

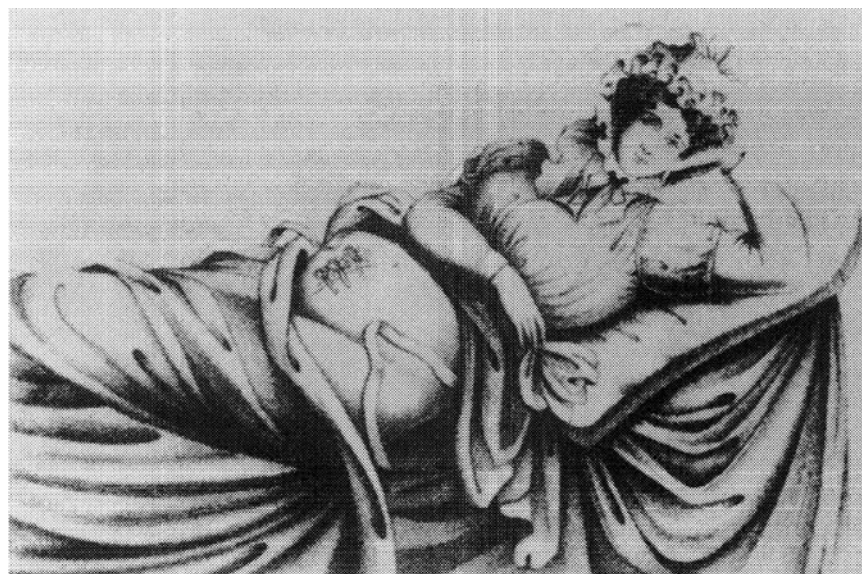
CONDUCT
UNBECOMING
A WOMAN



MEDICINE ON TRIAL IN
TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY
BROOKLYN

REGINA MORANTZ-SANCHEZ

Conduct Unbecoming a Woman



Conduct Unbecoming a Woman

Medicine on Trial in Turn-of-the-Century Brooklyn

Regina Morantz-Sanchez

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford New York

Athens Auckland Bangkok Bogotá Buenos Aires Calcutta
Cape Town Chennai Dar es Salaam Delhi Florence Hong Kong Istanbul
Karachi Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Mumbai
Nairobi Paris São Paulo Singapore Taipei Tokyo Toronto Warsaw

and associated companies in
Berlin Ibadan

Copyright © 1999 by Regina Morantz-Sanchez

First published by Oxford University Press, Inc., 1999
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

First issued as an Oxford University Press paperback, 2000

Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise,
without the prior permission of Oxford University Press.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Morantz-Sanchez, Regina Markell.

Conduct unbecoming a woman : medicine on trial in turn-of-the-
century Brooklyn / Regina Morantz-Sanchez.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-19-512624-6 (Cloth)

ISBN 0-19-513928-3 (Pbk.)

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

1. Gynecology—United States—History—19th century. 2. Dixon
Jones, Mary Amanda—Trials, litigation, etc. 3. Brooklyn daily
eagle—Trials, litigation, etc. 4. Gynecology—Law and legislation—
United States—History—19th century. 5. Gynecologists—Legal
status, laws, etc.—New York (State)—History—19th century.

6. Brooklyn (New York, N.Y.) I. Title.

RG67.U6M67 1999

618.1'00973'09034—dc21 98-29764

Frontispiece: From J. P. Maygrier mit Eduard von Siebold, *Abbildungen aus dem
Gesamtgebiete der theoretischen-praktischen Geburtshilfe, nebst beschreibender
Erklärung derselben*, Taf LX. Reutlinger: Verlag von Jacob von Ensslin, 1836.

Courtesy of the University of Kentucky Library.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

for ghe

This page intentionally left blank

Contents

Acknowledgments, ix

Introduction, 3

- 1 Saving the City from Corruption: The *Eagle* Launches a Campaign, 11
 - 2 A City Comes of Age, 35
 - 3 Becoming a Surgeon, 61
 - 4 Gynecology Becomes a Specialty, 88
- 5 Gynecology Constructs the Female Body and a Woman Doctor Responds, 116
 - 6 “The Lured, the Illiterate, the Credulous and the Self-Defenseless”: Mary Dixon Jones and Her Patients, 138
 - 7 Prologue: Gynecology on Trial for Manslaughter, 156
 - 8 Spectacle in Brooklyn, 165
 - 9 Meanings, 195

Appendix: Bibliography of Dr. Mary Dixon Jones’s Medical Writings, 215

Notes, 219

Index, 280

This page intentionally left blank

Acknowledgments

Long projects accumulate a lot of debt. I owe thanks to many people. Skilled archivists facilitated my research at every juncture. Special thanks are due to a group of dedicated souls at the Archives on Women in Medicine at the Medical College of Pennsylvania, now Allegheny University of the Health Sciences, whose willingness to service this project always resulted in a cheerful and speedy response to my requests. I am grateful beyond measure to Sandra Chaff, Margaret Jerrido, Jill Gates Smith, Teresa R. Taylor, and, more recently, Barbara Williams. Equally helpful were the people in Special Collections at the New York Academy of Medicine, especially Caroline Melish. Barbara L. Krieger facilitated photograph reproduction at Dartmouth University Library. Susan Rishworth, head of the Archives of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, was the gracious and cheerful administrator of a research grant from that organization that gave me a month of unprecedented freedom to browse among a wonderful collection of gynecology textbooks and old medical journals in an extraordinarily comfortable and serviceable setting. The staff at King's County Medical Society cheerfully allowed me to poke through papers and manuscripts stored in their records room. Librarians at the Brooklyn Historical Society, the New-York Historical Society, the New York Municipal Archives, and the National Library of Medicine also extended aid. Librarian Gordon Mestler, Kathy Powderly of the Division of Humanities in Medicine, and archivist Jack E. Termine, all at the State University of New York Health

x Acknowledgments

Science Center at Brooklyn, were enormously giving of their time. At the Lawson Tait Collection in Birmingham, England, Stan Jenkins, Mrs. Elaine Simpson, Mrs. Lilian Salt, and especially Dr. Brian Gough made my research there a memorable experience. Librarians at the Wellcome Institute and the Royal College of Physicians in London also deserve thanks. Other institutional staffs offering aid were at the Oregon Historical Society, Harvard University Special Collections, the Louise Darling Medical Library at UCLA, and the interlibrary loan departments of UCLA and the University of Michigan.

