The Myth of the Feminist Belle:
Three Confederate Women and Their Diaries

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April 2015
Acknowledgements

This thesis, the culmination of my undergraduate education, would not have been possible without the help of many. I would like to take a few paragraphs to acknowledge and thank them for their support and guidance.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisor, Professor Louis Masur. His enthusiastically taught class encouraged me to explore topics on the Civil War. Without his constant support and motivation, I would not have been able to write such a detailed and analytical thesis. I am beyond grateful for his encouraging words and his constant assistance as my advisor. It is my hope that my thesis reflects his generous time and patience.

I would also like to thank my second reader, Professor Rachel Devlin. Her class inspired me to narrow in on gender aspects of the war and to research women’s diaries. I appreciate the time that she spent reading my thesis and giving insightful and thoughtful comments.

Next, I would like to thank the members of my thesis seminar. Our discussions in thesis class motivated me to write, and helped me understand that I was not going through the stresses and difficulties alone. I am appreciative of their attention and time.

I would like to thank my family and friends. My father and brother gave me the space and quiet to work on my thesis. They also let me vent my frustrations and told me time and again that I would succeed. To my friends, I thank you for also listening to me talk about a topic you did not know about or have vested interest in. My friends gave me encouraging words of advice and could always take my mind off of thesis difficulties. I am thankful to have friends and family that understood the importance of my project.
Finally, I am thankful for the many Civil War diarists who documented wartime transformations in the midst of unrest and instability. Also, I am thankful for those who preserved and edited the diaries. The importance of the words of the three diarists I examined, Lucy, Sarah and Mary, cannot be overstated. While I took issue with many of their beliefs and ideas, their diaries served as the most important tools for my argument, and one of the most important sources of nineteenth century society.
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

The Civil war was a written war. Thousands of Americans wrote letters and diaries in order to witness and mark their place within the struggle. The diaries and letters serve as important windows onto the lives of everyday Americans, especially on the transformations of wartime society. The act of writing stemmed from a newly independent nineteenth-century America which looked to create its own unique national identity. For this reason, the nineteenth century became a culture of self-scrutiny.

Prior to the American Revolution, the South developed a strong identity quite different from its Northern counterpart. Southern society built a patriarchal system around the submission of African Americans and white women, and became enriched by large plantations fueled by slavery. After seceding, Southerners had to reevaluate and enhance their identity in order to create a new Confederate nationality and to justify the Civil War. The war especially made Confederate women become more self-conscious of their own expected roles in Southern society.

By the war’s outbreak, middle and upper class women remained submissive to their husbands in exchange for protection and comfort. Arguably, the war most greatly affected the role of Southern women. The war illuminated their assumed role as sacrificial patriots, and society expected women to cope with suffering and death while contributing to the domestic war front. The new role coincided with pre-conceived notions about women’s duties in society, but gave them a unique role in the war effort that was applauded and praised by the government, newspapers and other media outlets.
Southern women were aware of the mothers of the Revolution, and their maternal sacrifices during the Revolutionary War. Furthermore, like women of the Revolution, Southern women believed that they too were to carry on the morality of the rest of society. Conscious of their new and more important role, women began to become more critical of what was expected of them.

Diary writing gave women an outlet for their wartime frustrations. Often, Diarists would discuss that they wanted to be men in order to fight. Other times, Diarists would discuss the horrors of slavery. By writing down their emotions and feelings, women created a self-conscious, feminine space that allowed them to silently question the existence and place of women in Southern society. Furthermore, the act of diary writing gave women a place in the new national identity, and looked to define the role of the new Confederate woman. In some ways, the diaries could be seen as a strident movement for the independence of Confederate women. By looking inward, women recognized themselves as individuals, and contemplated Southern gender constraints. Female Confederate diaries serve as one of the most important documents of the nineteenth century culture of self-scrutiny, but also on the lives of women during wartime.

Although Confederate diaries often questioned Southern gender norms, women did not look to overturn the Southern patriarchal order. Upper and middle class Confederate women understood that they depended on a Southern national identity that adhered to female submission and slavery. Without the patriarchal and slaveholding order, wealthier women would have no chance at achieving high status or wealth. The only empowerment granted to women came

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through marriage and childbirth. If a woman married wealthy, and bore many children, than she fulfilled societal expectations, and became a good woman. Parents, schools and all facets of society taught women that they had to fulfill gender guidelines in order to live comfortably and prosper in the South. Confederate diarists could not act on any written attacks on Southern society, and most times, Confederate women’s seemingly radical writings did not necessarily challenge gender norms.

