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## Confronting the Reality of Changed Lives: Love and Loss for Women in Civil War America

### Shannon Clark David

*Do not weep, maiden, for war is kind.  
Because your lover threw wild hands toward the sky  
And the affrighted steed ran on alone,  
Do not weep.  
War is kind.*

*Mother whose heart hung humble as a button  
On the bright splendid shroud of your son,  
Do not weep.  
War is kind.*

-Stephen Crane, "War is Kind" [\[1\]](#)

The American Civil War was one of terrible, bloody battles that resulted in a staggering number of casualties for soldiers in the North and South, sending thousands of men either to their graves or home with disfigured bodies and crumpled spirits. Study of the war--this extreme level of sacrifice amidst miserable conditions--celebrates the brave soldiers who set out to willingly fight and die for their country, and the heroic military officers who led their men to what they believed to be certain glory. These men exhibited courage that many of them scarcely thought they had, and their gallant sacrifices forever changed the face of America. Today, thought of the Civil War immediately triggers stories and images of the heroic soldiers. Legendary battles like Bull Run, Antietam and Gettysburg come to mind; and heroes such as Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant are in the foreground of any Civil War recollections. We honor and remember the soldiers and the officers, but a very important group seems to slip into the background: the women. Granted, extensive study and praise has been given to the selfless nurses of the Civil War; but what about those women left at home? Often forgotten, these selfless women had no choice but to stand on their doorsteps and watch their beloved husbands and cherished sons march off into the horizon--likely never to be seen again.

In addition to the difficulty of awaiting news of the impending death of a lover, child or brother, many of these women were left to shoulder heavy responsibility single-handedly, perhaps forever. Despite the pain of sending a loved one off to war, fervent religious piety of the time and an unfaltering sense of duty prompted these women of

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Civil War America to willingly--even eagerly--watch their men leave home to fight for their country's cause. Although this sentiment was strong and widespread, and the social constructions of the time had great influence on women's attitudes toward the war, the grief that came with the death of a husband, son or brother was often more than religion or a sense of duty could console. Modern society's more progressive peaceful attitude toward war makes it difficult to understand the authentic pride and eagerness Civil War families felt toward making the sacrifice. Chivalric values of courage, honor and duty were unflinching in 19<sup>th</sup> century American society. While many women did subscribe to this value system--maintaining their pride and patriotism even after the death of their soldier--the fear and loneliness was sometimes unbearable, thus deteriorating the patriotic sense of duty society taught women to have. An examination of the letters and diaries of Civil War wives and mothers reveals the extent to which this sense of duty affected women's reactions toward war and death, and its *limits* in helping women overcome the human tendency toward fear, resentment and grief.

In his book *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War*, Gerald F. Linderman discusses the way the central value of courage translated into the home and onto the attitudes of soldiers' families, "Those who most imperatively urged enlistment were women. They, no less than soldiers, expected courageous behavior and anathematized cowardice."<sup>[2]</sup> This trend exemplifies the extent to which ardent American patriotism molded the convictions and behaviors of many women--sometimes even more so than men. While expected behavior from a modern perspective might be swooning and begging for her love to stay home with resentment of the war's existence and cause, Civil War wives and maidens frequently insisted that their men enlist. Gender stereotypes of the time defined the ideal man as brave, honorable and willing to make the ultimate sacrifice to protect his family from any imminent threat. Neglecting to enlist made a man a coward in the eyes of society, especially in the eyes of women.

Mary Chestnut, the wife of a leading South Carolina politician, recounts traveling through Richmond in June 1861 and seeing; "Soldiers everywhere. They seem to be in the air, and certainly to fill all space." According to Chestnut, these enlisted soldiers received abundant support from women, "To show they were wide awake and sympathizing enthusiastically, every woman from every window of every house we passed waved a handkerchief, if she had one. [...] Another new symptom--parties of girls came to every station simply to look at the troops passing."<sup>[3]</sup> The behavior of Southern women observed by Chestnut supports the stereotypical separation of gender spheres, building up men to fit the role of brave, mighty hero, and leaving women behind to fit the definition of dainty, love-struck maidens.

