



*From the Kansas City Star, January 2, 1894.*

# MARY ELIZABETH LEASE:

## Gendered Discourse and Populist Party Politics in Gilded Age America

by Brooke Speer Orr

**M**ary Elizabeth Lease is typically referred to in contemporary American history textbooks as a radical leader of the People's (or Populist) Party who directed desperate Midwestern farmers "to raise less corn and more hell." Although thorough research demonstrates that the oft-quoted phrase was a partisan newspaper embellishment, Lease nonetheless holds a solid place in America's radical history.<sup>1</sup> She was affectionately dubbed the "People's Joan of Arc," the "female Old Hickory," "Our Queen Mary," or simply the "heroine" by agrarian, labor, and women's rights supporters during the late-nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> In her lifetime

Brooke Speer Orr earned her Ph.D. from George Washington University in 2002. Her dissertation was a biographical study of Mary Elizabeth Lease. She is currently an assistant professor at Westfield State College in Massachusetts.

1. "Mary Never Said It; Mrs. Lease Says She Never Gave Utterance to the Expression: 'Raise Less Corn and More Hell,'" *Topeka State Journal*, May 25, 1896; William Allen White, *The Autobiography of William Allen White* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1946), 217–219; Katherine B. Clinton, "What Did You Say Mrs. Lease?" *Kansas Quarterly* 1 (Fall 1969): 52–59; Rebecca Edwards, "Mary Elizabeth Lease: Advocate for Political Reform" in Virgil W. Dean, ed., *John Brown to Bob Dole: Movers and Shakers in Kansas History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 135. Rebecca Edwards has thoroughly investigated the historical materials relating to Lease's alleged "to raise less corn and more hell" speech and concluded that Lease never uttered the phrase. Instead, Edwards insists that the phrase was first published and used by an anti-Populist Republican newspaper in order to mock Lease and portray her as an extremist. Only later, after the phrase had gained notoriety, did Lease adopt the comment as her own to serve her political purposes and galvanize the Populist crusade.

2. *Western Spirit* (Paola, Kansas), November 3, 1933; *Topeka Daily Capital*, January 14, 1891; Lydia Mayfield, "Mary Elizabeth Lease or 'Yellin' Ellen, the Kansas Tornado,'" *Texas Quarterly* 18 (Summer 1975): 16; Maryjo Wagner, "Farms, Families, and Reform: Women in the Farmers' Alliance and Populist Party" (Ph.D. diss., University of Oregon, 1986), 20.

Lease's activist roles moved well beyond those associated with the briefly influential third-party Populist politics of the Gilded Age, a time of intense class conflict in America as the nation adjusted to the wide-ranging and often chaotic changes associated with the processes and consequences of a modernizing capitalist society. Lease was also a teacher, homemaker, journalist, women's club member, women's rights activist, temperance supporter, practicing lawyer, Union Labor Party member, Knights of Labor activist, Irish Nationalist, socialist, Henry George reform advocate, Catholic Church member, Republican Party supporter and political aid, "Bull Moose" campaign worker, and Progressive reformer. Lease apparently recognized the diverse nature of her own career as an "advocate" or cause joiner when she explained in an interview toward the end of her life that she used her "energy ... to advocate the cause of the underdog."<sup>3</sup> Despite her many endeavors, Lease's contribution to the 1890s Populist movement remains her most celebrated and well-recorded role.

Mary Lease's Populist Party story particularly illustrates how gender conventions and the related complexities of class and ethnic identity shaped late-nineteenth-century American politics. An investigation of how and why Lease moved into overtly public activities at a time when women's access to public political realms was severely limited reveals how women's status was changing during this dynamic period. Lease's political success and national fame developed in part because she quickly learned how to manipulate American political culture and use traditional male party-politicking styles to assume a public platform. Opponents attacked Lease's presumed gender-role deviance by portraying her as a man, as physically masculine, as an unfit mother, and as a general threat to the social order. Lease's supporters extolled her reputed masculine traits while simultaneously linking her political work with female purity, moral virtue, maternalism, and social uplift.

Opponents' comments equating her behavior with manliness suggested that Lease violated social norms and likewise insinuated that her supporters were tainted, or at least politically misled, by heeding the council of a deviant and degraded female. Lease and her supporters freely oscillated between associating her political work with socially prescribed masculine, aggressive behavior and with feminine domestic virtue, suggesting that gendered political discourse was increasingly fluid as Gilded Age so-

3. "Advice to Raise 'Less Corn and More Hell' Still Good, Says Mary Ellen Lease at 78," *Kansas City Star*, March 29, 1931.

ciety broke down Victorian gender-role hegemony. Lease utilized and in fact exploited feminine and masculine sex-role ideals to justify her Populist Party activities, to defend herself against opponents' attacks, and to champion particular political candidates. Just as effectively, Lease's opponents ridiculed her political work with derisive gendered language, because this type of stereotyping language was widely understood and appealed to many, even though these anti-Populists probably most feared her class-conscious calls for a people's revolt.

Certainly other women, such as Lease's fellow Kansas Populist Annie Diggs, assumed important roles on the political stage within the Populist Party, but, as one newspaper wrote, Lease simply was "the most famous woman orator of the century." Although the notoriety of Lease's radical economic activism was rarely rivaled, the gendered responses she encountered reflected the larger political rhetoric of the late-nineteenth century in which ideas of manliness and femininity constructed both political language and behavior.<sup>4</sup> An examination of Lease's celebrated Populist Party speeches along with opponents' and supporters' responses exposes how gender ideals and gendered discourse shaped her political efforts and, in consequence, the agrarian revolt itself to some extent. Such a study also illuminates the ways in which contending partisan newspapers commonly employed gendered rhetoric to attack political opponents. This article analyzes newspaper accounts of Lease's Populist Party political career as well as her few recorded speeches during the 1890s to assess the ways in which the era's gender ideals both shaped and portrayed Lease's participation in the radical agrarian reform movement. Americans' gendered responses to Lease's public activism revealed how profoundly gender norms shaped Gilded Age political rhetoric. In fact, despite her militant calls for class warfare and her anticapitalist remarks, it was Lease's gender and her assumed defiance of gender roles that generated the vast majority of criticism

4. *Topeka State Journal*, March 10, 1893. For more on gendered political discourse during the late-nineteenth century, see Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). Similarly, Michael Goldberg's *An Army of Women* and Rebecca Edwards's *Angels in the Machinery* expose the complexities of Populism by discussing how the Populist, Republican, and Democratic Parties used gendered language to promote and defend their candidates and policy proposals. Michael Lewis Goldberg, *An Army of Women: Gender and Politics in Gilded Age Kansas* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Rebecca Edwards, *Angels in the Machinery: Gender in American Party Politics from the Civil War to the Progressive Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).



and comments from her political opponents and supporters alike.

While social mores continued to encourage women to conform to the “cult of domesticity” even after the Civil War, some women, Mary Lease among them, were instead becoming more politically active as the nineteenth century progressed.<sup>5</sup> Lease and other public women did not wholly reject the domestic ideology, but they did transform it for their own personal and political purposes. Accompanying the separate-spheres ideology was the somewhat paradoxical notion of female civic duty. Lease used the concepts of female civic duty and women’s presumed “moral authority” to enter the public sphere, but once there she adopted traditionally masculine political styles such as campaigning, debating, orating, running for office, and verbally lambasting her political opponents in public venues.<sup>6</sup> In adjusting ideas regarding female moral authority to male partisan politicking, Lease and other politically active women defied the notion of women’s second-class citizenship and challenged long-standing notions concerning men’s and women’s public versus private spheres. As one interviewer noted, Lease “is the first woman in American politics” because, in contrast, “the Anthonys and Willards and the Stantons have only tried to annex woman’s world to politics,” whereas “Lease is mixing up with man politics and acting like a woman.”<sup>7</sup>

Mary Lease grew up within a family of radicalized Irish immigrants and staunch Civil War Unionists, so her

5. Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1800–1860,” in *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976), 21–31. Welter contends that nineteenth-century religious literature, women’s magazines, manuscripts, autobiographies, diaries, popular fiction, marriage manuals, and gift books encouraged women to remain in the home. She identifies four principal components that constitute her “cult of true womanhood” construction, including purity, piety, submissiveness, and domesticity. As Welter explains, “A true woman’s place was unquestionably by her own fireside—as daughter, sister, but most of all as wife and mother” (p. 31).

6. Demonstrating that women moved in and altered the male public sphere and occasionally adopted masculine political traits, several new investigations challenge earlier works that exclusively highlighted nineteenth-century gender sphere segmentation, the domestic paradigm, and women’s reform activities such as church work and volunteerism that existed outside partisan political circles. For more on women’s political participation in the nineteenth century, see Melani Gustafson, *Women and the Republican Party, 1854–1924* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001); Nancy Isenberg, *Sex and Citizenship in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Lyde Cullen Sizer, *The Political Work of Northern Women Writers and the Civil War, 1850–1872* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Elizabeth R. Varon, *We Mean to Be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); and Wagner, “Farms, Families, and Reform.”

7. “Mary Ellen and Lorraine,” *Kansas City Star*, January 2, 1894; Varon, *We Mean to Be Counted*, 2–9.

political awareness and subsequent movement toward “man politics” were nurtured at an early age. Her radicalism developed in large part from her parents’ experiences in Ireland, namely her Irish father’s failed attempts to rebel against local British landowners followed by her family’s risky escape from British authorities, the havoc of the potato famine, and the endemic poverty of Ireland. Mary Lease’s father, Joseph Clyens, toiled as a relatively prosperous farmer in Monaghan County, Ireland, until the potato famine forced farmers off their land and into a precarious indebted state. While still in Ireland, Clyens apparently attempted to organize a revolt against British rulers and absentee landowners. Learning of the rebellion, British authorities reportedly set out to seize and hang Clyens, forcing him and his family to flee to America. Like thousands of their Irish Catholic tenant-farmer compatriots evicted in Ireland by British authorities, the Clyens family traveled to America in poverty.

