virginia go off to war. One is blond and has aspirations to be a schoolteacher. The other is dark, a smoker, divorced and now carrying an out-of-wedlock baby. One becomes the heroic poster child for Operation Iraqi Freedom, the subject of a hagiographic book and TV movie; the other becomes the hideous, leering face of American wartime criminality, Exhibit A in the indictment of our country's descent into the gulag. In the words of *Time* magazine, Pfc. Lynndie England is 'a Jessica Lynch gone wrong' (Rich 2004).

Feminist theorists have long contended that the discourses of war and national security are potent sites for the production and reproduction of gender identities (Cohn 1987; Elshtain 1987; Ruddick 1989). As Jean Bethke Elshtain argues, "wars destroy and bring into being men and women as particular identities by canalizing energy and giving permission to narrate. Societies are, in some sense, the sum total of their 'war stories'" (1987, 166). War stories in the United States are both representative and productive of hegemonic gender discourses identifying masculinity with war and femininity with peace. Even some feminists have supported this articulation of femininity, creating women's peace camps and identifying non-violence with feminine moral reasoning (Ruddick 1989; Sylvester 1994, 184–196). Yet, like all hegemonic discourses, the gender discourses associated with war are neither total nor uncontested. The idea that women are more peaceful and less involved in warfare, whether naturally or through socialization, has been challenged by figures as varied as poststructural feminist theorists and women in uniform (Tickner 2001, 58–64).

In 2003, challenges to stereotypes of "naturally" peaceful women were given increased salience from two women who attained notoriety as US soldiers in Iraq: Pfc. Jessica Lynch and Pfc. Lynndie England. Lynch, a 19-year-old Army supply clerk, was seriously injured, captured, and held as a prisoner of war until her dramatic rescue from an Iraqi hospital by US Special Forces 9 days

later. Originally lauded as bravely firing upon her attackers until her capture, the purportedly heroic Lynch found her foil in England, a 21-year-old Army reservist in a military police company who was photographed standing next to sexually and physically abused Iraqi detainees at the Abu Ghraib prison. In interviews, articles, and letters to the editor, numerous liberal feminists used these media spectacles as an opportunity to argue that women as a group were neither less valiant nor more upstanding than men, and that connecting men with war and women with peace was no longer sustainable.

These feminist interpretations, however, did not succeed in fending off Lynch and England's figurative appropriation as hegemonic articulations of femininity (Sjoberg 2006, 898). While this may come as no surprise—discourses do not become hegemonic by being vulnerable to attack—the cases of Lynch and England do provide a remarkably clear picture of rhetorical contestation, and of one of the primary mechanisms through which hegemonic discourses successfully resist change. In this article, I argue that the attempts to fix the gendered symbolic meanings of Jessica Lynch and Lynndie England pitted a number of liberal feminists, who argued that Lynch and England had demonstrated that women were perfectly capable of “masculine” bravery and depravity, against two entrenched tropes in the American public discourse, the Woman in Peril and the Ruined Woman. As such, an argument that appeared self-evident to feminists—that women are neither too weak nor too moral to fight—failed to gain traction because it failed to address counter-representations that placed Lynch and England within a ready-made, generally accepted gender discourse. While it is impossible to know if the feminist depictions of Lynch and England had any chance for success, my argument suggests that a more successful strategy for resisting hegemonic gender discourses requires feminists to both present alternative accounts and explicitly challenge the specific tropes taken up by the mainstream media.

HOW WAR (EN)GENDERS IDENTITIES

Even prior to poststructural efforts to dethrone the essentialized sovereign subject of traditional Western philosophy, Simone de

Beauvoir's landmark analysis in *The Second Sex* led to widespread agreement among feminist theorists that gender identity is socially constructed rather than naturally given (Peterson 1992, 9).¹ In addition to showing that gender, at least, is socially produced, feminists working within poststructural and psychoanalytic frameworks further depicted the patriarchal order as built around a binary opposition between the masculine and the feminine, with the masculine taking both the positive and neutral position, and the feminine representing the negative pole (Hooper 2001, 43; Lauretis 1987; Peterson and Runyan 1993, 24). In this formulation, the male is made the norm while the female is deviant. Other common binaries, such as strong/weak, active/passive, reason/emotion, and technology/nature, are themselves gendered, and so men and women alike can be treated as masculine or feminine depending on the pole with which they are associated (Cohn 1993). This analytical lens is useful even in situations in which women are portrayed positively, as with Jessica Lynch, and when everyone is seen as deviant, as with Lynndie England at Abu Ghraib. While all participants in the latter situation might be seen as departing from the norm of "civilized conduct," the ways in which such a departure is characterized according to the perpetrator's gender illuminate the generally hidden workings and effects of gendering as a process. Showing how gender norms are enacted and imposed rather than naturally makes resistance possible.

The images and tropes that proliferate in American public discourse on war, from the draft dodger and the embittered veteran to Private Benjamin and G.I. Jane, are intrinsically gendered, and help shape our ideas of what it means to be a man or a woman both in- and outside of the military. Elshtain (1987), for example, argues that war has given rise to two powerful gender archetypes in the West. The first, the "Just Warrior," is the traditionally masculine, reluctant soldier whose image is inspired by the Christian Just War tradition. This soldier fights not for the glory of battle or a thirst for killing, but to protect the innocents at home: the feminine "Beautiful Souls" who are "too good for the world yet absolutely necessary to it" (Elshtain 1987, 140). These archetypes identify violence and warfare as the provinces of men, and peace and nurturing as the provinces of women (Enloe 1989, 12; Pettman 1996, 92). Further in the article, I argue that part of the shock and revulsion provoked by Lynndie England, as opposed to her male counterparts, centered on

her complete departure from the feminine norm. As military sociologist Melissa Sheridan Embser-Herbert (2004) noted in the *Washington Post*, “The reversal of roles has taken us completely by surprise.”

