Disillusionment and the American Civil War:

Confederate Women and Changing Self-Perceptions

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Abstract

Confederate females in the antebellum South viewed themselves in light of the ideology of Southern womanhood, a series of gender norms that outlined their proper place in the home and society. The Civil War upended the social structure supporting Southern womanhood and challenged female commitment to the Confederacy, as increasing hardships and suffering led to widespread disillusionment among Confederate females. Conventional interpretations of female disillusionment maintain that it represented continuity in antebellum self-perceptions, amounting to bitterness over the forced abandonment of their way of life and an ardent desire to return to normalcy. However, the focus on the overall continuity of Confederate women's self-perceptions is a disservice to the historical record, as it overlooks the important shifts in sense of self that did occur near the end of the war, even if they were only temporary. This thesis seeks to further explore the ways in which female disillusionment marked an unprecedented split from traditional gender norms, most notably acceptance of the antebellum gender contract and the mandate on self-sacrifice. An analysis of Confederate females' writings and actions near the end of the war reveals an awareness of the unsustainability of male patriarchy, sacrificial limits, and differing scales of disillusionment that exhibit a newfound selfhood through criticism of male incompetency, dramatic new behaviors, and voiced desires to throw off the limits of gender.

Disillusionment and the American Civil War:

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The American Civil War is rightly regarded as a crucial turning point in United States history. The war left its mark on virtually every sphere of American society, with the self-perceptions of Southern women being no exception. As a result of the Civil War, Southern women took on new roles that challenged their antebellum positions in Southern culture, political and social systems, and the economy. In the antebellum South, the ideology of Southern womanhood outlined a woman's status in all aspects of society. It mandated a surrender of female autonomy to the white male in exchange for protection and security, and it defined the self-perceptions of Southern women. Though the war undermined several gender norms undergirding Southern womanhood and its corresponding social structure, many women initially continued to view themselves in light of its principles and cling to the antebellum gender contract. As the war drug on, however, increasing hardships challenged female commitment not only to the war but also to the tenability of their traditional dependence on men, leading to significant shifts in the self-perceptions of many Southern women.

Ascertaining the impact of this tumultuous time on the self-images of Southern women is important because of both the foundational nature of the American Civil War and the implications of self-perception. The social changes effected by the Civil War establish it as an important waypoint in gender studies, making it a crucial topic of study to better understand present day gender relations in the American South. Furthermore, a person's self-perception influences everything from her thoughts and actions to her relationships with others. Considering the extremely powerful role of self-perception in shaping one's life, it is important to understand how the changes wrought by the Civil War impacted its development among Southern women.

Traditional interpretations of female disillusionment posit that disaffection with the war signaled their resentment over the forced, prolonged disruption of their position in antebellum culture. Their words and actions represented the continuity of antebellum self-perceptions and the desire to return to the prewar patriarchal system. Under this view, the lack of a dramatic, sustained postwar transformation in female self-perceptions overshadows the temporary but notable shifts in self-image that resulted from a breakdown of the Southern patriarchal society during the war. Considering the extent to which gender norms were ingrained in Southern culture and defined the self-concepts of many Southern women prior to the Civil War, the sense of self and recognition of power and agency experienced by several women near the end of the war deserve further investigation.

Even if Southern women did not immediately capitalize on the opportunities the war brought them in the postwar years, their split from the principles of Southern womanhood in the late stages of the war is remarkable in that they are the first time such a break in Southern gender ideology occurred. For a significant portion of Confederate women, losing their protected position within Southern culture led them to reject or at least question the principles of Southern womanhood. Manifested in a burgeoning critical voice and political presence, dramatic new behaviors, and the desire of some to step beyond the limits of gender, the differing scales of Southern women's disillusionment all revealed a recognition of the unsustainability of male patriarchy and a limit to their sacrificial willingness.

Southern Womanhood and Antebellum Self-Perceptions

To better understand the impact of the war on Confederate women's self-perceptions, one must first understand Southern womanhood, the prevailing gender ideology that defined Southern women's self-images in the Antebellum era. Southern womanhood was a complex and

comprehensive set of characteristics, responsibilities, and behaviors deemed to be central to a Southern woman's identity and proper role in society. The ideology of Southern womanhood was undeniably intertwined with the identity of the South, and a violation of Southern womanhood was equivalent to a violation of Southern culture.[1] Overall, the ideology denied authentic selfhood to its adherents, but the overwhelming majority of women remained steadily committed to its principles.[2]

Southern Womanhood: Important Characteristics and Behaviors

The ideology of Southern womanhood was not an irrelevant set of virtues; it actively shaped Southern culture and the lives of women. Southern females were expected to be pious, Protestant women who served as moral exemplars for society.[3] Southern womanhood attributed to females an innate purity. In 1859, *The Ideal of Womanhood,* a manual for expected female behaviors and qualities, touched on female purity, stating that the proper woman "naturally flees from a vicious atmosphere…. Her ideal of virtue is far above that of man."[4] Submission and domesticity were also pillars of Southern womanhood, and no matter how "high in life the station of woman may be, she should not be above applying her hands to the fulfillment of domestic duties."[5] Southern women were to be efficient mistresses of the plantation house, overseeing household slaves in the cooking, cleaning, and daily chores. Outside of this

[1] Anne Goodwyn Jones, *Tomorrow is Another Day: The Woman Writer in the South, 1859-1936* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1981), 14.

[2] Jones, *Tomorrow is Another Day*, 17.

[3] Ibid., 29.

[4] Lizzie R. Torrey, *The Ideal of Womanhood, or Words to the Women of America* (Boston: Wentworth, Hewes & Co., 1859), 91-2.

[5] Ibid., 100.

managerial position, women were relegated to the role of mother and wife. [6] As stated by Victoria Ott, most Southern women viewed "marriage and motherhood as the final stages in their maturation."[7]

One of the most important aspects of Southern womanhood was the expectation of self-sacrifice. Southern culture called upon women to deny themselves and their personal desires in order to better serve their husbands and families.[8] This expectation provided the foundation for the antebellum relationship between the sexes, an arrangement that can be viewed as a sort of gender contract. In the antebellum South, women gave up autonomy and individualism in exchange for protection and security from the white male.[9] Indeed, Southern gender norms dictated that, "…to sacrifice even their happiness to his honor…is the real province of woman—this is her mission on earth."[10] Southern religion and priests reinforced the idea of female self-sacrifice by proclaiming the Christ-like woman as one who relinquished her own comfort for that of others.[11] Thus, antebellum culture exalted the white, upper-class female on a pedestal to be worshipped and protected by white males in return for female submission to and sacrificial service of male patriarchy.

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[6] Rable, *Civil Wars*, 8-10.

[7] Victoria E. Ott, *Confederate Daughters: Coming of Age During the Civil War* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 100.

[8] Drew Gilpin Faust, "Altars of Sacrifice: Confederate Women and the Narratives of War*," The Journal of American History* 76, no. 4 (March 1990): 1209.

[9] Edward D.C. Campbell and Kim S. Rice, eds., *A Woman's War: Southern Women, Civil War, and the Confederate Legacy* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997), 32.

[10] Torrey, *The Ideal of Womanhood*, 35.

[11] Rable, *Civil Wars*, 13.

Antebellum Acceptance and Self-Perceptions

The majority of Southern women embraced the expectations of their gender and believed in their inherent naturalness. Left with few alternatives, home and its comforts amounted to the "crowning ambition of female existence."[12] Southern women aligned their sense of self with the gender norms outlined by the ideology, believing they reflected the natural, God-ordained roles for their sex.[13] Indeed, some women equated self-realization to the virtues of self-abnegation and submission.[14] Even if a young woman received a higher education, female academies designed their courses to implant in pupils the virtues of female duty and separate spheres. The majority of young Southern women never planned to utilize their education beyond its uses in their conventional roles as wives and mothers.[15]

The undesirable alternatives to Southern womanhood also inclined most women to gladly adhere to its principles. Women preferred the security and dependence offered by Southern womanhood because, consciously or subconsciously, they realized how vulnerable they would be having to go against men in the fiercely competitive economic and social order. Leaving home risked the loss of property, becoming a social outcast, and an uncertain future.[16] Furthermore, the small number of jobs that were available to women were often tedious and low paying, making the elevated status within the home seem very appealing.[17] Southern law also

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[12] Ibid., 8.

