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Women of the Civil War: The Denial of Gender Assumptions

A female nurse by the name of Kate Cummings described the following scene in her diary that she had witnessed when she served on a battlefield: “Gray-haired men—men in the pride of manhood—beardless boys...mutilated in every imaginable way, lying on the floor...so close together that it was almost impossible to walk without stepping on them....”¹ The Civil War was an ugly conflict of violence and brutality between citizens on American soil. Historically, battle scenes depicted brave, fallen male soldiers, heavy artillery fire, gruesome conditions, and fellow countrymen attacking each other. Shockingly, not only did brother fight brother, but sister fought sister. Women during the Civil War found various ways to play crucial roles both on and off the battlefield, and the works written by these fearless women reveal the jobs they undertook, despite socially understood “rules” that told them to do otherwise. By taking on roles predominately held by men, the female population defied the laws of sexism and ultimately scrambled pre-existing gender roles during the Civil War era.

During the rise of the conflict, women, as well as men, felt it their calling to help their country and defend their beliefs, but those originally qualified to act on this were male. A lady by the name of Annie Samuels wrote to Confederate Secretary of War J. A. Sedden and showed the female inclination to fight and help their fellow citizens. In this letter, whose proposal was later denied by the Confederate Army, she wrote that the “true and loyal citizens of the Confederate states propose to organize a volunteer regiment for purposes of local defense.

¹ Cumming, Kate. *The Journal of a Confederate Nurse*. Edited by Richard Barksdale Harwell. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press. 1998.

Insomuch as the latest conscription bill takes every lord of Creation from sixteen to sixty— suggest she might to help army in defence of our homes.”² Samuel’s letter showed that women were willing to avoid normalcy and protocol, and directly address a man of great standing, something unheard of before, in order to defend their country and their beliefs. Annie Samuels was able to address such a letter because the Civil War provided women with such a desire that they overlooked “ladylike” ways of being housewives and bystanders, and described their wish to do as man did. Some females knew they would be denied such desires, and therefore belonged to the idea that they were better able to serve such a cause if they were men. “Would God I were a man,” once said Elizabeth Collier. These sentiments were seconded by Emma Walton with the exclamation, “How I wish I was a man!” and Sallie Mumford who claimed, “I do sometimes long to be a man.”³ These housewives from Louisiana wrote such revelations in their diaries and letters, revealing a feeling of discontent and helplessness amongst some nineteenth-century women. Because these are more of fantastical wishes, not directed to any sort of reform, one might argue that this just reasserts the proper roles of women; however, because women wish to be men, it really reveals the possible threat women brought to the derailment of gender roles.

Many women of the time took it upon themselves to support the war, and many were lead to believe if they were male, this could be easily done. Some women took it as far as to actually disguise themselves as men in order to serve. There were a total number of four hundred women

² Letter from Annie Samuels to the Confederate Secretary of War J. A. Sedden Asking to Form a Regiment of Women; 12/2/1864; War Department Collection of Confederate Records, Record Group 109. [Online Version <https://www.docsteach.org/documents/document/letter-from-annie-samuels-to-the-confederate-secretary-of-war-j-a-sedden-asking-to-form-a-regiment-of-women>]

³ 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 Mumford, quoted in Freeman, *South to Posterity*, 109; Dawson, *Confederate Girl's Diary*, ed. Robertson, 318.

who served as American soldiers in the Civil War, amongst these was Madame Loreta Janeta Velazquez, also known as Lieutenant Harry T. Buford, who explained of her wish to fight when she wrote the following: “From my early childhood Joan of Arc was my favorite heroine; and many a time has my soul burned with an overwhelming desire to emulate her deeds of valor, and to make for myself a name which, like hers, would be enrolled in letters of gold among the women who had the courage to fight like men — ay, better than most men — for a great cause, for friends, and for father-land.”⁴ Some of these women disguised themselves better, in regards to personality and character, as the war went on, for like most soldiers, war changed them. Belle Boyd wrote the following of her experience: “...the rifle balls flew thick and fast about me, and more than one struck the ground so near my feet as to throw the dust in my eyes.... I shall never again run as I ran on that day. Hope, fear, the love of life, and the determination to serve my country to the last, conspired to fill my heart with more than feminine courage.”⁵ Such women, first fearful, soon became hardened by war because of such horrifying experiences, and thus seemed less feminine than their masculine comrades. The ability for women to not have embraced their femininity helped them to convince male soldiers, who later revealed how shocked they were when they discovered the true identity of who they believed was their fellow “brother” in arms. One soldier by the name of Robert D. Hannah explained his disbelief when he

⁴ Mann, Herman. *The Female Review, Or, Memoirs of an American Young Lady: Whose Life and Character Are Peculiarly Distinguished, Being a Continental Soldier, for Nearly Three Years, in the Late American War: During Which Time She Performed the Duties of Every Department, into Which She Was Called, with Punctual Exactness, Fidelity and Honor, and Preserved Her Chastity Inviolable, by the Most Artful Concealment of Her Sex: With an Appendix, Containing Characteristic Traits, by Different Hands, Her Taste for Economy, Principles of Domestic Education, &c.* Dedham: Printed by Nathaniel and Benjamin Heaton, for the Author, 1797.

⁵ Boyd, Belle, and Sam Wilde. Hardinge. *Belle Boyd in Camp and Prison*. London: Saunders, Otley, and, 1865.

found out Albert D.J. Cashier was actually Jennie Rodgers with the words, “I never suspected anything of that kind [that Cashier was a woman]. I know that Cashier was the shortest person in the Co. I think he did not have to shave...”⁶ Because females successfully blended into male culture, they offset sexist gender assumptions such as those that supported women had unavoidable feminine ways, and therefore proved wrong the reasons given that hindered them from fighting.