While the literature on women and war is extensive, I focus here on two particular issues: the inclusion of women within the military, and the relationship between war and gender identities more broadly. Discussions of whether women belong on the front lines, in military academies, or in the military at all, divide not only the military, but also feminists. The ongoing revelations of widespread sexual harassment and abuse in the military provide ammunition for those who asked if the military is any place for a woman, while the wars in the Persian Gulf, during which women were frequently stationed near the lines of battle, renewed concerns specifically regarding women in combat. Lucinda Peach divides the feminist debate on military and combat inclusion into two sides, with “justice” feminists (referred to here as “liberal” feminists) supporting inclusion of women in the military based on “principles of equal rights and responsibilities, equal protection of the laws, and basic fairness,” and “difference” or “care” feminists opposing inclusion based on women’s unique moral voice, which puts a stronger emphasis on peace and diplomacy (Peach 1997, 102–107). In an ironic twist, anti-feminists, or gender traditionalists, have used many of the difference feminists’ arguments in protesting greater inclusion of women, though they typically do not go on to argue against militarism as a whole, as do many difference feminists (see, e.g., Ruddick 1989).

Given the ways in which femininity has been constructed as diametrically opposed to militarized masculinity, it is useful to inquire how servicewomen—who could potentially destabilize the gender binary—have historically been understood (Grant 1992, 83). The growing feminist literature on women in the military emphasizes the need to make visible the presence of servicewomen, their contributions to the military, and the pervasive discrimination, harassment, and sexual assault they face. Military women, despite the impediments in their paths, are described as essential to the maintenance of an all-volunteer force and as successful at all ranks and positions open to them (Francke 1997). For feminists, however, women in uniform can pose a conundrum: Those who feel that

virtues such as care have a privileged role in feminist thinking must grapple with the possibilities of feminist-sanctioned violence, while work built around the historical distinction between women's and men's experiences in war becomes increasingly challenged (Grant 1992, 91). Moreover, while greater inclusion of women in the military can be seen as a liberal feminist victory, this does not necessarily mean that military women will personally support feminist goals, or that their experiences can be successfully deployed in feminist rhetoric (Miller 2001).

The US military itself has made a concerted effort to portray its female troops as still sufficiently "feminine" in an effort to reap the benefits of greater (wo)manpower without upsetting its male forces or societal sensibilities (Enloe 1983, 127). Women in uniform may therefore be required to wear lipstick or maintain sufficiently feminine haircuts in a nod as much to the heartland as to the battlefield (Enloe 1983, 119, 141). The media is likewise complicit in establishing the femininity of female troops, and notably so in the case of Jessica Lynch. As Stacy Takacs portrays the Lynch coverage, "Documentaries about the rescue fetishized Lynch's femininity and vulnerability in order to remasculinize a coed military and militarize the identities of civilian men and women in ways that would perpetuate the project of hegemony" (Takacs 2005, 301).

Just as women within the military remain subject to the strictures of conventional gender norms, Cynthia Cockburn argues from a societal perspective that participation in war has neither led to greater equality for women in general, nor, despite fears of gender traditionalists, has women's presence "feminized" the military (2001, 21). Elshtain too claims that women in combat have historically been marginalized as a revolutionary force and regarded as exceptions proving the rule rather than exemplars of a new kind of femininity:

Western history is dotted with tales of those I call the Ferocious Few, women who reversed cultural expectations by donning warrior's garb and doing battle; and their existence as fact and myth seems not to have put much of a dent in the overall edifice of the way war figures in the structure of male and female experience and reactions (1987,8).

The Ferocious Few are eclipsed, numerically and symbolically, by the noncombatant many, thereby muting their significance (Elshtain 1987, 180). As noted, this outcome appears to be well in line with the wishes of the Department of Defense, which has routinely downplayed the service of women in the military, particularly when service has included direct combat experience, from which women are technically banned. Women are portrayed as having served with distinction, but not to such a degree that combat exclusion laws should be overturned (Francke 1997, 72).

Empirical research on the inclusion of women has focused not only on servicewomen, but also on the other women present within military contexts, including nurses, wives, girlfriends, mothers, sex workers, civilian contractors, and peace activists (D'Amico and Weinstein 1999; Enloe 1989). Historical records, narratives, and oral histories are used in many of these works to "make visible" the women who have been essential to the military's functioning, thus demonstrating that warfare has never been the province of men solely. Likewise, the literature on the military and the construction of gender identity has focused on the extent to which war reinforces oppressive gender relations. D'Amico and Weinstein write:

The military plays a critical role in the creation and maintenance of a particular pattern of gender relations in the wider society...The military's privileged position makes it not just a mirror of gender relations in society but a fundamental site for the construction of gender, that is, the defining of the boundaries of behavior—indeed, of life possibilities—for people we call men and women (1999, 5).

The figure of the masculinized warrior thus holds significance beyond the military. War strengthens norms of masculinity and femininity by emphasizing "manly" virtues in training and on the battlefield, and the need for innocent, vulnerable, and inherently peaceful women to be protected (Pettman 1996, 93–99). Hooper argues, for example, that war and military combat have played a significant role in establishing what it means to be a man in the modern era (2001, 81). Masculinized militarism has become a standard of professional competency, particularly for politicians,

who must prove that they are “tough enough” for the job. The result is foreign policy choices severely constrained by conventional notions of manliness (Enloe 2004, 124)

HEGEMONY AND DISCOURSE

In order to understand how gender identities are deployed, contested, and reinforced, we must look at public discourses that both utilize and directly address gender. The designation of certain roles, such as that of combat soldier, as appropriate or inappropriate for a specific gender relies on underlying discourses that are productive of gender. An analysis of these discourses, understood as the social language and practices that constitute “things” as meaningful, highlights how naturalized notions of gender are, in fact, constructed (Hansen 2006). As the editors of *Behind the Lines* note, “Statistics of military participation or factory employment are only the beginning of the story [of the gender implications of war]. The analyst must also explain the social meanings attached to those activities and to the general condition of women through the discourses of the participants” (Higgonet et al. 1987, 4).² I address this need for an explanation by examining the discursive battle over Lynch and England, two representatives of American involvement in Iraq, and the focus of debates regarding what the war says about women. Lynch and England provided what a number of feminists in the United States saw as an opportunity to counter hegemonic gender discourses that hold women back not only in the military, but in society overall.