[13] Edwards, *Scarlett Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, 19; Rable, *Civil Wars*, 13.

[14] Faust, "Altars of Sacrifice," 1219.

[15] Ott, *Confederate Daughters*, 17.

[16] Rable, *Civil Wars*, 10.

[17] Ibid., 29.

enforced the subordination of women, giving the husband complete legal authority over his wife in marriage.[18] However, it should be acknowledged that not all Southern women were convinced of the truthfulness and naturalness of their restricted sphere. Some Southern women put on a public persona that coexisted but did not necessarily agree with their true inner selves. Nevertheless, despite this private rebellion, few women outright rejected the role set before them and felt no need to even affect willing adherence.[19]

Altered Wartime Culture

With the advent of the Civil War, women of the Confederacy were required to take on responsibilities previously denied them. The Confederacy's ever-increasing need for able-bodied soldiers left many occupations open to women previously held by men. Many bristled at the increasing number of female workers—including some of the female workers themselves—feeling it was a disgraceful subversion of a woman's proper place. However, the crisis of war continuously overpowered these cultural tensions, and Confederate women, whether eagerly or reluctantly, joined the labor force in large numbers.[20] New responsibilities challenged antebellum gender norms and gave women unprecedented power to play a role in the public sphere. Nevertheless, even though the war required many women to step out of their restricted spheres, antebellum self-perceptions largely survived intact during the beginning of the war. Feelings of

[18] Ibid., 22.

[19] Jones, *Tomorrow is Another Day,* 22-24.

[20] Faust, *Mothers of Invention,* 80-1.

duty and honor compelled women to step into their new roles, aided by convictions of the rightness of the Confederacy's cause and the Southern way of life.[21]

Self-Perceptions in the Early Stages of War

From the very beginning of the war, the Confederacy greatly exploited the cultural expectation of female self-sacrifice for its own benefit. Recognizing Southern women's power in shaping morale, the Confederate government cast women's suffering as an important and honored undertaking necessary to sustain the war effort.[22] For example, shortly after the devastating loss at Gettysburg in 1863, the *Savannah Republican* called on Southern women to preserve the Confederate spirit and relinquish their hold on their men: "Women of the South! Do your spirits faint, or your hands falter? You, who so nobly urged this work, will you sustain it still? Are you not ready, if need be, to fill every possible post at home, and send the last man to the field?"[23] Near the end of the war, Confederate President Jefferson Davis called on Southern women to continue to support the war effort, stating, "Wherever we go we find the heart and hands of our noble women enlisted….They have one duty to perform—to buoy up the hearts of our people."[24] Giving up their men, forgoing material comforts, and volunteering in any way possible all reflected the expectation for heroic female self-sacrifice.

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[21] Edwards, *Scarlett Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, 72.

[22] Mary M. Cronin, "Patriotic Ladies and Gallant Heroines," *Journalism History* 36, no. 3 (2012): 139.

[23] *Savannah Republican*, July 19, 1863, quoted in Andrew Coopersmith, *Fighting Words: An Illustrated History of Newspaper Accounts of the Civil War* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), 189.

[24] Jefferson Davis, speech, September 23, 2864, Macon Georgia, Davis Papers, quoted in Angela Esco Elder, *Love & Duty: Confederate Widows and the Emotional Politics of Loss* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022), 82.

Initially, Southern women responded enthusiastically to these appeals for their support. In June 1861, Judith McGuire commented on the widespread occurrence of female sacrificial patriotism, writing, "The wants of the soldiers are supplied with a lavish hand, but personal indulgences are considered unpatriotic. How I do admire their self-denying spirit!"[25] Southern women hoped to follow in the footsteps of their Revolutionary War grandmothers as wholehearted patriots.[26] Refusing to support the war or show outward enthusiasm and sacrifice effectively made one not only a social outcast but a traitor to her own sex. As summarized by Drew Gilpin Faust: "Best was to feel right, so dedicated to the Cause that personal interest all but disappeared. Next best was to stifle lingering personal feeling. But the minimal requirement was to silence doubt and behave properly, even if right feeling proved unattainable."[27]

Thus, with antebellum gender norms and the rhetoric of female sacrifice both ingrained in their minds and weaponized by the government, most Confederate women ardently supported the Confederacy early in the war. Confederate women's zealous devotion to the cause stemmed from their self-perceptions. At the outbreak of war, Southern culture mandated that males rise up and defend state liberties, risking disgrace and shame if failing to perform this duty. Because of their subordinate position in Southern gender hierarchy, women based their honor on that of their male family members and also embraced a patriotic response to the war as the only proper recourse. As stated by historian Laura Edwards, a Southern woman's "identification with 'liberty,' honor,' and 'duty' that were not her own suggests how completely many planter-class

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[25] Judith Brockenbrough McGuire, *Diary of a Southern Refugee During the War*, ed. James I. Robertson (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 23.

[26] Rable, *Civil Wars*, 56.

[27] Faust, "Altars of Sacrifice," 1211.

women merged their own interests with those of their husbands, fathers, and other male relatives."[28] Incapable of viewing the war apart from the dictates of Southern gender hierarchy, Southern females recognized that their honor and status were equally at risk if they failed to perform their part. Female sacrificial patriotism in support of the war thus became a natural extension of the societal role deemed appropriate by Southern gender ideology. Diarist Cloe Whittle perhaps summarized this sentiment best: "There is a sublime meaning in suffering."[29]

Many Southern women also approached their new responsibilities with zealous devotion because they believed that the wartime violations of their traditional roles were only temporary.[30] Most women accepted new tasks out of a sense of duty to help their families survive the war and preserve their homes, their traditional sphere of influence and the bedrock of their identities.[31] Thus, many Southern women drew upon expected female virtues like sacrifice, patriotism, Christian duty, and familial loyalty to justify their unprecedented behaviors and cast their efforts in the light of "war-related benevolence."[32] Lucy Wood Butler captured this mindset, writing, "Our needles are now our weapons, and we have a part to perform as well as the rest."[33] Like Butler, most Southern women initially continued to perceive themselves in light of the principles

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[28] Edwards, *Scarlett Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, 72.

[29] Cloe Tyler Whittle Green Diary, 22 March 1863, *American Women's Diaries Microfilm, Segment II: Southern Women*, reel 7, frame 335, quoted in Anne S. Rubin, *A Shattered Nation: The Rise and Fall of the Confederacy, 1861-1868* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 51.

[30] Rubin, *A Shattered Nation*, 82.

[31] Ott, *Confederate Daughters*, 96.

[32] Rable, *Civil Wars*, 137.

[33] Campbell and Rice, eds., *A Woman's War*, 5.

of Southern womanhood and the patriarchal South, viewing their wartime efforts as an extension of their female duties.

Increasing Hardships and Disillusionment

Despite serving as an initial source of devotion and patriotism, Southern womanhood and the doctrine of self-sacrifice did not sustain female commitment for the entirety of the war. The prolonged war brought increasing hardships for Southern women, undermining their dedication to the cause and triggering a disillusionment that led to significant shifts from antebellum gendered behaviors. The diaries of Confederate females abound with woes of food and clothing shortages, the death of loved ones, the destruction of homes and plantations, forced dislocations, the cruelty of Union occupiers, and rising inflation that gradually wore down their initial enthusiasm and patriotism.[34] In April 1864, Susan Bradford confessed in her diary, "Today I have no shoes to put on."[35] Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas described her beloved home as "a scene of ruin and desolation" after General Sherman's army sacked her home in January 1865.[36] Lucy Breckinridge, commenting on the growing frequency of black mourning dress, a visible symbol of the heavy losses incurred by the war, wrote, "There were so many ladies there, all dressed in deep mourning, that we felt as if we were at a convent and formed a sisterhood."[37]

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[34] Faust, *Mothers of Invention,* 240.

