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Author(s): Drew Gilpin Faust

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Altars of Sacrifice: Confederate Women and the Narratives of War

Drew Gilpin Faust

It is the men, Hector tells Andromache in the sixth book of the *Iliad*, who “must see to the fighting.” From ancient history to our own time, war has centered on men, for they have controlled and populated its battlefields. Even in our era of shifting gender definitions, perhaps the most assertive—and successful—defense of traditional roles has been the effort to bar women from combat. Yet war has often introduced women to unaccustomed responsibilities and unprecedented, even if temporary, enhancements of power. War has been a preeminently “gendering” activity, casting thought about sex differences into sharp relief as it has both underlined and realigned gender boundaries.¹

Like every war before and since, the American Civil War served as an occasion for both reassertion and reconsideration of gender assumptions. Early in the conflict, Louisianian Julia Le Grand observed that “we are leading the lives which women have led since Troy fell.” Yet because the Civil War was fundamentally different from those that had preceded it, the place of women in that conflict stimulated especially significant examination and discussion of women’s appropriate relationship to war—and thus to society in general. Often designated the first “modern” or total war because of the involvement of entire populations in its terrible work of death, the Civil War required an extraordinary level of female participation. This was a conflict in which the “home front” had a newly important role in generating mass armies and keeping them in the field. Particularly in the South, where human and material resources were stretched to the utmost, the conflict demanded the mobilization of women, not for battle, but for civilian support services such as nursing, textile and clothing production, munitions and government office work, slave management, and even agriculture. Yet white Southern women, unlike their men,

Drew Gilpin Faust is Stanley I. Sheerr Professor of History at the University of Pennsylvania. She would like to thank John Boles, Anne Boylan, Evelyn Brooks, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Eugene Genovese, Steven Hahn, Jacquelyn Hall, Lynn Hunt, Michael Johnson, Anne Goodwyn Jones, Mary Kelley, Linda Kerber, Stephanie McCurry, James McPherson, Reid Mitchell, Sharon O’Brien, Philip Racine, Janice Radway, Armstead Robinson, Charles Rosenberg, Barry Shank, and David Thelen for their acute criticisms and helpful suggestions, many of which she admits to having been foolhardy enough to ignore.

¹ Homer, *The Iliad of Homer*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago, 1951), 166. Margaret Randolph Higonnet et al., eds., *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (New Haven, 1987), 4. See also Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Women and War* (New York, 1987); and Eric Leed, *No Man’s Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (New York, 1979).

were not conscripted by law. They had to be enlisted by persuasion. The resulting discourse about woman's place in Confederate society represented the rhetorical attempt to create a hegemonic ideology of female patriotism and sacrifice.²

Articulate Southerners, male and female, crafted an exemplary narrative about the Confederate woman's Civil War, a story designed to ensure her loyalty and service. As in the tales of war enshrined in Western literature from Homer to Sir Walter Scott, its plot recounted woman's heroic self-sacrifice, casting it as indispensable to the moral, political, and military triumph of her men and her country. The historian John Keegan has compellingly described the way in which the "battle piece," the highly conventionalized and heroic account of combat, has shaped men's expectations and experiences of war. But women have been no less influenced by a genre of female "war stories," intended to socialize them through accounts of their foremothers' deeds. The conventional designation of all women as noncombatants inevitably enhances the wartime significance of gender as a social category, as well as a structure of self-definition. The focus of Confederate public discourse on a "classless" white woman reinforced the privileging of female identity. Usually cast in the homogeneous singular, the "woman" who shared with her sisters rich and poor the experience of sacrificing men to battle represented a useful rhetorical convention within a Confederate ideology struggling to minimize the class divisions that might threaten national survival. At the same time that Confederate discourse appealed to a new and recognizable commonality widely shared by white Southern women—whose husbands or sons were nearly three times as likely to die as were their Northern counterparts—it promoted the notion of an archetypal "Confederate woman" as a form of false consciousness obscuring social and economic differences among the new nation's female citizens. Ultimately, the focus of Confederate ideology on female self-abnegation and sacrifice as ends in themselves would alienate many women from that rendition of their interests, from the war, and in many cases, from the Confederacy itself. Ideology and its failures played a critical role in shaping the relationship of women to the Southern Cause and in defining Confederate viability. In recent years scholars have answered the historiographical perennial, "why the South lost the Civil War," by emphasizing deficiencies in Southern morale. Almost all such arguments stress the importance of class conflict, especially growing yeoman dissent, in undermining the Southern Cause. Yet with a white civilian population that was overwhelmingly female and that bore an unprecedented

² Julia Ellen (Le Grand) Waitz, *The Journal of Julia Le Grand, New Orleans, 1862–1863*, ed. Kate Mason Rowland and Mrs. Morris L. Croxall (Richmond, 1911), 52. The special experience of Confederate women arose both from the newness of the kind of combat the Civil War produced and from the growing scarcity of Southern resources. For comparisons, see Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family, and Nazi Politics* (New York, 1987); Higonnet et al., eds., *Behind the Lines*; Joan Hoff Wilson, "The Illusion of Change: Women and the American Revolution," in *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism*, ed. Alfred F. Young (DeKalb, 1976), 383–446; Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill, 1980); Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750–1800* (Boston, 1980); and D'Ann Campbell, *Women at War with America: Private Lives in a Patriotic Era* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984). On Northern women during the Civil War, see Philip Shaw Paludan, *A People's Contest: The Union and the Civil War, 1861–1865* (New York, 1988), 156–60, 182–83, 327–30.



**This monument to the women of the Confederacy was erected in front of the state capitol in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1904 by the United Confederate Veterans and the state of Mississippi at the cost of \$20,000 and bears the inscription:
"To Our Mothers, Our Wives, Our Daughters, Our Sisters."
*Courtesy Mississippi Department of Archives & History, Special Collections Section.***

responsibility for the war's outcome, we must not ignore gender as a factor in explaining Confederate defeat.³

To suggest that Southern women in any way subverted the Confederate effort is to challenge a more than century-old legend of female sacrifice. The story of Confederate women's unflinching loyalty originated during the war and first found official expression in legislative resolutions offered by Confederate leaders to mark the contributions of female citizens. The Confederate Congress established the model in a declaration of gratitude passed in April 1862; the gesture was replicated in proclamations like that of the Mississippi legislature in 1863 thanking the "mothers, wives, sisters and daughters of this State" for their "ardent devotion . . . unremitting labors and sacrifices."⁴ After Appomattox this hortatory narrative of female dedication was physically realized in monuments to wives and mothers of the Confederacy and incorporated into scholarly literature on women and the war as conventional historical truth. Even the titles of scholarly works, such as Mary Elizabeth Massey's *Bonnet Brigades*, published in 1966 as part of the Civil War centennial, or H. E. Sterkx's more recent *Partners in Rebellion: Alabama Women in the Civil War*, communicate the image of Southern women fighting alongside their men. The same vision had a century earlier inspired Henry Timrod, poet laureate of the Confederacy, to entitle his wartime ode to Confederate ladies "Two Armies." Praising women's contributions in caring for the sick, plying the "needle and the loom," and "by a thousand peaceful deeds" supplying "a struggling nation's needs," Timrod promised women equal glory with the war's military heroes.

When Heaven shall blow the trump of peace,
And bid this weary warfare cease,
Their several missions nobly done,
The triumph grasped, the freedom won,
Both armies, from their toils at rest,
Alike may claim the victor's crest.⁵

³ John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York, 1977). For a similar ideological use of the "hegemony of gender," see Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789–1860* (New York, 1986). On yeoman dissent, see Paul D. Escott, *After Secession: Jefferson Davis and the Failure of Confederate Nationalism* (Baton Rouge, 1978); and Paul D. Escott, "The Cry of the Sufferers: The Problem of Welfare in the Confederacy," *Civil War History*, 23 (Sept. 1977), 228–40. On the history and historiography of Confederate morale, see Richard E. Beringer et al., *Why the South Lost the Civil War* (Athens, Ga., 1986); and Drew Gilpin Faust, *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism: Ideology and Identity in the Civil War South* (Baton Rouge, 1988). On the greater vulnerability of Southern men, see Maris Vinovskis, "Have Social Historians Lost the Civil War? Some Preliminary Demographic Speculations," *Journal of American History*, 76 (June 1989), 39.

⁴ "Resolutions of Thanks," in *The Messages and Papers of Jefferson Davis and the Confederacy, 1861–1865*, comp. James D. Richardson (2 vols., New York, 1981), I, 176; *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, 1864), 226.

⁵ An important departure from the celebratory historiographical tradition is George C. Rable, *Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism* (Urbana, 1989). Monuments to Confederate women were planned in Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Arkansas, Tennessee, and Florida. See also Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South, 1865 to 1913* (New York, 1987), 175–79; and J. L. Underwood, *The Women of the Confederacy* (n.p., 1906); Mary Elizabeth Massey, *Bonnet Brigades* (New York, 1966); H. E. Sterkx, *Partners in Rebellion: Alabama Women in the Civil War* (Rutherford, 1970). For the poem by Henry Timrod, see H. M. Wharton, *War Songs and Poems of the Southern Confederacy, 1861–1865* (Philadelphia, 1904), 215. For the notion of "two armies," see *Charleston Daily Courier*, Nov. 28, 1861.