To say that gender discourses are hegemonic is not simply to say that they are dominant. Rather, hegemonic discourses are sites of domination, producing “a lived system of meanings and values—constitutive and constituting—which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming” (Williams 1994, 596). They create the “common sense” of gender roles and expectations, thus operating at a hard to identify, and hard to contest, level (Hall 1996, 43). Yet no hegemonic system, gender or otherwise, is ever absolute or uncontested (Williams 1994, 599). Identities may be embraced or resisted to varying degrees, and as such contain much internal contradiction and variety (Hansen 2006, 21; Scott 1991, 792).

As Foucault reminds us, sites of oppression are simultaneously sites of resistance (1978, 95). In this article, I examine two largely spontaneous efforts of resistance in which feminists attempted to use the potentially subversive figures of Jessica Lynch and Lynndie England in order to contest the hegemonic gender discourse. Although these feminist counternarratives were overcome, at least initially, by deeply rooted tropes within the hegemonic gender discourses, it is useful to examine how they were overcome in order to imagine more successful means of resistance. The potential fissures within hegemonic understandings of gender are precisely why the study of war is so revealing. Because the act of war is so heavily infused with gendered notions of masculinity, public discourses regarding war have the opportunity to clarify existing gender norms, providing a unique moment to highlight contestation or reinforcement of these norms. The public nature of this discussion is crucial because the phenomenon I am investigating—the production of gender identity—is an intersubjective process occurring among socially-situated individuals, and the media provides one of the best access points into the public discourse on war and gender.

In carrying out this research, I engage in predicate analysis, a type of discourse analysis focusing on the verbs, adverbs, and adjectives that are attached to subject nouns. Predicates establish what sort of thing the subject is, both through adjectival and adverbial description, and through the verbs demonstrating what the subject can and cannot do (Milliken 1999, 232). As an example, take the following statement from *The Houston Chronicle*:

Jessie [Lynch] - that's what everyone called her - was a sliver of a beam, 5'-2" and 90-something pounds that made her seem as fragile as a glass figurine. In the box, her cap pulled low over those Bambi eyes, Jessie hacked and whacked at pitches, sometimes landing smack on her tush.

The predications of Lynch in that news fragment include:

- sliver of a beam
- 5'-2" and 90-something pounds
- seems fragile as a glass figurine
- Bambi eyes

- inept at baseball, sometimes fell on her rear

Given that I have used a fairly obvious passage for the sake of illustration, these sentences produce Jessica Lynch as a bumbling pixie or playful little girl rather than a trained and competent US soldier. Predicate analysis thus begins with the text in order to concretely demonstrate how subjects are produced through discourse. In using predicate analysis as a type of grounded theory, I have used predications found in my data to generate abstract categorizations, moving between text and categories until I felt each predication had been sufficiently accounted for in the analysis (Milliken 1999, 234).

One might grant the accuracy of this analysis, but still question its importance. Indeed, if this construction of Lynch—or the diametrically opposite construction of Lynndie England—were anomalous, then it is hard to see why these depictions would matter. I contend, however, that the constructions are not anomalous. Rather, the public representations of the two so-called poster girls for American involvement in Iraq were both produced by, and productive of, the common sense notions of gender among the American public. This common sense, or social background, not only produces subjects—Lynch as the little girl lost, England as the “Jessica Lynch gone wrong”—it makes certain kinds of arguments and ideas possible, even thinkable, and others not (Milliken 1999, 237). If, in the public’s final analysis, Lynch is seen as more like a hapless heroine in need of rescue and less like a veteran and former prisoner of war (POW), then attempts to use her image to press the cause of gender inclusion in the military, for example, will be fruitless. Yet representations of Lynch and England are also important in a broader sense. A discourse, such as the one I analyze, provides discursive spaces: “concepts, categories, metaphors, models, and analogies by which meanings are created” (Doty 1993, 302). The gender tropes represented in the news accounts I examine carve out a discursive space for American women in general by reproducing a particular account of who women are (i.e. who they should be), and how they can be expected to act. These tropes are all the more powerful for their transparency, providing ready-made gender metaphors to help audiences catalogue information they receive about particular men and women (Fay 1994, 4, 9). They construct gender at the harder to contest level of “common sense.”

In order to ensure a geographically representative sample of the public discourse, I looked at articles from April 2, 2003 through December 12, 2004 in *The New York Times*, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *The Houston Chronicle*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *USA Today*. I analyzed every news story, editorial, and letter to the editor containing “Jessica Lynch,” and “Lynndie England,” in the headline, lede, or key terms, looking for the predicates attached to these subjects. For the sake of comparison, I matched Lynch and England with similarly situated male soldiers—Spc. Edgar Hernandez, a former POW, and Cpl. Charles Graner, the alleged ringleader of the torture at Abu Ghraib—looking at the differences in representation between Lynch and Hernandez, and England and Graner. Abstracting from these predications, I determined that the feminine gender representations best fit into two particular tropes, the Woman in Peril and the Ruined Woman, which I examine in further detail below.