This thesis argues that upper and middle class Confederate women believed that maintaining class status was more important than transforming traditional gender notions. Some historians, such as C. Vann Woodward and Charles East, suggested that some of the diarists had feminist instincts. Through the strict scrutiny of diaries belonging to Mary Chesnut, Sarah Morgan and Lucy Breckinridge, it is clear that Confederate women valued the protections of their inferior positions.

A modern day definition states that feminism is “the theory of the political, economic and social equality of the sexes.” A feminist, then, is a person who believes in and strives for equality for any type of male and any type of female. Confederate female diarists cannot be considered feminists, because they often adhered to sexist ideas and lifestyles. Even if the three diarists looked to better some aspects of their own gender status, the aspirations only extended to white, upper-class females. Those on the margins, the poor whites, and African American females, did not have an equal place in the diarists’ world.

In his introduction to *Civil Wars*, George Rable argued that historians fervently search for female diarists who are strident feminists; discontent with traditional society. By only looking for

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extremes in women’s ideas, scholars pass over the fact that many women bred controversial ideas, but ultimately relied on the slaveholding system for support and protection. ⁴ A reviewer of Breckinridge’s diary, John R. Brumgardt said that “today Lucy would be a progressive feminist; as it was, her frustrations remained stillborn on paper, waiting for expression in a time more sympathetic to her views.”⁵ Brumgardt’s problematic statement, as Rable suggested, exaggerated the level to which Lucy was a champion of equal rights. Confederate women did not look for a future, but wanted to remain in their present, where they had safe homes and comfortable surroundings. Additionally, placing modern day ideas on women in the past becomes problematic. The truth was that women of the South grew up and become absorbed into a life of subordination. Most times, there was no choice but for women to adhere to gender constraints which dictated inequality.

Chesnut, Breckinridge and Morgan did not look to greatly change the Southern system because the women remained dependent on their husbands and the slaveholding system. Mary, the wife of a prominent senator, preached abolition and despised the submission of women in marriages. And yet, Chesnut called slave women prostitutes and said that she could not function without her slaves. Furthermore, Mary depended on her marriage to and employment status of James Chesnut in order to hold a high place in society. Mary could discuss politics with Confederate officials like Jefferson Davis, but she understood her submissive role in front of government men.

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⁴George Rable, Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism, (Chicago: The University of Illinois, 1991, X.
Unlike Mary, Eliza Fain, a Tennessean, was from the middle class and praised submission to her husband. Yet, Like Chesnut, Fain wanted her husband to keep his high position in the military in order to maintain the family’s status. Similar to Mary, Gertrude Thomas, a Georgian diarist, spoke of the evils of slavery, but only as the evils applied to women. Thomas represented the woman Chesnut discussed, who ignored their husband’s relations with slaves in order to maintain the appearance of Southern gentility and morality. All three married diarists lived different lives, but still brought up the same ideas and themes regarding slavery and gender. While Fain and Thomas were not as vocal about submission in marriages as Mary, all of the married women relied on their husbands to maintain their status in Southern society.

The two single diarists, Lucy Breckinridge and Sarah Morgan also had similar themes within their diaries despite differences in their experiences. While Lucy remained mostly shielded from the war in Botetourt, Virginia, Sarah became a refugee because of Union occupation of Louisiana. Both women said that they wanted to be men, but understood that their gender constraints prevented them from fighting in war. Morgan never spoke out against slavery, but did expect her slaves to remain loyal. By contrast, Breckinridge called herself an abolitionist, but, like Chesnut and Thomas, was only concerned with the morality of whites. In spite of qualms about marriage and the submission of women, both Sarah and Lucy looked for the perfect mate in order to continue their lives of comfort and dependence.

Like Lucy and Sarah, Julia LeGrand and Lucy Buck, two single women from Louisiana and Virginia respectively, accepted Southern gender constraints and slaveholding society.

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Similar to Sarah and Lucy, Buck used illness as an escape from new wartime duties, especially after the departure of her slaves. Single Confederate women from all areas could not handle new wartime responsibilities and stresses, and used illness as a way to silently escape their own anxieties. Although Buck rarely mentioned her slaves, it was clear that when she did, she expected, like Morgan and Breckinridge, for her slaves to remain loyal to the Buck family.