The painstaking detective work this book required could not have been accomplished without generous financial support from several sources. In addition to the ACOG fellowship mentioned above, I received a National Endowment for the Humanities summer fellowship, a grant from the National Library of Medicine, and two NEH Senior Fellowships. The NEH's Division of Science, Technology, and Medicine enabled me to complete the project, and Dan Jones at the helm of that division was a particularly supportive administrator. UCLA and the University of Michigan also offered generous help in the form of faculty research grants.

The department of history at the University of Michigan extended me a different kind of encouragement. Its administrative and support staff has proved to be among the most efficient and good-natured I have ever encountered. As for my colleagues, I cannot sing their praises too highly. From them I have been granted an abiding nourishment rare in many academic settings and have found myself welcomed into an intellectual community made up of scintillating scholars as well as compassionate human beings.

I have been blessed with a collection of graduate students, some of whom have already gone on to successful academic careers, whose research assistance has been invaluable. Sue Zschoche and Margaret Finnegan took this project as seriously as if it were their own. Both went above and beyond the call of duty repeatedly and without complaint and also provided a stimulating sounding board for my ideas and theories. At UCLA, Pat Moore, Joan Johnson, John Olmstead, Michelle Moravec and, especially, Sue Gonda and Charles Romney deserve thanks. Maureen Stewart, Becky Conekin, Ruth Hartman, John Mogul, and Leslie Paris at the University of Michigan also made important contributions toward moving the research along. Leslie offered ideas and interpretations as well. Michelle Seldin handled the frustrating task of tracking down photographs with efficiency and good cheer and helped prepare the index. Charles Romney and Maureen Henke, at Fourth Dimension Interactive, provided technical assistance in rendering the map of Brooklyn.

Early in this project, the encouragement and intellectual support of Barbara Bair, Jane Sewell, Dale C. Smith, Anita Clair Fellman, Gert Brieger, Gerald Grob, Ed Tenner, Burt Hansen, Sue Zschoche, Sue Gonda, Charles Romney, Ann Lombard, Margaret Finnegan, and George Sanchez was invaluable. Others read and critiqued parts or all of the manuscript. Joel Howell, Jane Sewall, Russ Maulitz, Tom Bonner, and Dale C. Smith monitored the accuracy of the medical history. Joel Howell read the entire manuscript at least twice. Other indefatigable critics were Ellen Chesler, Arleen Tuchman, Sara Blair, Bruce Shulman, Deb-

orah Kuhn McGregor, Susan Douglass, Charlotte Borst, Leslie Paris, Robyn Muncy, Nancy Theriot, and members of the Center for the Study of Social Transformation at the University of Michigan. Finally, the unstinting intellectual input of Louise Newman and Geoff Eley cannot be measured. They read and reread drafts of chapters every step of the way and in the end became collaborators who pushed and pushed until I got it right. The Michigan Robert Wood Johnson Clinic Scholars (1998) saved me from several errors.

I am also grateful for the bountiful sustenance of a number of extraordinary friends who helped move me through some rough spots. Geoff Eley, Anita Clair Fellman, John Efron, Barbara Bair, Louise Newman, Alice Blue and Marc Fitzerman, Karl and Diane Pohrt, Joan Meisel and Lee Hunt, Ellen Chesler and Matt Mallow, Susan Douglass and T. R. Durham, David Scobey and Denise Thal, Kathy Dalton and Tony Rotundo, Kate Schechter and Ari Roth, Jonathan Freedman and Sara Blair, Anita Norich, Peggy Somers, Kathleen Canning, Sonya Rose, Kali Israel, Bruce Shulman and Alice Killian, Julia Adams and Jeff Jordan, Robin Kelley and Dierdre Harris-Kelley, Bill and Lorna Chafe, Mitch and Phyllis Miller, John Chambers, Harvard Sitkoff, Valerie Matsumoto, and Brenda Stevenson deserve special mention.

Thomas LeBien of Oxford University Press is an old-fashioned, hands-on editor. His insights are impeccable, and it has been an utter pleasure working with him. I was very fortunate. His assistant, Susan Ferber, couldn't have been more efficient or encouraging. Joellyn Ausanka was a cheerful and skilled production editor, and I was particularly pleased to be able to renew her acquaintance.

My family is forever a source of personal growth: I thank my children, Adam Max Sanchez, Alison Morantz, and Jessica and Shaya Billowitz; my grandchildren, Sara Chana, Bracha, and Dovid Mordecai; my brother, Jon Markell, and his wife, Carrie; my mother, Rosalind Markell; and May and Ralph Ziskin.

This page intentionally left blank

Conduct Unbecoming a Woman

This page intentionally left blank

Introduction

Nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history.

—WALTER BENJAMIN, *Theses of the Philosophy of History*

In February and March 1892, Brooklyn's one million citizens were riveted by the spectacle of an extraordinary libel trial pitting their largest newspaper, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, against Dr. Mary Amanda Dixon Jones, a female gynecological surgeon of considerable national and international reputation. The newspaper had printed a series of lurid articles in the spring of 1889 that not only hinted at financial improprieties but portrayed the doctor as an ambitious and unscrupulous social climber, a knife-happy, over-eager, and irresponsible practitioner who forced unnecessary operations on unsuspecting women and used the specimens gleaned from their bodies to advance her reputation in diagnosis and treatment. These startling feature stories set off an avalanche of public criticism, eventually giving rise to two manslaughter indictments and eight malpractice suits. It took almost two years for Dixon Jones to clear her name of all criminal and civil charges. She then retaliated by suing the *Eagle*, seeking \$150,000 in damages.¹

The two-month legal extravaganza of 1892 was the longest libel suit tried in the United States to date. It involved leading physicians in New York and Brooklyn, as well as an array of witnesses, including humble craftsmen and seamstresses, immigrants speaking only broken English, tradesmen and their

4 Conduct Unbecoming a Woman

industrious wives, former patients with babies in their arms, and prominent members of Brooklyn's professional and commercial elite. Roughly 300 people testified. For the first time, jars full of specimens and surgical mannequins became common sights in the courtroom, while the indications for radical gynecological surgery were discussed in obscure and technical language by leading pathologists and surgeons from New York, Brooklyn, New Jersey, and Philadelphia. According to the *Eagle*, the trial attracted a throng of curious onlookers, decidedly not the "idle loungers that form the divorce or murder trial audience," but professional men, "citizens of standing and reputation," and significant numbers of respectable women.² Lawyers estimated that the *Eagle's* court costs were in the range of \$30,000.³