Soon after the family’s arrival in America, Mary was born in 1853, in Ridgway, Pennsylvania. According to Lease, her “father was an Irish exile” who “was banished from Ireland” and thus “fled to America with a price set upon his head and his property confiscated by the English crown.” In fact, Lease explicitly attributed her radical spirit and candid hatred of the British, particularly the British financial elite, to her father. “He took up arms against the British government,” Lease recalled in one address, and hence “I came by my rebellious spirit honestly.”<sup>8</sup>

Mary’s “rebellious spirit” and movement toward political activism were further fueled when, as an adult, she witnessed and experienced severe agricultural hardships. After the Civil War, she moved to Osage Mission, Kansas, in order to take a teaching job at a mission school. There she met and married Charles Lease, a successful pharmacist who owned his own business called City Drug Store. However, the Leases confronted financial ruin during the depression that struck America in 1873. The impoverished Lease family moved to Denison, Texas,

8. Joseph Coohill, *Ireland: A Short History* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), 39–58. For more on the Irish tenant-farmer system and Irish Nationalism, see Terry Golway, *Irish Rebel: John Devoy and America’s Fight for Ireland’s Freedom* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1998); Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism* (London: Pluto Publishing, 1983); Thomas N. Brown, *Irish-American Nationalism, 1870–1890* (New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1966); and Edwards, “Mary Elizabeth Lease,” 128–129. *Fort Scott Weekly Monitor*, January 18, 1894; “Mrs. Lease Beards the Red Dragon of Wall Street,” *Kansas City Star*, October 25, 1914 (Lease quotations).



Mary Elizabeth Lease first gained a measure of fame as a champion of social and economic reform during the latter half of the 1880s, about the time, perhaps, that this image was made in Wichita, Kansas.

where Charles worked as a drugstore clerk and Mary as a laundress. In 1883 the family moved back to rural Kansas and lived on a farm that Mary recalled as “dreary, monotonous, hard, bleak, and uninspiring.” Only a year later the family moved to the city of Wichita, where Charles returned to work as a pharmacist. Although Mary Lease’s time as a farmer was relatively short, she gained an understanding of the interconnected problems of political disempowerment, environmental hardship, and the endemic

poverty plaguing America’s agricultural communities.<sup>9</sup> Her firsthand experiences with farmer impoverishment along with her long-standing and passionate commitment to radical Irish Nationalism would soon allow her to effectively communicate and personally connect with agrarian reform audiences.<sup>10</sup>

As Mary Lease and American farmers observed the economic cycle of declining agricultural commodity prices combined with escalating farmer debts during the 1870s and 1880s, Lease began to accuse the federal government, under Republican Party control, of engaging in what she would later describe as a “fraud against the people.” In fact, Lease came to the conclusion that the Republican Party worked on behalf of monopolies by allocating money, land, and transportation resources to such powers at the expense of working people. Several other interconnected issues also angered Lease and others in the Midwestern, Western, and Southern agricultural communities: a national banking system seemingly biased against agriculture, the removal of Civil War “greenbacks” from circulation and the related problems of currency contraction, the seemingly unstoppable decline of agricultural prices in a glutted market, high protective tariffs that aided manufacturers and hurt farmers’ buying power, government legislative actions ostensibly in favor of railroads and other monopolies, and the demonetization of silver.

These concerns regarding perceived and real government trade discrimination and economic favoritism would soon fuel the Populist movement, which sought to politically and economically empower farmers and workers and challenge the corporate, financial, and political elites. The Populist movement evolved during the

9. *Fort Scott Weekly Monitor*, January 18, 1894; Edwards, “Mary Elizabeth Lease,” 129–131. For more on Mary Lease’s early life, see Dorothy Rose Blumberg, “Mary Elizabeth Lease, Populist Orator: A Profile,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 1 (Spring 1978): 1–15; and Richard Stiller, *Queen of Populists: The Story of Mary Elizabeth Lease* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1970).

10. Mary Lease, in fact, first attracted significant public fame not as a Populist Party orator but as an advocate for the Irish Nationalist “land war” cause after she conducted a Kansas statewide fund-raising lecture tour in 1885 calling for an end to British landlordism and the exploitative “rack-rent” system and advocating Ireland’s home rule. On St. Patrick’s Day of that year, Lease delivered her first widely attended public speech in Wichita, titled “Ireland and Irishmen,” and established herself as an ardent Irish Nationalist. *Wichita Weekly Beacon*, March 23, 1887; “Mrs. Lease Lectures in New York,” *Topeka State Journal*, December 21, 1896; *Wichita Daily Beacon*, March 2, 6, and 18, 1885; Mary Elizabeth Lease, “Ireland, Her Poets, Warriors and Statesmen,” in “Mary Elizabeth (Clyens) Lease Pamphlets,” vol. 1, no. 6, 9–12, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society (endnote information).

1890s as the most visible and well-organized expression of farmers' fears concerning wealth inequality, corporate power, worker exploitation, and generalized anxieties over the seemingly chaotic state of a nation moving toward modernity. Populists approved of the basic features of capitalism such as property rights, a system of wage labor, and a market framework of commodity exchange, but only so long as those features functioned within the context of a government-regulated, nonmonopolistic economic system.<sup>11</sup>

Within the Kansas political realm, Mary Lease and the Populists believed that Republican legislators manipulated local and national economies at the expense of "the people" by granting northeastern financial institutions and corporations, particularly railroad monopolies, large monetary and land subsidies in various Midwestern localities. Beyond these troubles, the agricultural bust in Kansas accelerated in 1888 when drought, dust storms, heat, cyclones, and successive blizzards destroyed crops and land values collapsed. Eastern investors thereafter cut the flow of credit to the West by calling in their loans during these successive economic slowdowns. Many farmers could accept yearly crop-yield fluctuations based upon unpredictable weather conditions, but vacillations in crop prices that they believed could be influenced or controlled by Republican federal or state policies angered them. Such frustration would prompt Lease, along with thousands of other Kansas farmers and workers fearful of unrestrained capitalist growth, to demand government regulation and oversight of the nation's economic markets in an effort to protect "the people."<sup>12</sup> So it was the economic turmoil consuming Gilded Age America, along with her personal experiences, that nurtured Lease's radicalism to the point of propelling her into the public political domain.

Mary Lease became a nationally renowned Populist Party orator in the 1890s, stirring crowds with her radical comments regarding the nation's afflictions of wealth strat-

ification, farmer impoverishment, corporate monopoly, and class conflict. Many of her Populist ideas had been formulated when she had worked with the Knights of Labor during the previous decade. The Knights of Labor encouraged women to join local assemblies and hired women, including Lease, as lecturers and organizers. Thousands of Irish American women joined the Knights of Labor and other trade unions during the late-nineteenth century. Irish culture had traditionally valued women's economic contributions to their family units, so this type of labor-related activism was regarded as socially acceptable and within the parameters of Irish American women's long-standing familial economic roles.<sup>13</sup> Lease hailed the Knights for working for the "toiling masses" to gain "a proper share of the wealth" in America, for combating "the jeering Sampsons of corporation and monopoly," and for halting "the march of oppression" that workers confronted. Also appealing to Lease was the Knights' endorsement of women's suffrage. Indeed, Lease expressed pride in being a Knights member because "that was the organization that first recognized that women were human beings."<sup>14</sup> While a few other notable Irish American women, such as Mary Harris "Mother" Jones, crossed over from trade unionism to more radical economic activism, most female Irish immigrants viewed their trade unionism in pragmatic "bread-and-butter" terms and not as a challenge to patriarchy and exclusive male political participation.<sup>15</sup> Lease's oratorical skills were irresistible to the emerging Populist Party even as many of her Irish American compatriots remained skeptical of women's overt political activism.

The Populist Party was a farmers' political and social revolt against what they perceived as the excesses, oligarchic control, political manipulation, and corruption of big businesses and financial institutions of the late-nineteenth century. Kansas became a hotbed for the Populist revolt during the 1890s as farmers there struggled with wide-ranging problems such as environmental crop destruction,

11. Paul D. Travis, "Changing Climate in Kansas: A Late 19th-Century Myth," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 1 (Spring 1978): 52–58; Edwards, "Mary Elizabeth Lease," 133–136; Goldberg, *An Army of Women*, 53–55; Elizabeth Sanders, *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State, 1877–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 109; Robert McGuire, "Economic Causes of Late-Nineteenth-Century Agrarian Unrest: New Evidence," *Journal of Economic History* 41 (December 1981): 848.

12. Edwards, "Mary Elizabeth Lease," 133–136. For more information on the Populist movement generally, see Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); and O. Gene Clanton, *Kansas Populism: Ideas and Men* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1969).

13. Hasia R. Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America: Irish Immigrant Women in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 99–103.

14. "Preamble of [the] Constitution of the Knights of Labor, January 1, 1878," in Henry Steele Commager, ed., *Documents of American History* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 546–547; Edward T. James, "More Corn, Less Hell? A Knights of Labor Glimpse of Mary Elizabeth Lease," *Labor History* 16 (Summer 1975): 408; *Wichita Weekly Beacon*, October 27, 1886; *Leavenworth Times*, December 7, 1892.