Julia LeGrand lived a similar experience to Sarah and was a Louisiana refugee. Unlike Morgan, LeGrand felt an overt patriotism to the Southern cause, and spoke out, to the dismay of her neighbors, in front of Union soldiers. Although Sarah would not have agreed with Julia’s public displays, they both shared a hatred for General Butler because he placed women within the public sphere. All four of the single women saw slaves as inferior “creatures” that needed to be controlled and morally guided by masters. The women did not agree on every aspect of Southern society or the war effort, and they did not all discuss the exact same themes. Still, the fact remains that the women understood their place in Southern society. Even if the girls did speak out, it was in order to preserve the future of Southern society that depended on the submission of women and slaves.

Through the close examination of Confederate female diaries, it is clear that war made women question their place in wartime society, but that the women did not look to transform the South. Upper and middle class women of all ages, and from different states, wanted to preserve their own statuses and to continue to thrive under antebellum culture. Women could offer self-examinations within their diaries, but they never acted on calls for abolition or marriage reform.

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9 Ibid., 209.
Instead, women maintained their proper roles, sought or preserved an acceptable marriage, and preached the inferiority of African Americans. In the end, ideas about gender reform became permanently inked into female diaries because class status dictated the outward actions and beliefs of Confederate women.
Chapter 1

Sarah Morgan Dawson

On the eve of the Civil War, nineteen year old Sarah Morgan lived in Baton Rouge, Louisiana where patriarchy reigned and slavery was king. From 1862 until 1865, although the later entries are scarce, Sarah kept a wartime diary to provide her companionship in times of change and sadness. The Morgan family lived among the middle class with a comfortable two story home, and eight slaves. Like her father, Sarah began the war as a political Whig and unionist. By the war’s end, the destruction of her Baton Rouge home, the death of her two brothers, Gibbes and George, only weeks apart, and her relocation to Clinton and New Orleans caused her to “confess [herself] a rebel, body and soul.” 11 The diary, previously edited by her grandson Warrington Dawson in 1913, was published in a new edition by Charles East in 1991 in hopes of preserving more of Sarah’s original voice. In the introduction, East presumed that Sarah’s ideas about womanhood displayed in her diary made her a feminist.12 On the contrary, Sarah’s reluctance to succumb to new war time responsibilities, her silence in heated social situations, and her want to be a man proved her need to maintain antebellum gender norms. Sarah believed that the South, and therefore her position in society, could only be saved from Unionist expansion through the elite women’s ability to retain femininity and gender norms.

Sarah grew up among Southern ideals and codes of honor that placed women in submissive and genteel roles. Despite Sarah’s wealthy upbringing, her Civil War diary exemplified how young Southern women often struggled with the role of women in the midst of

12 Ibid., xxiv.
a violent, masculine conflict. Despite her conflicts with wartime, Sarah remained loyal to the Confederacy, and to its beliefs regarding slavery and gender. When Sarah could not outwardly express her frustrations with society or gender issues, she would challenge Southern ideals within the confines of her war diary. Sarah’s diary entries can often be seen as rebellious because she questioned the significance of women in the war effort, and also wished to be a man. However rebellious Sarah’s entries may have seemed, Sarah never outwardly showed great frustration towards gender roles and seemed satisfied with black inferiority. Sarah’s inability to act upon what East called “feminism” showed that Sarah was not looking to change Southern society. In reality, Sarah wanted to maintain traditional gender norms in order to preserve her class and racial status after the war. Throughout Sarah’s diary, she grappled with her new wartime role in society, and realized the constraints of Southern womanhood. Yet, Sarah’s public maintenance of traditional gender norms showed that she valued a post-war return to a non-feminist, patriarchal system.

Sarah embraced Southern ideals that viewed slavery as a benevolent institution, which caused her to see her own slaves who stayed with Morgan’s. Southerners believed that slavery represented the idea of benevolent paternalism where masters took care of slaves and slaves returned the master’s protection for work.¹³ Despite that Sarah was a woman and not considered the reigning master, Victoria Ott explained that Sarah, like many young women, would have been taught at a young age to treat slaves like family members who needed their mistresses, care and guidance.¹⁴ Sarah showed her understanding of the reciprocity of the slave system by teaching the enslaved Christianity. In the midst of Union bomb threats on Baton Rouge, Sarah

¹⁴ Victoria E. Ott, *Confederate Daughters Coming of Age During the Civil War* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 32.
made sure to reserve bible classes for her slaves every day at ten. During the time, the slaves “difficulties and grievances during the day [were] laid before” Sarah and she would “sit like Moses judging the children of Israel, until [she] could appease the discord” which included “work[ing] Rose’s stubborn heart to a proper pitch of repentance for having stabbed a carving fork in Lucy’s arm.”