In his charge to the jury, Judge Willard Bartlett, whose legal career had rendered him particularly experienced in libel cases, apologized for his inability to summarize the proceedings adequately, noting that "hundreds of witnesses have been examined, thousands of pages of testimony have been taken. My own notes," he admitted, pointing to the stack of four notebooks beside him, "amount merely to a skeleton of the proof." Indeed, what made the trial unique in legal history was the fact that the offending libelous passages encompassed an unprecedented 69,000 words, comprising reading material considerably longer than an ordinary novel.⁴ Moreover, at the end of twenty-three hours of deliberation, a frustrated jury begged the judge to be discharged. Incensed, Bartlett refused. They debated an additional eighteen hours before reaching their verdict.⁵

The press covered the proceedings with interest. The New York *Tribune* dubbed the inquiry "by far the most important ever tried in this city." The Brooklyn *Citizen*, the Brooklyn *Times*, the New York *Times*, and the New York *World* highlighted the story. The *Brooklyn Medical Journal* claimed that the event involved the "honor and reputation" of its medical establishment, and even the *Journal of the American Medical Association* commented on the verdict. The *Eagle* reported from court almost daily, and printed much of the testimony verbatim, while the Philadelphia *Ledger* hailed the case as "the most important . . . since the Beecher" scandal, a reference to the salacious Beecher-Tilton adultery trial that had riveted citizens in the New York area in the early 1870s.⁶

A month after the decision was handed down, Charles Dixon Jones, Mary's son and surgical partner, broke into the home of Dr. Joseph H. Raymond, former Brooklyn Health Commissioner and the editor of the *Brooklyn Medical Journal*. Enraged, Charles dragged the older man from his bed and horsewhipped him when he refused to retract a negative editorial just published by the *Journal*. Though the affair was eventually settled with the offer of an apology, the incident seemed a graphic ending to an electrifying couple of months.⁷

Manifestly a remarkable event in 1892, the Dixon Jones imbroglio disappeared from the historical record only a few years later. The newspaper quickly turned to bigger and better campaigns, while Dixon Jones closed her surgical practice and moved to New York City. Using slides and specimens she had accumulated during her surgical career, she spent the next decade working in

and publishing articles on the clinical pathology of the female reproductive system. Already advanced in years when the trial occurred, she died in 1908 at the age of eighty. By 1928, when the editors of the *Dictionary of American Medical Biography* alluded to the episode in their published biographical sketch of this admittedly singular woman, the incident had largely been forgotten.⁸

Yet the Dixon Jones affair compels our attention. A marvelous tale, it has all the components of an intricately crafted suspense novel. Innocent patients died. Others recovered from dangerous surgery only to discover that they could never bear children. Investigative reporters doggedly tracked rumors of malfeasance. A female physician went on trial for manslaughter. Brooklyn's leading newspaper conducted a protracted smear campaign, accusing Dixon Jones of displaying a "mania" for the knife. The libel trial that resulted brought the city's upper crust under scrutiny. The management of public and private structures of philanthropy was called into question.

What follows is unabashedly a work of historical reconstruction. Dixon Jones's story was obscured in the historical record. It intruded into my research now and then, much as tiny patches of desert vegetation appear when seen from an airplane—like blotches encroaching aimlessly on the uniform character of the landscape. Knowledge of the event accumulated just as serendipitously. Traces presented themselves in random fashion: an article of Dixon Jones's on ovariectomy with a footnote referring vaguely to the betrayal of jealous colleagues in Brooklyn, a letter to the dean from a female physician colleague inquiring about Dixon Jones's record at the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania, a negative report from another well-meaning woman doctor in Brooklyn describing an unnamed woman physician whose obvious talent could not compensate for her coarse manners and questionable reputation. These fragments hinted at an interesting tale waiting to be told. Using letters, trial proceedings published in the Brooklyn *Eagle*, summaries of events described elsewhere, newspaper accounts, maps, city archives, medical articles, biographical information, and medical school, hospital, and specialty society proceedings and archives, I offer the results of ten years of detective work.

The story is a resifting of the evidence pondered by Dixon Jones's two juries and a revisiting of their verdicts, guided by hindsight and a better grasp of context. Though the gaps in the record are real, and the motivations and private thoughts of leading participants unattainable, there is much that can be said to make this affair comprehensible. While my own perspective is every bit as partial as that of the eleven men who judged Dixon Jones,⁹ I have also had access to evidence beyond their knowledge: private remarks voiced about the outcome, the opinions and responses of contemporaries after the trials, an historian's understanding of the social change that provided a formative, if default backdrop. This makes my perspective a very different one from theirs.

Of course, I believe there is more here than simply a good story. Adequately contextualized, this fascinating incident opens a window onto complex processes of social change, not just in Brooklyn, but in the nation at large. For example, the trial represents a chapter in the social history of medicine, marking in all its complexity the emergence of new models of professional identity and

6 Conduct Unbecoming a Woman

the birth of a challenging medical subspecialty—gynecological surgery—that catalyzed a rethinking of attitudes toward specialization and toward the female body. Because not all physicians saw these developments as positive, the event is also a study in professional rivalry and competition. Additionally, the affair speaks eloquently of public perceptions of medicine, offering insight into how ordinary men and women viewed some of the most dramatic technological and scientific advances in medical practice generated in the last third of the nineteenth century. It reveals much about the intimate relations between patients and their doctors as well. Nor can the complex implications of the trial be properly understood without considering the emerging culture of the urban middle class, or weighing the growing importance of Brooklyn as a metropolitan center. The specific habits and character of the city's respectable elites had much to do with the attention given the affair as a public event. Moreover, it is unlikely the libel suit would ever have occurred had it not been for the increasing importance of the press as an instrument of cultural production and social control in the city. Finally, because its leading actor was a woman accused of murder and mayhem, the episode compels us to ask how and in what specific ways gender tensions structured these other themes.