Letters to the editor explicitly addressed the gendered coverage of the Lynch and England stories. A writer to the *New York Times* noted, “But it’s interesting to me that in the endless hullabaloo about the Jessica Lynch story, no one has asked the question that leaped to my mind from day one. If it were Pfc. Joseph Lynch, would we have even heard of him?” (Berman 2003), while a writer to the *Houston Chronicle* argued, “Had [Lynch] been a man, her actions would have been labeled as courageous, brave, valorous. But, because she is a 19-year-old petite blond, she is, instead, being called ‘spunky’—sort of like, Gidget goes to war” (Jehl and Blair 2003). In addition to highlighting the importance that Lynch and England’s femininity has had in terms of news coverage, the remarks of letter writers, journalists, and academics writing in the mainstream press were infused with the principles of liberal feminism, indicating that Lynch’s bravery proved that women should be allowed in combat positions, and that England’s actions proved that women were no more or less humane than men. According to another letter writer to the *New York Times*, “Those who have been arguing that women are incapable of fighting in combat are surely eating their words today. Who could have imagined that the unlikely hero of this war would be a beautiful female warrior?” (2003b). Embser-Herbert suggested that the example of Lynndie England demonstrated “Just as women have proven themselves capable of leading troops in difficult situations, so

have they now shown that they can become vulnerable to the power of a role, the power of wielding power” (2004). Some feminists connected Abu Ghraib to the influence of pornography and reality television shows. Conservative media commentators such as Linda Chavez and George Neumayr put the blame for Abu Ghraib on the shoulders of feminists and those who had agitated in favor of women in the military (Douglas 2004). According to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, conservative commentator Rush Limbaugh was frustrated that the US Army would not release Lynch’s medical records, which would state whether she had been raped. The paper reports, “[Limbaugh] wanted to know if Lynch had been raped, he said, not out of voyeurism but because it might shut up those feminists who are always griping about letting women serve alongside men in the military” (Bookman 2004). In short, both Jessica Lynch and Lynndie England were depicted as gender representatives, and the public discussion surrounding these soldiers provided a discursive battlefield for the next round of gender wars (Francke 1997).

While the media generally depicted Lynch and England as complete opposites, they did share an important and overlooked trait in addition to gender: their race. The whiteness of Lynch in particular was significant insofar as it heavily influenced the role she could play within resistance and reinscription of feminine gender identities (Rowe and Lindsey 2003, 174). Lynch’s whiteness, unremarked upon, allowed her to represent “the all-American girl,” whereas the experiences of other women in Lynch’s convoy, such as Pfc. Lori Piestewa, the first American Indian (Hopi) woman killed in combat, and Spc. Shoshana Johnson, the first black woman prisoner of war, were considered unremarkable because their racial identities precluded them from universality (Howard and Prividera 2004; Kumar 2004, 302). Yet this was not simply a case of whiteness as the unspoken norm. Specifically white femininity was also at play (Prividera and Howard 2006). The exclusive focus on the young, childless, and possibly raped Lynch carried echoes of the myth of virginal white women who need to be protected, especially from men of color. Women of color, such as single mothers Piestewa and Johnson, were seen as aggressive and sexually rapacious in this myth, and were not accorded the same protection. Black women in particular, whose brawn is mythologized in figures such as Sojourner Truth, are portrayed as towering pillars of strength who

stand in stark, unfeminine, contrast to white women (Painter 1996; Palmer 1983; Smith 1994). Shannon Holland has argued that depictions of Lynch focused primarily on her dedication to upholding norms of white womanhood, including diminutiveness, nonaggression, physical ineptitude, and altruistic love of children (2006, 33–35). Thus Lynch, with her aura of hyperfemininity untarnished by her presence in the Army, represented a woman in need of protection, while Piestewa, who died in an Iraqi hospital following the attack, and Johnson, who was captured and seriously injured, represent women considered expendable, that is, women whose race disqualified them from femininity and the attendant expectations of protection.³ In Deepa Kumar's words, "While the stories are similar, Johnson could not be Lynch. As a black woman with dreadlocks, she simply does not qualify for the status of 'girl next door'" (2004, 302).

England's whiteness played a different role. While the blonde Lynch represented a naïve and harmless country girl, the dark-haired England who, like Lynch, was also from Appalachia, represented the uncivilized, sexually licentious hillbilly (Mason 2005, 40). England's white privilege was in jeopardy because of her overt sexuality and her social class which, along with her cropped hair, likewise threatened her femininity. Carol Mason holds that the hillbilly is not white, but a "white other," who "serves as a foil for middle-class social mores, defining modern norms against the perceived abnormality of a liminal subject whose sexuality, gender, class, and race are distinctly 'other'" (2005, 42). In placing the blame for the torture of Abu Ghraib prisoners on the white other, and a sexually deviant woman at that, the purity of the white Just Warrior was upheld.

THE DISCURSIVE BATTLEGROUND

Jessica Lynch

Pfc. Jessica Lynch, a US Army supply clerk in the 507th Maintenance Company, was captured by Iraqi forces on March 23, 2003 near Nassiriya. Her convoy had gotten lost in the desert and was attacked by the Iraqi Army, leaving 11 other US soldiers dead and 9 wounded. On April 1, 2003, US commandos staged a raid on the hospital where an Iraqi tipster had revealed Lynch was being held, successfully rescuing the badly injured POW (Schmitt 2003).

From the beginning, the media and the Pentagon appeared determined to see Lynch as a potent symbol of the Iraq War. Reporters described her as a “poster girl,” and then an object of manipulation. In reports that turned out to be false, a front page story in *The Washington Post* depicted Lynch as a female Rambo who went down shooting (Cohen 2003; Priest, Booth, and Schmidt 2003; Schmidt and Loeb 2003). Lynch was a hero⁴ and, according to this narrative, exemplary of the justness of the American cause in Iraq (Kumar 2004, 297). When reporters discovered that Lynch’s gun had jammed and that she had been sitting in her Humvee praying rather than fighting, commentators recast Lynch as a victim of Pentagon propaganda and a media-entertainment complex wanting to profit from her story (See 2004c; Rich 2003). Yet in looking at the predications attached to Lynch in the news coverage and the gendered tropes the coverage rests on, it is clear that Lynch’s story was used in a far more subtle way to shore up existing gender norms and to prevent feminists from using her case for their causes (Holland 2006).