Linderman offers examples of more extreme patriotic behavior, including a report from a man in Richmond from May 1861 that "the ladies are postponing all engagements until their lovers have fought the Yankees."<sup>[4]</sup> If this report is true, it displays the staunch attitude many women held toward the importance of contributing to the war effort--to go so far as to use one's sexuality and womanhood as leverage to encourage enlistment is a somewhat manipulative patriotism far unlike anything that might be observed in contemporary American society. One Confederate woman, when asked if her husband was a soldier, answered, "He would not be my husband if he were not in the army!"<sup>[5]</sup> Clearly, a fierce patriotism had pervaded most communities at the beginning of the war, and

women were no exception. Union women were taught to support their men in much the same way Confederate women did. Andrew Johnson told northern women, mirroring southern sentiments, "It was better to be a brave soldier's widow than a coward's wife." [6] Patriotism was essentially a social rule, and it manifested itself in women in surprising ways.

Many mothers also fully supported and encouraged their sons' decisions to not only go to war, but also to stay, despite the heartache and horrors. One Union mother wrote to her son in October 1862, "While I feel that I would give all the world to see you, I would not have you leave your post at this hour of your country's peril. You can now better serve the government where you are than you could here, and the government is everything to us now." [7] This woman clearly displays where her priorities lie; she sees the government as "everything," above her own happiness, and above the safety and well being of her son. A Southern mother whose home was near a battle zone would not let her son stay long when he was able to break from the army to see her. "She would rather hear of my death on the field of battle," the soldier said, "although it would nearly break her heart, than to hear of my being branded as a deserter." [8] The unwavering sense of duty and patriotism was strong for civilians of both the Union and the Confederacy; perhaps the strongest proof of this is the steadfast will of *mothers* to see their beloved *children* fight in raging, horrific battles until the war was won.

It was not always patriotism and loyalty to the government that sparked a mother's support of her son's decision to fight, however. For some, religious devotion was behind such behavior. Reid Mitchell's book, *The Vacant Chair: The Northern Soldier Leaves Home*, describes the initial reaction of a Union mother to her son's desire to enlist. "She was never strong," her son writes, "and the thought of my leaving home for the uncertainties of a soldier's life so affected her heart that she could only say, 'Oh, John, say you won't go, or I shall die.'" [9] Though her son agreed to stay at home, Mitchell says the woman "had prayed during the night, and learned her duty." [10] Having raised her son with ardent Christian values, it seems that this Union mother ultimately found her support for the war within her religious faith and allowed her son to fight. The urgency of remaining loyal both to God and one's country was great in Civil War America, and it certainly proved compelling enough to motivate mothers to send their children off to war.

Some women, however, allowed personal values to overcome social and religious expectations of total devotion to the war--staunchly refusing the imposed social values and soon growing eager for the men's hasty return. In an 1862 letter from Clara Pierce Wood to her husband Amos, a Union soldier, she says, "I hope the time will soon come when you will be with us again & I hope this war will not take you from us again [...] I hope you will continue to have the mind that you will not enlist again & I think you will with much love & a kiss for you." [11] The affectionate and almost desperate tone of this letter implies a much greater concern for having her husband back with the family than his continuing contribution to the war effort. Perhaps Clara Wood was not the patriot society asked that she be, or perhaps she assumed that the war would soon be over and her dear husband had given enough and ought to give someone else a turn. As the bleak reality of a long, bloody conflict became clear, the loneliness and fear of those left at home grew with the number of casualties. In many cases, this was enough to

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turn a woman's sentiments away from patriotic wartime duty to an insurmountable desire to have her husband back at her side.