Work on this book has benefited in countless ways from recently expanded scholarly definitions of what counts as history. In particular, historians' experiments with what Robert Darnton has called "history in the ethnographic grain" had yielded exhilarating results. This approach to the study of the past has uncovered uniquely striking source material in popular trials and other public spectacles, which scholars have read revealingly as social theater.¹⁰

Given our own experience with sensational trials in the last decade, we cannot help but be impressed by the rhetorical significance of such events. Trials, for example, by using a variety of techniques of persuasion and dramatization, carefully construct arguments that can advance the causes of participants, both within and outside the courtroom. Each side hopes to appear narratively coherent and rational to the larger public, which will eventually ponder and judge. The Dixon Jones libel case was just such a contest—one that imbued ordinary social life with dramatic meaning. That the incident attracted considerable public notice suggests that it marked a moment of collective self-reflection, crisis resolution, and transformation.¹¹

To explain how this occurred, this book draws heavily on recent work in feminist theory and the history of medicine, especially scholarship on professionalization, doctors and patients, and the female body.¹² By insisting that gender be separated from biological sex as a category of analysis, feminist scholars have been busy demonstrating how and in what specific ways modern gender roles were fashioned, as was modern science itself, through culture.

My past work on women physicians in the United States, for example, argued that in the colonial period women participated in healing as nurses, midwives, and practitioners of folk medicine. Professional medicine was closed to them because in Anglo-American tradition, a physician had to be a *gentleman*. Though reality in the United States fell far short of the ideal, the identification of formal medical knowledge with men continued until the mid-nineteenth cen-

ture. By then, complicated social changes, including the development of the ideology of domesticity and a powerful popular critique of professional expertise in general, accompanied by holistic approaches to illness that required sympathy and intuitive medical judgment from all practitioners, opened up opportunities for women to study medicine. Based on the limitations of mid-nineteenth century physicians' power to cure, there were strong arguments for women's superior ability to care for ill patients and provide the emotional support many of them required. Eventually, new concepts of professionalism and a new ideology of science emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century that repositioned women in the profession in complicated ways but eventually worked to curtail their increasing numbers and marginalize their contributions within the twentieth-century professional world. At every juncture in this long process, had the historical circumstances been slightly altered, women might have developed a different relationship to medicine. The present study of Mary Dixon Jones's career reopens some of these questions about late nineteenth century professionalization, offering an in-depth perspective on some of the issues which only a case study can provide.¹³

Politics, male anxiety about shifts in power relations between the sexes, social and political upheaval, professional concerns, and changes in the family all had an impact on women's fate as professional practitioners. But these forces also produced new knowledge regarding the female body, including the "discovery," invention, and treatment of a wide range of female ailments, from anorexia nervosa to fibroid tumors. As gynecology emerged as a specialty, it targeted women's bodies as a case apart, elaborating on the theme of women's biological difference, a subject that, along with parallel theories about race, dominated the newer disciplines of biology, embryology, genetics, and the emerging social sciences of anthropology, psychology, and sociology.¹⁴

Mary Dixon Jones practiced gynecology and gynecological surgery at a time when many members of her specialty sought to fashion a coherent program for female health and a shared explanation for women's social role based on biological theory. Some invented a therapeutic regimen that ultimately entailed the invasion of the body through the surgical removal of the reproductive organs. How she managed to balance her sense of herself as a woman and as a professional who participated actively in these developments is a central theme in this study.

There is another reason that Mary Dixon Jones's story is important. Because in many respects she invented herself, her career reveals a great deal about the fashioning of a culture and life-style unique to the urbanizing middle class in the late nineteenth century. Scholars in the last decade have been particularly interested in how new notions of public space and public responsibility emerged in western Europe and the United States during and after the Age of Revolution.¹⁵ American historians have used this work to describe the characteristics of an urbanized, class-stratified, mixed-sex public culture that began to appear in the nation's cities in the decades after the Civil War. They have argued that middle-class identity was constructed from the "physical milieu" and "social round of daily life" that gave rise to new styles and manners, new notions of

8 Conduct Unbecoming a Woman

proper behavior and social responsibility, new constructions of family life, gender roles, child nurturance and education, domestic space, and taste. Carpets, sofas, and pianos—artifacts of a new life-style—shaped social relations and taught etiquette in complex ways, even as they helped distinguish the living quarters of the respectable from those of the very rich, as well as the poor.¹⁶

The social values, styles, and networks that gave the emerging bourgeoisie coherence often did not seek expression directly through politics, but were based on a “canon of domestic privatism and intraclass sociability” that was powerfully catalyzed by women.¹⁷ Indeed, the boundaries between public and private in the nineteenth century were constantly shifting, always permeable, and often intertwined.¹⁸ Thus female reform and professional activity in this period has been understood as “quasi-political.” Though produced on behalf of and flowing out of private domestic life, female charitable and benevolent enterprise, which expanded and diversified in complex ways after the Civil War, could be represented as one form of women’s entry into the public sphere. For a time, Mary Dixon Jones and her Woman’s Hospital in Brooklyn were lavish recipients of this uniquely female-organized social largesse.¹⁹

Indeed, the work of women doctors like Mary Dixon Jones represented the ways in which many middle-class women eroded the gulf between women’s private life and the public domain. Women entered the medical profession as part of a determined effort to apply the civilizing effects of womanhood to the needs of an increasingly unstable and rapidly industrializing society. Like female teachers, they were comfortable touting their special skills at nurturance, and armed themselves with the conviction that the profession of medicine needed the “leaven of tender humanity that women represent.”²⁰

But once women entered the field, they were socialized as professionals, and they quickly learned that the ethos of professionalism was a profoundly gendered phenomenon. Increasingly, toward the end of the century, medical school curricula, residency programs, specialty societies, and teaching methods were structured around cultural conceptions of masculinity and geared toward the male life-cycle. Those who attempted to alter the direction of medical practice in significant ways were generally marginalized, while women who were willing to “blend in” had to work harder than their male colleagues for lesser public recognition and reward. Other female physicians developed their own version of female professionalism, one that combined a belief in women’s special gifts at patient care with a willingness to defer to men by concentrating their attention on preventive medicine and the treatment of women and children.²¹ Refracted through the narrative of the libel trial, Mary Dixon Jones’s life speaks eloquently to these group dilemmas, demonstrating that there were limits to how, when, and in what manner women could enter the professional public sphere.

The Dixon Jones affair indirectly illuminates another source of women’s entrance into the public realm, one that emerged most noticeably in the last third of the century. This was middle-class housewives’ gradual appearance in specific commercialized spaces of the city, which were remade to accommodate their new responsibilities as consumers. Women’s role as family purchasing agents

became increasingly elaborate, as dynamic urban locales, with magnificent department stores, specialty shops, restaurants, and newly refurbished theaters, enticed women out of the home and competed with more traditional forms of leisure and benevolent activity for their attention and patronage. It was a world where style, fashion, display, opulence, materialism, and the buying and selling of goods melded together to demand a special kind of competence, helping to create new models of the “lady in public.” It was also a world in which women became more responsible for their own health and the health of their families. Their role as consumers of health care is an essential part of Dixon Jones’s rise to prominence as a gynecologist.