15. For more on Mother Jones, see Elliot J. Gorn, *Mother Jones: The Most Dangerous Woman in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002); Mary Harris Jones, *Autobiography of Mother Jones* (New York: Dover Publications, 2004); and Diner, *Erin's Daughters in America*, 99–103.



the decline of agricultural prices, railroad and grain-elevator operators' high rates, political marginalization, the boom-bust economic cycle, and generalized economic hardship. Mary Lease quickly attracted and energized listeners during these depression years because of her ability to define farmers' financial frustrations in rather simplistic, straightforward terms. During one Populist Party campaign speech, Lease allegedly informed her audience that "the most tremendous social and political revolution" was sweeping over the nation. Commenting on such speeches, a Republican critic insisted that Lease "was sometimes a bit of a demagogue" who knew less than he about the fundamental causes of the Populist uprising, but because "it was an uprising, she rode the waves" and "flashed across Kansas in that day of turmoil." After an interview with Lease, another reporter said Lease impressed him "as one of those radical, strong, warm natures which feels and has impulses rather than thoughts. She can see a wrong and feel an injury quickly, but would be slow and far from sure in her remedies. Her mind is untrained, and while displaying plenty of a certain sort of power, is illogical, lacks sequence and scatters like a 10-gauge gun."<sup>16</sup> Lease's speeches were not infused with cogent economic theories, as she was not a scholar, or peppered with specific details about the complexities of farmer discontent, but these omissions made little difference to her supporters. She was able to translate and convey abstract ideas about interest rates, stocks, financial capital, and corporate trade into a clear and comprehensible message. When Lease lobbied for issues, ranging from antimonopoly legislation to women's suffrage, she typically divided the world into two clear, distinct categories: the oppressors versus the oppressed, or the good versus the bad. Lease "is not the sort of woman," wrote one of her contemporaries, "to be shelved without a protest," so listeners always knew exactly where she stood on any given issue.<sup>17</sup> The uncompromisingly radical nature of her speeches attracted Populists looking for someone or something to blame for farmer and worker suffering and likewise gave her political opponents plenty of rhetorical ammunition with which to publicly attack her.

Recognizing her tremendous oratorical abilities after listening to her speeches at one of their founding conven-

tions in Topeka during June 1890, Kansas Populist Party officials asked Mary Lease to officially lecture on behalf of their new political organization in preparation for the fall elections. Lease accepted the offer and began traveling throughout Kansas as a stump speaker rallying voters for the third party. She encouraged listeners to translate their evident rage over economic privation into concrete action in the form of Populist Party political participation. Although the Populist Party disseminated information concerning its activities and goals through organizational meetings, picnics, parades, songs, print literature, and person-to-person conversations, hired lecturers were the mainstay of the party's political campaigns at every level and in every state in which the party organized. Consequently, Lease delivered at least 160 speeches in Kansas and elsewhere during the 1890 campaign alone. She would later travel throughout the nation campaigning for the national Populist Party during the presidential elections of 1892 and 1896, gaining a reputation as one of America's leading and most dynamic speakers.<sup>18</sup> Lease's oratorical skills and her ability to clearly and succinctly communicate the Populist message helped to transform the movement from a local, grassroots, amorphous protest group into a nationally organized political party.

Mary Lease's evangelist-style speeches stirred listeners' emotions and roused their anger over the seemingly ubiquitous "money power" in America. Her speeches more closely resembled religious revival oratory than any sort of constrained academic, political language, prompting her opponents to mock that she encouraged chaos and "hollering crowds." Linking Christianity and Populism, Lease compared the crucifixion of Jesus to the farmer's mortgage indebtedness, a connection that effectively dramatized her case and imbued her audiences with a sense that they were crusading for a righteous cause. She sprinkled her speeches with phrases from the Bible. Consequently, some of Lease's opponents denounced Lease as a "self-styled evangelist" creating a "new faith." Nevertheless, Lease's ability to present the Populist movement as a religious crusade helped her to legitimize the agrarian revolt and simultaneously attract new People's

16. White, *Autobiography of William Allen White*, 217–219 (the "Republican critic"); *Topeka Advocate*, August 20, 1890; *Kansas City Star*, April 1, 1891, in "Kansas Scrapbook, Biographical Files," vol. 3: 38–44, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society. See also O. Gene Clanton, "Intolerant Populist? The Disaffection of Mary Elizabeth Lease," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 34 (Summer 1968): 192.

17. *Atchison Daily Globe*, March 5, 1895.

18. Wagner, "Farms, Families, and Reform," 9; *Wichita Evening Eagle*, November 1, 1933; "Mary Elizabeth Lease: The Distinguished Author and Lecturer," Western Lecture Bureau (Wichita, Kans., ca. 1890), in "Mary Elizabeth (Clyens) Lease Pamphlets," vol. 1, no. 5.

# Mary Elizabeth Lease



THE DISTINGUISHED  
**AUTHOR AND LECTURER.**  
UNDER MANAGEMENT OF  
The Western Lecture Bureau,  
WICHITA, KANSAS.

Party voters. Her emotional, revivalistic oratorical style paralleled the techniques utilized by nineteenth-century itinerant ministers, and Populist camp meetings resembled

antebellum religious revivals.<sup>19</sup> It was Lease's focus upon economic issues along with her exceptional, almost ministerial, oratorical abilities that enabled her to move into the male political realm, where she worked to coalesce agrarian, labor, and women's-rights supporters.

Those late-nineteenth-century Americans such as Mary Lease who joined the Populist movement believed that the greatest social evils plaguing America were wealth stratification, the maldistribution of property, and the exploitation of the working and agrarian classes. Class conflict jolted America during the Gilded Age as the nation adjusted to the labor, economic, and agricultural changes associated with the growth, expansion, and ultimate hegemony of modern industrial capitalism. Labor and agrarian radicals such as Lease believed American society was afflicted by perpetual class conflict in which the "Jay Gould monopolists," "monied power," "new Slave Power" of "railroad thieves," "monopolist kings," corrupt bankers, unscrupulous British and other "foreign" investors, and "stock-gambling millionaires" were ruining America. For Lease, monopolies were neither natural nor essential to capitalism since in her view they sprang forth after business competition, economic discrimination, and financial corruption went unchecked.<sup>20</sup> She argued that a redistribution of wealth and property was necessary to counter the wealth- and power-centralizing trends plaguing America. According to Lease, many Populists, and American labor reformers, the "land robbers" and the "monied men" who controlled property and were protected by corrupt politicians remained the central problems debilitating the nation. "The people are at bay," threatened Lease, "let

19. *Kansas City Star*, October 29, 1894; *Wichita Weekly Eagle*, September 2, 1892 (quotation); Harry Levinson, "Mary Elizabeth Lease: Prairie Radical," *Kansas Magazine* (1948): 21.

20. *Lane Leader*, October 16, 1890; Eric Foner, *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 158–160; *Joint Debate Between Mrs. M. E. Lease and J. M. Brumbaugh*, in James I. Costigan, "An Analysis of Selected Speeches by Mrs. Mary E. Lease" (master's thesis, Southern Illinois University, 1960), 91, 78; Norman Pollack, *The Humane Economy: Populism, Capitalism, and Democracy* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 50, 57, 65, 177.



the blood hounds of money who have dogged them so far beware."<sup>21</sup>

That Mary Lease inspired agrarian protests and roused class resentments brought her notoriety, but that she was a female orator remains particularly significant. If gender ideals such as the domestic ideology continued to act as strong societal forces, then how and why was Mary Lease, as a woman, able to enter the Populist Party's political center stage? Lease used her Populist campaign platform to discuss her party's proposed reforms such as railroad rate regulation, wage and hours laws, and tax and election reform, yet she also used this stage to campaign for women's equality and women's suffrage. The Populist movement itself had very little to say about the status of women in America. Likewise, the movement never contemplated the interconnected problems of gender and economic inequity or sought to substantially incorporate women's rights issues into its vision for America. Yet the Populist movement attracted support from those seeking to challenge the political and economic elite, which might have meant, by extension or consequence, a concurrent challenge to the entrenched class and gender orders. The Granger movement and the Farmers' Alliance movement of the Midwest and West, both of which were cooperative organizations that acted as precursors to the People's Party, had traditionally encouraged local female membership, political partisanship, campaign work, and even organizational leadership and thus profoundly influenced the evolution of gender dynamics within the third party. The Republican press even feared the potential independent political power of the Farmers' Alliance and consequently intentionally exaggerated the extent to which women controlled the organization. The *Topeka Daily Capital* wrote that "the Farmers' Alliance of Kansas was largely controlled by women in 1888, the farmers' wives surpassing their husbands in the work of organizing against the old parties." The Farmers' Alliance attracted many politically ambitious women such as Lease who assumed some leadership responsibilities within their local organizations.<sup>22</sup> These politicized women soon turned their energies to the Populist Party in order to join and support a movement they

believed would reform a political system that ignored the plight of farmers.