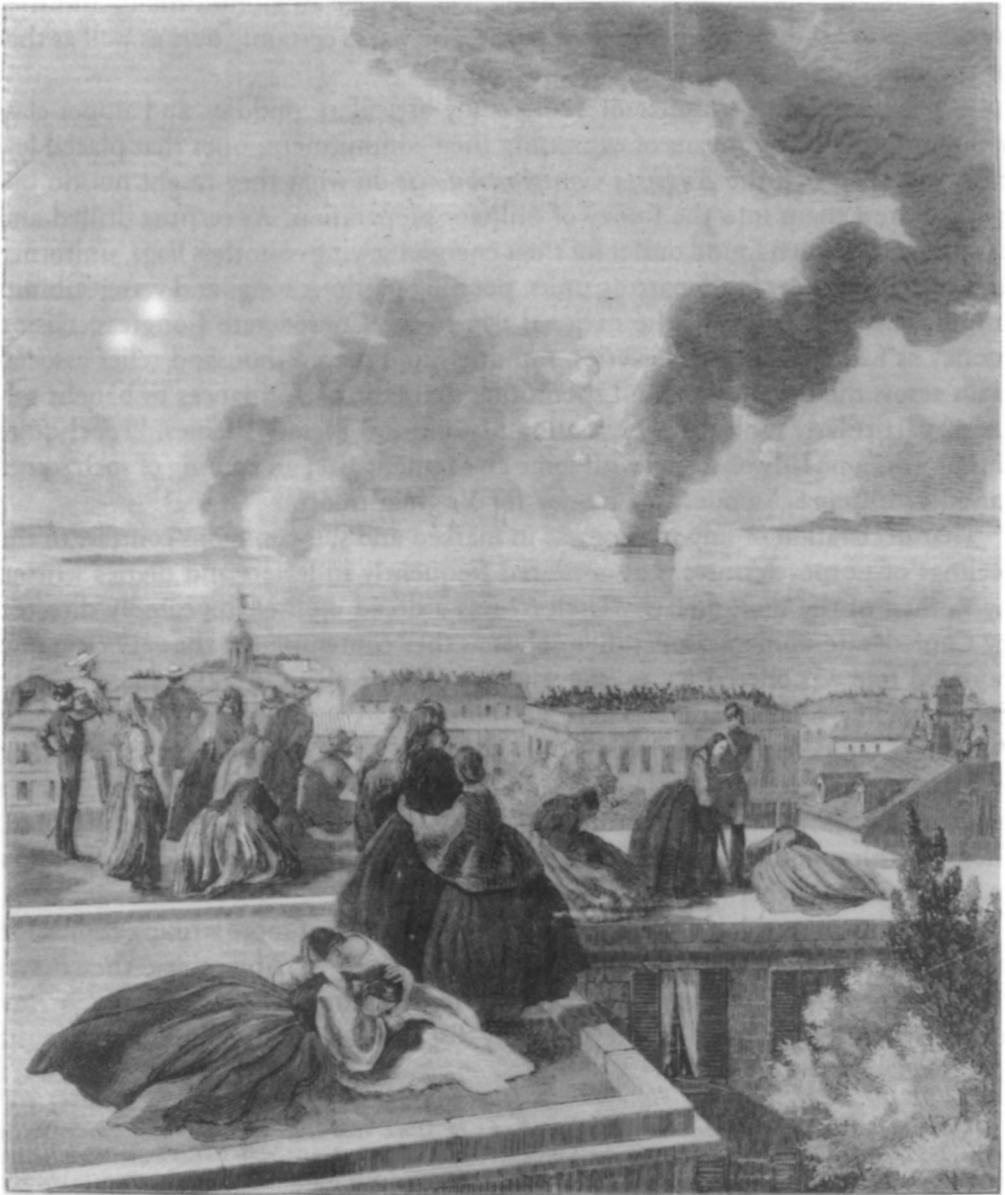
The tenacity of such a rendition of Southern women's wartime role—its survival from Confederate myth into twentieth-century historiography—is less curious than at first it seems. Confederate versions originated so early in the conflict as to have been necessarily prescriptive rather than descriptive. This was not simply a story, but an ideology intended to direct Southern women, to outline appropriate behavior in the abruptly altered wartime situation. The flattery, the honorific nature of this discourse, was central to its rhetorical force. And the deference to women's importance ensured the survival of the narrative and its evolution into historical interpretation. Ironically, it fit neatly with an emergent twentieth-century feminist historiography eager to explore women's contributions to past events previously portrayed from an exclusively male point of view. Yet the passage of women's history beyond its earlier celebratory phase and the adoption of more critical and analytic approaches to female experience may enable us at last to see the story as the fiction it largely is, to explore its development, political origins, and rhetorical purposes and thus to understand how it shaped Confederate women's wartime lives.⁶

With the outbreak of hostilities in early 1861, public discourse in the Confederacy quickly acknowledged that war had a special meaning for white females. The earliest discussions of the Confederate woman in newspapers and periodicals sought to engage her in the war effort by stressing the relevance of her accustomed spiritual role. The defense of moral order, conventionally allocated to females by nineteenth-century bourgeois ideology, took on increased importance as war's social disruptions threatened ethical and spiritual dislocations as well. "Can you imagine," asked the magazine *Southern Field and Fireside*, "what would be the moral condition of the Confederate army in six months" without women's influence? What but a woman "makes the Confederate soldier a gentleman of honor, courage, virtue and truth, instead of a cut-throat and vagabond?" "Great indeed," confirmed the *Augusta Weekly Constitutionalist* in July 1861, "is the task assigned to woman. Who can elevate its dignity? Not," the paper observed pointedly, "to make laws, not to lead armies, not to govern empires; but to form those by whom laws are made, armies led . . . to soften firmness into mercy, and chasten honor into refinement."⁷

But many Southern women, especially those from the slave-owning classes most instrumental in bringing about secession, were to find that a meager and unsatisfactory allotment of responsibility. As one woman remarked while watching the men of her community march off to battle, "We who stay behind may find it harder than

⁶ A popular work, dedicated by its author as a "monument" to female contributions to the Southern Cause, is Rita Mae Brown, *High Hearts* (New York, 1986). For a more scholarly consideration, see Janet E. Kaufmann, "Under the Petticoat Flag": Women Soldiers in the Confederate Army," *Southern Studies*, 23 (Winter 1984), 363–75. For examples of the new women's historiography, see Nancy A. Hewitt, "Beyond the Search for Sisterhood: American Women's History in the 1980s," *Social History*, 10 (Oct. 1985), 299–321; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill, 1988); Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988); Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland*; and Nancy MacLean, "Behind the Mask of Chivalry: Gender, Race, and Class in the Making of the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s in Georgia" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1989).

⁷ "Educated Woman—In Peace and War," *Southern Field and Fireside*, April 11, 1863; *Augusta Weekly Constitutionalist*, July 17, 1861.



“The House-Tops in Charleston during the Bombardment of Sumter”

—*Harper's Weekly*.

Reproduced from *Harper's Weekly*, May 4, 1861.

they who go. They will have new scenes and constant excitement to buoy them up and the consciousness of duty done.” Another felt herself “like a pent-up volcano. I wish I had a field for my energies . . . now that there is . . . real tragedy, real romance and history weaving every day, I suffer, suffer, leading the life I do.” Events

once confined to books now seemed to be taking place all around them, and they were eager to act out their designated part. "The war is certainly ours as well as that of the men," one woman jealously proclaimed.⁸

In the spring and summer of 1861, many articulate middle- and upper-class women sought active means of expressing their commitment, ones that placed less emphasis than had the *Augusta Constitutionalist* on what they might not do but instead drew them into the frenzy of military preparation. As recruits drilled and bivouacked, women found outlet for their energies sewing countless flags, uniforms, and even underwear for departing units; penning patriotic songs and verse; submitting dozens of designs for the national flag to the Confederate Congress; raising money as Ladies Gunboat Societies, forming more than a thousand relief associations across the new nation; and sponsoring dramatic performances to benefit soldiers, particularly tableaux representing historic and literary themes. "I feel quite important," one lady observed with some amazement after an evening of such scenes raised a substantial amount of money for Virginia troops.⁹

That declaration of importance was in marked and self-conscious contrast to the feelings of purposelessness that appeared frequently in letters and diaries written by women of the master class. "Useless" was a dread epithet, repeatedly directed by Confederate women against themselves as they contemplated the very clear and honored role war offered men. "We young ladies are all so . . . useless," bewailed Sarah Wadley of Louisiana. "There are none so . . . useless as I," complained Amanda Chappellear of Virginia. "If only I could be of some use to our poor stricken country," wrote a young Louisiana girl to a friend in Tennessee, while Emma Holmes of Charleston sought escape from her "aimless existence." "What is the use of all these worthless women, in war times?" demanded Sarah Dawson. "I don't know how to be useful," another Virginia woman worried.¹⁰

Some women translated these feelings into a related, yet more striking expression of discontent. Without directly challenging women's prescribed roles, they nevertheless longed for a magical personal deliverance from gender constraints by imagining themselves men. Some few actually disguised themselves and fought in the

⁸ Sarah Katherine Stone, *Brokenburn: The Journal of Kate Stone, 1861-1868*, ed. John Q. Anderson (Baton Rouge, 1955), 17; Julia Le Grand to Mrs. Shepherd Brown, Nov. 17, 1862, in *Journal of Julia Le Grand*, ed. Rowland and Croxall, 52-53; Kate Cumming, *Kate: The Journal of a Confederate Nurse*, ed. Richard Barksdale Harwell (Baton Rouge, 1959), 38-39. See also C. W. Dabney to "My Dear Brother," May 1, 1861, Charles W. Dabney Papers (Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill).