From April 2, 2003 to December 12, 2004, 169 articles and letters to the editor in the papers I searched included “Jessica Lynch” in the headline, lede, or key terms. Of these, the 42 articles and letters that included more than a cursory reference to Lynch converged upon a particular picture of the former POW. Table 1 lists the most common predications attached to Lynch, in descending order of frequency.

TABLE 1. Common Predications of Jessica Lynch

Predication	Frequency
Age (including numerical age, “young,” and “teenager”)	63%
Small-town girl	50%
Manipulated (including by US government and by media)	48%
Plans to be kindergarten teacher	33%
Coloring (including “blonde,” “white,” and “pale”)	21%
Raped	21%
POW	21%
Stature (including numerical height, “petite,” and “slight”)	19%
Pretty/beautiful	14%
Has boyfriend/engaged to be married	14%
Won “Miss Congeniality” at county fair	12%

References to Lynch's young age, unworldliness, and small stature served to paint a picture of the soldier as ill-prepared to fend for herself, thus implicitly justifying the first mission to rescue a US soldier from captivity since World War II (Kumar 2004, 300). The focus on Lynch's appearance emphasized her identity as a woman over her identity as a soldier, a trend that was apparent even in the brief period she was depicted as a female Rambo. For example, a *Houston Chronicle* article that described Lynch's ability to carry and shoot a gun through enemy territory emphasized that she was "by far the most petite soldier of the 507th" and went on to describe Lynch as a "bubbly teen" with "Bambi eyes" (Olson 2003). While this type of coverage emphasized Lynch's grit and determination, it also feminized these qualities, softening the image of the armed woman with the implication that she could not have been expected to prevail without help. The predications of Lynch participate in the long history of feminizing women in the military and establishing their need for protection (Stiehm 1988). Lynch may have been a soldier, but more importantly, she was "like any other young woman" according to *USA Today*: "In many ways, Lynch is like any other young woman contemplating the future. She is excited about her June wedding to Sgt. Ruben Contreras, but unlike other brides-to-be, she is not revealing where they're getting married to avoid a media crush at the church door. And while she is in Manhattan, she really wants to go shopping" (US Department of Justice 2003).

Importantly, Lynch was represented not only as a woman in need of rescuing, but as a *virtuous and good* woman in need of rescuing. Depicted as an innocent small-town girl who wanted nothing more than to teach kindergarten, and might as well have ended up in Iraq accidentally, Lynch both needed and deserved to be rescued. Coverage in *The New York Times* was representative:

Even today, Linda Davies was still clutching the note that Pfc. Jessica Lynch, her former kindergarten student, sent six weeks ago from the desert of Kuwait, set out on pastel paper in a schoolgirl's round handwriting and marveling at how far she had come from her home in rural West Virginia. 'I can say I've been to places that half of Wirt County will never see,' Private

Lynch, 19, wrote with the wonder and awe of a country girl who had not visited Charleston, the state capital, until she graduated from high school but had now embarked on what she plainly saw as a great adventure (Miko 2003).

News reports emphasizing Lynch's lack of guile, her humility, her insistence on not being labeled a hero, and her manipulation by the government and media further cemented Lynch's image as humble and unthreatening, a nice girl who was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

These predications—pretty, petite, passive—can be seen as parts of a larger narrative invoking the image of the Woman in Peril, or Damsel in Distress (Kumar 2004, 300). Incorporating elements of what Melani McAlister refers to as “the captivity narrative,” the Woman in Peril trope in the American context can be traced back to colonial wars with American Indians in the 1600s. Then, tales of escaped captives from King Phillip's War, such as Mary Rowlandson and Hannah Dunston, emphasized the heroines' innocence and virtue, suggesting that these qualities were representative of their society as well (McAlister 2003).⁵ In focusing on these virtues, the Woman in Peril trope incorporates the image of women as Beautiful Souls: delicate, pure, and easily sullied by the horrors of the world.

The Woman in Peril trope was further consolidated in Victorian art, literature, and press. In these representations, the imperiled heroine might find herself at the mercy of any number of problems, from kidnapping, rape, fatal illness, economic ruin, or blackmail to simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Notable writers and artists employing this trope include Robert Browning (“Count Gismond”), Alfred Lord Tennyson (“The Lady of Shalott”), and the numerous painters and sculptors inspired by Plutarch's story of the rape of the Sabine women.

Today, the Woman in Peril (also referred to as the “female in jeopardy,” or “fem-jep”) is primarily a subgenre within mystery, suspense, thriller, and romance literature and films. Television “movies of the week” (*Eye of the Stalker: A Moment of Truth*, *Betrayed: A Story of Three Women*), gothic romances (*Bride of Pendorric*), and detective classics (*The Copper Beeches*) relies on this stock character. Yet this trope is also present in other spheres of the American consciousness, working in subtle—but nonetheless important—ways

to shape how we view actual woman as well as literary heroines. Comparing Lynch to other famous captives, McAlister writes:

She is tough, a soldier seized in the line of duty. Like Hannah Dunston, she was “fighting to the death.” But she is also young, white and pretty. The focus on her injuries points up her vulnerability. Even her bravery is feminized. “Talk about spunk!” Senator Pat Roberts of Kansas said, using language we didn’t hear when, say, Capt. Scott O’Grady was rescued from Bosnia in 1995 (McAlister 2003).

Moreover, Lynch’s status as a Woman in Peril was virtually sealed once her authorized biography, Rick Bragg’s *I Am a Soldier, Too: The Jessica Lynch Story*, revealed that she had been a victim of anal sexual assault, or “brutally raped by her Iraqi captors,” according to the *Houston Chronicle*. This too emphasized Lynch’s feminine vulnerability and provided yet another justification for her unexpected rescue mission.

The work done by the Woman in Peril trope in framing Lynch’s story becomes more apparent when coverage of Lynch is compared with coverage of other American soldiers. Matching Lynch’s case with that of a male soldier is difficult because no single male soldier received anything close to the same level of attention. Thus, I have looked for a case similar in detail rather than in prominence, and have chosen to focus on another American POW captured at the same time as Lynch, Spc. Edgar Hernandez. Hernandez was one of the six other soldiers captured with Jessica Lynch, and was among the POWs shown on Iraqi television a few days later. Advancing US Marines rescued Hernandez and six other POWs from a house in Samarra on April 13, 2003.