With its political emphasis turned toward economic reform, the 1890s Populist Party did offer a relatively egalitarian vision of men's and women's roles and provided women with a more hospitable and socially equitable environment than did the dominant Republican and Democratic Parties. The Populists' skepticism regarding the limitless advantages and assured upward mobility that hard work, discipline, and morality would bring to all individuals helped to break down dominant views concerning the validity of laissez-faire government policies. At the same time, Populists challenged middle-class cultural values generally, including those related to gender, and consequently offered women more significant roles than did the "old parties." Lease and her allies in fact defended her political activities by employing ideas regarding women's moral authority and by arguing that the "political mismanagement" of the "old parties" dominated by men had led the nation to a state of decay, corruption, and decadence. Thus, they claimed that Populist men and women alike needed to purify and reform the political realm. Articulating the connection between politics, female purity, and the home, or the public and private spheres, Lease contended that "politics" is "the foundation of the home," and therefore "women have resolutely entered that domain of politics and bid fair to maintain there."<sup>23</sup> On the one hand, the Populists turned away from the trappings of traditional middle-class gender ideology; on the other hand, they used these same conventional views regarding female domesticity to allow for and even champion Lease as a woman in politics.

Mary Lease's tremendous oratorical abilities, along with the Populist movement's general challenge to the status quo, ultimately permitted her to assume a central role within the party hierarchy as a political lecturer. Both supporters and opponents agreed that Lease's oratory was extraordinary. Populist broadsides advertised her upcoming speaking engagements by announcing that she had a "tongue tipped with eloquence." A contemporary claimed that Lease "had a voice like the roaring of many waters, and her words seemed to have a hypnotic effect on her audience." The *Chicago Herald* insisted that "her magnetism and popularity as a speaker are unique and wonderful."

21. John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1931), 84; *Topeka State Journal*, March 31, 1891.

22. Edwards, *Angels in the Machinery*, 102; *Topeka Daily Capital*, September 20, 1894.

23. Mary Elizabeth Lease, speech before the Labor Congress, delivered at the Chicago Art Palace (September 2, 1893), in the *Abilene Monitor*, September 7, 1893; Mary Elizabeth Lease, "The Legal Disabilities of Women," *Kansas Sunflower* (February 1894): 7-8.

A Pennsylvania newspaper ranked Lease as “one of the world’s greatest orators,” while another observer argued that Lease’s voice could “win her audience over if any one can.” With countless other accounts describing her spell-binding, exceptional voice, the historical record clearly attests that Lease possessed a remarkable gift for oratory.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, whether endorsing Lease by praising her “able” and “entertaining” speeches or denigrating her by referring to her as a “dragon,” or even as a satanic figure, the press consistently recorded her political orations, which ultimately helped to popularize her and her many causes.<sup>25</sup>

Compliments and criticisms of Mary Lease’s lecturing suggested that oratorical success had certain gendered parameters that equated “good” public oratory with masculine sounds and manly traits. Supporters attributed what in nineteenth-century terms would have been masculine characteristics to Lease when praising her lecturing style, indicating that she spoke in a “forcible and logical style” and exhibited “physical endurance” during her lengthy speeches.<sup>26</sup> In the same vein, perhaps the most common gendered attack leveled against Lease by political opponents involved describing her voice as “masculine,” that of a “man-woman,” resembling a “war whoop,” and seemingly “more male than female.” By routinely discussing Lease’s “man-like” traits, particularly her masculine voice, her adversaries inadvertently acknowledged that Lease was an important political actor. Lease’s “masculine voice howls” noted an observer, while another editorial insisted that her oratory exhibited “a strength in her endurance which is not the possession of many of her sex.” Wichita Republican Victor Murdock vividly described Lease’s “unequaled” voice as “authoritative” with a low “contralto” tone that “could command an audience of men.”<sup>27</sup> Another reporter discussed Lease’s “strong man’s voice,” whereas a different editorial offered her a

backhanded compliment by stating that her voice had an “entire absence of that femininity of voice, which so often makes the expounders of women’s rights doctrines ridiculous on the platform.” In an article noting how several people mistook her for a man, a reporter said of Lease that “as every one knows her voice is noted for its masculinity.” Lease apparently explained in an interview that her political lecturing work did not “unsex me,” but the interviewer still concluded that “Lease somewhat unsexed herself by her indulgence in turbulent and inflammatory discourse” and by discussing “grave and serious governmental problems.”<sup>28</sup> It is unsurprising that Lease’s voice stirred opponents’ intense resentments and gendered mockery because her oratorical gifts were routinely quoted and commended by political supporters.

In a period when many public officials and private citizens agreed that women’s disenfranchisement and political marginalization were simply an “accident of gender,” Mary Lease’s political activities incited much public criticism for moving beyond accepted gender boundaries. One Republican newspaper chastised Lease’s party’s “monopoly of the women speakers,” informing readers that the Republican Party was more relevant than the Populists because “time spent by the women speakers is wasted.” As a woman defying the “cult of true womanhood,” Lease routinely confronted gender-specific verbal attacks that lacked any relevance to the reforms she proposed. Critics of Populism ridiculed Lease’s apparent challenge to female domesticity and submissiveness. These opponents proclaimed, for instance, that Lease’s “ambitious and aggressive” public lecturing brought about her acute rheumatism, which could have been avoided if she had properly kept to “housekeeping.”<sup>29</sup> A popular nineteenth-century social critic named John Young explained that a “lady is always unobtrusive, never talks loudly, or laughs boisterously, or does anything to attract attention of the passers-by.” Lease,

24. *Kansas City Star*, February 12, 1894; *Topeka Advocate*, August 20, 1890; *Topeka Advocate*, December 17, 1890; “Mary Elizabeth Lease,” Western Lecture Bureau; “A Woman of Sudden Fame,” *Kansas City Star*, April 1, 1891; *Kansas Commoner* (Newton), June 12, 1890.

25. *Spokane Chronicle* and *Clarion Breeze*, in “Mary Elizabeth Lease,” Western Lecture Bureau, 1; John D. Bright, *Kansas: The First Century* (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing, 1965), 497; *Wichita Weekly Beacon*, December 15, 1886; *Wichita Eagle*, June 10, 1887.

26. *Topeka Advocate*, August 20, 1890; *Topeka State Journal*, October 18, 1893.

27. Victor Murdock, news clipping, in Stiller, *Queen of Populists*, 73; *Wichita Weekly Eagle*, February 2, 1894; *Wichita Weekly Eagle*, October 22, 1892; *Atchison Daily Globe*, March 5, 1895; “Mary Ellen and Lorraine,” 5; *Kansas Weekly Capital* (Topeka), October 15, 1891; *Wichita Daily Eagle*, August 25, 1896.

28. *Topeka State Journal*, September 2, 1893; *Kansas Weekly Capital and Farm Journal* (Topeka), March 8, 1894; *Topeka Daily Capital*, August 5, 1894; *Topeka State Journal*, January 19, 1895, August 18, 1896.

29. *Kansas City Star*, January 22, 1891, June 15, 1894 (quotations concerning Lease). In popularizing the “true womanhood” construction, which Lease challenged, as well as the desired characteristics of manhood, the widely circulated *Godey’s Lady’s Book* asserted, “The characteristic endowments of women are not of a commanding and imposing nature, such as man may boast of, and which enable him to contend with the difficulties and dangers, to which both personally and mentally, he is liable. They consist in purity in mind, simplicity and frankness of heart, benevolence, prompting to active charity, warm affection, inducing a habit of forbearance and self-denial, which the comfort or good of their human ties may demand.” *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, in Mary P. Ryan, *Womanhood in America: From Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1983), 115.

however, “manifests her disposition to annihilate anyone who dares to oppose her,” declared an adversary attempting to demonstrate that her confrontational demeanor contrasted drastically with social norms and advice manuals encouraging female passivity.<sup>30</sup>

Mary Lease certainly did appear to violate John Young’s female ideal as her contemporaries testified that she maintained a loud and boisterous voice, and her opponents accused her of disregarding other conventional standards of female behavior. With no equally public and vocal female counterpart in the Kansas Republican and Democratic Parties, anti-Populists easily linked Mary Lease’s public activism to the defilement of “true womanhood” and used her speeches as evidence that Populism threatened the traditional social order. The viciousness of some of these attacks suggested that opponents probably feared her strength in galvanizing Populist Party constituents, so they employed popularly understood gendered discourse to counter Lease’s influence. Opponents of Populism commonly turned to several gendered themes when attacking Lease and her party, namely, Lease’s apparent neglect of her domestic duties, her manly attributes, her dress and physical appearance, her gender-role deviance within her family, and her demasculinized husband. Lease responded to such criticisms by upholding the sanctity of motherhood, equating Populist reforms and women’s rights with social uplift, and publicizing the Populist Party as the protector of the “true” family ideal. Both opponents and supporters of the agrarian revolt utilized the discourse of gender to explain Lease’s public behavior and to define and delineate the appropriate boundaries of women’s public and private activities.<sup>31</sup>

30. Nineteenth-century advice manuals and etiquette books such as John Young’s *Our Department* instructed men and women in how to behave in public and private settings, ranging from courtship rituals to personal health maintenance. *Our Department* specifically advised women to “cultivate their moral sense” and to work hard to obtain an education that endowed them with proper manners; the book advised men to develop a good “character.” John H. Young, *Our Department* (Atlanta, Ga.: Southeastern Publishing Co., 1883), 15, 145–146, 240–241; *Topeka Daily Capital*, July 20, 1897; *Wichita Weekly Beacon*, December 15, 1886; *Wichita Eagle*, June 10, 1887.

31. For more on the nineteenth-century women’s sphere, see Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood”; Paula Baker, “The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780–1920,” *American Historical Review* 89 (June 1984): 620–647; Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Barbara Leslie Epstein, *The Politics of Domesticity: Women, Evangelism, and Temperance in Nineteenth-Century America* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1981); and Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789–1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986).