Scholars attracted to what has been called “the linguistic turn” in the social sciences have attempted to understand cultural formation by focusing on the interrelationship between language and the creation of individual consciousness, social organization, and structures of power. Their emphasis on the necessity of multiple perspectives has challenged traditional depictions of culture as unified and coherent, and they stress the instability of meanings and the numerous contradictions inherent in particular historical events.²² These cautions have guided my interpretations of the Mary Dixon Jones trial. The nature of the evidence makes it impossible to reach immutable and consistent conclusions about the motives of each of the participants. Nor can one argue that one version of the story is more “true” than any of the others. I have a point of view, but, in the final analysis, it is the reader who must choose which narrative presented here makes the most sense.

The book consists of nine chapters. The first will describe and measure the ramified effects of the original twenty-four articles published by the *Eagle* from April 24 to June 16, 1889. Chapter 2 draws an in-depth portrait of Brooklyn as a burgeoning metropolis, seeking to explain at least in part what made this city such a logical site for an event of this kind. The middle four chapters turn to issues in medicine. Chapter 3 chronicles Mary Dixon Jones’s route to becoming a surgeon, demonstrating that this woman kept company with some very talented male surgeons who shared her approach to patient care. Chapter 4 offers what I hope is a unique historical overview of the emergence of gynecology in the United States, arguing that surgery as a whole, and gynecological surgery in particular, was highly contested among practitioners, with some endorsing radical procedures and others calling them into question. Chapter 5 examines gynecologists’ and gynecological surgeons’ ideas about female health, seeking to consider how and in what ways the practitioner’s gender shaped attitudes. Chapter 6 explores the complexities of the physician-patient encounter by reconstructing the patient’s world and attempting to understand why many women might have actively sought operations. In Chapter 7 we return to the courtroom for a detailed examination of the manslaughter trial, and in Chapter 8 we examine the rhetorics and narratives of the libel trial itself. The final chapter speculates on the larger social and cultural meanings of the affair.

The surgeon Howard Kelly’s curious sketch of Mary Dixon Jones in the 1920 edition of the *Dictionary of American Medical Biography* speaks to her complexity as an historical figure. Kelly was a younger contemporary, a brilliant

10 Conduct Unbecoming a Woman

surgeon who made his career as one of the shining stars of the faculty at Johns Hopkins Medical School, which opened its doors in 1893. His report of Dixon Jones's suit against the Brooklyn *Eagle* for allegations of malpractice is clearly reproachful in tone, not because he necessarily believed the accusations, but for Dixon Jones's willingness to risk making herself a public spectacle. Summing up her life, he observed:

Dr. Jones was peculiar in person, flashy, and tawdry in appearance, but undoubtedly a student. Lack of judgment and of intimate contact with the better members of the profession may have been responsible for a certain mental obliquity with which she is accredited. The Nestor of surgery in Brooklyn declared that "she was quite a pachyderm."²³

One takes note of Kelly's admiration for Dixon Jones's intellectual drive, but pauses at the use of the word "tawdry." As our story unfolds, we shall see that the Brooklyn *Eagle* took pains to paint Dixon Jones in a negative light, but though the newspaper often discussed her appearance, it never claimed that she looked cheap or gaudy. Moreover, in Victorian parlance, "pachyderm" referred to a person who was thick-skinned and insensitive, an individual who did not shrink from a fight. Her biographer's choice of words suggests that Victorian men had no appropriate language to describe the unconventionality of this singular woman. They resorted instead to familiar terms of female denigration. Dixon Jones may or may not have forced life-threatening operations on timid patients, botched surgery that ultimately led to death, and mismanaged funds at her small hospital. Of these matters we will learn a great deal more before we judge. Mary Dixon Jones deliberately avoided close connections with the female professional networks that proffered support and affiliation after she completed her medical education. She chose a more aggressive and individualistic path to professional success, one that prompted her to seek out male colleagues, rather than female ones. Whatever we conclude about her skills as a surgeon, it is also true that she was a woman who either deliberately or unknowingly ignored the gender scripts that dictated professional behavior for a female physician of her time. And for that, among other things, she was punished.

My attempt to read Mary Dixon Jones, the woman doctor, back into the historical record gives her something she deeply craved during her lifetime: a place in history. Ironically, she will not necessarily be remembered for the reasons she might have wished. How could she have known in 1892 that her angry libel suit against the Brooklyn *Eagle* would locate her at the center of an intense debate bringing together for public consideration important and weighty questions in medicine, professionalization, social relations, and gender roles? In the final analysis, it was not her remarkable surgical achievements, of which she was justly proud, but the transgressive nature of her professional career that rescues her from historical obscurity, making her, at long last, a worthy subject for history.

1

Saving the City from Corruption: The *Eagle* Launches a Campaign

On February 14, 1889, Ida Hunt, the twenty-six-year-old wife of a printer, checked herself into the Woman's Hospital of Brooklyn for the removal of a tumor. According to the account published in the Brooklyn *Eagle*, Ida was robust and physically fit. L. P. Grover, a physician who had treated her since childhood, found her "beautiful and healthy" when he had examined her six months before. Though he admitted to noting a sensitive and "slightly irritated" organ "on the left side," he assured her that she suffered a minor reflex irritation that would readily yield to bromides. When Ida asked whether she needed an operation, he "strongly advised against it."¹

But Ida was dissatisfied with Grover's diagnosis. Plagued with headaches, she visited several local

12 Conduct Unbecoming a Woman

physicians and T. Gaillard Thomas, the world-renowned gynecologist at the Woman's Hospital in New York City, before settling on Mary Dixon Jones. Countering the advice of the male practitioners, Dixon Jones diagnosed the presence of a worrisome tissue mass and cautioned that the growth could burst without warning, killing her or driving her insane. Though her skeptical husband begged her to reconsider, Ida trusted Dixon Jones, insisting that the doctor was "a very nice lady and a good Christian and very pious, that she always prayed before she performed an operation, and that she had . . . saved the wife of an eminent banker from the same trouble." Ida seemed delighted to share a physician with the wife of a prominent businessman, and was much reassured by the doctor's claim to have performed eighty-five laparotomies without losing a patient.² After nine days' preparatory in the hospital, Ida Hunt submitted to surgery.