⁹ Francis Butler Simkins and James Welch Patton, *The Women of the Confederacy* (Richmond, 1936), 22; Clara D. MacLean Diary, Aug. 9, 1861 (Manuscript Division, William R. Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, N.C.); Greenville Ladies Association Records (South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia); Ladies Relief Association, Spartanburg, 1861, *ibid.*

¹⁰ Sarah Lois Wadley Diary, Aug. 20, 1863 (Southern Historical Collection); Amanda Chappellear Diary, April 19, 1862 (Virginia Historical Society, Richmond); Clara to "My dear Friend Jesse," May 4, 1863, Warren Ogden, Collector, Miscellaneous Civil War Letters. (Manuscripts Section, Special Collections Division, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University, New Orleans, La.); *The Diary of Miss Emma Holmes, 1861-1866*, ed. John F. Marsalek (Baton Rouge, 1979), 251, 323; Sarah Morgan Dawson, *A Confederate Girl's Diary*, ed. James I. Robertson, Jr. (Bloomington, 1960), 119; Caroline Kean Hill Davis Diary, Feb. 13, 1865 (Virginia Historical Society). See also Mary Eliza Dulany Diary, June 10, 1862, *ibid.*; Cornelia McDonald, quoted in Douglas Southall Freeman, *The South to Posterity: An Introduction to the Writings of Confederate History* (New York, 1939), 152.

Confederate army, but far more widespread was the wish that preceded such dramatic and atypical action. "Would God I were a man," exclaimed Elizabeth Collier. "How I wish I was a man!" seconded Emma Walton. "I do sometimes long to be a man," confessed Sallie Munford. Such speculation represented a recognition of discontent new to most Confederate women. Directed into the world of fantasy rather than toward any specific reform program, such desires affirmed the status quo, yet at the same time, they represented a potential threat to existing gender assumptions.¹¹

Without directly acknowledging such frustrations, Confederate public discussion of women's roles sought to deal with this incipient dissatisfaction by specifying active contributions women might make to the Southern Cause and by valorizing their passive waiting and sacrifice as highly purposeful. Confederate ideology construed women's suffering, not as an incidental by-product of men's wartime activities, but as an important and honored undertaking. In a popular Confederate novel aptly entitled *The Trials of a Soldier's Wife*, the heroine explained to her husband, "Woman can only show her devotion by suffering, and though I cannot struggle with you on the battle-field, in suffering as I have done, I feel it has been for our holy cause."¹²

Public treatments of woman's patriotism soon broadened her accepted spiritual responsibilities to encompass wartime morale. "The time has come," Leila W. wrote in the *Southern Monthly* of October 1861, "when woman should direct into the right channel the greater power which she possesses in giving tone to public sentiment and morals, and shaping national character and national destiny." Moral service to God would now be paralleled by morale service to the state. Southern women, the *Mobile Evening News* concluded, held the "principal creation and direction" of Confederate public opinion "in their hands." The *Natchez Weekly Courier* assured the "Women of the South," that "the destinies of the Southern Confederacy" rested "in your control."¹³

Women thus became acknowledged creators and custodians of public as well as domestic culture in the wartime South, exercising their power over communal sentiment in a variety of ways. They filled the pages of newspapers and periodicals with patriotic stories and verse and, perhaps even more important, composed many of the songs that served as the central medium of public wartime expression and constituted the most substantial publishing effort of the war. With men preoccupied by military affairs, magazines such as the *Southern Literary Messenger* eagerly

¹¹ Elizabeth Collier Diary, April 11, 1862 (Southern Historical Collection); Emma Walton to J. B. Walton, May 12, July 15, 1863 (Historic New Orleans Collection, New Orleans, La.); Sallie Munford, quoted in Freeman, *South to Posterity*, 109; Dawson, *Confederate Girl's Diary*, ed. Robertson, 318. For an example of a Southern woman disguising herself as a man, see J. M. Fain to E. Fain, Dec. 10, 1861, Huldah Annie Briant Collection (Manuscript Division, William R. Perkins Library); and Annie Samuels et al. to James Seddon, Dec. 2, 1864, Letters Received, Confederate Secretary of War, RG 109, microfilm 437, reel 122, B692 (National Archives). For an extended fictional treatment, see Brown, *High Hearts*.

¹² Alexander St. Clair Abrams, *The Trials of a Soldier's Wife: A Tale of the Second American Revolution* (Atlanta, 1864), 165.

¹³ Leila W., "Woman a Patriot," *Southern Monthly*, 1 (Oct. 1861), 115; *Mobile Evening News*, Jan. 25, 1864; *Natchez Weekly Courier*, March 12, 1862. See also Faust, *Creation of Confederate Nationalism*.



A Southern woman places a havelock—a linen cap popular during the early months of the war—on a Confederate soldier. Watercolor entitled *Equipment* by Confederate veteran William Ludwell Sheppard. Courtesy Eleanor S. Brockenbrough Library, *The Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, Virginia.*

sought contributions from women writers and struggled to evaluate the torrents of unsolicited poetry with which patriotic ladies flooded their offices.¹⁴

But the escalating demand for troops after the bloody battle of Manassas in July 1861 offered women a new role to play. Here their patriotism and moral influence began to assume a more personal dimension, foreshadowing demands to be made of them as the conflict intensified. And this contribution involved women from a much wider social spectrum than had many of the earlier, largely middle- to upper-class efforts of ladies' societies and lady authors. Military manpower needs from the fall of 1861 onward required a rationalization of female sacrifice and a silencing of women's direct interest in protecting husbands and sons. The nineteenth-century creed of domesticity had long urged self-denial and service to others as central to woman's mission. But war necessitated significant alterations, even perversions, of this system of meaning; women's self-sacrifice for personally significant others—husbands, brothers, sons, family—was transformed into sacrifice *of* those individuals to an abstract and intangible "Cause."

The effective redefinition of women's sacrifice from an emphasis on protection of family to a requirement for relinquishment of family was problematic enough to occupy a significant portion of Confederate discourse on gender. Songs, plays, poems, even official presidential pronouncements sought to enlist women of all classes in the work of filling the ranks. One popular theme inverted *Lysistrata*, urging young women to bestow their favors only on men in uniform. In a much-reprinted song, a male songwriter assumed a female voice to proclaim, "I want to change my name." This fictionalized heroine was searching for a husband,

But he must be a soldier
A veteran from the wars,
One who has fought for "Southern Rights"
Beneath the Bars and Stars.¹⁵

"None but the brave deserve the fair," a letter from "MANY LADIES" to the *Charleston Daily Courier* warned cowards and slackers in August 1861. Even Jefferson Davis addressed the question of ladies' appropriate marital choice, declaring the empty sleeve of the mutilated veteran preferable to the "muscular arm" of "him who staid at home and grew fat."¹⁶

One song published early in the war acknowledged the conflict between woman's traditional role and the new demands on her. From "stately hall" to "cottage fair," every woman, rich or poor, was confronted by her own "stormy battle," raging within her breast.

There Love, the true, the brave,
The beautiful, the strong,

¹⁴ Mary B. Clarke to Macfarlane and Fergusson, Sept. 21, 1861, Macfarlane and Fergusson Papers (Virginia Historical Society); *Augusta Weekly Constitutionalist*, Oct. 16, 1861.

¹⁵ Theodore von La Hache, *I Would Like to Change My Name: A Favorite Encore Song* (Augusta, Ga., 1863).

¹⁶ *Charleston Daily Courier*, Aug. 15, 1861; Davis quoted in unidentified newspaper clipping in George Bagby Scrapbook, vol. 2, p. 128, George Bagby Papers (Virginia Historical Society).

Wrestles with Duty, gaunt and stern—
Wrestles and struggles long.¹⁷

But, like male songwriters who addressed that theme, the “Soldier’s Wife” who had penned the lyrics was certain that women would win their own “heart victories” over themselves and in their “proudest triumphs” send their menfolk off to war. Stirring popular marches captured the very scene of parting, with men striding nobly into the horizon, while women just as nobly waved handkerchiefs and cheered their departure. “Go fight for us, we’ll pray for you./Our mothers did so before us.” Popular songs and poems urged women to abandon not just interest but also sentiment, repressing their feelings lest they weaken soldiers’ necessary resolve. One graphic, even gruesome, ballad entitled “The Dead” portrayed a boy “oozing blood” on the battlefield as in his dying breath he insisted,

Tell my sister and my mother
Not to weep, but learn to smother
Each sigh and loving tear.¹⁸

A poem published in the *Richmond Record* in September 1863 elevated such repression of emotion into woman’s highest duty. “The maid who binds her warrior’s sash/ And smiling, all her pain dissembles,” “The mother who conceals her grief” had “shed as sacred blood as e’er/ was poured upon the plain of battle.” Not only was she to sacrifice husband, brother, or son, woman was to give up feeling as well. As a Virginia woman diarist remarked, “we must learn the lesson which so many have to endure—to struggle against our feelings.” But “’tis a hard struggle for me sometimes,” she admitted.¹⁹

Much of Confederate discourse negated the legitimacy of that emotional struggle by denying its reality altogether. Women, one newspaper proclaimed, had been offered a “glorious privilege” in the opportunity to contribute to the Cause by offering up their men. Any lingering resistance, the logic of the essay implied, should be overcome by the far greater—because transcendent—satisfaction of participation in the birth of a new nation.²⁰

Yet popular expressions often acknowledged women’s doubts in an effort to dispel them. A newspaper poem, “I’ve Kissed Him and Let Him Go,” was among the frankest of such treatments.

There is some, I know, who feel a strange pride
In giving their country their all,
Who count it a glory that boys from their side
In the strife are ready to fall,
But I sitting here have no pride in my heart;
(God forgive that this should be so!)

¹⁷ “Heart Victories,” in *Songs of the South* (Richmond, 1862), 68–69.

¹⁸ “Our Mothers Did So before Us,” *ibid.*, 70–71; “The Dead,” *ibid.*, 47–48.

¹⁹ *Record of News, History and Literature*, Sept. 3, 1863, 105; Chappellear Diary, May 19, 1862.

²⁰ *Charleston Daily Courier*, Aug. 19, 1861.

For the boy that I love the tears will still start.
Yet I've kissed him, and let him go.²¹

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.