Anti-Populist newspaper editors routinely used gendered name-calling as a political device to chastise Mary Lease and other Populists and to mock their agrarian reform agenda. Republican Party and other anti-Populist press railed against Lease and her party by referring to Lease as a “rabble rousing female fanatic,” a “demagogess,” “the people’s party Amazon,” and even as a “she hyena.” While the opposition press commonly used derogatory names to designate male Populists such as Kansan Jeremiah Simpson, who was referred to as “Sockless Jerry,” they clearly focused upon Lease’s sexuality and physical appearance in their nicknaming endeavors. Whereas Simpson gained his nickname after he argued that his Republican political opponent purchased expensive socks that Simpson could not afford, opponents called attention to Lease’s seemingly unfeminine attributes by labeling her as “sexless as a cyclone” and a “Patrick Henry in petticoats.”<sup>32</sup> “Mrs. Lease calls Jerry Simpson the ‘Abraham Lincoln of the West,’ and Jerry Simpson calls Mrs. Lease the ‘Modern Joan of Arc,’” but, an *Atchison Daily Globe* writer speculated, “Lease resembles Joan of Arc in nothing except that she is a woman, and even this has been doubted. Some people say she is a man, and that her real name is Bill Lease.”<sup>33</sup>

Mary Lease’s outward appearance, attire, and fashion sense were routinely discussed by the press, exposing the societal emphasis upon appropriate female dress and gendered beauty norms. Discussions of Lease’s physical appearance and dress-reform proposals appeared in the political sections of newspapers and were used by editors of all political views to both belittle and extol Populism. Lease regarded women’s restrictive and uncomfortable clothing as “relics of barbarism.”<sup>34</sup> Responding to her chal-

32. *Kansas Weekly Capital* (Topeka), March 10, 1892; *Topeka Daily Capital*, July 20, 1897; Gerald W. Johnson, *The Lunatic Fringe* (New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1957), 142; *Topeka State Journal*, August 20, 1896.

33. *Atchison Daily Globe*, June 15, 1892. Critics were especially prone to write that Lease exhibited a masculine persona and both looked and acted like a man. When Lease allegedly shouted, “Let us be men” at a Farmers’ Alliance picnic, one opponent commented that the “other women present wouldn’t agree to it and the scheme fell through.” After Lease spoke at an opera house in Wellington, the venue’s manager apparently stated that “Mrs. Lease is a perfect gentleman, and acted the man in every respect.” When she refused a lecturing engagement, a newspaper joked that “Mrs. Lease is, in short, not the man we took her to be.” A Republican campaign worker said of Lease that “the old lady was a ‘man of her word,’” and another opponent called her “a self-made man.” Another paper joked that a Populist who had listed “the great men this country” had “neglected to mention Mrs. Lease.” *Topeka Daily Capital*, November 23, 1892; *Weekly Kansas Chief* (Troy), August 27, 1891; *Wichita Weekly Eagle*, October 10, 1890, December 12, 1890; *Topeka State Journal*, August 13, 1894; *Kansas City Journal*, August 5, 1903.

34. *Wichita Daily Eagle*, August 12, 1896; *Topeka State Journal*, December 19, 1894; *Leavenworth Times*, July 11, 1895.





William Allen White, Republican editor of the *Emporia Gazette*, described Lease as “sexless as a cyclone. . . . She had no sex appeal—none!” Partisan newspapers of the era tended to harshly criticize all of their political opponents, but Lease encountered more explicit and virulent attacks concerning her physical appearance than did her male Populist colleagues.

lenges to the status quo by focusing on issues concerning women’s dress, a reporter wondered if Lease and Susan B. Anthony wore lingerie, whereas a different writer teased that Lease wore a steel corset. Other opponents of women’s rights and Populism simply stated that Lease was not “pretty,” which could have been interpreted by contemporaries in two contradictory ways: that she failed to achieve the feminine beauty ideal or that she appeared masculine enough to assume a public political role. Some anti-Populists inadvertently complemented Lease’s political work when chastising her “unfeminine” physical appearance. For instance, an opponent indicated that Lease “does not pretend that she is pretty” because “she is too much in ear-

nest for that kind of vanity.”<sup>35</sup> That being said, many partisan remarks about Lease’s appearance were vicious. One journalist called her “tall and raw-boned and as ugly as a mud hen,” while another critic indicated that Lease had “a nose like an ant-eater, a voice like a cat fight and a face that is rank poison to the naked eye.” Famed Kansas Republican editor William Allen White described Lease as “sexless as a cyclone. . . . She had no sex appeal—none!” Gilded Age partisan newspapers tended to harshly criticize all political opponents, but Lease encountered more explicit and virulent attacks concerning her physical appearance than did her male Populist colleagues.<sup>36</sup>

Along with gendered political discourse contemplating Mary Lease’s physical appearance, opponents considered the physical hazards of female public political agitation. One editorial argued that activist women such as Lease, Anthony, and the militant British suffragist Emmeline Pankhurst actually underwent physical changes as a result of their public political agitation. In an article titled “Astonishing Physical Changes Wrought in Her by Her Efforts in the Recent Great Political Campaign,” a *New York World* reporter maintained that women such as Lease experienced “changes in face and figure” due to their activism. This pseudoscientific study insisted that Lease developed a “thin-lipped mouth” because she spoke too frequently, and that her hands were thin, nervous, and sensitive, apparently the result of too much gesturing and gavel wielding. Several other newspapers published articles concerning Lease’s physical dimensions, including the widths and lengths of her individual body parts as well as how her physical makeup had changed over her time as a public figure. In other words, readers were forewarned that female political activities eventually caused unwelcome and potentially dangerous physical changes in women. In an article titled “The Physiognomy of Mrs. Mary E. Lease,” a different reporter, though sympathetic to the Populist cause, confessed that Lease’s frame “has a large degree of both the feminine and masculine,” a condition attributable to her demeanor and occupation.<sup>37</sup> Given that gender ideals instructed women to behave in a deferential, submissive manner, opponents and even some supporters interpreted

35. *Topeka State Journal*, February 26, 1891; *Wichita Weekly Eagle*, July 5, 1895, January 10, 1896.

36. *Atchison Daily Globe*, November 14, 1894, February 1, 1893; *Atlanta (Ga.) Journal*, September 21, 1892; *Wichita Daily Eagle*, October 20, 1892; White, *Autobiography of William Allen White*, 218–219.

37. *Topeka State Journal*, August 20, 1896; *New York World*, December 27, 1896, 24; *Modern Light* (Columbus, Kans.), September 3, 1891.

Lease's nondeferential public politicking and general willingness to strongly assert her views as evidence of her physical manliness.

To legitimize Mary Lease's public activism and the Populist reforms she endorsed, her supporters responded to such attacks by highlighting her femininity and domesticity. For instance, when promoting one of Lease's speaking tours, a supportive paper commented that Lease maintained "a strong maternal affection," exhibited "a deep love of domestic enjoyment," and was "a Joan of Arc of moral reform." Another sympathizer assured readers that Lease was indeed fully female despite critics' comments to the contrary, while other supporters emphasized her delicate features, insisting that Lease was attractive, eloquent, sported a stylish hairdo, and dressed in the latest fashions. In an article subtitled "Not a Masculine Woman," one partially sympathetic reporter described Lease's physical makeup and feminine adornments, and assured readers that after careful examination she in fact was "very feminine" and "woman all over." Lease herself deflected explicitly gendered criticisms about her physical appearance by claiming that opponents mocked her looks and called her a "female tramp" simply to mask the fact that she was encouraging "a most wonderful uprising of the people" in which poor farmers and workers were challenging the economic and political elites.<sup>38</sup> In other words, anti-Populists utilized gendered discourse to counter Lease's class antagonism and trump Populist economic reforms.

On several occasions during the 1890s, Kansas Populists considered Mary Lease's candidacy for different political offices, including the U.S. Senate, the U.S. House of Representatives, the Kansas governorship, and various Kansas state offices. Public discussions of Lease's possible campaigns exposed the myriad of gendered remarks opponents could use to ridicule her and the Populists. Some critics called Lease a "Senatrix" and a "politicianess," and one journalist warned Kansans of the dangers of living "under petticoat government" if Lease was elected as governor or a senator for their state. A Republican paper objected to Lease's senatorial bid "because she could not stand up at the bar and take a drink with her brother senators," apparently an important component of the fraternal male political order. Another paper simply stated that Lease's female "nervous system" could not endure the trials of legislating,

38. *Kansas City Star*, February 12, 1894, January 28, 1891; "A Woman of Sudden Fame"; *Lane Leader*, October 16, 1890.

which were "not encountered in housekeeping." Insinuating that Lease's "unfeminine" campaign endeavors would lead to ill repute, an anti-Populist writer contended that many "pure American girls and women ... through their [political] ambition have become first the toys and then the cast-aways of men ... [and] public servants."<sup>39</sup> Republicans lambasted Populists for contemplating the political nomination of a "vindictive" and unbalanced woman and likewise warned readers that such potential "petticoat" rule endangered society. In highlighting Lease's gender and hence her defunct political abilities, the Republican press ridiculed the Populists while simultaneously presenting its own party as reliable, strong, logical, rational, and committed to manly political action. "Mrs. Lease's chief qualification for the position of congressman-at-large," jeered the opposition press, "is probably the easy and graceful manner she has of being at large."<sup>40</sup> Because her public political endeavors diverged so markedly from the activities of most nineteenth-century American women, Lease was an obvious target for those seeking to denounce Populism.