Hernandez’s coverage in the news was overwhelmingly eclipsed by coverage of Lynch, and he was often grouped in with the soldiers who had been captured and rescued with him. Nonetheless, insofar as news stories mentioned the Mexican-American Hernandez, he was depicted as the classic reluctant soldier who, like Lynch, joined the Army young so he could pursue a better life. While the Army tried to determine whether Hernandez was still alive, news reports focused on his worried family and their prayers. Once his rescue was announced,

coverage fell squarely in the “When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again” tradition, with a continued emphasis on his family. Coverage in the *Houston Chronicle* was representative:

Spc. Edgar A. Hernandez of Alton was presented with a professionally produced music CD in his honor. “POW Edgar Hernandez,” by Paul Ochoa y Los Milagros, was released at the homecoming event. The song speaks of the soldier’s deep religious faith and how it helped him overcome suffering while captive. The CD case shows the stern-faced soldier from the 507th Maintenance Co. posing before a US flag. Other photos depict his family as they endured his captivity and celebrated his release (Gonzalez 2003).

The juxtaposition between the praying mother attempting to remain strong at home and the “stern-faced soldier” carrying out his duty aided by prayer re-inscribes the home front/battleground, female/male, Beautiful Soul/Just Warrior binaries, implicitly suggesting that Hernandez, his mother, and his girlfriend were all carrying out their culturally-appropriate gender roles, with the men fighting and the women weeping.

The contrast between this narrative and the ones surrounding Lynch is not obvious; indeed, there are many similarities. The most striking differences surround the predications present in Lynch’s coverage that are not present here. Unlike Lynch’s injuries, which were initially exaggerated by the news media and continually analyzed in detail, Hernandez’s gunshot wounds were scarcely mentioned. While acknowledging that Lynch’s injuries were more severe, I argue that in taking Hernandez’s wounds for granted without the endless questioning of how he got them, or how he was treated by his captors, the media sent the message that these wounds were to be expected and they were scarcely a big deal while Lynch’s injuries, because she is a woman, were exceptional. Claiming that Hernandez was strong, his brother commented to *The New York Times*, “I know he’ll go through whatever he has to go through, and I have faith in the Lord.” Moreover, excepting mentions of his stern countenance, the ever-present physical descriptions in Lynch’s coverage were absent from the stories on Hernandez. Readers are not told whether his strength or

stature played any role in his capture, whether Iraqi women were as “besotted” by him as the male doctors allegedly were by Lynch, or whether he fit anyone’s idea of a “typical” US soldier. Overall, the very fact that Hernandez was unremarkable—just another American POW—whereas Lynch became a national hero is itself telling.

The picture of Lynch as a Woman in Peril was not uncontested. Numerous feminists made the argument that her actions, particularly when it was believed she had gone down shooting, showed that women belonged on the front lines. A letter writer to *USA Today* argued, “Pfc. Jessica Lynch has, in an instant, shattered all presumptions that women are not on the same level as men in the field of battle...The certification of a true female hero in the field of battle will do far more for women than all of the marches and other protests for equality by women’s rights groups over the years. Lynch is not just a battle-tested soldier, she’s also a living testament to the capabilities of women” (Rennekamp 2003), while an editorial in the same paper stated:

Lynch is a soldier—one who reportedly fought her abusive captors with heroism and courage – but she’s a symbol, too. Her experience shows that the time is right to blast through the armored ceiling that keeps women second-class citizens in the military...Lynch is only the latest in a long line of women who prove their sex’s capacity for steely heroism. Although Lynch’s story has yet to be told, word has leaked out that under Iraqi attack she decided to fight to the death. She emptied her rifle into Iraqi troops” (Gerber 2003).

Yet the arguments based on Lynch as G.I. Jane barely had a chance, quickly running out of steam once it was revealed that Lynch had not, in fact, “engaged Iraqi troops in a deadly firefight before being captured.” The portrait of Lynch as one of the Ferocious Few was quickly eclipsed by that of Lynch as the Woman in Peril, and thus Lynch was transformed from a potentially powerful role model and argument for inclusion of women in combat into an example that suggested women will ultimately end up needing to be rescued.

Why was the liberal feminist argument so ineffective at capturing discursive ground? One reason is that it is a familiar argument with

an even more familiar rejoinder. In making this argument, feminists are already fighting against presumption. More importantly, the vision of Lynch as damsel in distress drew on an entrenched archetype that gave her story an air of inevitability and placed Lynch within a framework that was already familiar. The *Woman in Peril* emphasizes women's need to be protected, a key element of the hegemonic gender discourses underpinning contemporary foreign policy and international relations. As Holland argues, "As a representation of both a victimized female and an assailed child, Lynch's body appears as a justification for preserving the masculine prowess of her male protectors and the patriarchal power of the institution that they represent" (2006, 37).

Lynndie England

If the American press and public were ready to canonize Jessica Lynch, they were just as quick to demonize Pfc. Lynndie England. England, an Army Reservist with the 372nd Military Police Company, first came into the public eye in late April 2004 when journalists broke the story of US soldiers torturing detainees held at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.⁶ Two of the Abu Ghraib pictures receiving the most press coverage depicted England with naked prisoners, holding one prisoner on a leash and pointing at another's genitals while giving the "thumbs-up" sign. While six other members of her company were also charged with abusing prisoners, and England herself was regarded as having played only a "bit part" in the scandal, England became the soldier most publicly identified with the Abu Ghraib abuses, displacing Jessica Lynch as the war's poster girl.

From April 30, 2004 to December 12, 2004, 36 articles and letters to the editor in the papers I searched included "Lynndie England" in the headline, lede, or key terms. Seventeen of these articles and letters included more than a cursory reference to England, with Table 2 listing the most common predications.