What also became clear as the reality of the men's absence sank in was the difficulty of maintaining a farm or plantation alone. Particularly in the South, where a majority of the civilians lived on open farms and maintained their livelihood by keeping that farm alive, the effects of the war were devastating. A lack of resources for the entire Confederacy meant less for each family, and the maintenance of these households was extremely difficult for a woman to achieve alone. In her book *The Confederate Belle*, Giselle Roberts examines every aspect of life for Confederate women during and after the war—including life on the plantation without men. Amanda Stone's husband died and left her with their plantation before the war began; she had managed to run it sufficiently, but not without the help of her brothers and sons. When the war erupted, however, they were among the first to enlist, leaving the plantation to Amanda and her daughter Kate. With the onset of war, the two women "immediately confronted the reality of changed households and changed lives." Kate recounts the departure of her brother, saying, "The parting will be dreadful for Mamma. She so depends on My Brother, her oldest and best beloved."<sup>[12]</sup> This provides an example of the financial and physical burden created by male absence. The reality of extensive manual labor often proved too difficult for families at home to shoulder.

In many cases, maintaining the farm or plantation was hard work and perhaps nearly impossible to do for very long. Yet, the effect of a son's absence was felt far more in a mother's heart than in the pain of her overworked back. One Southern woman, Judith McGuire, spoke of her empty home in her empty town after the men have all gone to fight and the children have all gone to a safer place. McGuire wrote, "I heard my own footsteps so plainly, that I was startled by the absence of all other sounds. There the furniture looked so quiet, the best so fixed and smooth, the wardrobes and bureaux [*sic*] so tightly locked, and the whole so lifeless! [...] I paused, to ask myself what it all meant. Why did we think it necessary to send off all that was so dear to us from our own home?"<sup>[13]</sup> This feeling of utter loneliness brought doubt to the minds of many women—some of whom could suppress it with a devotion to patriotic duty, some of whom could not.

Though the pain of a loved one's absence and the knowledge of his dangerous situation was great for women at home, such devotion both to their soldiers and their country was inspiring to the men in the army, giving them a reason to carry on. As Linderman suggests, "A woman's love was a stimulus that, often by admonition, sometimes by inspiration, would propel the soldier's combat performance, as he might have put it, above self."<sup>[14]</sup> This is indeed the case in many soldiers' letters home or diaries written amidst the daily terrors they faced. One Confederate Captain wrote, "Oh, woman, what would inspire men to breast the storms of bullets and face death fearlessly except thy happiness and thy influence!"<sup>[15]</sup> While it was important that women were able to have such a valuable effect on their soldiers, it created a troublesome paradox as they struggled with their men's absence and potential peril. They had to strive to maintain a positive and supportive attitude so that the soldiers may be brave and therefore fight effectively, thus increasing their risk and the likelihood of injury or death. Ironically, the more supportive and encouraging women were, the more likely their men were to bravely thrust themselves into harm's way.

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One Confederate woman described in her diary the departure of a group of soldiers at the train station, and the strength displayed by the women saying goodbye in hopes of keeping the men's spirits high. "A crowd had gathered around the depot to see them off," she writes,

Mothers, wives, sisters, sweethearts and friends--all were there. Standing on the platform and looking around I marveled at what I saw. Women with bright, smiling faces, looking tenderly on the soldiers, who were ready to depart. Saying fond, loving words of advice and of hope: pressing the beloved gray-clad figure in a parting embrace; kissing the dear lips, maybe for the last time, and yet those brave women smiled. [16]

Though this is the scene the soldiers witnessed as they sped off to war, the true pain of the women left behind emerged when their men were out of sight, "As soon as the train pulled out and the soldier boys could not see, the scene changed. Sobs and tears, wild outbursts of grief on every side, and yet, this had been suppressed lest it grieve those brave hearts, who were going forth to battle for home and country." [17] This scene of confined grief is indicative of the emotional conflict that raged in the minds and hearts of the women who were asked to be encouraging and supportive regardless of how they felt.

This inner conflict did not keep women from doing their part to encourage the soldiers, however, acknowledging that they had to act where they could. Judith McGuire, the Southern woman who at first did not seem to understand or accept the necessity or meaning of the war, vowed to do whatever she could to help, despite her doubts. "We are very weak in resources," she writes,

but strong in stout hearts, zeal for the cause, and enthusiastic devotion to our beloved South; and while men are making a free-will offering of their life's blood on the altar of their country, women must not be idle. We must do what we can for the comfort of our brave men. We must sew for them, knit for them, nurse the sick, keep up the faint-hearted, give them a word of encouragement in season and out of season. There is much for us to do, and we must do it. [18]

Although there were rare exceptions, most women were confined to contribute to the war, as McGuire articulates, by sewing, knitting, nursing the sick, cooking, offering kind words, and other tasks typical of the conventional female role. It is difficult to distinguish between devotion to the cause and devotion to the soldiers, but with either one as the root of their actions, women found a way to be helpful and encouraging, despite what they might suffer from the losses.