[35] Katharine M. Jones, *Heroines of Dixie*, vol. 2, *Winter of Desperation* (Marietta, GA: Mockingbird Books, 1975), 70.

[36] Jones, *Winter of Desperation,* 253.

[37] Lucy Breckinridge, *Lucky Breckinridge of Grove Hill: The Journal of a Virginia Girl, 1862-1864*, ed. Mary D. Robertson (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1979), 88-9.

Indeed, as Cornelia Peake McDonald claimed, "One half of the privation and misery endured by the Southern people will never be known…."[38]

Though not applicable to all Confederate women, these hardships caused many to withdraw their support for the war and seek its end. Claims that the war was not worth it permeate female writings of the period. After finding men "in every stage of mutilation," Constance Cary declared that she was "permanently convinced that nothing is worth war!"[39] A witness of the Richmond bread riot, a woman from the upper echelons of society stated, "I am for a tidal wave of peace—and I am not alone."[40] Reflecting on the destruction and loss wrought by the war, Cornelia McDonald sadly questioned, "Who can help asking why it must have been?"[41] Lamenting the death of so many young Confederate men, Mary Boykin Chestnut dismally conjectured, "Is anything worth it—this fearful sacrifice, this awful penalty we pay for war?"[42] Increasingly, Confederate women abandoned their initial patriotism, and disillusionment with the war and the Confederacy became widespread.

Allowing for Greater Complexity in Traditional Interpretations of Disillusionment

The disillusionment of Confederate females near the end of the war has not gone unnoticed by historians. Most posit that war-weariness represented a reactionary movement to

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[38] Cornelia Peake McDonald, *A Woman's Civil War: A Diary with Reminiscences of the War, from March 1862*, ed. Minrose C. Gwin (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 219.

[39] Campbell and Rice, eds., *A Woman's War*, 13.

[40] Jones, *Winter of Desperation*, 113.

[41] McDonald, *A Woman's Civil War*, 124.

[42] Mary Boykin Chestnut, *A Diary from Dixie, as Written by Mary Boykin Chestnut, Wife of James Chestnut Jr., United States Senator from South Carolina, 1859-1861, and Afterward an Aid to Jefferson Davis and a Brigadier-General in the Confederate Army,* ed. Isabella D. Martin and Myrta Lockett Avery (London: William Heinemann, 1905), 316.

the war's destruction of traditional ideals of Southern culture and reflected stability in their self-perceptions. Anne Sarah Rubin delineates between war-weariness and disillusionment, claiming, "Many expressed war-weariness, in both word and deed, but that was not the same thing as rejecting the Confederacy itself."[43] Historian Laura Edwards argues that the prolonged war disappointed expectations of only temporary abandonment of their domestic roles, leading to calls for desertions to hasten the return to the prewar patriarchy.[44] Similarly, George Rable maintains that although the greater independence and responsibilities offered by the war gave some women feelings of satisfaction, it never outweighed their inherent belief that the wartime culture was but a temporarily altered social situation.[45] Jean Berlin perhaps puts it most simply when she states, "…most beleaguered Southern women wanted the war to end and to return to some semblance of a normal life."[46]

Admittedly, for many Southern women, the Civil War did not lead to a radical transformation in their perceived role in Southern society. However, although current scholarship highlights the absence of a radical transformation in Southern women's self-perceptions as a result of the Civil War, this does a disservice to complexity within the historical record. The lack of a dramatic shift in Confederate females' self-images should not overshadow the remarkable changes that did occur, even if they were not permanent. For many Confederate women,

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[43] Rubin, *A Shattered Nation*, 53.

[44] Edwards, *Scarlett Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, 82.

[45] Rable, *Civil Wars*, 119.

[46] Berlin, "Did Confederate Women Lose the War?," 187.

disenchantment with the war and Confederate idealism evinced a greater sense of self notable for its dramatic split with antebellum gender ideology.

Unlike most historians, Drew Gilpin Faust argues that while Southern women initially relied on the conventional virtue of self-sacrifice to sustain them and acted in accordance with their wartime roles, the expanding dimensions of sacrifice and the prolonged war caused them to challenge the assumptions that had legitimized their early sacrifices. Before the war, denial of the self was justified by male protection.[47] Once this care was unable to be provided by the men, it became clear that there were limits to women's sacrificial willingness. The war changed women's perception of female subordination, long considered to be natural and just, into one of oppression.[48] Women felt neglected and betrayed, losing their trust in the patriarchal system.

Southern women's rejection of the Confederacy and the war implies a recognition that its cause did not encompass their own interests, therefore suggesting a newfound sense of self.[49] The remainder of this thesis will explore Confederate women's writings and behaviors near the end of the war to provide numerous examples in support of this interpretation. Though disillusionment manifested itself in different levels among Southern women, a betrayal of the antebellum gender contract and the reaching of sacrificial limits pushed Confederate women to develop a critical voice and an increased political presence, prioritize their own interests over those of the Confederacy in radical new self-preserving behaviors, and lament restrictions on their gender, all of which testify to a growing selfhood.

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[47] Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 242.

[48] Faust, "Altars of Sacrifice," 1225.

[49] Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 242.

Betrayal of the Antebellum Gender Contract

One of the most significant reasons for Confederate women's disillusionment was the betrayal of the antebellum sex bargain in which they surrendered their autonomy for male protection and security. Historians estimate that as many as three out of four Southern white males served in the army, leaving Confederate women extremely vulnerable and with no male figure to fulfill the traditional protectoral role.[50] The war undermined the ability of white men to defend their homes and slavery, and perhaps more importantly, prevent the "degradation of white women."[51] Without their gallant male protectors, Confederate females felt betrayed and soon began to criticize male incompetency and provide for themselves through increased political involvement, signaling their recognition of the unsustainability of the male patriarchal system.

The Absent Male Protector

The story of Stephen Ramseur and his wife Nellie does much to capture the phenomenon of the absent male figure. In the fall of 1863, Stephen Ramseur, at this time a brigadier general in the Army of Northern Virginia, postponed his wedding because he prioritized his duty to the military as most important. Though claiming that he was "heartsick" and that his "disappointment has almost unmanned" him, he nonetheless concluded that "until further developments it is clearly my Duty to remain here."[52] The delayed marriage serves as perhaps a perfect symbol of the unfulfilled gender contract: Ramseur let down his fiancée before they even

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[50] Catherine Clinton, *Stepdaughters of History: Southern Women and the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2016), 4.

[51] Thavolia Glymph, *The Women's Fight: The Civil War's Battles for Home, Freedom, and Nation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 23.

[52] Stephen Dodson Ramseur, *The Bravest of the Brave: The Correspondence of Stephen Dodson Ramseur*, ed. George G. Kundahl and Gary W. Gallagher (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 166.

made it to the altar. As the war drug on, duty to country increasingly outweighed Confederate men's traditional duty to their wives, leading to feelings of betrayal.