Participants disagree as to what happened next. The operation went badly, and peritonitis ensued. Several days later, Dixon Jones told James Hunt that the cancerous tumor had burst during "one of the most terrible operations I have ever performed." Hunt understood that his wife was dying and called Ida's father, a bricklayer and veteran fireman, to the hospital. Together they sat by her bedside for hours, leaving late in the evening. The next morning, according to the *Eagle*, Hunt received a request by telephone to hurry to the hospital. When he arrived, Dixon Jones asked him to take Ida home. Her case was hopeless, the doctor explained, and she needed familiar surroundings. But a little later, when Hunt brought the carriage to fetch his wife, Dixon Jones announced that the patient had rallied, and refused to let her leave. Then, at eleven that evening, there was a knock at their door, waking both Hunt and Ida's parents, the DeVoes. On Dixon Jones's behalf, Mary, the hospital nurse, urged a rapid return to the hospital. Ida must be brought home immediately.

The anxious family complied. A storm was gathering. Bitter cold, it was already snowing hard, with accumulation so far of half an inch. At two o'clock in the morning, the *Eagle* reported, the dying Ida was gently laid into a carriage, sandwiched between Dixon Jones and her mother, and resting on blankets and pillows provided, not by the doctor, but by her father. Friction ensued between Dixon Jones and Ida's parents. When Mrs. DeVoe complained about taking her daughter out in the snow, Dixon Jones allegedly dismissed the idea, insisting that "the ride will do her good." The father told the *Eagle* that it later dawned on him that Dixon Jones wanted the girl moved so that death would occur "at some other place than the hospital." The doctor deliberately waited until nighttime, he asserted, "so that the neighbors would not see."

Once settled in her own bed, Ida denounced Dixon Jones and Jones's son Charles, her surgical assistant, calling them "murderers and hypocrites." She claimed that at the very last moment she had changed her mind about having the procedure. "I fought as hard as I could and screamed," a distraught Ida told her mother. But Mrs. Jones administered the ether by force, insisting, "You've gone this far and now you've got to go through with it." When Ida regained consciousness after the surgery, she heard someone admit that "some-

thing had gone wrong.” Distraught until the very end, Ida Hunt expired in her mother’s arms at 11:30 the next morning.³

Only days later, Mr. DeVoe visited Dixon Jones, seeking certification of the cause of death on Ida’s insurance papers. The doctor responded by presenting a bill for her medical services, promising to sign the insurance forms as soon as it was paid. DeVoe asked to see the tumor Dixon Jones had removed from his daughter’s body. “Oh, why didn’t you come before?” she answered. “We’ve just shipped it to Paris.” “I told a doctor that,” DeVoe informed the *Eagle*’s reporter, “and he laughed and said they had tumors enough of their own in Paris without importing any. I don’t believe Ida ever had a tumor,” he added. Even more curious, the undertaker and embalmer judged Ida’s body to be in a suspicious state. Apparently, the stitches from the abdominal incision had ripped open and the body cavity was stuffed with ether-soaked rags “covered with loose flaps of skin left by the operation.”⁴

The high drama of Ida’s last ride, accomplished stealthily in the darkest of night in near blizzard conditions, became for the Brooklyn *Eagle* a central marker in a larger narrative crafted with great care and sensitivity, particularly to readers hungry for good copy. Ida is portrayed as an innocent young victim in the prime of life, beloved by a loyal and caring family, whose unhappy fate was sealed by a sadistic and knife-happy woman surgeon. Later in this chapter, we will meet Ida Hunt again in a very different scenario from the one described by the *Eagle* in 1889. We will learn that she had been chronically ill since early in her marriage, and that the real cause of her poor health may well have been the venereal disease she contracted from her significantly older husband. Later still in this book, we will entertain the idea that Hunt was not simply the victim of an overly ambitious female physician, but a decisive patient who could speak casually and without embarrassment about her illness, while actively seeking aid from referral networks of laywomen and a variety of physicians. For the *Eagle*, however, she symbolized the innocent young woman betrayed, abandoned, and forced to die under the cruelest and most shocking conditions.

Appearing on May 3, the tale of “Ida’s Last Ride” marked a crucial moment of escalation in the series featuring Dr. Mary Dixon Jones and the Woman’s Hospital of Brooklyn launched by the newspaper on April 24, 1889. Composed of twenty-four pieces, some of them quite lengthy, the exposé ran almost daily, tantalizing readers from the last week in April through the middle of June. Beginning innocently enough, with a promise to investigate the hospital, the articles rose gradually to a resounding crescendo, displaying all the trappings of a sensationalist campaign.

It was a campaign, however, that was contoured to fit the newspaper’s specific image and needs. Though originally a Democratic party organ, the Brooklyn *Eagle* had emerged by the 1880s as an independent newspaper, projecting the stable values of the business-oriented, Protestant bourgeoisie. Staid and respectable compared with its counterparts across the river like the New York *World*, a shining exemplar of the new “yellow journalism,” the paper

14 Conduct Unbecoming a Woman

identified strongly with the city of Brooklyn. The *Eagle's* editors, sensitive to the high profits New York rivals earned from melodrama, were not above initiating an occasional assault of their own, particularly when it served to convince readers of the *Eagle's* vaunted role as a "public service." The paper chose its targets carefully, however, wary of offending its "sacred cows"—primarily the city's businessmen and the professionally prominent. In the case of Dixon Jones, the newspaper's accusations contained a variety of interesting motifs, including charges of the misuse of public funds to finance what was allegedly a private hospital. Posing as a pious woman with an unblemished record of medical service, Dixon Jones was shown to have misrepresented the institution to key members of the philanthropic elite. Adding insult to injury, the *Eagle* also intimated that the doctor operated indiscriminately on patients, endangering countless lives and deliberately misinforming clients of their true physical condition. The newspaper cited numerous examples of unprofessional conduct, implying that the respectable medical community suspected her of charlatanry. Our story begins, then, with an examination of each of these arrogations in detail.⁵