Sarah manipulated the story of Moses and the Israelites to better meet Southern expectations. Laura Edwards mentioned that many masters did not teach their slaves this story because it assumed that God wanted slaves freed and masters punished. Sarah, however, changed the story to make herself Moses, and the slaves, the Israelites, who saw Sarah as their chosen leader, and therefore had to listen to her.

After the meeting, Sarah exclaimed that the slaves would shout “God Bless Miss Sarah!” but Sarah remained unsure if she could accept “flattery from… humble creatures.” Sarah saw her biblical teachings and moral behavioral lessons as benevolent not only because her parents taught her it was, but also because the child-like depicted slaves thanked her for her actions afterwards. Yet, Sarah’s own acceptance of benevolent paternalism did not allow her to realize that the slave’s violent behavior towards one another in the first place could have represented a small rebellious act. The benevolent institution provided comfort and security for Sarah, whose own family retained wealth, power and privilege in Baton Rouge. For this reason, Sarah did not understand how slaves could leave for Union lines.

Sarah believed that slavery gave her family wealth and offered benefits to both blacks and whites which caused her see her slaves, who did not runaway to Union lines, as loyal.

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Because Sarah believed God divinely sanctioned slavery, she, and many other Confederate women, could not understand why slaves would want to leave their benevolent masters.\textsuperscript{18} After Union soldiers made their way through Baton Rouge, Sarah encountered the possible freedom of her slaves. Sarah sarcastically remarked that her “servants they (union soldiers) kindly made free and told them they must follow them” but Margaret, a Morgan slave, rejected her freedom by saying “I don’t want to be any free-er than I is now…I’ll stay with my mistress” and Charles, another slave, said “I am only a slave, but I am a secesh negro, and wont fight in such a d—crew.” Sarah recounted that “five thousand Negroes followed their Yankee brothers…but ours remained” and that “the conduct of all our servants [was] beyond praise.”\textsuperscript{19} Sarah’s sarcasm towards Union soldiers spoke to the anger and resentment Confederate’s felt towards the Federal cause which, Southerner believed, looked to destroy the Southern way of life.

Sarah believed that her slaves stayed in order to reap the benefits of such a benevolent system. In reality, Sarah’s slaves did not want to remain enslaved, but the Morgan slaves probably had no means to live in freedom or grew fearful of rumors about violent Union troops, and unsafe Union camp conditions. Furthermore, the Morgan slaves would have associated the Morgan plantation as their home, and a home that they had put great work into.\textsuperscript{20} As the slaves saw Union soldiers destroying slave quarters, raping slave women and burning the plantations they had worked hard to cultivate, slaves would see the Union army as their oppressors, and not as their liberators. Sarah believed her slaves stayed with her because they enjoyed the alleged protection of whites in exchange for hard labor, but the truth was much more complicated. Sarah

\textsuperscript{18} Faust, \textit{Mothers of Invention}, 77.
\textsuperscript{19} Morgan, \textit{Sarah Morgan}, 250.
may have believed that she was a maternal protector of loyal slaves but Sarah never would see African Americans as equal.

Because Sarah prospered under the comforts of slavery, she could not accept the equality of blacks and whites. After Sarah left her home in Baton Rouge, she constantly obsessed over what would happen to her possessions at the hands of the Union Army. As Faust mentioned, Sarah and other female Confederates obsessed over their lost and saved possessions because they marked the upper class women’s superior race, female gender and high social status. Sarah’s clothes assigned her to a specific social space, where other beings, such as black slaves, did not exist. In order to maintain the racial hierarchy her parents taught her at a young age, Sarah had to maintain her clothes, and keep them out of the space of black slaves.

After leaving her house for the second time in August, 1862, Sarah’s greatest fear was that the army would “clothe their negro women with [her] clothes, since they only steal for [blacks]” and Sarah claimed she “would rather have all [she] owned burned, than in the possession of the Negroes.” Sarah further explained a situation in a neighbor, Mrs. Jones’, house where “the negroe women, at whose disposal all articles were placed…walked around selecting things with the most natural airs and graces.” Sarah saw her clothes as important to her social status and gender, but she also had an underlying fear that blacks would become or thought themselves, the equals of whites. Sarah sarcastically commented on the way the black women flaunted themselves in Mrs. Jones’ house precisely because she thought it was ridiculous that blacks could lay claim to white people’s articles. Already disgusted that slaves wanted or

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23 Ibid., 215.
were being lured to freedom, Sarah could not bear that Union soldiers also wanted slaves to wear her garments. Sarah’s obsession with maintaining her own higher societal positions stemmed from her devotion to the patriarchal system, and her reliance on slaveholding society.