The increasing raids and intrusions of Yankee occupiers destroyed in many Southern women any remaining notions of a distinct domestic sphere and of the ability of Confederate men to protect them.[53] Georgian Dolly Lunt recalled Union soldiers raiding her food stores in Atlanta, stating, "To my smokehouse, my dairy, pantry, kitchen, and cellar, like famished wolves they come, breaking locks and whatever is in their way." Lunt noted that she felt "utterly powerless" as she watched Yankees drive away with her food and livestock.[54] In the Shenandoah Valley, Matthella Harrison described the destruction inflicted by Yankee cavalry: "Fires of barns, stockyards, etc. soon burst forth and by eleven, from high elevation, fifty could be seen blazing forth…. The sky was lurid and but for the green trees one might have imagined the shades of Hades had descended suddenly."[55] Subjected to pillage and desolation and left without male protection, it became increasingly impossible for Southern women to cling to the plausibility of the antebellum gender contract.

Though rare, some Yankee invaders also subjected Southern women to violent attacks. One woman from Arkansas recalled a situation in which Federal troops thrust her right leg into

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[53] Sarah E. Gardner, *Blood & Irony: Southern White Women's Narratives of the Civil War, 1861-1937* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 24.

[54] Dolly Sumner Lunt, *A Woman's Wartime Journal: An Account of the Passage over Georgia's Plantation of Sherman's Army on the March to the Sea, as Recorded in the Diary of Dolly Sumner Lunt*, ed. Julian Street (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 20.

[55] *Diary of Matthella Page Harrison Diary 1862-1864,* August 17, 1864, quoted in Michael G. Mahon, *The Shenandoah Valley, 1861-1865: The Destruction of the Granary of the Confederacy* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 1999), 115.

the hot coals of the fireplace after she refused to give them money, resulting in severe burns.[56] Rape, however, perhaps most tangibly represented the inability of Southern males to protect the purity of the Southern female idolized in antebellum culture. Even if spared the horrors of physical assault, hundreds of Southern women still suffered from crude, suggestive remarks with no male figure to defend their honor.[57]

In addition to depriving many Southern white women of material goods and subjecting them to physical violence, Yankee raids also attacked the foundation of Southern culture. The idea of the home was for many Southern women the bedrock of society and the basis of their identity. With their homes subjected to Union plunder, Confederate women lost the desire to support a cause that had lost the sanctity of its foundation.[58] As George Rable writes, "Sherman's men brought the war home to Confederates regardless of sex; few Southern women could any longer feel immune to the vicissitudes of the world outside their homes."[59] The home no longer afforded protection to the Southern white female, and this sudden deprivation thrust Southern women into a situation in which they had to secure their own safety.

In place of the absent husbands, the Confederacy initially assumed the responsibility of providing for soldiers' families. The state of Mississippi, for example, promised its men that "those dear ones they have left behind shall not want whilst Mississippi has it in her power to assist them," and the Mississippi governor referred to soldiers' families as the

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[56] Rable, *Civil Wars*, 160.

[57] Ibid., 161.

[58] Berlin, "Did Confederate Women Lose the War?," 173.

[59] Rable, *Civil Wars*, 180.

"adopted…children of the State."[60] The Confederacy's promise to protect Southern women thus attempted to preserve the antebellum gender contract, substituting the government as the authority figure over women in place of their husbands.[61]

It did not take long, however, for the Confederate government to fail to deliver on its promise of protection. As the war drug on and inflation and shortages grew more intense, most women lost faith in the ability of their government to provide their desired security. As the Confederate government became more desperate, leaders enacted measures of increased centralization that many Confederates viewed as usurpations of individual rights and an abandonment of the principles the South had once stood for. Conscription efforts, increased taxation, and the seizure of produce angered and overwhelmed Southern women. As stated by Paul Escott, "…the Confederacy became a source of trouble rather than aid, an unwelcome presence rather than a friend. In many areas, the government seemed to do nothing to defend the citizens, yet it constantly demanded more from them."[62] Instead of providing for its women, the Confederacy instead chose to take from them, seriously violating its promise of protection. Deprived of their husbands, sons, and governmental protection, many Confederate women were for the first time left to their own devices.

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[60] *Laws of the State of Mississippi, Passed at a Called and Regular Session of the Mississippi Legislature, Held in Jackson and Columbus, Dec. 1862 and Nov. 1863* (Selma: Cooper & Kimball, 1864), 247, and Charles Clark, Inaugural Address, Oct. 16, 1863, quoted in Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 134.

[61] McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 134.

[62] Paul Escott, *After Secession: Jefferson Davis and the Failure of Confederate Nationalism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 154.

Critical and Political Voice

The most immediate effect of the betrayed antebellum contract among many Southern women was the recognition that male patriarchy was unsustainable in the long-term. This awareness manifested itself in the development of a critical, political voice. Confederate women increasingly censured the perceived incompetence of male soldiers and government leaders as the horrors of war, exacerbated by the prolonged absence of the male protector, revealed the shortcomings of female dependency. Political criticism catapulted Confederate women into an intellectual sphere previously outside their reach and helped foster both an infantile sense of self and a growing belief in the importance of their own opinions. Soon, Confederate women stepped beyond political censure to political activism, further testifying to a newfound sense of independency.

Throughout the war, hundreds of Confederate women took to their diaries to document and sort out their thoughts about the war and all that came with it, an action that promotes a greater freedom of the mind. As stated by Steven Stowe, "A diary by its nature encourages an intellectually active, organizing voice, putting the diarist legitimately at the center of determining the meaning of things."[63] Sarah Gardner refers to Confederate white women as "pen and ink warriors" when discussing their diary writings about the war. As white women suffered from increasing hardships, they lamented their inability to fight in the war due to their sex and instead fought a war within the pages of their diaries, filling their entries with biting commentary on the events of the day as well as conjecturing about the war's causes and the future of the South.[64]

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[63] Steven Stowe, "City, Country, and the Feminine Voice," in *Intellectual Life in Antebellum Charleston*, ed. Michael O'Brien and David Moltke-Hansen (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1986), 316.

[64] Gardner, *Blood & Irony*, 20.

Government leaders became common victims of the embittered Southern women. The diarist Cornelia McDonald wrote, "I have often thought that no greater despotism could be than that government was in the last months of its existence."[65] Similarly, Ann Wilkinson Penrose lamented the Confederacy's promises to protect its women: "We cannot help feeling sometimes very bitter towards our Govt. that so utterly neglected us, and now seems to take no heed, or care of us, leaving us entirely in the power of our direst foes."[66] Many other Southern women shared the betrayal felt by McDonald and Penrose, and they funneled that despair into bitter commentary that revealed their loss of faith in the antebellum male protector.

Criticism of Confederate military leaders also became one of the most common responses to the betrayal of the antebellum gender bargain, as many Confederate women filled their diaries with scorn for the perceived weakness of the previously glorified Confederate military leaders and their inability to protect them. In February 1865, close to the fall of Petersburg, Mary Boykin Chestnut lamented, "Lee could not save his own—how could he come to save us?"[67] Considering her high-ranking position as the wife of Brigadier General James Chestnut Jr., her lack of faith in the army points to how high up the breach of the gender bargain was felt in Southern society. Even if not publicly voiced, Southern women questioned their dependency on men and entered into an intellectual sphere previously off limits.

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[65] McDonald, *A Woman's Civil War*, 224.

[66] Ann Wilkinson Penrose, *Ann Wilkinson Penrose Diary and Family Letters, 1861-186*5 (Louisiana State University), April 23, 1862, quoted in George C. Rable, "'Missing in Action': Women of the Confederacy," in *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War*, edited by Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber, 145.

[67] Chestnut, *A Diary from Dixie*, 346.

A similar example of Mary Chestnut's despair can be seen in the recollections of Mary Loughborough. After the fall of Vicksburg in 1863, Loughborough recorded a scene in which women going to church witnessed masses of Confederate soldiers retreating from Vicksburg and claiming, "We are whipped; and the Federals are after us." When the soldiers tried to blame the loss on the incompetent General Pemberton, the women scorned them, stating, "It's all your own fault. Why don't you stand your ground?" Most notably, one woman cried, "We are disappointed in you! Who shall we look to now for protection?"[68] Recognizing that their traditional dependency on men was not impregnable, Southern women's subsequent criticism and laments represent a marked departure from the intellectual life of submission and domesticity in the antebellum South, demonstrating Southern women's burgeoning faith in the authenticity and credibility of their own opinions. As the war drug on and conditions worsened, however, this unvoiced censure transformed into a tangible presence in Confederate politics, most notably through contacting Confederate leaders. Thus, the Civil War helped nurture the political identity of "the soldier's wife" in the South.[69] These women became a very powerful constituency within the Confederacy and profoundly shaped Southern politics as never before.