There is considerable evidence that women of all social levels acted in accordance with these principles in the early months of conflict. Wartime gender prescriptions were so clear to a group of young ladies in Texas that they sent hoopskirts and bonnets to all the young men who remained at home. Other women comprehended the message well enough but, even early in the conflict, embraced it reluctantly. "Oh, how I do hate to give him up," a Louisiana woman sighed, but "I suppose I have to be a martyr during this war."²²

And propelling men into the army was only the beginning. Once soldiers had enlisted, women were to help keep them in the ranks. The silencing of feeling and self-interest was to continue. "DON'T WRITE GLOOMY LETTERS," warned the *Huntsville Democrat*. Some women, noted an 1862 correspondent to the *Georgia Countryman*, seemed to be giving "up too easily. Some of them write very desponding letters to the soldiers. This is wrong. I am not surprised at their feeling badly; but they should not write gloomy letters," which would cause soldiers to "lose confidence in themselves."²³

From the outset, the home front was acknowledged to exert significant control over military morale. And as the conflict wore on and desertions and disaffection increased, the connection became clearer. Women must do more than send their men to battle. When men deserted, women were to demonstrate that devotion to the Cause had primacy over personal commitments to husbands or sons. The *Richmond Enquirer* appealed directly "to the women to aid us in this crisis. None have so momentous an interest; and none, as we firmly believe, wield so much power. . . . They know those stragglers, one by one, and where they are to be found. They, the mothers and the sisters, may, if they will, be a conscript guard impossible to be evaded. They know whose furloughs are out, whose wounds are healed, who are lingering idly about . . . philandering and making love. . . . Will not the women help us, then?"²⁴

As the character of the war changed, so did public considerations of woman's place in it. Early discussions struggled to define some positive contribution women might make, some outlet for the patriotism that especially characterized women of the slave-owning classes. But the growing scale of the conflict transformed a rhetoric that tended to patronize women into one that implored them to make essential and

²¹ "I've Kissed Him and Let Him Go," in clipping in George Bagby Scrapbook, vol. 5, p. 99, Bagby Papers.

²² J. M. Fain to Huldah Fain Briant, May 19, 1862, Briant Papers; Priscilla Munnikhuyzen Bond Diary, June 29, 1862 (Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge).

²³ *Huntsville Democrat*, Aug. 21, 1861; *Countryman*, March 18, 1862.

²⁴ *Richmond Daily Enquirer*, Aug. 5, 1863. One in eight Confederate soldiers deserted, as contrasted with one in ten from the North. Vinovskis, "Have Social Historians Lost the Civil War?" 41.

increasing sacrifices for the Cause. As the Reverend R. W. Barnwell emphasized in an address to the Ladies Clothing Association of Charleston, "WITHOUT YOU, THIS WAR COULD NOT HAVE BEEN CARRIED ON, FOR THE GOVERNMENT WAS NOT PREPARED TO MEET ALL THAT WAS THROWN UPON IT." Beginning with the rising toll of battle deaths, the reality of the demands on women—the reality of war itself—intruded unremittingly not just on women's lives but on the stylized narrative created about them. Experience began to challenge the assumptions sustaining their early sacrifices.²⁵

From the perspective of 1865, the first months of the conflict would come to seem an age of innocence, a time, as one Virginia matron put it, "when we were playing at war." Stories of military history and romance began to pall in face of the unrelenting pressures of real war. In mid-1862 a Virginia girl answered in verse her cousin's inquiry, "If I had found enough romance in this War":

Yes, wild and thrilling scenes have held
A joyous sway upon my heart,
But what a dread romance is this,
To fill in life so sad a part.

Slighter changes oft have thrilled
My Spirit's gay and gladening song.
But this plagu'd [plagued], horrid, awful War
Has proved to me romance too long.²⁶

Much of the shift in women's perceptions of the war arose from the ever-expanding dimensions of required sacrifice. The need for military manpower was unrelenting, until by the end of the war, three-fourths of white Southern men of military age had served in the army and at least half of those soldiers had been wounded, captured, or killed, or had died of disease. This left almost every white woman in the South with a close relative injured, missing, or dead. But women had to sacrifice more than just their men. First luxuries, then necessities were to be relinquished for the Cause. "Fold away all your bright tinted dresses. . . . No more delicate gloves, no more laces," one poem urged. Women "take their diamonds from their breast/ And their rubies from the finger, oh!" a song proclaimed. A Virginia lady later reminisced that in the summer of 1861 she felt "intensely patriotic and self-sacrificing" when she resolved to give up ice creams and cakes. This, she remarked with some irony, "we called putting our tables on a war footing." By the next year, meat and grain had begun to disappear from many plates, and by 1864 one Confederate official informed Jefferson Davis that in Alabama, at least, civilian "deaths from starvation have absolutely occurred." In face of such realities, a Richmond periodical struggled to reassure the region's women and revalidate the notion of sacrifice:

²⁵ Barnwell quoted in *Diary of Miss Emma Holmes*, ed. Marsalek, 101–2.

²⁶ Margaret Beckwith *Reminiscences*, vol. 2, p. 10 (Virginia Historical Society); Chappellear Diary, July 2, 1862.

But e'en if you drop down unheeded,
 What matter? God's ways are the best:
 You have poured out your life where 'twas needed,
 And He will take care of the rest.²⁷

An initial conception of wartime self-denial as an enforced separation from loved ones and the absence of cakes and ice cream had been transformed even for the most privileged women of the South into the possibility of starvation for themselves and their families and the likelihood of death or injury for a husband or child.

For women of the slave-owning classes, the departure of husbands and sons and the continuing pressures of war took on additional significance. The burden of slave management, the designated responsibility of male planters and overseers before the conflict, now often devolved on women. The isolation of many plantation women in rural areas populated overwhelmingly by blacks exacerbated white women's dismay. Unsupervised slaves began to seem an insupportable threat. "I lay down at night," Addie Harris of Alabama complained, "& do not know what hour . . . my house may [be] broken open & myself & children murdered. . . . My negroes very often get to fighting."²⁸

The slave system of the American South rested upon the realities of paternalistic domination—upon the power of white males over both women and black slaves. But the ideology of paternalism always presumed reciprocal obligations between the supposedly powerful and the powerless. Both the rhetoric and the practice of white gender relations had assigned political and social control to males in return for their assumption of the duty to maintain social order, to exert effective dominance over potentially rebellious bondsmen. Protecting white women from threats posed by the slave system upon which white male power rested was an inextricable part of planters' paternalistic responsibility. Yet when masters departed for military service, the Confederate government, as collective representation of slaveholders' power, failed to provide adequate means to control plantation slaves. Under such circumstances, many Confederate mistresses felt not only terrified but also abandoned and betrayed. Slave management was a duty for which most women believed themselves unsuited; they had not understood it to be in the domain allocated them by the paternalistic social order they had long accepted as natural and right. As one woman explained, she was simply not "a fit and proper person" to supervise bondsmen; another insisted she had not the "moral courage" to govern slaves. "The idea of a lady"

²⁷ *Record of News, History and Literature*, July 16, 1863, 37; "Slap-By Klubs," in *Songs of the South*, 67; Catherine Cochran Reminiscences, vol. 1 (Virginia Historical Society); U. S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (128 vols., Washington, 1880–1901), ser. 1, LII, pt. 2, p. 667–68. Statistical information on the Confederate army is incomplete, and thus casualty estimates necessarily involve guesswork. These figures are James M. McPherson's revisions, made in a telephone conversation to Drew Gilpin Faust on Oct. 26, 1989, of numbers he offers in James M. McPherson, *Ordeal By Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York, 1982), 18; and James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York, 1988), 471, 854. For his computations, McPherson considers 18–40 to be effective military age.

²⁸ Addie Harris to G. W. Randolph, Oct. 29, 1862, Letters Received, Confederate Secretary of War, microfilm 437, reel 53, H1166.

exercising the required corporal dominance over slaves, Alice Palmer of South Carolina noted, “has always been repugnant to me.”²⁹

The absence of white men accustomed to managing slaves and the disintegration of slavery under the pressures of growing black assertiveness thus placed an unanticipated and unwanted burden on plantation mistresses, most of whom had never questioned the moral or political legitimacy of the South’s peculiar institution. But in the new war-born situation, Confederate women could not indulge in the luxury of considering slavery’s merits “in the abstract,” as its prewar defenders had urged, nor unthinkingly reap its material rewards. Slavery’s meaning could not rest primarily in the detached realms of economics or politics, nor could white women any longer accept it as an unexamined personal convenience. The emotional and physical cost of the system to slaveholding white women had dramatically changed. Women now confronted all but overwhelming day-to-day responsibilities that they regarded as not rightfully theirs, as well as fears that often came to outweigh any tangible benefits they were receiving from the labor of increasingly recalcitrant and rebellious slaves.