Discussions of Mary Lease's possible legislative nomination particularly inspired opponents to label Lease as a socially corruptive "man-woman," meaning a dangerous outlier who adopted deviant gendered personas that, unfortunately, other women might emulate. When reports circulated concerning Lease's possible run for public office, one paper declared that she behaved "like a gentleman," and another proclaimed that Lease "wears the breeches in a real as well as a figurative sense." In portraying Lease as a man, a journalist wrote that "it is hoped that Mrs. Lease shaved before she went to Washington," since "the last time the [*Atchison*] *Globe* saw her she had a growth of hairs on her chin that looked bad." Opponents likewise expressed concern regarding the potentially harmful affects such a "man-woman" could have upon society if elected. One political opponent feared Lease's "unfeminine demagoguery" and her negative influence upon Kansas and asked Kansans to reject Lease's political ideas in order to "save posterity from ignominious extinction." Several opposition papers expressed concern regarding Lease's "demoralizing influence" upon the girls of Kansas because her public be-

39. *Kansas Weekly Capital and Farm Journal* (Topeka), December 1, 1892; *Atchison Daily Globe*, July 25, 1894; *Wichita Weekly Eagle*, December 22, 1893; *Kansas City Star*, November 22, 1892; *Leavenworth Times*, November 22, 1892; *Kansas City Star*, June 15, 1894; *Wichita Weekly Eagle*, March 6, 1891.

40. *Kansas City Star*, June 4, 1894; *Wichita Weekly Eagle*, June 15, 1894; *Topeka Daily Capital*, June 13, 1894.



# The Lane Leader.

LANE, FRANKLIN COUNTY, KANSAS, THURSDAY, OCTOBER 16, 1890.

M. D.,  
son.  
to is, and  
at home  
KANSAS.  
M. D.  
son.  
d to  
KANSAS.  
DEN,  
yancer,  
IONS.  
RE,  
e Loans.  
KANSAS.  
RD,  
RER.  
peciality.  
dging.  
KANSAS.  
ILL,

## THE LANE LEADER. By Dursley Sargent.

### REPUBLICAN NOMINEES.

For Congressman, Second District,  
E. H. FUNSTON.

### State Ticket.

For Governor,  
LYMAN T. HUMPHRY.

For Supreme Justice,  
ALBERT H. HORTON.

For Lieut-Governor,  
A. J. FELT.

For Secretary of State,  
WM. HIGGINS.

For Attorney-General,  
L. B. KELLOGG.

For Supt. Public Instruction,  
GEO. W. WINANS.

For Auditor of State,  
GEO. M. HOVEY.

For Treasurer of State,  
S. G. STOVER.

### County Ticket.

For County Attorney,  
C. A. SMART.

For Clerk of District Court,  
JOHN A. FROW.

For Probate Judge,  
L. C. CRITTENDEN.

For Supt. Public Instruction,  
P. A. HILDEBRAN.

For Representative 15th District,  
J. M. MECHEM.

For Representative 16th District,  
H. H. DAY.

## Mrs. Lease at Lane.

### Grand Rally of the People's Party.

As we reported last week, the People's party held a grand rally, on the 7th inst., in Lincoln park, and after a number of brief, but stirring speeches, interspersed with song, the chairman introduced

Mrs. MARY E. LEASE, who at once astonished and delighted the vast audience with her wonderful voice, sound logic, and charming eloquence. She began by referring to the way in which she had been spoken of as an anarchist, and a female tramp, and explained that she was the daughter of an Irish exile—an Irish patriot,—who arrived in this country just in time to enlist in the Union army. Thus she was the daughter of a Union soldier, who was starved to death at Andersonville, and the sister of two brave brothers, who also fought with the boys in blue. Yet she had been slandered as an anarchist and a traitor.

We are living in a wonderful time and age of the world's history; old ideas, traditions and customs had broken loose and drifted from their moorings. It is now being conceded that there is no difference between the brain of an intelligent man and woman. Men, women and children are thinking to-day, hence we witness a most wonderful uprising of the people. In this movement woman finds her important part. We are to-day actors in one of the most important dramas ever enacted in all the world's history. This movement is not only destined to bring reform to the American nation but is destined to bring emancipation to all the world (applause). The

does it come that the people are losing their homes at the rate of 900 a week? How can they hope to redeem their homes when the mortgage indebtedness of six states amounts to more than the out-put of gold and silver in the United States? Because the speaker had declared that mortgages had been foreclosed in Shawnee county, Kansas, at the rate of three a day, the Topeka Capital had called her an anarchistic, hypocritical, diabolical liar, and had made it out that there had been only three foreclosures in six months. But on full investigation she found that the number was practically even greater than she had said. The product of our toil is in the hands of a few who have gotten rich—by earning, by gift, or by stealing. How have the millionaires acquired their wealth? Class legislation has reached out and robbed the masses. They might call her an anarchist or socialist or what they liked, but if there is an industrious, hard working man who has not enough food, it is because some one has stolen his share, and she defied any one to prove that she had told a single lie. The speaker then went on to review the legislation of the past twenty-five years, and said that they were not going to inquire, in the words of Jim Hallowell, "Who saved this nation?" But they would find out who stole this nation. It has been shown that 250,000 people own the entire wealth of the nation, and this concentration of wealth was brought about by the financial legislation of the past 25 years. In 1862 the greenback was legal tender money, just as good as gold and silver, and the speaker

## "HEY ALL SING FROM GRANDPA

We've found the Store w/  
With great variety of goods  
So low the prices are the  
Which makes us as a fan

And that is the reason w

F. C. V

The fair and square place

## DRY GOODS, GROC

Hats, Caps, Boots, Shoes

Always stocked with a full li

Always ready to make you tl

Although obviously a Republican-leaning newspaper, the Leader favorably covered Mary Lease's speech at her party's "grand rally" on Tuesday, October 7. "The powerful address of Mrs. M. E. Lease, containing as it did so much truth," reported publisher Dursley Sargent on October 9, "was well calculated to re-assure the wavering and convert the party-bound."

havior apparently encouraged them to adopt masculine manners and other deviant gender-role characteristics. In addition, the opposition argued that men who championed Lease's political candidacy and who heeded her political advice would themselves become feminized and humiliated. They would be better served reading cookbooks and staying out of the masculine realm of serious political debate, claimed these critics. Others, aiming to challenge the legitimacy of the People's Party, charged that the movement was under the command of women such as Lease. Populist "men didn't do much" and "only acted as scene shifters and s[t]upes," sneered one such critic, because Lease and other female Populist activists such as Annie Diggs "were the stars in the play." This confused gender hierarchy, warned critics, made Populism a dangerous force.<sup>41</sup>

If political adversaries derided Mary Lease's bids for elective office in gendered terms, her supporters were no less eager to use gender to defend her political activism. Populists and women's rights advocates who defended Lease's political work espoused gendered notions concerning women's moral superiority, piety, and pure feminine vulnerability. *The Farmer's Wife*, an 1890s women's journal that supported the Populist Party, declared that because of "her true woman's heart beating and aching for the oppressed and homeless ... as only a mother can plead," Lease would naturally protect the American family if appointed to the U.S. Senate. After a Republican newspaper apparently insinuated that Lease was a neglectful mother, the

41. Topeka Daily Capital, January 16, 1891; Leavenworth Times, July 3, 1895; Weekly Kansas Chief (Troy), March 3, 1891; New York Times, August 13,

1893, 4; Kansas Weekly Capital (Topeka), December 17, 1891; Weekly Kansas Chief, March 5, 1891; Atchison Daily Globe, October 29, 1896; Topeka Daily Capital, September 1, 1896, March 8, 1891; Victor Murdock, "Folks" (New York: Macmillan Company, 1921), 100.



*Advocate*, a Populist newspaper, demanded that the Republicans halt their “malicious libels,” as Lease was a devoted mother. Lease’s supporters defended her political participation by highlighting her pious maternal behavior and domestic devotion. The 1892 Populist presidential candidate, General James B. Weaver, stated that Lease was “struggling for the outcast and oppressed children” and equated her political work with nurturing female protection.<sup>42</sup>

Anti-Populists countered such rhetoric by portraying Mary Lease as an unfit wife and mother and denouncing the Populist Party for supporting a deviant woman who apparently ignored her female duties. Political opponents claimed Lease was “never at home” and “can’t teach her own children.” “Mrs. Lease cannot be with us on the occasion of our big pop rally,” wrote a critic, “but we will make a terrible effort to have him here if he can get some one to wash the dishes and take care of the children while he comes.” Another jeered that Lease was home so infrequently that her children did not think of their home as having a mother.<sup>43</sup> A Republican newspaper indicated that an “Eastern magazine” had published an article called “The Home Life of Mrs. Lease,” which prompted the writer to mock that “Lease will probably read it with considerable curiosity.” Still another critic asserted that Lease claimed to be “in favor of a peaceful and harmonious fireside” but wondered “why she so persistently absents herself therefrom?” Other papers ridiculed Lease’s deficient mothering capabilities by playing off her alleged “To Raise Less Corn and More Hell” speech. The *Concordia Times* observed that “Lease has been devoting altogether too much attention to raising cane in the field of Kansas politics and too little attention to raising her children.”<sup>44</sup> With motherhood so central to the nineteenth-century female domestic



Annie La Porte Diggs, another of the impressive female actors in the 1890s Populist drama, moved in 1873 at age twenty to Lawrence, Kansas, where she participated in the temperance movement and worked as an associate editor on the short-lived *Kansas Liberal*. “Little Annie” wrote a *Farmers’ Alliance* column for the local newspaper; joined the staff of *Topeka’s Advocate*, the leading reform weekly in the state, in March 1890; and served as state librarian from 1892 to 1902.

ideal, anti-Populists easily waged such attacks upon Lease, who actually was often on the campaign trail, by calling her a manly politician who neglected her familial roles and evidently lacked ‘natural’ maternal skills.