Confederate women emphasized their status as soldiers' wives as a negotiation tool and wrote to Confederate governors and secretaries of war demanding material assistance and political favors. Elizabeth Lesson, for example, implored Confederate Secretary of War James Seddon to allow her husband to return home, stating, "Thare is no use in keeping a man thare to kill him and leave widows and poore little orphen children to suffer while the rich has aplenty to

[68] Loughborough, Mary Ann Webster. *My Cave Life in Vicksburg. With Letters of Trial and Traveling* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1864), 43-4.

[69] McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning,* 135.

work for them…My poor children have no home nor no Father."[70] Wartime widows especially capitalized on their status as women who had made the ultimate sacrifice: their husbands. As summarized by Angela Elder, these women had "sacrificed their husbands to the cause," and consequently, "they expected the Confederacy to take care of them."[71] After losing her husband in the war and being denied support for her and her three young children by officials in Yazoo City, Mary Jones wrote to the Mississippi governor and pointedly informed him of her expectation that the Confederate government provide for her: "Every Body say I must be taken care of by the Confederate State they did not tell my Deare Husband that I should Beg from Door to Door when he went to fight for his country…You ar all that I can call on for protection."[72]

Clearly, the ravages of the Civil War made the antebellum gender bargain of submission in exchange for protection untenable. Many Southern white women recognized the cracks in this conventional relationship and assumed an unprecedented political voice, stepping up to fight for their own provision and protection. One may argue that Southern white women's petitions for governmental aid showed their continued belief in their status as dependents, but the means by which Confederate women fought for their security still represent a striking departure from antebellum gender norms. As stated by Stephanie McCurry, "To be sure, the women still traded in their identity as dependents of soldiers, but they also managed to craft a useful corporate

[70] Elizabeth Leeson to James Seddon, July 22, 1863, in Letters Received, Confederate Secretary of War, in RG 109, NA, Microcopy M 437, Roll 100, pp. 664-66, quoted in Escott, *After Secession*, 108.

[71] Elder, *Love & Duty*, 112.

[72] Mary Jones to Governor Pettus, April 16, 1862, roll 6, Pettus Correspondence, MDAH, quoted in Elder, *Love & Duty*, 113.

identity."[73] Female petitions for aid symbolize a recognition of their own agency, power, and ability to be political actors in their own right, even if they did not yet correlate with a complete split with antebellum self-perceptions. Considering the strict adherence to the patriarchal Southern culture practiced by the majority of white women before the war, any divergence from its behavioral norms is notable.

Sacrificial Limits

Closely tied to the betrayal of the antebellum sex bargain was the emergence of limitations on Confederate women's sacrificial willingness. As previously stated, the Confederate government exploited the conventional narrative of female sacrifice to enlist their support in the war effort. However, once care was unable to be provided by the men, it became clear that the call for self-sacrifice could only be adhered to for a certain amount of time.

The increasing hardships and overwhelming number of deaths made it impossible for many women to rationalize their terrible experiences within the prevailing narrative of self-abnegation as equivalent to self-fulfillment.[74] In 1864, Emma Holmes lamented the growing list of casualties, declaring, "the history of this war will be written in letters of blood over every inch of our land…."[75] Ella Thomas commented on the collapse of sacrificial patriotism, stating, "Country glory and patriotism are great things but to the bereaved hearts of Mrs. Stovall and Mrs. Clayton, each moaning for the death of their first born, what bitter mockery there must be in

[73] McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 142.

[74] Faust, "Altars of Sacrifice," 1225.

[75] Emma Holmes, *The Diary of Miss Emma Holmes, 1861-1866*, ed. John F. Marszalek (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 369.

the words."[76] Plagued by tragedy and loss, Confederate women increasingly prioritized their own interests above the needs of the Confederacy. Women of all classes engaged in new self-preserving behaviors, demonstrating a dramatic split from previously held beliefs that the cultural expectation of female sacrifice was justified. Without as many resources to rely on and held to less stringent standards of acceptable behavior, lower class white women especially engaged in more radical actions that corresponded to their greater material deprivation.

Desertion and Frivolity: Upper Class Women and the Prioritization of the Self

Many behaviors of upper class Southern women testify to their limited adherence to calls of self-sacrifice. One of the most widespread signs of disillusionment, these women began to urge their men to desert the Confederate army. Advantaged by their social status, upper class women especially sought exemption for their husbands and sons through substitutes or the securement of a special office.[77] In letters to the government and their men and in their private writings, Southern females asserted their right to their men over the Confederacy's right to their military service. In September 1862, Mary Scales wrote to the Confederate Secretary of War and in plain words expressed that her ceiling on sacrifice had been reached: "I know my country needs all her children and I had thought I could submit to her requisitions…but now the last lamb of the fold is to be taken, the mother and helpless woman triumph over the patriot."[78] In October 1862, Octavia Spencer wrote to her husband, urging him "to give up now while you have life,"

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[76] Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, *The Secret Eye: The Journal of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, 1848-1889*, ed. Virginia Ingraham Burr (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 257.

[77] Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 240.

[78] Mary L. Scales to the Confederate Secretary of War, September 8, 1862, Letters Received, Confederate Secretary of War, RG 109, reel 72, National Archives, quoted in Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 241.

claiming that he had more than done his part.[79] Gertrude Thomas spoke for many women when she said, "Am I willing to give my husband to gain Atlanta for the Confederacy? No, No, No, a thousand times No!"[80]

Calls for desertion directly corresponded to the emerging limits on women's willingness to adhere to their sacrificial role. Drew Gilpin Faust argues that the war transformed the narrative of female sacrifice from self-denial in *service* of significant others into a *sacrifice* of those men for an "abstract and intangible 'Cause.'"[81] Denying oneself a domestic pleasure to satisfy a husband was one thing, but denying oneself the right to protect or even have a husband was something entirely apart.

Upper class Confederate females' pleas for their men to desert take on an even greater significance when viewed in context. Ever since the beginning of the war, Confederate newspapers exploited the sacrificial role of the Southern wife to ensure her support of the cause, and these efforts only increased as the war drug on. In August 1863, for example, the *Richmond Enquirer* placed the responsibility of ensuring eligible men served in the military entirely on the shoulders of Confederate women. It stated, "No wonder an appeal is made, then, to the women to aid in this crisis. None have so momentous an interest; and none, as we firmly believe, wield so much power. They can do more for us this day than the President with all his conscript guards…or General Lee with his appeals to the stragglers."[82] Statements such as this one

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[79] Octavia Stephens to Winston Stephens, March 19, 1862, Bryant-Stephens Papers, University of Florida, quoted in Faust, *Mothers of Invention,* 241.

[80] Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 240.

[81] Faust, "Altars of Sacrifice," 1209.

[82] *Richmond Enquirer*, August 5, 1863, quoted in Coopersmith, *Fighting Words*, 190.

appeared all over Southern newspapers near the end of the war, but Southern women increasingly ignored them and chose instead to claim their menfolk for themselves.

As they saw the glorious Confederate cause crumble around them, Confederate women could no longer justify the loss of their loved ones as an acceptable female sacrifice. At the beginning of the war, such calls for abandonment would have brought shame and disgrace to the entire family. Military service in the Confederacy was associated with the sense of honor inherent in antebellum Southern culture and weighed especially heavy on the jealously guarded public images of upper class Southern women.[83] The shame associated with such an action in the beginning of the war, however, was meaningless now in the face of life-or-death situations. As women rejected the previous social norms that governed their words, actions, and social images, they subsequently claimed for themselves the freedom to act out of self-preservation, regardless of what was expected of them.