DUPING THE ARISTOCRACY AND BILKING PUBLIC COFFERS

Accusations of deception and fraud were launched in the *Eagle's* very long first feature, which began by describing a lavish benefit parlor concert attended by the wealthy inhabitants of Brooklyn's "Heights and Hill" districts. The affair was held at the home of Joseph Knapp, one of the city's several millionaires.⁶ The *Eagle* pictured in detail the "rare and costly" flowers, "the finest singers and instrumentalists that money could buy," and a banquet of such culinary perfection that "Lucullus" himself would have been forced to "acknowledge that he was a barbarian." It was, the *Eagle* opined, "as highly satisfactory a gathering as ever was collected in the name of charity." Yet a closer examination of the festivities revealed that few of the guests knew much about the institution they had been brought together to support. Even the hostess could not offer adequate details, and was obliged to summon to her side Mary Dixon Jones, described by the *Eagle* as a "stout, voluble, middle aged lady, with a captivating smile and a very plausible and insinuating way of talking" to elaborate to the curious about the Woman's Hospital of Brooklyn. With great gusto she entered into an explanation, calling the hospital "the most wonderful . . . in the world," citing its "extraordinary record of results in treatment" and its "grand work" in the cause of charity. But though the rich and well born of Brooklyn were content, the *Eagle* clearly was not. Its reporter observed caustically that guests went away "as wise in regard to the institution they were helping as the host himself," who, he added pointedly, "did not know where it was situated."⁷ As more of the Woman's Hospital's story was unfolded, many of Brooklyn's first men and women faced increasing embarrassment. Though the newspaper would eventually let Brooklyn's rich and well born off the hook, its first article highlighted the gullibility of Brooklyn's elite.

Chronicling the newspaper's efforts to sort through layers of misconception in preparation for this opening salvo, the article's next paragraph turned to reporter Sidney Reid's interview with Mary Dixon Jones and her son Charles at their home a few weeks after the Knapp concert. Hoping to glean an accurate history of the institution in an unrehearsed conversation with the Joneses, Reid found himself obligated instead to listen to a prepared statement detailing their charity, self-sacrifice, courage, and perseverance.

Her hospital, Dixon Jones explained, was founded in 1881, when she was unable to secure a bed for an ailing patient in the renowned Women's Hospital in New York City. Believing that Brooklyn's good women also needed "such a refuge," she took the lead in establishing it. A number of prominent individuals joined in supporting the work, but she took pains to point out that the institution's first report featured *her* "earnest and self-sacrificing labor in the cause." There were, of course, other staunch advocates, including the institution's corresponding secretary, Mrs. E. E. Baldwin, the wife of Dr. S. L. Baldwin, recording secretary of the Methodist Episcopal Foreign Missionary Society. Indeed, several of the "best" men and women of Brooklyn were forthcoming with financial aid. Judge George G. Reynolds, a city judge and former state supreme court justice, drew up the papers of incorporation. Thomas Pearsall, another well-known lawyer, secured the deed for the institution's first dispensary on Tillary Street, and donated money from time to time. Additional contributors were John Gibb, a successful businessman active in club circles, philanthropist C. N. Hoaglund, whose special interest in medical research led him to endow Brooklyn's first pathology laboratory, future mayor David M. Boody, and Wall Street stockbrokers S. V. White and Arthur B. Claflin. Also interested were Mrs. Seth Low, whose husband had become Brooklyn's first reform mayor in 1881, her wealthy father-in-law, A. A. Low, and philanthropists George I. Seney, P. C. Cornell, A. S. Barnes, and D. W. McWilliams. Like Mrs. Low, several prominent wives were also active in the cause. Indeed, the list of Board of Trustees and the Advisory Board members first presented to Reid, which, according to the *Eagle*, even included the president of the Eagle Association, Colonel Hester, and the *Eagle*'s publisher, St. Clair McKelway, read like a *Who's Who* of Brooklyn's socially prominent. Skeptics had to agree that the assemblage was impressive.⁸

But Reid was not yet prepared to let the matter drop, partly because the *Eagle* had received some curious mail after the Knapp concert. Dixon Jones herself had written the newspaper a note, asking for a feature highlighting the hospital's charitable activities. "Pardon this trespass," it began:

Some two years ago you told me you would gladly allow something in the *Eagle* for the Woman's Hospital of Brooklyn. The faculty and Board of Trustees want to report some of the good work of the hospital, as it is right that it should, as many good people and the city help support the hospital. Of course, the Woman's Hospital of Brooklyn, like all special hospitals, is not large, but has done some most successful surgical work. No hospital has better statistics. If you will

16 Conduct Unbecoming a Woman

kindly send a reporter to my house tomorrow at any hour I will give him some facts from the records of the hospital. Will you please drop me a line stating the hour.

Dr. Mary A. Dixon Jones

Initially inclined to comply, the *Eagle* became troubled when a second, anonymous communication arrived the same day, accusing the hospital and Dixon Jones of fraud. Addressed to the editor and signed only with the title "M.D.," this letter-writer called for an investigation. "I have reason to believe that it is a private institution obtaining public money," it read. "It gets \$2000 from the city this year and I think that if you looked the thing up you would find it was not entitled to a cent."⁹

Thus, already on his guard when the interview with the Joneses began, Reid was further put off by the prepared statement, which was accompanied by disparaging remarks about the competition, the Women's Homeopathic Hospital of Brooklyn. In addition, mother and son denigrated the Hospital Saturday and Sunday Association, a charitable clearinghouse that had recently refused to grant money to their institution. Reid also puzzled over an odd slip of Charles's, who had playfully voiced relief that *his* hospital had "no unmanageable lady managers" with which to contend.¹⁰

After his interview with the Joneses, the reporter visited the office of Paul C. Grening, a real estate developer and hotelier who was listed as the Woman's Hospital president. Reid noted that, while waiting for Grening to accede to the interview, Dixon Jones appeared, visibly shaken, and met with Grening for at least ten minutes before reemerging into the outer office. There she questioned Reid about what he intended to print. Explaining that he couldn't reveal such information in advance, she left with a plea to "be sure you say something nice."¹¹

Reid pursued a hard line of questioning with Grening, who acknowledged his connection with the institution since its establishment and confirmed the list of incorporators and trustees that the Joneses had already supplied. Grening compared his interest in the cause to that of "many other good people," adding that he thought it to be "a good thing." When Grening asked why the *Eagle* was pursuing an inquiry, Reid mentioned the allegation that the institution was a private one accepting public money. Vigorously denying the charge, Grening reminded Reid that the hospital functioned like all other institutions of its kind, and was "entirely open and above board."¹² When pressed, however, he was compelled to add that only he, Charles, and Mary Dixon Jones were in attendance at most trustees' meetings. He admitted further that Howard A. Smith, vice president of the Bedford Bank and cited as treasurer of the Woman's Hospital, had actually resigned some time ago. "But," he added, "I wouldn't say anything about that if I were you. Leave him in as treasurer." Further questioning revealed that it was Grening himself who transacted the hospital's business, signing the checks, paying the bills, and handling "all funds." Conceding to the reporter that he was dependent on the Joneses for information regarding the amounts of contributions, reports of the number of patients, and accounts of operations, he added, "I have the utmost confidence in them."¹³