The war’s mounting death toll dictated the emergence of yet another dimension of female responsibility. While men at the front hurried their slain comrades into shallow graves, women at home endeavored to claim the bodies of dead relatives and to accord them proper ceremonies of burial. Woman’s role was not simply to make sacrifices herself but also to celebrate and sanctify the martyrdom of others. In the Confederacy mourning became a significant social, cultural, and spiritual duty. Through rituals of public grief, personal loss could be redefined as transcendent communal gain. Women’s tears consecrated the deaths of their men, ensuring their immortality—in Southern memory as in the arms of God—and ratifying soldiers’ individual martyrdom. Such deaths not only contributed to Confederate victory but also exemplified the sacred conception of Christian sacrifice with which the South had identified its nationalist effort. And in honoring men’s supreme offering, women reminded themselves of the comparative insignificance of their own sacrifices. Loss of life of a beloved could not compare with loss of one’s own; civilian anxiety and deprivation were as nothing in face of soldiers’ contributions. “Even when a woman does her best,” Kate Cumming observed of her efforts to nurse wounded soldiers, “it is a mite compared with what our men have to endure.”³⁰

Whatever doubts about the value of her contributions Cumming held, her labor, like that of thousands of other Southern women, was essential to the Confederate social and economic order. The size of Civil War armies and the unforeseen dimensions of the conflict required civilian productivity of an unprecedented scale. And

²⁹ Amanda Walker to the Secretary of War, Oct. 31, 1862, *ibid.*, reel 79, W1106; Lucy Sharp to John Randolph, Oct. 1, 1862, *ibid.*, reel 72, S1000. It is important to recognize that many of these letters complaining about slave management were prompted by the passage of the Confederate law exempting slave managers from military service and thus were not simply disinterested cries of pain. Alice Palmer to Hattie Palmer, July 20, 1865, Palmer Family Papers (South Caroliniana Library).

³⁰ Cumming, *Kate*, 191–92. See also Patricia R. Loughridge and Edward D. C. Campbell, Jr., *Women and Mourning* (Richmond, 1985); and Drew Gilpin Faust, “Race, Gender, and Confederate Nationalism: William D. Washington’s *Burial of Latané*,” *Southern Review*, 25 (April 1989), 297–307.

since women constituted such a large proportion of white Southern civilians, the production of goods and services became in large measure their responsibility. "We must go to work, too," as a DAUGHTER OF 'OLD VIRGINIA' wrote in the *Richmond Enquirer*. The exigencies of war thus weakened the role prescriptions that had denied white women remunerative labor outside the home and had directed that only black women should work the land. Public ideology now needed to redefine such activities as valued, while limiting the potential shift in gender expectations implicit in the altered behavior.

The debate within the Confederacy about nursing exemplifies the complexity of such wartime attitudes toward change. From the earliest months of the conflict, many journalists and editors urged that women be permitted—in fact, encouraged—to nurse wounded soldiers in military hospitals. Yet even these advocates of nursing reform were well aware of the dangers implicit in their proposals. Women, the *Confederate Baptist* observed, might prove "most valuable auxiliaries" within the hospital, as long as they remained "in their proper sphere" and did not seek to "direct or control the physician." Nursing would be acceptable as another dimension of women's service and sacrifice, but it must not be transformed into female empowerment.³¹

Many women showed themselves eager to make such contributions regardless of the ideological terms in which their actions were construed: they volunteered to help overworked army physicians and began to establish "wayside hospitals" to care for traveling soldiers at depot towns throughout the South. But the entry of women volunteers into hospital settings provoked outbursts of protest from those who believed nursing "would be injurious to the delicacy and refinement of a lady." In the eyes of many Southerners, both male and female, hospital work was simply "not considered respectable."³²

By the fall of 1862, however, the Confederacy's need for nurses had yielded legislation providing that women be recruited and remunerated for hospital labor. Yet resistance lingered, especially among male physicians. Phoebe Pember, a matron at Chimborazo Hospital in Richmond, encountered widespread resentment from doctors that greatly increased the difficulty of her job, and Cumming transferred from one hospital because of a senior physician's opposition to female nurses. There was, she summarized, a "good deal of trouble about the ladies in some of the hospitals of this department."³³

Many women shared the aversion to female nursing. Ladies who dedicated themselves to ward work, such as Pember, Cumming, and Louisa McCord, were subjects of gossip and speculation. Women working in hospitals seemed in the eyes of many

³¹ *Richmond Daily Enquirer*, March 7, 1862; *Confederate Baptist*, Oct. 15, 1862; Phoebe Yates Pember, *A Southern Woman's Story: Life in Confederate Richmond*, ed. Bell Irvin Wiley (Jackson, Tenn., 1959), 25; C. Vann Woodward, ed., *Mary Chesnut's Civil War* (New Haven, 1981), 641. For expression of similar concerns in the North, see Susan M. Reverby, *Ordered to Care: The Dilemma of American Nursing, 1850–1945* (New York, 1987), 43–47.

³² Pember, *Southern Woman's Story*, 25; Simkins and Patton, *Women of the Confederacy*, 86; Cordelia Scales, "Civil War Letters of Cordelia Scales," ed. Percy L. Rainwater, *Journal of Mississippi History*, 1 (July 1939), 173. On nursing, see also Rable, *Civil Wars*, 121–28.

³³ Cumming, *Kate*, 65.

Southerners to display curiously masculine strengths and abilities. Clara MacLean confided to her diary that her neighbor Eliza McKee, recently departed for Virginia as a nurse, had always possessed such strength as to seem “almost masculine—Indeed I used to tell her I never felt easy in her society if discussing *delicate* subjects; I could scarcely persuade myself she was not in disguise.” And Mary Chesnut, the famed South Carolina diarist, felt much the same about the intimidating strength of her friend McCord, who seemed to possess “the intellect of a man.” Nurses were not truly women, but in some sense men in drag.³⁴

Such attitudes enabled Southerners to blunt the impact and significance of women’s changed behavior by framing it within existing ideological categories. These beliefs permitted some women to become nurses, excused others—who lacked the requisite “masculine” traits—from doing so, and at the same time discouraged any permanent expansion in the boundaries of the female role: nursing continued to be regarded as deviant, requiring behaviors inconsistent with prevailing class and gender expectations.

Public discussion of women’s wartime entry into teaching demonstrates a similar effort to employ ideology to limit the impact of war-born behavioral change. Although a feminization of teaching had occurred in the North in the antebellum era, Southerners had not encouraged women’s assumption of classroom responsibilities. But, as the *Augusta Daily Constitutionalist* remarked in May 1863, the war had “swallow[ed] up” the men preparing to be teachers. “We are left no resource then but to have female teachers . . . Women are peculiarly fitted, naturally and morally, for teachers of the young.”³⁵ The report of the superintendent of common schools of North Carolina for 1862 reminded the people of his state that there was no employment in which ladies rendered needy by circumstances of war might labor more usefully than “in the business of forming the hearts and minds of the young.” The State Education Association of North Carolina offered a prize in November 1861 for the best essay on the subject of the “propriety and importance of employing more female teachers in our common schools,” thus inviting the general public to help redefine the ideological consensus the association hoped to foster.³⁶

Confederate educators gave significant attention to training women as teachers. To some degree the shift was self-interested, for in the absence of young men, professors’ livelihoods depended on recruiting other minds for instruction. Trinity College in North Carolina began in 1864 to fill its depleted classrooms with women, and many women’s colleges thrived during the war. Wytheville Female College in Virginia reported its population “but very slightly diminished”; Baptist Female College of Southwest Georgia grew steadily, even though it had to move into the presi-

³⁴ Phebe Levy to Eugenia Phillips, Sept. 13, 1863, Philip Phillips Family Papers (Library of Congress); Clara MacLean Diary, March 3, 1862, Clara D. MacLean Collection (Manuscript Division, William R. Perkins Library); Woodward, ed., *Mary Chesnut’s Civil War*, 677.

³⁵ *Augusta Daily Constitutionalist*, May 14, 1863.

³⁶ W. Buck Years and John G. Barrett, eds., *North Carolina Civil War Documentary* (Chapel Hill, 1980), 237; “Proceedings of the 6th Annual Meeting of the State Education Association,” *North Carolina Journal of Education*, 4 (Nov. 1861), 326. By the end of the war, the percentage of female teachers in North Carolina had risen from 7% to 50%. Years and Barrett, eds., *North Carolina Civil War Documentary*, 231.

dent's house and relinquish its main building to a soldiers' hospital. Hollins College in Virginia worked to establish a system of scholarships for future teachers, and the Statesville North Carolina Female College created a new teaching department.³⁷

But Southerners by no means uniformly embraced this new departure. Emma Holmes of South Carolina reported in 1862 the opposition a friend confronted from her family when she took over the village school, and Holmes herself faced stubborn family resistance to her desire to become a schoolmistress. Elizabeth Grimbball's mother was "terribly mortified" by her daughter's insistence on teaching, and as late as mid-1863, the Convention of Teachers of the Confederate States pointedly restricted membership to "any male citizen" of the new nation. Yet, as the president of Davidson College in North Carolina baldly declared to a 1864 graduating class of women, "*Our females must engage in the work of teaching; for there is no other alternative.*"³⁸

Discussions of gender appeared in almost every public mode of communication within the Confederacy—in sermons, newspapers, poetry, song, the new Confederate drama, even painting—and in personal documents such as diaries and letters.³⁹ But the comprehensive narrative of Confederate women and the war evolved in the course of the conflict and, while comprising a largely coherent whole, usually appeared piecemeal rather than as a complete story. In 1864, however, an Alabamian named Augusta Jane Evans published a novel that might justly be regarded as the most systematic elaboration, and in many ways the culmination, of the discussion that had preceded it. As a novel, it was quite literally a narrative, a story of woman and the war entitled *Macaria; or, Altars of Sacrifice*. Evans had written it as she sat at the bedsides of wounded soldiers, and she dedicated it to the Confederate army. *Macaria* became a wartime best seller, read widely not just by women, for whom novel reading had become such an important and pleasurable pastime, but by men in the intervals between battles or during periods of hospital convalescence.⁴⁰

Like the mythological figure in her title, who sacrificed herself on the altar of the gods in order to save Athens in time of war, Evans's heroine Irene is "ambitious of martyrdom." The novel is structured as her pilgrimage toward "Womanly Usefulness," which she ultimately realizes in the Confederate war effort. Here, at last, after the long struggles that constitute the bulk of the story, Irene finds her lifework,

³⁷ Years and Barrett, eds., *North Carolina Civil War Documentary*, 244; *Sixth Annual Circular of Wytheville Female College* (Wytheville, 1861); *Minutes of the Bethel Baptist Association* (Macon, 1863). See also *Catalogue of the Trustees, Faculty, and Students of the Wesleyan Female College, Macon, Georgia* (Macon, 1862); and Farmville Female College, *The Next Term of this Institution*, broadside [n.p., 1863].