From the beginning, evidence of England's sexual transgressions was accorded as much attention as the abuses that led to her notoriety.⁷ England's most frequent predication described the 21-year-old divorcée as being pregnant out-of-wedlock. Virtually every story included a gossipy mention of the pregnancy's duration, with the *Washington Post* noting, "[England] is in camouflage green

TABLE 2. Common Predications of Lynndie England

Predication	Frequency
Pregnant	76%
Age	65%
Details of abuses	47%
Graner's girlfriend (including "had a romance with" and "romantically involved with")	35%
Snuck out to visit Graner	29%
Promiscuous, had sex	29%
Out of control	12%
Small town girl	12%

like any other soldier. But her standard BDU, her battle dress uniform, is cut maternity-style to accommodate a bulging stomach, eight months pregnant." While such maternal mentions were more frequent than mentions of England's promiscuity, the press emphasized the salacious details as soon as they were made public, depicting England as a wayward teenager sneaking out to have sex with her boyfriend. References to England's disappointed mother were especially effective at portraying England as an irresponsible kid up to no good. As *USA Today* put it, "The six indecency charges against England carry harsher penalties—five years per offense—than the charges for her alleged involvement in the prison abuse. England's mother, Terrie, has sat in the courtroom, a few feet behind her daughter, as witness after witness has described photographs depicting her daughter performing sexual acts and posing in various stages of nudity" (Parker 2004). The *Los Angeles Times*, meanwhile, quotes England's lawyer: "Of course she regrets things. Every one of us has done things in our teens and early twenties we have come to regret" (Rich 2004). Representationally, England here is at a disadvantage: she is depicted as either a sex fiend or a as a dumb kid who did not know any better at the time.

Discussion of the abuses England committed generally portrayed them as the result of Cpl. Charles Graner's influence. Journalists frequently noted that England was only present in the cellblocks to visit Graner, while letters to the editor and England's family blamed the incidents on her superiors as well. Like the discussion of England's sexuality, this strategy served to minimize both England's culpability and her moral agency—she was depicted as not

necessarily sadistic, simply easily led (Sjoberg 2007, 96). These images of England as a naive, pregnant, promiscuous child engaged in a “romance” with a far older man can be seen as taking part in the Ruined Woman trope. Like the Woman in Peril, the narrative of the Ruined, or Fallen, Woman is largely a product of the Victorian era, though its biblical roots are evident in numerous artistic portrayals of Jesus Christ and various adulteresses and prostitutes. While the ruined women of literature were primarily prostitutes, as in *Oliver Twist* and *La Traviata* (literally, *The Fallen Woman*), any woman who had “fallen from innocence” by engaging in unauthorized sexual relations was considered part of this class (Saunders 1986, 5). Though occasionally presented sympathetically, as in *The Scarlet Letter* and the work of Edith Wharton and Ellen Glasgow, ruined women were generally depicted as inherently impure and irredeemable. Exceptions included the vulnerable innocents led astray by wicked men, succumbing, according to this narrative, much as Eve did to the serpent. Tracts railing against the evils of “white slavery” emphasized women’s vulnerability to men ever ready to take advantage of them:

But, happily, a majority of impure women are not of this class. A vast majority of them love virtue better than vice, purity better than lewdness. They have been led astray from various causes, and having taken the one false step which, according to our code of social ethics, makes a woman forever an outcast, find themselves forced into the paths of sin, which they tread until they fill premature and dishonored graves. Many there are whose ruin can be ascribed to an ardent, susceptible nature, which has been worked upon by designing villains whom society gives free license to prey upon the lambs within its ranks. These poor creatures have been deceived and, in a moment of weakness, have been lead astray and fallen never to rise again (Long 1883).

Thus, Ruined Women are presented as either lewd from birth or as easily deceived and incapable of exercising agency.

The image of the Ruined Woman is still very much at work in contemporary discourse on prostitution, unwed mothers, and other

women perceived as sexual transgressors (Wahab 2002). The prevalence of this trope made it all but inevitable that England, an unwed mother impregnated by an older man with a history of domestic violence, who had further compounded her situation by posing for sexually explicit pictures and sexually humiliating Iraqi prisoners, would be depicted as the epitome of the Ruined Woman. The public discussion is split, however, over what kind of Ruined Woman England represents. Initially, the disturbing photographs released of England and her comrades abusing prisoners led to her characterization as “a bad apple” and one of the inherently immoral types of ruined women beyond redemption. As a letter writer to *USA Today* pointedly wrote, “Taking orders is no excuse for such disturbing violations of human rights. If, for example, Pfc. Lynndie England—who appears in several photographs—is a ‘good girl,’ why is she seen smiling and giving the thumbs-up sign in front of a pile of naked Iraqi detainees?” (Garaffa 2004). As reports began to implicate those in charge of Abu Ghraib and details of England’s pregnancy and relationship with Graner became more widespread, however, depictions of England tended to resemble more the narrative of a woman who has been led astray, an object who has been ruined by a corrupting influence.

This picture becomes clearer when compared to the coverage of Cpl. Charles Graner, the so-called corrupting influence and alleged ringleader of the Abu Ghraib abuses. Where England is portrayed as being told by her boyfriend to pose for pictures and hold onto leashed Iraqis, Graner is depicted as giving orders and aggressively abusing prisoners of his own volition. Unlike the uncertainty surrounding England’s true nature, Graner is unambiguously represented as a villain through and through. Graner was alleged to have been mentally and physically abusive to women and men alike back in the United States, and while newspapers did quote the obligatory friends and neighbors claiming that Graner was actually a good man, these protestations were overshadowed by the substantial and detailed coverage of Graner’s misdeeds.