And the losses were immeasurable. It is important to note that though they remained strong as they watched their families torn apart, Civil War women display in many letters and diaries that they were not ashamed of expressing and confronting their grief, vulnerability, and sense of utter loss in facing the death of a loved one. One Union woman writes to her friend about the death of her brother and the destruction of a profound sibling relationship, saying:

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I have been travelling through dark and thorny places, dear, where there were no roses of thought to send to you [...] To me there come no changes but sad ones [...] The decease of my brother adds greatly to my loneliness. In my isolated position, he was almost my only medium with the world of intellect. How much my mind has owed to him can never be described. I loved him, too, and this separation [...] rouses up a thousand memories of childhood and youth.<sup>[19]</sup>

This woman's loss of her beloved brother left her to confront the stark reality of a destroyed sibling bond, a bond that had offered her both a valuable link to the intellectual world and a loving connection to her past--and yet, she makes no indication of doubt or uncertainty of the war or its cause. This woman's acknowledgement of her grief exhibits the kind of emotional strength and maturity necessary to deal with the profound pain that erupts when a loved one is killed by war.

One Confederate mother, Margaret Junkin Preston, faced several irreparable blows to her cherished family as a result of the war. In her diary, she remembers Christmas Eve 1861, before the war has taken its toll on the family. She illustrated a lovely picture of how a happy American family lived before suffering the effects of the war--with a pleasant, comfortable image modern Americans can certainly relate to. However, with a bleak transition to the miserable reality of her home life after a year of Civil War battles, Preston describes Christmas Eve 1862:

*Now* the sadness of the household forbids any recognition of Christmas; we are scattered to our own separate rooms to mourn over the contrast, and the Library is in darkness. Willy, whose genial face rises so brightly before me, lies in a distant grave -- cut off by a violent death. Randolph's coffin has been carried out of the house so recently that no sunshine has yet come back. Frank is here with his *one* arm, making me feel perpetually grieved for him.<sup>[20]</sup>

This Southern woman's diary provides a deeply personal, honest depiction of a family that suffered enormously from the pains of war. With two sons killed and a husband with an amputated limb, Preston has seen some of the most extreme devastation that came from the Civil War, and she does not refrain from grieving the loss of her family.

Though she unabashedly describes her pain and the misery of her family as a result of the war, Margaret Junkin Preston displays the kind of selfless loyalty to the necessity of the war that both Southern and Northern women had the dedication to maintain throughout. After facing the dismal reality of Christmas after her family has been torn apart by war, Preston says, "Yet why complain? This is nothing to what many others have suffered."<sup>[21]</sup> Her courage in asking "*why complain*"--despite the reality that her family's loss was truly monumental and certainly compares with what many suffered, demonstrates the dynamic strength Civil War women were able to muster in a time of unparalleled crisis.

Thousands of women's lives changed forever in Civil War America, essentially as a result of a fiercely patriotic sense of duty. To develop and maintain the kind of optimism these 19<sup>th</sup> century women exhibit must have required an incredible strength of will. Although the social influences of religious piety and the patriotic duty was powerful

in both Union and Confederate communities, it was ultimately a woman's *natural* strength that either allowed her to look past the devastation of war and carry on—or, that allowed her to weep.

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- [16] Susan Bradford Eppes, *Through Some Eventful Years*, *The American Civil War: Letters and Diaries*.
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- [18] Judith White Brockenbrough McGuire, *Diary of a Southern Refugee During the War*, *The American Civil War: Letters and Diaries*.
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- [20] Margaret Junkin Preston, *The Life and Letters of Margaret Junkin Preston*, *The American Civil War: Letters and Diaries*.
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