³⁸ *Diary of Miss Emma Holmes*, ed. Marsalek, 172; Grimbball quoted in Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 46; *Proceedings of the Convention of Teachers of the Confederate States* (Macon, 1863), 4; *North Carolina Journal of Education*, 7 (July 1864), 88. On teaching, see also Rable, *Civil Wars*, 129–31.

³⁹ For a consideration of painting, see Faust, "Race, Gender and Confederate Nationalism."

⁴⁰ [Augusta Jane Evans], *Macaria; or, Altars of Sacrifice* (Richmond, 1864). On Evans and women's fiction generally, see Anne Goodwyn Jones, *Tomorrow Is Another Day: The Woman Writer in the South, 1859–1936* (Baton Rouge, 1981); Nina Baym, *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820–1870* (Ithaca, 1978); and Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth Century America* (New York, 1984).



Augusta Jane Evans, author of *Macaria; or, Altars of Sacrifice*.
 Courtesy Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery.

giving her father and her beloved beau Russell up to die on the battlefield and dedicating herself to the highest possible existence, laboring in “God’s great vineyard.” Married women, she admits, may be happier, but life was not made for happiness. It is the blessing—and *macaria* also means blessing in Greek—of the single woman to be more useful “because she belongs exclusively to no one, her heart expands to all her suffering fellow creatures.” For Irene, sacrifice becomes a vocation, not unlike that of the nun. And, indeed, Evans describes Irene abandoning fashionable garments for robes of black or white, tied at the waist by a tassel, suggesting that the analogy with the female religious is entirely self-conscious—for Evans as well as Irene. To her childhood friend, similarly bereaved by war, Irene declares, very much in the language of prevailing Confederate ideology,

You and I have much to do during these days of gloom and national trial—for upon the purity, the devotion, and the patriotism of the women of our land, not less than upon the heroism of our armies, depends our national salvation.⁴¹

In the context of Irene's persistent cry, "I want to be useful," the war comes as something, not to be endured, but to be celebrated, for it offers her the possibility for self-fulfillment she has been seeking. Stunningly beautiful, Irene is nevertheless no docile, subservient lady. She is in many ways what the nineteenth century would have seen as a "modern" woman, fiercely independent, for example even as a young child declining to permit a slave to carry her school books. "I don't choose," she declares, "to be petted like a baby or made a wax-doll of . . . I am strong enough to carry my own books." She refuses to marry at her father's behest, engages in abstruse astronomical researches, which she publishes in scientific journals—although under a pseudonym. She speaks of herself in the language of bourgeois individualism, stressing her rights of self-ownership and self-determination. To her suitor Hugh who insists, "you belong to me and you know it," Irene responds, "No! I belong to God and myself." Yet with the coming of war, Irene, like so many actual Southern women, only briefly laments "if I were only a man" before dedicating herself to the difficult work of sacrifice. Self-realization, toward which she has been striving in the first two-thirds of the novel, is now defined as finding its fullest expression in self-denial. Irene is rendered semidivine by her martyrdom to service and sacrifice and repeatedly echoes Christ's words at the time of his crucifixion: "Not my will, oh, God! but thine!"⁴²

Macaria appealed directly and calculatedly to sentiments prevailing within its potential audience of Southern women readers—acknowledging their fears of uselessness, of widowhood or spinsterhood, as well as their attraction to a new language of self-determination. These notions were rhetorically conjoined in the novel with the ideology of feminine nationalism and Christian sacrifice that Evans offered as her solution to the dilemmas of both the Confederate woman and her country. Irene and her friend Electra busily devote themselves to nursing the wounded, caring for the war's orphans, and, in artist Electra's case, creating cultural forms for the new nation. Feminine fashion and extravagance are roundly attacked. Even women's most basic economic needs are dismissed: a poor woman declares she "would rather live on acorns" than keep her husband out of the army to support her. And by titling her story *Macaria*, Evans situates it within the long tradition of war narratives of female silence and sacrifice:

all the stern resolution and self-abnegation of Rome and Lacedaemon had entered the souls of Southern women. Mothers closed their lips firmly to repress a wail of sorrow as they buckled on the swords of their first-born, and sent them forth . . . to battle for the right.⁴³

⁴¹ [Evans], *Macaria*, 116, 168, 183, 182, 183.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 141, 9, 13, 134, 167, 179.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 139, 137.

But in the effort to establish a resonance with her readers, to address themes that would secure their emotional and intellectual participation in her narrative, Evans undermines the very ideology of martyrdom she hoped to valorize. Affirming the values of individualism by associating them with her beloved Irene, Evans only with difficulty resolves their implicit challenge to the ideology of personal sacrifice. And she manages it largely through the invocation of an analogy with Christ, a literal *deus ex machina*. The tensions inevitably remain, as they certainly did in the minds of women throughout the South increasingly unable to reconcile themselves to the demands war placed on them.

Even as Augusta Evans wrote, even as thousands of Southern women eagerly read her paean to self-sacrifice, they had begun emphatically to dissent from the roles and scenarios composed for them. A pseudonymous woman wrote revealingly to the *Montgomery Daily Advertiser* in June 1864. At first, she observed, women had rivaled “the other sex in patriotic devotion,” but

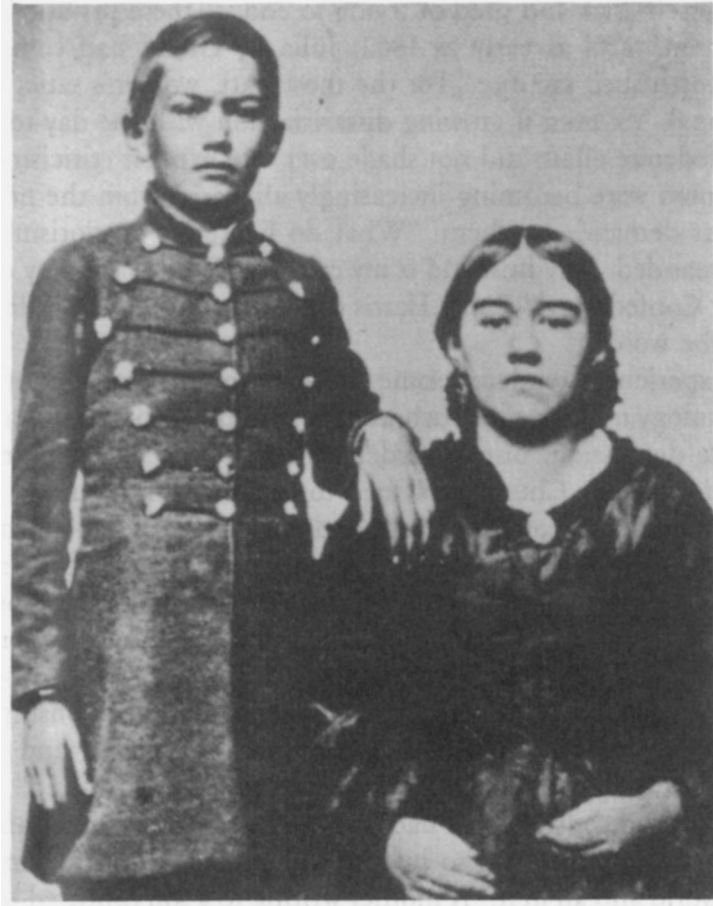
Oh what a falling off is there! . . . a change and such a change, has come over the spirit of their dream. The Aid Societies have died away; they are a name and nothing more. The self-sacrifice has vanished; wives and maidens now labor only to exempt husbands and lovers from the perils of service . . . Never were parties more numerous. . . . Never were the theatres and places of public amusement so resorted to. . . . The love of dress, the display of jewelry and costly attire, the extravagance and folly are all the greater for the brief abstinence which has been observed.⁴⁴

The effort to define sacrifice as purposeful was failing. As a New Orleans Creole woman wrote her soldier son, “je ne vois que des sacrifices, des victimes, la ruine, la misère, rien de gagné.” Women’s willingness to be disinterested, to embrace the needs of the nation as prior to their own, had begun to disappear. As one woman facing the conscription of her last son explained, “I know my country needs all her children and I had thought I could submit to her requisitions. I have given her cause my prayers, my time, my means and my children but now the last lamb of the fold is to be taken, the mother and helpless woman triumph over the patriot.”⁴⁵

White Southern women, socialized from an early age in the doctrines of paternalism with their implicit promises of reciprocal obligation, expected that their sacrifices would be recompensed. At all class levels, women had retained the sense of a moral economy of gender in which they traded female self-abnegation for care and protection. The “helpless woman” held an implicit power of requisition within her very assumption of helplessness. By the later years of the war, however, the ability of Southern men to meet requirements for care and protection, to ensure the physical safety—and even the subsistence—of the civilian population had broken down. In response, many women began to demonstrate the conditional nature of their patriotism; there were clear limits to their willingness to sacrifice. Concerns about

⁴⁴ *Montgomery Daily Advertiser*, June 15, 1864.

⁴⁵ A. Grima to Alfred Grima, Nov. 27, 1863, Grima Family Papers (Historic New Orleans Collection); Mary L. Scales to the secretary of war, Sept. 8, 1862, Letters Received, Confederate Secretary of War, reel 72, S890.