Some women did not want to take the risk of becoming a man, but did not find comfort if they were idle throughout the course of the War. Unlike their disguised sisters, many women followed the medical path and became influential nurses. Since women were originally taught to aid men, for a woman to become a nurse on the battlefield did not seem to be a far stretch from her usual role in society; however, in Louisa May Alcott’s diary, she wrote the following discussion she had with her family: “‘I want something to do.’ ‘Write a book,’ Quoth the author of my being. ‘Don’t know enough, sir. First live, then write.’ ‘Try teaching again,’ suggested my mother. ‘No thank you, ma’am, ten years of that is enough.’ ‘Take a husband like my Darby, and fulfill your mission,’ said sister Joan, ‘Can’t afford expensive luxuries, Mrs. Coobiddy.’ ‘Go nurse the soldiers,’ said my young brother, Tom... ‘I will!’”⁷ This dialogue explains what women were expected to do with their life: marry, teach, or write. Alcott was a distinguished young lady, yet such minor roles were expected of women, thus the mere act women became nurses defied family and community expectations. Another lady who defied such roles was Clara Barton, dedicated nurse and medical pioneer. Leadership roles of the Civil War era were predominately held by men, a practice in which the election of Barton as Department President

⁶ Albert D.J.Cashier. *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*. 51 (Winter 1958): 380–387.

⁷ Alcott, Louisa May. *The Journals of Louisa May Alcott*. Edited by Joel Myerson and Daniel Sheahy. Boston: Little, Brown. 1989.

of the Women's Relief Corps and her induction of various women into other positions of the Corps was a direct blow to the assumption men were meant to lead. Barton, after being elected, wrote a letter to the Grand Army of the Republic that read "...with sincerest appreciation of the honor conferred, I assume the duties of the office. Fully realizing the responsibilities of the position, and that in unity only can there be strength, I earnestly ask the loyal support of each officer and member of our Order,"⁸ after which she continued to induct more female nurses into various leadership positions. When such women moved up the ranks, the idea that men were the ones with all the power faded. Nurses experienced hardships and difficulties while serving, as much as any soldier. The compassion and tenderheartedness of such nurses is shown in the following diary entries from Louisa May Alcott when she wrote, "Till noon I trot, trot, giving out rations, cutting up food for helpless 'boys', washing faces, teaching my attendants how beds are made or floors swept, dressing wounds, taking Dr. Fitz Patrick's orders, (privately wishing all the time that he would be more gentle with my big babies,) dusting tables, sewing bandages, keeping my tray tidy, rushing up & down after pillows, bed linen, sponges, books & directions, till it seems as if I would joyfully pay down all I possess for fifteen minutes rest,"⁹ and again with: "Though often home sick, heartsick & worn out, I like it—find real pleasure in comforting tending & cheering these poor souls who seem to love me."¹⁰ By resenting the doctor's mistreatment of wounded soldiers and her term of endearment for said soldiers by calling them her "big babies," Alcott provides an example of nurses' kind, nurturing dispositions.

⁸ Barton, Clara. *Auxiliary to the Grand Army of the Republic*. Headquarters Department of Vermont, Women's Relief Corps.; 2/29/1908; St. Johnsbury, VT
https://www.loc.gov/resource/mss11973.064_0550_0674/?sp=2

⁹ Alcott, Louisa May. *Selected Letters of Louisa May Alcott*. Edited by Joel Myerson and Daniel Sheahy. Introduction by Madeleine Stern. Boston: Little Brown. 1987.

¹⁰ Alcott, Louisa May. *The Journals of Louisa May Alcott*. Edited by Joel Myerson and Daniel Sheahy. Boston: Little, Brown. 1989.

Furthermore, Confederate nurse Ada Bacotre recalled the horrors many female nurses faced when she said, “I had a terrible fright this morning, my eye fell on a man who had been put there...without my knowledge. Such an object I never before beheld, he is shot in the face, his eyes are blood shoten & his face all bandaged up, face very much swollen & the blood trickling from his noze... I almost dropped on the floor,”¹¹ which explained how shocked nurses’ sweet personalities reacted when they saw Civil War battlefield horrors. Unlike those who fought, nurses were depicted as caring and tenderhearted, which led to further chaos regarding gender assumptions about women, for they were seen as either compassionate, like most believed they should be, or cold and distant, and the battlefield could not be an explanation for the latter because both of these sorts of women served on the front lines. The ability of nurses to take on leadership roles and their dispositions different from those who fought on the front lines resulted in the confusion of the perception of a woman, and ultimately led to the scrambling of gender roles.

From the beginnings of the Civil War, women were proactive in the ways they went about to aid the war effort. While some did not look past the fact they were not men, and others whose attempts at finding a job were shut down because it was merely proposed by women, some females were able to succeed. Whether they were disguised as men or bandaged wounds, women’s roles in the war ultimately led to an abrupt change in the definition of their roles in society and their characters. Previously seen as perfect for the home life, as teachers and wives, women denied these ways that were previously put in place for them. Women soldiers reversed the idea of women not being able to withhold feminine characteristics and fight, and their ability to hide so easily amongst the ranks brought shock to the male community. In contrast to these

¹¹ "York Daily Record, Ada Bacotre." *York, Pennsylvania/Tribune News*, March 25, 1876.

militant women, nurses were compassionate and sympathetic, causing a mixing of ideals and added confusion to the perception of how women should act and their general societal roles. Not only did nurses bring contrasting perceptions, but they also held leadership roles, debunking the idea that only men could be leaders. The various actions of women in the Civil War resulted in a derailment of sexist ideals and ultimately a breaking of the perception of gender roles from those previously instilled in society.

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