**M**ary Lease in fact remained firmly tied to the notion that women best served their nation and community through motherhood, and she regarded motherhood as women’s central and most important social role, despite her calls for women’s direct involvement in the political sphere. Lease flatly stated that she maintained “the greatest abhorrence for childless women.”

42. Susan E. Marshall, *Splintered Sisterhood: Gender and Class in the Campaign Against Woman Suffrage* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 88–89, 124–127; *Topeka Daily Capital*, November 24, 1892; *Topeka Advocate*, July 8, 1891, December 21, 1892.

43. *Topeka State Journal*, December 31, 1890; *Council Grove Republican*, October 26, 1894; *Atchison Daily Globe*, June 1, 1892; *Wichita Weekly Eagle*, March 27, 1894.

44. *Topeka Daily Capital*, March 17, 1894, August 19, 1892; *Concordia Times*, July 3, 1891.

In an interview, she linked the sanctity of motherhood to the fulfillment and value of womanhood and stated that “woman’s part in the economy of nature is first and distinctively most important, that of motherhood.” Lease reasoned that their mothering responsibilities made women “more spiritually developed” than men, so women should naturally “take a conscious part in the active life of the world.” Lease used personal interviews as an avenue to profess her devotion to her family but also to explain that although her special role as a woman in society related to mothering, that role needed protection through women’s influence in the public sphere. She reasoned that mothers already influenced, guided, and taught the nation’s future male policy-makers, so women were obviously fit and deserving of the franchise. In interviews, Lease deflected opponents’ criticisms by portraying herself as a model “republican” mother who wished to influence both the public and private spheres in order to protect her children and rear virtuous, patriotic citizens.<sup>45</sup>

In turning the domestic maternal ideology to her political advantage, Lease simultaneously portrayed herself as pious, moral, and feminine and commanding, authoritative, and masculine. She used language relating to women’s presumed maternal and moral authority that she had learned while working with the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) when the rhetoric suited her own political purposes. The WCTU argued that women would use the vote to protect the American family by passing temperance laws and other implicitly profamily legislation that male legislators disregarded as they wrangled for greater personal power. Lease reasoned, for instance, that “intelligent and progressive women” must enter “the political arena for the purpose of setting men right” and because “where woman is excluded is not a fit place for human beings.” “The ballot is power” and should be granted to women, Lease remarked, and “power makes respect, and, when placed in the hands of the homekeepers of this nation, it will be a power for uplifting humanity, and women’s wants will not be treated with contempt, as they are to-day.” She likewise argued that with both temperance legislation and women’s suffrage enacted, political corruption would subside, saloons would shut down, and a general “uplifting

of humanity” would occur. Lease insisted that women’s purity, piety, and legislative input were needed to cleanse the national political realm and to “strike down the beasts of drunkenness and lust.” Like the WCTU leader Frances Willard, Lease linked motherhood, Christianity, patriotism, and women’s moral authority to legitimize and justify her calls for women’s political rights. Lease’s supporters also utilized the WCTU’s ideas when advertising her lecture engagements, insisting that Lease was a “prohibitionist” seeking “to cure drunkards” as well as “a promoter of patriotism” who politically acted as “a defender of homes.”<sup>46</sup>

Lease rejected arguments concerning women’s inept political abilities and demonstrated early on that she was more radical and vocal than most suffragists. While Lease certainly utilized traditional arguments regarding women’s presumed moral superiority when countering claims that women should not enter politics, she nonetheless adopted a masculine persona when asserting her Populist views. Lease neither flinched from nor apologized for uttering harsh partisan comments during public political debates, even after listeners recorded that Lease gave her opponents “bitter tongue lashings” and portrayed her as rejecting the idealized domestic paradigm. Lease believed her political objectives were best met by influencing politicians and setting policies from within political circles, not by cautiously pressuring men indirectly from outside the political realm. She constantly expressed her belief in “women’s rights and the political equality of the sexes” and asked men to “give the women a chance” to reform society through the vote and direct political actions. Lease’s Populist speeches lambasted bankers and monopolists but also the nation’s “great big male oligarchy,” which she believed manipulated the political system and wrongly controlled the nation’s wealth. The *New York World* apparently mocked Lease’s outspoken women’s rights efforts by insisting that the “proper balance of the social order,” meaning the “supremacy of man,” was not seriously threatened by Lease since she was more interested in the “proper” placement of her bonnet.<sup>47</sup> However, opponents’ repeated attacks upon Lease probably reflected their fears concerning the influence of her women’s rights message.

45. *Wichita Daily Eagle*, August 12, 1896; *New York World*, January 24, 1897, 29; *New York World* item, quoted in *Topeka Daily Capital* (“May 1906”), in “Kansas Scrapbook, Biographical Files,” vol. 6: 199. For more on the “ideology of republican motherhood,” see Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1986), v–vi.

46. *Topeka Daily Capital*, February 16, 1894, June 13, 1894; Lease, “Legal Disabilities of Women,” 2, 7–8; *Topeka State Journal*, January 15, 1897; *Atchison Daily Globe*, July 21, 1893; *Kansas City Star*, February 14, 1894.

47. “It’s Worth Repeating: A Rabblouser in Petticoats,” *High Plains Journal* (Dodge City, Kans.), April 26, 1951; *Wichita Weekly Eagle*, April 27, 1894; *Topeka State Journal*, August 18, 1896; *New York World*, quoted in the *Wichita Weekly Beacon*, April 10, 1896.

Mary Lease cannot be neatly classified as a “new woman” feminist, meaning the women’s rights model of the independent, educated, middle-class woman publicly lobbying for legal and sexual equality; seeking self-fulfillment; and shunning assumptions of female dependence, morality, and religiously defined gender roles. As a daughter of Catholic immigrants reared within a working-poor family who lived through the trials of the Civil War, Lease’s experiences and worldview were naturally quite different from those of the typically younger, middle-class, native-born, bourgeois “new” American women. Lease’s feminism, moreover, differed from that of many of her middle-class suffragist contemporaries because it was mixed with her militant discussions of class warfare, wealth inequality, and farmer and labor economic exploitation. Her suffrage speeches in fact often focused upon women’s economic empowerment, not simply their domestic contributions, as she demanded that women earn a fair living wage in order to advance their independence. Although in some speeches she justified her calls for women’s equality with the popular moral-authority argument commonly used by her contemporaries, Lease more often than not simply stated that women were equal to men and should be treated as such in all areas of society.<sup>48</sup>

Whereas her political supporters championed Lease’s direct oratorical style, her opponents employed gendered ideas concerning female “indecision” or “confusion” to mock Lease and her fellow women’s rights and Populist advocates. Whether or not Lease uttered conflicting statements in her speeches or during interviews, her opponents insisted that she exhibited traits understood as specifically female, such as indecisiveness, nervous-system deficiency, and wavering mental capacity. Lease did inject her speeches with what her listeners could legitimately argue were inherently inconsistent and incongruous statements. On women’s rights, for instance, Lease vacillated between utilizing U.S. constitutional theory and the argument for women’s moral authority to bolster and defend her views.<sup>49</sup> This seemingly contradictory defense of women’s rights was part of Lease’s larger oratorical style. Her sometimes theoretically paradoxical style enabled critics to denounce

her “natural” female indecision or “floppiness” even if at the same time she was exhibiting a traditionally male style of manipulating arguments to appease different audiences or constituencies. An editorial attributed Lease’s “highly paradoxical and wobbly” positions to “effeminate weakness” and to the fact that “she follows her affections and refuses to heed the plain dictate of her delicate judgment,” meaning she refused to conform to appropriate female roles.<sup>50</sup> One nonpartisan paper contended that Lease was “a woman with masculine desires” but “never gives up the feminine privilege of acting contrary.” Political opponents ridiculed Lease and the Populist reforms she proposed by associating the party with women who were “uncontrolled by reason and delicacy” and thus were unfit for public pursuits. Therefore, the anti-Populist message claimed that heeding the advice of Lease, an irrational and impulsive person, was unwise, yet to be expected from women. A Republican newspaper attempting to mock Lease’s indecision actually provided insight into the nature and causes of her tremendous popularity within Populist Party circles: “Mrs. Lease may tell one story at 1 o’clock and another at 2; but whatever story she tells, she is always interesting.”<sup>51</sup> That Lease was so “interesting,” charismatic, emotional, and direct enabled her to attract large crowds and set herself apart from other political campaigners of her day.

The anti-Populist press did not reserve its criticisms solely for Mary Lease. Her husband, Charles Lease, a pharmacist who was not a Populist activist, also confronted a hostile press. Nineteenth-century advice manuals informed readers that manhood or manliness involved the careful cultivation of certain characteristics and traits, including virility, physical strength, physical endurance, willpower, self-discipline, hard work, modesty, purity, social respectability, and control over one’s family. The opposition press pictured Charles as a neglected, wretched, and demasculinized man who in fact better reflected the feminine domestic ideal than did his wife. If Mary Lease was the family “man-wife,” then Charles Lease essentially adopted the conven-

48. *Topeka Advocate*, November 6, 1890; *Kansas City Journal*, May 1901; *Topeka Advocate*, July 27, 1892. For more on Mary Lease’s women’s rights activism, see Brooke Speer Orr, “Mary Elizabeth Lease: Nineteenth-Century Populist and Twentieth-Century Progressive” (Ph.D. diss., George Washington University, 2002).