A young Mississippian and his mother.
Courtesy William A. Albaugh III Collection.

personal loss and personal survival—both physical and psychological—had eroded commitment to the Cause. The romance of the “battle piece” had disappeared before the pressing realities of war. Unable any longer to imagine herself one of the legendary “Spartan women,” Lizzie Hardin confided to her diary, “Perhaps there are few of us who in reading stories of ancient heroism or the romance of modern war have not had some idle thoughts of the role we might have played in similar circumstances. How often have I dropped the book while my fancy kept time to the warlike trumpet or languished in some prison cell or sent up Te Deums from the bloody field of victory. But how different the picture when you view it in a nearer light.” On a tour of the battlefield at Seven Pines in search of her wounded cousin, Constance Cary (later Harrison) reported seeing men “in every stage of mutilation” and proclaimed herself “permanently convinced that nothing is worth war!” Margaret Junkin Preston greeted the news of the death of her stepson and several of his friends by protesting, “Who thinks or cares for victory now!” Sarah Jane Sams

proclaimed herself “sick and tired of trying to endure these privations to which we are all subjected,” and as early as 1862, Julia Le Grand had come to feel that “nothing is worth such sacrifice.” For the most part, women’s satiety with war remained personal. Yet even if growing dissatisfaction with the day-to-day management of Confederate affairs did not shade over into explicit criticisms of Southern war aims, women were becoming increasingly alienated from the new nation and resentful of its demands on them. “What do I care for patriotism,” one woman pointedly demanded. “My husband is my country. What is country to me if he be killed?” “The Confederacy!” Emily Harris complained to her diary late in 1864, “I almost hate the word.”⁴⁶

Wartime experiences rendered some women almost incapable of functioning. Modern psychology might define such women as in the grip of traumatic stress reactions or severe depression, but Confederates used quite effective descriptive language of their own. Lila Chunn explained to her soldier husband in the spring of 1863, “I experience such constant dread and anxiety that I feel all the time weary and depressed.” Another woman described many wives and mothers she knew as “stunned and stupefied . . . forever” by grief, and a resident of Lynchburg, Virginia, believed that her poverty and suffering had driven her “almost upon the borders of craziness.” Cornelia McDonald, struggling to care for a family of seven children in embattled Winchester, Virginia, clearly understood the relationship between her debilitated physical condition and her emotions. Emaciated and weakened by hunger, she found that by 1863 she had become “faint-hearted” as well. “My feelings were beyond control . . . I had lost the power of resistance and all my self-command.” Her depression was so intense she felt she “could willingly say ‘good night’ to the world and all in it.” A mother writing to a son captured by the Yankees and imprisoned in the North may perhaps have put it most simply and eloquently: “I would wrote before now but I was Clean out of hart.”⁴⁷

But many Confederate women retained hope that their sufferings would be relieved. Within the framework of paternalistic assumptions to which they clung, hardships were defined as injustices worthy of attention and intervention by rulers of the Confederate state. As an “unassuming girl” from Alabama explained to the secretary of war in requesting a furlough for her brother, “I feel there is yet justice

⁴⁶ G. Glenn Clift, ed., *The Private War of Lizzie Hardin* (Frankfurt, Ky., 1963), 17; Constance Cary Harrison, *Recollections Grave and Gay* (New York, 1911), 83; Elizabeth Preston Allan, *The Life and Letters of Margaret Junkin Preston* (New York, 1903), 148; Sarah Jane Sams to Randolph Sams, March 14, 1865, Sarah Jane Sams Collection (South Caroliniana Library); Waitz, *Journal of Julia Le Grand*, ed. Rowland and Croxall, 44–45; Margaret Crawford, “Tales of a Grandmother,” in *South Carolina Women in the Confederacy*, ed. Mrs. A. T. Smythe, Miss M. B. Poppenheim, and Mrs. Thomas Taylor (2 vols., Columbia, S. C., 1903), I, 210; Emily Harris Diary, Nov. 18, 1864, David Harris Papers (College Library, Winthrop College, Rock Hill, S. C.).

⁴⁷ Lila Chunn to Willie Chunn, May 19, 1863, Willie Chunn Papers (Manuscript Division, William R. Perkins Library); Myrna Lockett Avary, ed., *A Virginia Girl in the Civil War, 1861–1865* (New York, 1903), 41; Annie Upshur to Jefferson Davis, Jan. 24, 1863, Letters Received, Confederate Secretary of War, reel 114, U2. Cornelia McDonald, *A Diary with Reminiscences of the War and Refugee Life in the Shenandoah Valley* (Nashville, 1935), 165, 167, 114–15; Mary A. Blackburn to David B. Blackburn, Dec. 19, 1864, Point Lookout Letters, Miscellaneous Files, Adjutant General’s Office, RG 109 (National Archives). On stress reaction among soldiers, see Drew Gilpin Faust, “Christian Soldiers: The Meaning of Revivalism in the Confederate Army,” *Journal of Southern History*, 53 (Feb. 1987), 83–86.

& mercy in the land, to *you* therefore I present my humble petition." Women thus began to regard their difficulties as a test of the moral as well as the bureaucratic and military effectiveness of the new nation and tied their patriotism to the competency of the state's performance in these matters of personal concern. Women penned anguished letters to President Jefferson Davis and a succession of secretaries of war seeking assistance in return for their sacrifices. Miranda Sutton of North Carolina was unable to sign her name, but she dictated a petition asking that one of her sons be released from the military to help provide her with food. Six of her sons had served in the army; two, in addition to her husband, had died. She professed certainty that the moral economy of sacrifice would bring favorable attention to her request. "Your petitioner humbly conceives that having made such sacrifices for the southern cause her claims humble though she be will not be overlooked." Sixty-year-old Harriet Stephenson of North Carolina was perhaps even more direct. With five sons in the army, she informed Secretary of War James Seddon, "I think I have did enough to you for you to take sum intrust in what I so mutch desrie of You"—the discharge of one of her sons to provide her support. Nancy Williams of Mississippi made a similar request of Davis: "I think I have done well for our cause, give up all of my sons, one of which was only fifteen. . . . please answer my letter immediately." When he did not, she wrote again, still expressing faith that her expectations would be fulfilled. "I ask this favor from the government, hoping and believing that it will be granted." Frances Brightwell of Louisa County, Virginia, appealed directly to Davis's paternalism in asking the discharge of her husband after her father's death had left her an "orfrint child." "My heart is broken I have no one to take care of me oh I think it will kill me Please try and doo sumthing for me. . . . I know a good gentlemond like yourself feals for a tinder female."⁴⁸

Some bolder—or perhaps only less calculating—women seemed less to implore Confederate officials than to threaten them. "One of the anxious widowed mothers of Alabama" was unwilling to sign her letter of complaint to the president. But she promised him that the unjustified conscription of her son guaranteed that "a day of retribution will surely come" to the South. Another female correspondent who believed her son had been unfairly taken by the army informed Davis, "I suspect that our confederacy must fall where such injustice reigns." Almira Acors wrote Davis, describing her desperate poverty and the failure of her neighbors to aid her, a failure suggestive of a more general breakdown of paternalism throughout Southern society: "it is folly for a poor mother to call on the rich people about here there hearts are of steel they would sooner thow what they have to spare to their dogs than give it to a starving child . . . I do not see how God can give the South a victory when the cries of so many suffering mothers and little children are constantly ascending up to him. . . . if I and my little children . . . die while there Father is in service I invoke God Almighty that our blood rest upon the South."

⁴⁸ Ella Stuart to secretary of war, April 28, 1863, Letters Received, Confederate Secretary of War, reel 111, S312; Miranda Sutton to secretary of war, Jan. 28, 1864, *ibid.*, reel 140, S79; Harriet Stephenson to secretary of war, Jan. 18, 1864, *ibid.*, S47; Nancy Williams to Jefferson Davis, April 1, 1863, Oct. 29, 1863, *ibid.*, reel 116, W246; Frances Brightwell to Davis, March 17, 1862, *ibid.*, reel 31, B167.

A War Department official marked the outside of the letter “File”; Almira Acors did not even receive a reply.⁴⁹

For all their intended audacity, these women offered only a limited challenge to Confederate power and legitimacy. They threatened Davis and his government by invoking a higher, divine paternalism, rather than by assaulting the larger assumptions of paternalism itself. God, they warned, would punish the Confederacy because it had not lived up to its own ideals—particularly its obligations to the women and children that its social assumptions had defined as powerless and dependent. Within such a framework of criticism, women still regarded themselves as largely passive—even if increasingly angry. God, not they themselves, would avenge their wrongs. If Davis and his secretary of war would not protect them, they would summon a yet more powerful father figure to the task.⁵⁰

But by 1863, at least some Confederate women had become more aggressive in their expressions of discontent. In the case of women from yeoman families particularly, oppressions of class and gender reinforced one another, impelling numbers of the aggrieved toward overt action against the war effort. Destitute female petitioners warned Confederate officials that they would urge their husbands and sons to desert if their basic needs for family subsistence were not met. As Nancy Mangum explained to Gov. Zebulon Vance of North Carolina, prices must be lowered or “we wimen will write for our husbands to come . . . home and help us we cant stand it.” Other wives and mothers did not bother with warnings. Martha Revis informed her husband after news reached her of Southern defeats at Gettysburg and Vicksburg, “I want you to come home as soon as you can after you get this letter.” One mother, whose willingness to sacrifice had reached its limit, wrote her son, a Confederate captain and prisoner of war, “I hope, when you get exchanged, you will think, the time past has sufficed for *public* service, & that your own family require yr protection & help—as others are deciding.” As the desertion rate rose steadily in the Southern army throughout 1864, Confederate officials acknowledged the significant role needy wives and mothers played in encouraging soldiers to abandon their posts. As one North Carolinian bluntly explained, “Desertion takes place because desertion is encouraged. . . . And though the ladies may not be willing to concede the fact, they are nevertheless responsible . . . for the desertion in the army and the dissipation in the country.”⁵¹ And women undertook a kind of desertion of their own, many from the northern tier of Confederate states fleeing to friends and relatives in the North because of what a Confederate provost marshal described as their inability “to support themselves here.”⁵²

⁴⁹ Anonymous to Davis, May 14, 1864, *ibid.*, reel 118, A134; Mrs. M. L. Nelson to Davis, n.d., *ibid.*, reel 137, N77; Nelson to Seddon, Oct. 12, 1864, *ibid.*, N80; Almira Acors to Davis, March 23, 1862, *ibid.*, reel 29, A62; The appearance of the instruction “file” on letters describing such desperate circumstances is striking and is also noted by Rable, *Civil Wars*, 75.