Emerging near the end of the war, a movement of frivolity and gaiety among upper class women also testified to women's limits on sacrifice. The *Montgomery Daily Advertiser* reported on this movement in 1864, stating, "The Aid societies have died away…Never were theatres and the places of public amusement so restored to…the extravagance and folly are all the greater for the brief abstinence which has been observed."[84] A member of the wealthier class, Mary Chestnut recounted in her diary, "The deep waters are closing over us…We care for none of these things. We eat, drink, laugh, dance, in lightness of heart."[85] Though not partaking in them

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[83] Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 243.

[84] Campbell and Rice, eds., *A Woman's War*, 12.

[85] Chestnut, *A Diary from Dixie*, 339.

herself, Judith McGuire condemned the excessive parties in her diary in January 1865, writing, "the most elegant suppers are served—cakes, jellies, ices in profusion, and meats in the finest kinds in abundance, such as might furnish a meal for a regiment of General Lee's army."[86] As McGuire noted, these women withheld their supplies from the Confederate cause, prioritizing their own mental wellbeing above the calls for sacrifice. This movement of excess completely rejected the expectation self-denial, once again showing limits to Southern women's willing adherence to gender norms and their growing tendencies to act according to their own desires.

Many people involved in the gaiety movements were also wartime widows who declined to partake in the traditional mourning rituals of sobriety and sorrow. Southern womanhood mandated a certain social etiquette for widows; normally, a Southern widow observed her husband's death for two and a half years, wearing all black clothing and slowly transitioning her dress to include other somber colors such as grays and whites. A widow's external appearance reflected her own inner grief.[87] In the Civil War particularly, mourning represented the woman's continued patriotism by shifting her "monogamous love" from her deceased husband to the "deathless cause for which he fought."[88]

Instead of immersing themselves in constant sorrow by holding onto the memory of their husbands and the Confederate cause for which they died, many wartime widows pursued distraction in the form of parties and excess living.[89] Diarist Kate Stone commented on the struggles of widows that pushed them to shed antebellum social structures, writing, "People do

[86] McGuire, *Diary of a Southern Refugee*, 241.

[87] Elder, *Love & Duty*, 32-3.

[88] Ibid., 82.

[89] Ibid., 103.

not mourn their dead as they used to….We can only live in the present, only from day to day. We cannot bear to think of the past and so dread the future."[90] The overwhelming sacrifices demanded by the war made grief unbearable and traditional gender norms unsustainable. Instead of trapping themselves in a constant reminder of their grief by adhering to conventional mourning rituals, wartime widows became some of many Southern women that prioritized their mental health over strictly observed social norms in an effort at self-preservation.

Radical New Behaviors: The Special Case of Lower Class White Women

Less restrained by the bounds of propriety and left without status or wealth to fall back on, sacrificial limits produced dramatic new behaviors among poorer white women. From the beginning of the war, poor white women were not as likely to support the Confederacy, as many lacked husbands or did not own land, thereby reducing sources of pride in the cause.[91] The perils of war, however, do not discriminate according to patriotism. Poor white women experienced hardships on a scale greater than many upper class women who had more resources to rely on, thus stripping most poor white females of any vestiges of Confederate nationalism they harbored. Prior to the war, women of nonslaveholding families typically completed chores, cared for the children, and often worked alongside their husbands cultivating the land, but when their menfolk went off to war, yeoman women faced an insurmountable list of tasks.[92] Thus, food and clothing shortages, inflation, and the loss of loved ones hit these women especially hard and made it virtually impossible to adhere to the Confederacy's calls for sacrifice. The destruction of their

[90] Kate Stone, *Brokenburn: The Journal of Kate Stone, 1861-1868*, ed. John Q. Anderson (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1955), 277, 293.

[91] Victoria E. Bynum, *The Long Shadow of the Civil War: Southern Dissent and Its Legacies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 39.

[92] Escott, *After Secession*, 107-8.

homes, traditions, and families thrust poor white women into self-preserving behaviors much more extreme than their upper class contemporaries.

Many lower-class women resorted to thievery and crime to support their starving families, and some even engaged in prostitution. In Durham Township, for instance, the names of poor white women filled the crime dockets.[93] More visible than thievery, however, were the violent, public riots often carried out by lower class women. Known to contemporaries as "women riots" and "female raids," crowds of women seized bread and other provisions they believed to be rightly theirs in locations all over the South. Riots are recorded in Savannah, Mobile, Petersburg, Richmond, Atlanta, and many other less prominent locations.[94]

In the North Carolina Piedmont, an area centered mainly in Randolph County as well as portions of surrounding counties, disillusionment and Unionism were especially prevalent, and small clashes between Confederate soldiers and citizens were extremely common during the final two years of the war. A group of women in Salisbury County, North Carolina, for example, wielded axes and hatchets, and after being refused their demanded grain, they rushed the man guarding the depot and stole ten barrels of flour.[95] According to Michael B. Chesson, the larger riots recorded in history are perhaps more famous for their greater size and more organized scale, but they do not differ much from the commonplace burglaries and robberies that occurred nearly

[93] Ibid., 40.

[94] Campbell and Rice, eds., *A Woman's War*, 11.

[95] Victoria E. Bynum, "'War within a War:' Women's Participation in the Revolt of the North Carolina Piedmont, 1863-1865," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 9, no. 3 (1987): 44-5.

every night of the war. Both the riots and instances of crime testify to the breakdown of female adherence to social norms in the antebellum South.[96]

Perhaps the most famous riot, the Richmond bread riot is an excellent example of the measures disillusioned women went to in order to protect their self-interest. Rumor and exaggeration in primary sources make it hard to determine the actual number of women present, but historians estimate that more than a thousand women and very few men took part in the Richmond bread riot.[97] A planned event, female leaders met prior to the riot in Belvidere Hill Baptist Church and decided to demand food from the governor, agreeing to take it by force with the aid of axes and hatchets if denied their requests. In the end, the women looted thousands of dollars' worth of food and shoes.[98]

One of the most tangible representations of sacrificial limits, bread riots among the lower classes such as the one in Richmond "represented a rejection of female suffering and sacrifice that paralleled upper-class women's growing disenchantment with war's costs."[99] Unlike the luxurious, excessive parties of upper class women, the sacrificial limits of poor white women manifested themselves in mass protests and criminal behavior. At one Savannah woman's trial resulting from her participation in the riot, she passed out cards that aptly summed up the desperation that led many lower class women to assert their own interests above the calls to sacrifice: "Necessity has no law and poverty is the mother of invention. These shall be the

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[96] Michael B. Chesson, "Harlots or Heroines? A New Look at the Richmond Bread Riot," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 92, no. 2 (April 1984): 135.

[97] Ibid., 138.

[98] Ibid., 139, 143.

[99] Campbell and Rice, eds., *A Woman's War*, 9.

principles on which we stand. If fair words will not do, we will try to see what virtue there is in stones."[100] Pushed by "necessity," women of the Confederacy invented new selves that were capable of defending their own interests and chances of survival, and women like this Savannah rioter resolved to take any means necessary, however radical the action.