Though Graner is generally described as the apparent father of England’s baby, the relationship is given much less significance in the discussion of Graner than in the discussion of England. His status is typically given a cursory mention—“Graner is believed to be the father of the child England is carrying”—but there is no speculation

over what role he will play in his son's life. Graner is presented as an impregnator but not a father; that is, he is one of the quintessential "villains whom society gives free license to prey upon the lambs within its ranks," and thus it is hardly surprising that he was able to prey on a vulnerable young girl who had grown up in a trailer in West Virginia.

Among those who resisted the narrative of a naïve girl ruined by a lecherous older man, were the feminists who attempted to use England's story to poke a hole in the stereotype of the Beautiful Soul. Her pregnancy and sexual conduct were ignored, and her participation in the abuses was depicted as evidence that women could be just as depraved as men. The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* quoted Tamara Sobel, director of the Girls, Women and Media Project: "It's actually sexist to think that somehow the bar is higher for women, that women in war have more of an obligation than men do to keep things as fair and humane as possible, and that seeing women break the rules of law and of dignity is more offensive than seeing men do it" (Hiskey 2004). This can be seen as the other side of the liberal feminist argument: not only are women just as good as men, they are also just as bad, and it is a double standard to expect otherwise. This counternarrative was contested by conservatives who argued that women should be held to a different standard, and that Abu Ghraib represented a dangerous breakdown of gender roles resulting from the inclusion of women in the military. According to this argument, either the military had taken an impressionable girl and socialized her in an environment that stripped her of her femininity, or the presence of a promiscuous and wanton young lady had encouraged soldiers to release their sexual tension by placing prisoners in pornographic positions. The first image strips England of much of her agency, while the second image strips the men involved of much of their agency.

Though it remains to be seen what effect Lynndie England's example will have on military gender inclusion policy or on gender norms more broadly, it is important to once again note that her participation in the Abu Ghraib scandal was considered so exceptional as to warrant far more news coverage than those more deeply involved, and that the nature of her coverage was highly gendered (Sjoberg 2007, 89–90). England's exceptionalism can be seen as a result of her departure from traditional gender roles, and the Beautiful Soul norm, which required a counter-trope, the Ruined

Woman, for the public to make sense of this departure. Two gender binaries are thus upheld: the Just Warrior/Beautiful Soul binary (insofar as the public overwhelmingly expressed shock that it had been transgressed), and the Beautiful Soul/Ruined Woman or Madonna/whore binary. This suggests that while feminists and gender traditionalists are likely to remain deadlocked on the subject of women's "true" inner nature, in the meantime the trope of the ruined woman is alive and well, and shaping our perceptions of gender roles and current events.

CONCLUSION

Feminists and gender traditionalists alike seized on the 2003 Iraq War as an opportunity to further their views on female gender identity and equality. The most public battles for the right to define "women" happened with the stories of Jessica Lynch and Lynndie England, two young women from rural West Virginia whose symbolic statuses as female soldiers came to carry more weight than anything either of them had actually done. In this article, I have argued that gender traditionalists won insofar as the soldiers were understood within the context of two common Western tropes, the Woman in Peril and the Ruined Woman. These tropes reproduce traditional views of femininity, upholding the sex/gender system and classic binary oppositions that have put women at a disadvantage.

The ad hoc feminist counternarratives attempting to marshal the examples of Lynch and England for the cause of women's inclusion in the military, or even to resist the dominant images of women, were less immediately successful. Time will tell whether they are able to win the discursive battlefield back by reinterpreting the narratives surrounding Lynch and England, but this could only be accomplished by providing more compelling frameworks for understanding the two women. That is, it will not be enough to simply demonstrate that women are engaged in stereotypically masculine acts of bravery or depravity; feminists must simultaneously address efforts of gender traditionalists to "re-feminize" the Ferocious Few. There are consequently two primary reasons the counternarratives failed to gain currency. The first is that liberal feminists already have an

institutionalized and aggressive set of opponents ready to contest their arguments for equality. While discursive space for their arguments exists, it remains under attack from an entrenched opposition shored up by tradition. Perhaps more importantly, feminists were also fighting background assumptions about gender norms that offered ready-made outlines for understanding the Lynch and England stories. Because these tropes operate on a deeper level, they are harder to recognize and contest.

As noted, gender identity is not monolithic. How it is interpreted depends on a number of factors, including the cultural material available for deployment. In analyzing how classic tropes are used to represent current people and situations, we gain a deeper understanding into how gender is being constructed and how one might disrupt or support such a construction. The invisibility of these frameworks for understanding obscures the extent to which they matter, and so in this paper I have attempted to shed light on the workings of two tropes in an area generally regarded to have significance for gender identity. If Elshtain is correct, and societies are in some measure the sum of their war stories, then it behooves us to pay attention to the gendered material from which these stories are constructed.

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NOTES

1. Sharp disagreement remains over the extent to which this construction is constrained by the physical body. See Dietz 2003.
2. Here I focus on news coverage rather than personal interviews because I believe this to be a more accurate indicator of intersubjective, social meanings.

3. Johnson herself has indicated in interviews that she does not believe race was a factor in why Lynch received greater publicity than did Johnson. See Byrd 2004.

4. It is worth noting that Lynch was more often described using the masculine “hero” as opposed to the feminine “heroine.” While it is possible that “heroine” has simply fallen out of fashion, like “authoress” and “poetess,” it is also plausible that heroism in the military is so bound up in masculinity that it appeared “more natural” to refer to a Rambo-esque Lynch as a “hero.”

5. Kumar 2004 notes that in the same way captivity narratives were used to justify genocide of American Indians in colonial era, so too are tails of Arab mistreatment of “their” women used to justify military intervention Kumar.

6. See Sjoberg 2007 on the use of the word “torture.”

7. I believe that popular focus on England as opposed to the other women photographed at Abu Ghraib, Spc. Sabrina Harman and Spc. Megan Ambuhl, can be explained at least in part by England’s pregnancy and “sexual misconduct” with Charles Graner, the alleged ringleader of the Abu Ghraib abuse. Additionally, England appears in more of the photographs initially released to the public than either of the two other women.

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