⁵⁰ In their growing discontent with their situation, some women even came to question the paternalistic justice of God. See Grace Brown Elmore Reminiscences, June 20, 1865 (South Caroliniana Library).

⁵¹ Yeans and Barrett, eds., *North Carolina Civil War Documentary*, 22, 97; M. Chichester to Capt. Arthur Chichester, May 2, 1864, Point Lookout Letters; Charles Fenton James to “Dear Sister,” Feb. 13, 1864, Charles Fenton James Papers (Southern Historical Collection).

⁵² See, for example, the report of applicants requesting permission to leave the Confederacy, July 25, 1864, Letters Received, Confederate Secretary of War.

As the emotional and physical deprivation of Southern white women escalated, the Confederate ideology of sacrifice began to lose its meaning and efficacy. Hardship and loss were no longer sacred, no longer to be celebrated, but instead came to seem causes for grievance. Late in 1862 an article in the *Children's Friend*, a religious periodical for boys and girls, found in what might earlier have been labeled a dedicated wartime "sacrifice" only deplorable "Oppression." "Many women," the paper reported, "especially in large cities, have to work hard, and receive very little for it. Many of them sew with their needles all day long, making garments for others, and get so little for it that they have neither food enough, nor clothes, nor fire to make their children comfortable and warm. There are many such now in Richmond working hard, and almost for nothing."⁵³ Southerners had defined the purpose of secession as the guarantee of personal independence and republican liberty to the citizens and households of the South. Yet the women of the Confederacy found themselves by the late years of the war presiding over the disintegration of those households and the destruction of that vaunted independence. Most white Southern women had long accepted female subordination as natural and just, but growing hardships and women's changed perception of their situation transformed subordination, understood as a justifiable structural reality, into oppression, defined as a relationship of illegitimate power.

The erosion of the sacredness of sacrifice was also evident in the changed attitudes toward death that appeared among Confederate civilians by the last months of the war. As one Virginia woman explained. "I hear now of acres of dead and . . . wounded with less sensibility than was at first occasioned by hearing of the loss of half a dozen men in a skirmish." This shift in perception was reflected in altered mourning customs. As Kate Stone explained in the spring of 1864, "People do not mourn their dead as they used to." Constance Cary was shocked by the seemingly cavalier and uncaring manner in which military hospitals treated the deceased, dropping six or seven coffins in "one yawning pit . . . hurriedly covered in, all that a grateful country could render in return for precious lives."⁵⁴ The immediate and tangible needs of the living had become more pressing than any abstract notion of obligation to the dead.

The urgency of those needs yielded a sense of grievance that by 1863 became sufficiently compelling and widespread to erupt into bread riots in communities across the South. In Savannah, Georgia, Mobile, Alabama, High Point, North Carolina, Petersburg, Virginia, Milledgeville, Georgia, Columbus, Georgia, and in the capital city of Richmond itself, crowds of women banded together to seize bread and other provisions they believed their due. Their actions so controverted prevailing ideology about women that Confederate officials in Richmond requested the press not to report the disturbance at all, thus silencing this expression of female dissent. In the newspapers, at least, reality would not be permitted to subvert the woman's war story that editors had worked so assiduously to develop and propagate. A Savannah police court charged with disciplining that city's offenders similarly

⁵³ *Children's Friend*, Dec. 1862.

⁵⁴ Dulany Diary, Aug. 10, 1862; Stone, *Brokenburn*, ed. Anderson, 277; Harrison, *Recollections*, 188.



“Southern Women Feeling the Effects of Rebellion and Creating Bread Riots”

— *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*.

Reproduced from *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, May 23, 1863.

demonstrated the incompatibility of such female behavior with the accepted fiction about Southern women's wartime lives. "When women become rioters," the judge declared baldly, "they cease to be women." Yet in resorting to violence, these women were in a sense insisting on telling—and acting—their own war story. One Savannah rioter cared enough about the meaning of her narrative to print up and distribute cards explaining her participation in the disturbance. "Necessity has no law & poverty is the mother of invention. These shall be the principles on which we will stand. If fair words will not do, we will try to see what virtue there is in stones."⁵⁵

Upper-class women did not usually take to the streets, but they too expressed their objections to the prescriptions of wartime ideology. And, like their lower-class counterparts, they focused much of their protest on issues of consumption and deprivation. The combination of symbolism and instrumentalism in the bread riots was paralleled in the extravagance to which many Confederate ladies turned. In important ways, reckless indulgence represented resistance to the ideology of sacrifice. Mary Chesnut's husband James found her "dissipated" and repeatedly criticized her refusal to abandon parties and frivolity. In February 1864 the *Richmond Enquirer* declared the city to be a "carnival of unhallowed pleasure" and assailed the "shameful displays of indifference to national calamity." Richmond's preeminent hostess was reported to have spent more than thirty thousand dollars on food and entertainment during the last winter of the war. Even a council of Presbyterian elders in Alabama felt compelled in 1865 to "deplore the presence, and we fear, the growing prevalence of a spirit of gait, especially among the female members of some of our congregations." And instead of resorting to riots, numbers of more respectable Richmond ladies subverted ideals of wartime sacrifice and female virtue by turning to shoplifting, which a Richmond paper reported to be "epidemick" in the city, especially among women of the better sort. Women, one observer noted in 1865, seemed to be "seeking nothing but their own pleasure while others are baring their bosoms to the storms of war."⁵⁶

The traditional narrative of war had come to seem meaningless to many women; the Confederacy offered them no acceptable terms in which to cast their experience. Women had consented to subordination and had embraced the attendant ideology of sacrifice as part of a larger scheme of paternalistic assumptions. But the system of reciprocity central to this understanding of social power had been violated by the wartime failure of white Southern males to provide the services and support understood as requisite to their dominance. And in a world in which Augusta Evans's independent and assertive Irene could become the war's most popular literary heroine,

⁵⁵ *Countryman*, May 3, 1864. On bread riots and female violence, see Michael Chesson, "Harlots or Heroines? A New Look at the Richmond Bread Riot," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 92 (April 1984), 131–75; Paul D. Escott, *Many Excellent People: Power and Privilege in North Carolina, 1850–1900* (Chapel Hill, 1986), 67; Victoria Bynum, "'War within a War': Women's Participation in the Revolt of the North Carolina Piedmont," *Frontiers*, 9 (1987), 43–49.

⁵⁶ Woodward, ed., *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*, 430; *Richmond Daily Enquirer*, Feb. 11, 1864; Minutes of the Tombeckbee Presbytery, April 8, 1865 (Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian Church, Montreat, N. C.); unidentified clipping in George Bagby Scrapbook, vol. 5, p. 131, Bagby Papers; James to "Dear Sister," Feb. 13, 1865, Charles Fenton James Collection.

women would not assent indefinitely to the increasing sacrifice and self-denial the Civil War came to require. Although the fictional Irene was able to bear the tension between self-abnegation and self-realization in her own life, many Southern women found themselves unable or unwilling to construct their own experiences within a similar narrative. By the late years of the conflict, sacrifice no longer sufficed as a purpose. By early 1865, countless women of all classes had in effect deserted the ranks. Refusing to accept the economic deprivation further military struggle would have required, resisting additional military service by their husbands and sons, no longer consecrating the dead, but dancing while ambulances rolled by, Southern women undermined both objective and ideological foundations for the Confederate effort; they directly subverted the South's military and economic effectiveness as well as civilian morale. "I have said many a time," wrote Kate Cumming in her diary, "that, if we did not succeed, the women of the South would be responsible." In ways she did not even realize, Cumming was all too right. It seems not insignificant that in wording his statement of surrender, Robert E. Lee chose terms central to women's perceptions of themselves and the war. The Confederate effort, he stated at Appomattox, had become "useless sacrifice." Confederate ideology about women had been structured to keep those terms separated by interpreting sacrifice as a means of overcoming uselessness, by rendering sacrifice itself supremely purposeful. But the war story offered Confederate women at the outset of conflict had been internally flawed and contradictory and finally proved too much at odds with external circumstance; it was an ideology designed to silence, rather than address, the fundamental interests of women in preservation of self and family. As Julia Le Grand explained, it was an ideology that left women with "no language, but a cry," with no means of self-expression but subversion. In gradually refusing to accept this war story as relevant to their own lives, women undermined both the narrative presented to them and the Confederate cause itself. And without the logistical and ideological support of the home front, the Southern military effort was doomed to fail.⁵⁷

Historians have wondered in recent years why the Confederacy did not endure longer. In considerable measure, I would suggest, it was because so many women did not want it to. The way in which their interests in the war were publicly defined—in a very real sense denied—gave women little reason to sustain the commitment modern war required. It may well have been because of its women that the South lost the Civil War.

⁵⁷ Cumming, *Kate*, 4; Robert E. Lee quoted in Douglas Southall Freeman, *Lee's Lieutenants: A Study in Command*. (3 vols., New York, 1972), II, 752. See also Rable, *Civil Wars*, 207; Waitz, *Journal of Julia Le Grand*, ed. Rowland and Croxall, 16.