49. *Wichita Weekly Eagle*, April 27, 1894; *Topeka Daily Capital*, February 16, 1894; Lease, “Legal Disabilities of Women,” 2, 7–8; *Topeka State Journal*, January 15, 1897.

50. Whereas men were commended for their rational thinking, nineteenth-century social commentators maintained that women were naturally prone to impulsive, undisciplined behavior but should aim to act submissive and passive. See Marshall, *Splintered Sisterhood*, 89, 105, 125–126; and John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 56–57. For attacks on Lease’s indecision, see *Topeka Daily Capital*, October 21, 1892; and *Leavenworth Times*, October 11, 1900.

51. *Atchison Daily Globe*, April 25, 1894; *Topeka Daily Capital*, March 8, 1891; *Topeka State Journal*, January 11, 1894.





*Mary Lease's Populist speeches lambasted bankers and monopolists but also the nation's "great big male oligarchy," which she believed manipulated the political system and wrongly controlled the nation's wealth. Partisan newspapers throughout the nation frequently mocked Lease, but the opposition's repeated attacks upon her probably reflected their fears concerning the influence of her women's rights message.*

tional "wifely" helpmate role within the household.<sup>52</sup> Mary had "domesticated" Charles, one reporter penned, as her word was the "law" within the Lease family. A satirical poem advised Lease to "remember that [her husband] is far weaker than you!" Another reporter clearly embellished an interview with Charles in order to portray him as feminine. The interviewer noted that Charles "blushed prettily" when questioned and spoke in a deferential manner when explaining that "'here in my home with my children

52. Thomas Rowland Burkholder, "Mythic Conflict: A Critical Analysis of Kansas Populist Speechmaking, 1890-1894" (Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 1988), 195.

I watch her career, and feel proud that I am blessed to be the husband of such a woman. ... I make home always a pleasant place for her to come to; and when she is here I take care that she is not disturbed by the children or by household cares. ... Of course I cannot understand all the great questions she deals with, but I try to understand them to please her.'" Lease's political opponents discussed her marital situation and Charles's familial role to demonstrate that the People's Party sanctioned family deviance and, by consequence, possibly even the destruction of the American family. When Lease returned home from one of her numerous campaign tours, the opposition press mocked that "her husband feels like a new woman."<sup>53</sup>

Charles Lease was described as child-like, subservient, deferential, domestic, and exhibiting "matronly ways." "The mother instinct is ever strong" in Charles, wrote one journalist, while another observed that the "familiar sight on Wichita streets these days is little Mr. Lease with his arms full of bundles." One paper joked that Charles made raspberry jam simply to please Mary, and another indicated that Charles remained at home and did the housecleaning in accordance with Mary's demands.<sup>54</sup> In 1894 the *Atchison Daily Globe* published a mock interview with Charles and Mary Lease in which Charles was portrayed in the traditional female role and Mary in the traditional male role to illuminate his lack of manliness and her lack of wifeliness. In this interview and other articles, the opposition press referred

to Mary Lease as the "man" of the family and insisted that Charles enjoyed housework, cooking, and mothering. Again hinting at an inappropriate gender-role hierarchy within the Lease family, political opponents reported that Lease's husband, like a child, "climbed on her lap" and

53. Judy Hilkey, *Character Is Capital: Success Manuals and Manhood in Gilded Age America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 34, 126, 137, 142, 167; *Topeka Daily Capital*, March 20, 1895; *Topeka Daily Capital*, January 17, 1897, July 2, 1897; *Leavenworth Standard*, August 24, 1894.

54. *Leavenworth Times*, April 14, 1895; *Topeka State Journal*, May 19, 1894; *Atchison Daily Globe*, December 22, 1894, June 30, 1892; *Wichita Weekly Eagle*, May 22, 1895.

pleaded for her return home.<sup>55</sup> By comparing Lease's public activism to domestic neglect, the anti-Populist press utilized ideas previously put forth by temperance advocates who argued that saloon-going, neglectful fathers and husbands were destroying the American family. In this case, Lease was ruining her home by entering politics and turning her back on her familial, domestic duties. The "wives of traveling men, in their jealousies and fears, would find a dear and sympathizing friend in Mr. Lease," noted the *Atchison Daily Globe*. One of its editorials called Charles "a mere household slave and drudge," and another of the paper's journalists suggested that Lease sought "woman's emancipation from man's thralldom" and "regarded her spouse as a shining ideal of heaven-designed subjugation."<sup>56</sup> Anti-Populists routinely exploited the domestic ideology as well as conventional gender division-of-labor standards in order to call into question not only Mary Lease's legitimacy but also the reforms she proposed.

Anti-Populist journalists commonly detailed Mary Lease's earnings both in an attempt to connect her reform activities to some sort of politically corrupt profit-making scheme and to portray Lease, as opposed to her husband, as the family provider. Despite the rising number of women entering new factory, sales, and clerk jobs in the late-nineteenth century, the entrenched gender division of labor that evolved as industrialization developed remained a powerful guiding force for businesses, families, labor unions, and politicians as their discourse continued to reflect and champion male breadwinning. Therefore, Lease's financial contribution to her family's household income, earned in the male domain of public politics, was ripe material for opponents' sar-



*By 1896 Mary Lease was featured in a New York World article among "the faces that have made history." Lease's forceful language, intense partisanship, and boisterous calls for a people's revolt incited strong reactions and ensured her national fame. Unlike most of her female Populist contemporaries, Lease consciously adopted masculine oratorical styles and politicking behavior while simultaneously employing the conventional female domestic ideology if and when it bolstered her argument.*

donic remarks. One such paper suggested that Lease was "complaining that she would have amounted to more if she had not been hampered by a family to support."<sup>57</sup> When

55. Walter T. K. Nugent, *The Tolerant Populists: Kansas Populism and Nativism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 83; *Topeka State Journal*, June 5, 1894, May 29, 1894; *Leavenworth Times*, November 26, 1892; *Atchison Daily Globe*, October 6, 1894, December 14, 1894.

56. *Atchison Daily Globe*, November 20, 1896, June 29, 1897.

57. For more on women's labor status during the late-nineteenth century, see Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 75–214; and Ava Baron, ed., *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American*

asked about her Populist Party campaign salary during an interview, Lease allegedly responded, "I have a family to support," which enabled her opponents to chastise her and her husband for their inverted gender-role arrangement. "Mr. Lease has greatly risen in public respect," proclaimed a critic, "since he threatened to lick the man who wouldn't pay Mrs. Lease's traveling expenses." "Is the financial distress of the Lease family due to the failure of Mrs. Lease, as a man, to earn the living," queried another journalist, "or the failure of Mr. Lease, as a woman, to manage domestic affairs economically?"<sup>58</sup>

In 1896 Mary Lease was featured in a *New York World* article among "the faces that have made history." Lease's forceful language, intense partisanship, and boisterous calls for a people's revolt incited strong reactions and ensured her national fame. She was "a harridan in the eyes of her enemies," wrote a former Republican political opponent, "and a goddess to her friends."<sup>59</sup> Although Lease was unique for her time, the Populists' acceptance of Lease and other female activists, such as Annie Diggs, Sarah Emery, and Eva McDonald Valesh, attested to the tradition of female political participation in the "frontier" lands of the Midwest and West but also exposed the breakdown in long-standing gender conventions based upon pseudoscientific explanations concerning the "naturalness" of gendered political roles as the twentieth century approached and the Progressive era's "new woman" replaced the Victorian era's "true woman."

*Labor* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991). For comments about Lease's "earnings," see *Topeka State Journal*, June 4, 1894; *Topeka Daily Capital*, July 2, 1897; and *Atchison Daily Globe*, December 17, 1896.

58. *Atchison Daily Globe*, November 3, 1896, December 9, 1896; *Topeka State Journal*, September 2, 1891.

59. *New York World*, December 27, 1896; White, *Autobiography of William Allen White*, 217–219.

Yet Lease's exceptional oratorical abilities set her apart from most of her contemporaries, male and female alike. Her spellbinding, evangelist style drew large crowds and generated intense emotional responses from her listeners. Unlike most of her female Populist contemporaries, Lease consciously adopted masculine oratorical styles and politicking behavior while simultaneously employing the conventional female domestic ideology if and when it bolstered her argument at any given time. Such political tactics of course left Lease vulnerable to partisan attack. In portraying Lease as a man, anti-Populists questioned the legitimacy of her claims first because she was a woman and second because she was a Populist. Such opponents insisted that Lease's public activities exemplified gender-role deviance, represented a debasement of "true womanhood," strangely encouraged her to adopt male traits and a masculine demeanor, oddly transformed her physical makeup, and even demasculinized her husband.<sup>60</sup> Her supporters and opponents—and even Lease herself—exaggerated certain socially prescribed male and female gender ideals to defend or disparage her and her reform agenda, rather than simply presenting her as an androgynous figure.

For many anti-Populists, particularly Republicans, fearful of the Populist message that essentially challenged the political and economic elite, the use of gendered discourse was an accessible partisan political tool for both countering and ridiculing the "people's revolt." Mary Lease's political career and the explicitly gendered responses it inspired illustrated the ongoing significance of gender ideology in American politics during the Gilded Age and foreshadowed the continued influence of gender ideology in constructing political discourse as the twentieth century dawned. [KH]

60. *Atchison Daily Globe*, April 21, 1893, September 23, 1895; *Topeka Advocate*, December 21, 1892; *Topeka Daily Capital*, August 19, 1892.