So ended the narrative portion of the *Eagle's* first article. Summarizing its conclusions and throwing down the gauntlet to the Doctors Jones and their supporters, the newspaper offered readers fifteen troubling "facts" it would elaborate on in the next several weeks. The *Eagle* would prove that hospital trustees did not authorize Dixon Jones to make any statement on their behalf, although Dixon Jones claimed that her prepared remarks gave the history of the hospital as "the trustees understand it." Moreover, the newspaper alleged, other members of the board did not even know that they were trustees *until the reporter informed them of the use of their names*. Most did not recall ever being summoned to a meeting and had never seen the hospital. What they did remember was that Dixon Jones had visited them from time to time, asking for money. Grening, in contrast, knew only what the Joneses told him. In addition, the *Eagle* would show that in actuality there was not *one* Woman's Hospital of Brooklyn, but *two*. The first was indeed incorporated in 1881, as Dixon Jones attested. The second's incorporation had not been legally recorded until May 7, 1885! Though Dixon Jones was connected with both institutions, conflict with the first hospital's Board of Lady Managers in February 1883 led to its disbanding soon afterward and the sale of the institution's buildings to the Nervous Hospital in the spring of 1884.¹⁴ The *Eagle* claimed that when the second Woman's Hospital was organized the following fall, Dixon Jones took the early history of the first institution and made it the history of the second. Dixon Jones thus misused people's good names, and obscured the institution's origins to Reid. The present "Woman's Hospital," run by mother and son, was "getting \$2000 under Chapter 666, Laws of 1887, and \$866 from the Excise Fund, and is constantly reaching out for more." Readers were left to ponder the implications of this "very strange state of affairs."¹⁵

In several more articles published over the course of the next week, the *Eagle* continued to highlight the twin themes of misrepresentation and mismanagement. Reid and a team of reporters interviewed most of the men who were cited as hospital trustees. In addition to Brooklyn's District Attorney James A. Ridgway, they spoke with Augustus Van Wyck, a prominent lawyer elected a city court justice in 1884, D. W. McWilliams, former president of the YMCA and the superintendent of Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Sunday School, lawyers Foster H. Backus and George G. Reynolds, Brooklyn's ex-mayor, the Honorable Samuel Booth, and Howard A. Smith, vice president of the Bedford Bank, whose name was listed in the Hospital's annual report as treasurer of the institution. The latter, a friend of Paul Grening's, had taken over the hospital's books the previous summer only as a favor to Grening, who was obliged to sort out the affairs of a hotel he owned in Saratoga Springs. Smith attended one meeting of the Board of Trustees and, along with "the best in the city," admitted to heartily enjoying the Knapp concert. Though almost all the other men were present at the concert as well, they were nevertheless "astonished" to hear that their names had been listed as incorporators or trustees of the hospital. Ridgway, who would eventually prosecute a manslaughter indictment against Dixon Jones, had given her a \$50 contribution, but knew little about the institution, save that some "splendid names" were linked to it. Like Ridgway, Van Wyck vaguely

18 Conduct Unbecoming a Woman

recalled a visit from Dixon Jones "some years ago" asking for permission to use his name. He had declined, but generally responded favorably when contributions to the hospital were solicited. The others recounted a similar story.¹⁶

Using words like "humbug," while accusing the city of being "completely fooled," the newspaper compared Dixon Jones's manipulations to a "confidence game" that would have given the notorious confidence man "Hungry Joe" pause.¹⁷ Neither the hospital's trustees nor members of its advisory board apparently knew of their office. "Mrs. Jones . . . took a handful of names and juggled them to suit herself and each man thought that all the other men mentioned knew all about the matter. . . ." Those solicited assumed that their patronage was imitated by "some of the best men in the city." "How Mrs. Jones must have smiled," one feature concluded.¹⁸

Reiterating its charge that the institution was "altogether a private hospital imposing on the public and individuals by pure bluff," the *Eagle* printed the hospital's entire articles of incorporation, dated May 7, 1885. "There are some queer things about this instrument," not the least of which was that the organization "did not follow its own rules," it editorialized.¹⁹ On April 26, Paul C. Grening sent the newspaper a full financial statement of hospital activity for the duration of his affiliation, along with his letter of resignation, effective immediately, as president of its Board of Trustees.²⁰

MAD AND BAD IN BROOKLYN: MEDICINE, SCIENCE, AND MURDER

The *Eagle's* accusations of misrepresentation certainly undermined public confidence in Mary Dixon Jones's personal integrity, but even more shocking were its revelations regarding her surgical practice. On May 2, the newspaper resumed its exposé with the story of forty-nine-year-old Sarah T. Bates, the faithful wife of a U.S. Navy engineer stationed with the Pacific Coast Squadron. Beginning with the Bates incident and continuing for the next two weeks, the themes of lives destroyed by unnecessary surgery and a doctor covering her tracks in senseless and irrational ways recurred like leitmotifs in *Eagle* accounts. In its discussions of hapless patients, the *Eagle* not only hinted at cruelty, but drew a portrait of science gone mad. A private hospital on public funds, a "bogus" Board of Trustees and consulting staff, a president "who only knew what they . . . told him" was "bad enough." But such facts would become "insignificant and altogether immaterial," promised the *Eagle*, when measured against other, more dreadful transgressions. The newspaper then tantalized readers with heart-wrenching narratives of several unfortunate women who "fell into the hands of Dr. Mary A. Dixon Jones."²¹

Bates was "a most lovable woman, member of Rev. Charles Cuthbert Hall's church" and the beloved sister of the *Eagle's* outraged informant, Mrs. Annie Gale, wife of a local leather merchant. Claiming in its headline that "SHE WAS ALIVE, and the Undertaker Waited for Her to Die," the newspaper told a tale of "the most remarkable hospital case on record . . . the strange story of a surgical operation and the stranger developments which followed it." Ac-