Reactions to these female raids reveal that many contemporaries were aware of Southern women's dramatic departure from gender norms and recognized the collective power of female resistance. As stated by Catherine Clinton, "…that rioting women might bring the Confederate capital to its knees was certainly news."[101] The radicalism of many lower class Southern women forced male leadership to recognize females as a collective force. After the Richmond bread riot, the *Vicksburg Whig* condemned the participants and demanded retribution, stating, "If women will go so far as to aim a blow at our commercial honor, which should remain untarnished, their sex should not save them from punishment."[102] Not only did these riots embarrass Confederate leaders by highlighting its struggles with shortages, but they also revealed that the ladies of the South, who had so revered their beloved Confederacy at the outset, were withdrawing their support in favor of their own survival. Perhaps more significantly, however, statements such as the one from the *Vicksburg Whig* indicate that many in the Confederacy began to ignore the privileges of gender usually afforded to Southern women, showing how far they had strayed from antebellum gender norms.

Along with rioting, poor white women especially protested the perceived unfairness of Confederate conscription policies that seemed to draft more men of their class than of the planter

[100] Ibid., 22.

[101] Clinton, *Stepdaughters of History*, 7.

[102] *Vicksburg Whig*, April 11, 1863, quoted In Coopersmith, *Fighting Words*, 170.

class. In this way, many poor white women also assumed a greater political voice, but they often went beyond mere vocal protest. A group of females from Bladen County, North Carolina christened themselves with the name of "regulators" and refused to give up their sons, husbands, and brothers to a war that was being fought for the rich man. They demanded that Governor Vance set price limits on bread before they made "examples of all who refused to open there barn doors." Soon after this threat, five women from this group were convicted of raiding the Bladenboro grain depot of six sacks of corn and one sack of rice.[103]

Some women even engaged in physical resistance, especially to draft officers. Victoria Bynum recounts the story of Franny Jordan in Moore County, North Carolina that recruited two other women in early 1864 to retrieve her son from Confederate soldiers who had impressed him into service. Only when a soldier pretended to drive his bayonet through Franny did she and her companions leave.[104] Bynum notes that women like Franny are often depicted in the historical record as wives and mothers, rarely being seen as individuals, but Bynum claims that these women are arguably citizens, individuals who "publicly asserted opinions or influenced the course of wartime policy."[105] Clearly, poor white women's sacrificial limits compelled them to take drastic actions in order to protect their loved ones and provide for themselves, once again prioritizing personal interests above those of the Confederacy.

Differing Scales of Disillusionment

A complete discussion of disillusionment and changing self-perceptions among Confederate women requires analyzing its various manifestations, as disillusionment among

[103] Bynum, "'War within a War,'" 44.

[104] Bynum, *The Long Shadow of the Civil War*, 37.

[105] Ibid., 38.

Confederate women differed in its scale. Some women who exhibited a greater sense of self simultaneously harbored a disaffection for Confederate leaders, government policies, and soldiers as well as a continued patriotism. Thus, increased selfhood did not necessarily correlate with a wavering commitment to the war, creating a complex mixture of Confederate nationalism that coexisted with behaviors contradictory to the gendered ideals of the antebellum South. Like those women who did yearn for peace, the disillusionment of women who remained committed largely stemmed from Southern males' inability to uphold their protectoral role in the antebellum gender contract and the reaching of sacrificial maximums. Although these women also harshly condemned the failures of Confederate males, they went beyond the criticism and political activism of completely disillusioned females by explicitly voicing their own desires to shake off the limitations of Southern womanhood and amend male shortcomings.

Recognition of Self Interest and Critical Voice

Like Confederate women who sought an end to the war, some Confederate women who still believed in the rightness of the Confederate cause nonetheless urged their men to desert the army, recognizing its numbered days. Mary Maxcy Leverett, a South Carolina woman who remained patriotic for the duration of the war, wrote to her son in July 1864, stating, "Resign, if there is no other better step to take."[106] Interestingly, though Leverett urged her own son to resign if necessary, she expressed her distaste for Confederate deserters and those who secured jobs away from the front lines just two months later: "It is despicable to see how some young men are skulking in the Offices in this Town & I despise them for it. It would break me down for

[106] Mary Maxcy Leverett to her son Milton, July 30, 1864, in *The Leverett Letters: Correspondence of a South Carolina Family, 1851-1868*, ed. Frances Wallace Taylor, Catherine Taylor Matthews, and J. Tracy Power (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000), 354.

you to be killed, yet I would hate to see you act like these men who are so despised by all."[107] Leverett clearly harbored a severe disdain for men who shirked military duties, but she nonetheless called for her son to resign. Leverett's language shows that she was reluctant to urge resignation, as she advised him to take other possible steps first, but she was clearly disappointed in many Confederate soldiers for betraying their antebellum protectoral role and virtues of male bravado and strength. Lamenting the soldiers' inadequate performance but not yet wishing for an end to the war, Leverett nonetheless prioritized her son above the Confederacy and even her personal misgivings against desertion.

Criticism of Confederate deserters can be found in many other women's writings, showing their dismay at Confederate men's inability to hold up their end of the antebellum sex bargain. Women who remained committed to the Confederacy often expressed their hatred for and extreme disappointment in male deserters by attributing to them a cowardice and weakness not seen in the prewar years. In Randolph County, a Miss McMasters declared that deserters and those who hid them should be "swung up and let hang [by their] Toenails." Similarly, Jane Suggs claimed that she could "nock them [deserters] in the head with a ax."[108] Anger at the incompetence of the Confederate military and its deserters also led many women to proclaim their desire to serve in the military and lament the social constraints on their sex.

Like their disillusioned counterparts, many women who remained committed to Confederate independence also criticized government leaders. Diarist Judith McGuire, despite continuing to support Confederate leaders and acknowledging their mandate to lead, nevertheless

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[107] Leverett to her son Milton, September 16, 1864, 362.

[108] Bynum, "'War within a War,'" 47.

expressed her disappointment in their decision to surrender Richmond: "I know that we ought to feel that whatever General Lee and the President deem right for the cause must be right, and that we should be satisfied that all will be well; but it would almost break my heart to see this dear old city, with its hallowed associations, given over to the Federals."[109] Though perhaps not overt criticism, McGuire's statement still touches on a sense of betrayal and dissatisfaction with her beloved leaders.

Similarly, Catherine Ann Devereux Edmondston continued to believe in the Confederate cause very close to its collapse, stating on February 17, 1865, "We will succeed! God will not desert & deliver us over to the enemy this goodly land which He has given us!"[110] Despite this enduring patriotism, on April 6, 1865, just three days before the Confederate surrender, Catherine Ann Devereux Edmondston blamed the Confederate government for the mass desertion of Confederate soldiers, citing its incompetent rule. She wrote, "Now see the result! A noble cause & a free people well nigh sacrificed upon the altars of Bad Government & Bad Faith with the people."[111]

Many women did not reserve their criticism only for government officials or male deserters. For instance, despite wishing that every Southerner would die instead of being forced to stay in union with Northerners whom she considered a "degenerate race" of people, Sarah

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[109] McGuire, *Diary of a Southern Refugee*, 334.

[110] Catherine Ann Devereux Edmondston, *"Journal of a Secesh Lady": The Diary of Catherine Ann Devereux Edmondston, 1860-1866*, ed. Beth Gilbert Crabtree and James W. Patton (Raleigh: North Carolina Division of Archives and History, 1979), 666.

[111] Ibid., 689.

Wadley harshly condemned Confederate Generals Pemberton and Blanchard.[112] After a successful Union raid in Delhi, Louisiana in December 1862, Wadley lamented, "if we only had a man here for a Gen'l instead of the effeminate creature we have, these raids might be prevented…."[113] Following the fall of Vicksburg, Wadley proclaimed, "May every true patriot execrate the name of Pemberton."[114] Catherine Edmondston also denounced military leaders. She was extremely critical of Confederate General Braxton Bragg. After the Union victory in the Second Battle of Fort Fisher in January 1865, Edmondston compared Bragg to a "martinet," a strict disciplinarian, who wrongly arrested Major General William Whiting for not abandoning his post at a critical moment. Edmondston concluded, "Had Whiting obeyed him & had the fort fallen during his absence, what a magnificent scapegoat would he have made of himself to cover Gen Braggs faults with all!"[115]

In December 1864, after General Hood retreated from the Battle of Nashville, Nannie Haskins Williams recounted her disappointment in General Hood for failing to press an advantage. She lamented, "…oh the bitter, bitter disappointment. They waited 'til too large an army was collected then he left us, again, only to raise our heads with a firm bitter smile to

[112] Sarah Wadley, *Diary, August 8, 1859 – May 15, 1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 1:127.

[113] Sarah Wadley, *Diary, August 8, 1859 – May 15, 1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 2:103.

[114] Sarah Wadley, *Diary, August 8, 1859 – May 15, 1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 3:24.

[115] Ibid., 663.

breathe 'Wait and Hope.' But my God! How long will we have to wait."[116] Despite their continued commitment to the Confederacy, Wadley, Edmondston, and Williams clearly lost confidence in the ability of military leaders to adequately fulfill their duties, testifying once again to the breakdown in the antebellum social contract and the burgeoning tendency of Confederate women to assert their own opinions.

Committed but Disappointed: Stepping Beyond the Confines of Gender

Similar to how women who sought an end to the war criticized the failures of male patriarchy, those who remained committed also lamented male incompetency and recognized the inherent flaws of female dependency. Because they retained their commitment, however, their criticism differed from those of completely disaffected females in that their comments were buttressed with a burning desire to help the Confederacy succeed. Many women still supportive of the Confederate cause but frustrated by male inadequacy either expressed or acted upon the desire to go beyond the conventional female role of sacrificial support. Most frequently, patriotic Confederate women sought to render their services militarily based on their disappointment in male efforts to secure victory.

In various words, the phrase "I wish I had been born a man" became an extremely common theme in the writings of Confederate women.[117] After lamenting being stuck "poring over this stupid page" in her diary, Sarah Morgan longed for greater freedom the South's gender rules, stating, "O for liberty! The liberty that dares do what conscience dictates, and scorns all

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[116] Nannie Haskins Williams, *The Diary of Nannie Haskins Williams: A Southern Woman's Story of Rebellion and Reconstruction, 1863-1890*, ed. Minoa D. Uffelman (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2014), 103.

[117] Faust, "Altars of Sacrifice," 1207.

smaller rules!"[118] Julia Le Grand echoed this sentiment, declaring, "I am like a pent up volcano…I hate common life, a life of visiting, dressing and tattling, which seems to devolve on women, and now that there is better work to do…I suffer, suffer, leading the life I do."[119] These statements are a direct denunciation of the confines of Southern womanhood, revealing an ardent belief that they are worth more than traditional conceptions of their sex.

Many women especially complained of their inability to serve militarily. Lucy Breckinridge of Virginia spoke for many women when she stated, "I wish the women could fight…I would gladly shoulder my pistol to shoot some Yankees if it were allowable!"[120] Some women even asserted that females being in charge would yield better results.[121] Disapproving of Southern men shirking military service, Emma Holmes judged that she, along with an injured soldier, would excel at getting men to enlist. She claimed, "If he & I were made enrolling officers, I'm sure the ranks would soon be filled without calling the negroes as Gen. Lee wants and & the President too."[122] Similarly, Elsie Bragg, wife of Confederate General Braxton Bragg, wrote to her husband, "we women bear up better than our men," and suggested going to Fort Pillow herself to shame "soldiers to stand their posts by showing what women could brave and

[118] Sarah Morgan Dawson, *Sarah Morgan: The Civil War Diary of a Southern Woman*, ed. Charles East (Chicago: Touchstone, 1992), 123.

[119] Julia Le Grand, *The Journal of Julia Le Grand: New Orleans, 1862-1863*, ed. Kate Mason Rowland and Morris L. Croxall (Richmond: Everett Waddey Co., 1911), 52-3.

[120] Breckinridge, *Lucky Breckinridge of Grove Hill*, 132-3.

[121] Clinton, *Stepdaughters of History*, 43.

[122] Holmes, *The Diary of Miss Emma Holmes, 1861-1866*, 397.

endure."[123] Confederate females' wishes to join men in fighting shows how their self-perceptions became much more fluid. Escaping gender norms was no longer taboo; instead, it became a fervent desire for many.

Disappointment in Confederate men pushed some women beyond the pages of their diary and inspired them to take up arms for themselves. A group of eleven women in Harrisonburg, Virginia signed a proposal for a regiment of women for regular service in the Shenandoah Valley campaign and sent it to James A. Seddon, the Confederacy's Secretary of War at the time. Sixteen additional women and "others too numerous to mention" agreed to be listed on the letter jacket.[124] Their proposal blatantly expressed their belief that Confederate men failed in their responsibility to protect them:

> In as much as the latest conscription bill takes every lord of creation from sixteen to sixty—we suggest that the right to bear arms in defence of our homes be delegated to certain of the fairer portion of this illstaned [sic] Confederacy. With the permission of the War department we will raise a full regiment of Ladies between the ages of 16 and 40—armed & equipped to perform regular service in the Army of the Shenandoah Valley. Our homes have been visited time and again by the vandal foe—many of them…subjected to every conceivable outrage & suffering and this we believe is owing to the incompetency of the Confederate Army upon which we depend for defence.[125]

Left on their own to combat the perils of life on the home front, these women believed in their ability to protect themselves better than its traditional defender, the white male. Such a radical rejection of the antebellum relationship between men and women most certainly demonstrates

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[123] Elsie Bragg to Braxton Bragg, "Bivouac," [Louisiana], May 9, 1862, TS, Writings: Books, Wiley Paper, quoted in Gardner, *Blood & Irony*, 25-6.

[124] Campbell and Rice, eds., *A Woman's War*, 94.

[125] Ibid., 95.

the increasing sense of self among Southern women and the growing awareness of their ability to shape and gain control of their lives in light of the failed antebellum gender contract.

Conclusion

In summation, the Civil War most definitely challenged Confederate women's self-perceptions as defined by the antebellum gender ideology of Southern womanhood. Increasing hardships undermined initial patriotism, leading to disillusionment with the Confederacy and male patriarchy that subsequently prompted changes in the way Southern women viewed themselves and their own power. The material and psychological desolation wrought by the war revealed limits to women's adherence to expected behaviors, specifically self-denial and a surrender of autonomy, causing them to prioritize themselves and their own interests. Increasingly, Confederate women felt betrayed by white males for failing to live up to their traditional role of protector and could no longer justify their lives within the narrative of submission and dependency. Women expressed their newfound selfhood in various ways, including calls for desertion, frivolous living, biting criticism of government leaders, military generals, and soldiers, and self-preserving behaviors like rioting for food and resisting draft officers among the lower classes. Not every woman in the South became disaffected and disavowed their initial commitment, but criticism of the government, Confederate deserters, and military generals as well as wishes and actual attempts to serve militarily still express a loss of trust in male protection, a limit to their sacrificial willingness, and an assertion of their own opinions.

The lack of a widespread, persistent change in Southern female's self-perceptions should not gloss over such dramatic changes that did occur, even if only temporary. The actions of disillusioned Confederate women are notable and significant because they represented an

unparalleled breakdown in the patriarchal culture of the South and gave thousands of women their first experience with recognizing and asserting their own interests and capabilities. Like never before, the Civil War breached the gender hierarchy upholding Southern society and thrust women into the limelight. Pushed by necessity, these women engaged in self-preserving behaviors and relied on themselves, rather than their husbands, for the first time, amounting to an extraordinary recognition of self-agency. Thus, this period of female disillusionment and burgeoning selfhood represents an important waypoint for the development of feminism in Southern culture. Further study of Southern females' war born yet infantile sense of self is necessary to determine its reaches and limits. Regional analysis of Confederate females' disillusionment may also be helpful in ascertaining if there is any variance in self-perception between the different Confederate states.

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