Through Sarah’s devotion to her father and brothers, and less respectable treatment of her mother, Sarah showed that she valued the Southern patriarchal order. In January 1862, Sarah began her diary entries, but not with the turmoil and unrest of the Civil War. Instead, Sarah’s first two diary entries focus on the three month old death of her brother Harry, who dueled till the death, and then her father, who died of natural causes six days later. In Sarah’s entries, it can be seen that she was engulfed in, as Leann Whites referred to it, patriarchal family order. Sarah remembered the day her father died as “the simple story of how [her] mother was made a widow, and [she and her siblings] were left orphans” because “all that made our home happy, or secured to us was gone; a sad life lay before [them].” As the head of household, Sarah’s father supported her way of life, and maintained order on the plantation. Although Sarah’s mother was predictably more present in her domestic sphere, Sarah could even fathom the idea of just having a mother, and would prefer to see herself as an orphan. Sarah had an emotional bond with her father, as the youngest, and he seemed to dote on her with material good and emotional affections. Within her diary, Sarah admitted that “Father was very proud of [her]. They used to say [she] was his favorite daughter.” From a young age, she was taught about paternal benevolence in slavery to gear her for her own submission to her father’s paternal will. With an

24 Morgan, Sarah Morgan, 5-11.
26 Morgan, Sarah Morgan, 22.
27 Ott, Confederate Daughters, 21.
28 Ibid.
29 Morgan, Sarah Morgan, 25.
understanding that paternalism gave Sarah her wealth and status, Sarah excluded her own mother’s efforts in securing the Morgan household.

In contrast to her reverence and respect for her father and brother’s, Sarah described her mother as weak. According to Ott, Sarah should have also had a close bond with her mother, who would have taught Sarah all domestic responsibilities.\(^{30}\) Sarah did mention that her mother assisted her in her education; however, most of Sarah’s diary only gave indications of her mother being weak and unimportant.\(^{31}\) After her brother, Charlie, had “gone to Greenwell before daybreak...” and had left “four women…to save [themselves]”, a canon went off in Baton Rouge and, Sarah’s “Mother had just come in, and was lying down, but sprang to her feet and added her screams to the general confusion.”\(^{32}\) By noting the absence of men in the house, Sarah assumed that the chaos was due to the lack of patriarchal figure. Additionally, Sarah’s mother, the presumed eldest in the room, did not help control matters, but equated herself with the younger women and added to the confusion. While Sarah’s father was meant to control the household, financially and verbally, Sarah’s mother retained a more submissive role, even in the eyes of her children. Unlike Sarah’s father, Sarah did not believe that her mother could protect the house, but instead saw her as a burden in a stressful situation. The Southern patriarchal system prohibited Sarah from seeing her mother in a powerful or responsible role. Like her mother, Sarah’s own femininity caused her to struggle with new war time responsibilities.

Despite Sarah’s superior class, Sarah reluctantly sacrificed gender norms and social mores in hopes of preserving Southern society. After the Morgan’s heard canon fire in Baton Rouge, Sarah, her sisters and her mother fled to Greenwell. In Greenwell, Sarah wrote “I could

\(^{30}\) Ott, *Confederate Daughters*, 21.
\(^{32}\) Morgan, *Sarah Morgan*, 87.
not quite reconcile myself to the idea of sleeping in a room with seventeen people, nine of whom were negroes—among them a few who are not endurable in the open air, even.”

As a refugee, Sarah could not deal with being away from home where she had to immerse herself with other classes and races. Sarah’s home represented an enclosed space where she only had to equate herself with people of the same class status and race. In Greenwell, Sarah had to share sleeping quarters with blacks, which would never happen in her home. Still, Sarah only spoke out in her diary about her refugee status, and willed herself to sleep among African Americans. Sarah’s awareness of the war’s abridgement of her own class status, yet her ability to perform sacrificial tasks, spoke to the idea that Sarah assumed her sacrifices would allow her to return to normal life after the war. While being a refugee challenged Sarah’s class status, performing new tasks around the house challenged Southern ideas of femininity.

As a Southern woman, Sarah was unaccustomed to menial labor, and complained about her new job because it challenged gender norms. Before the war, Sarah’s father and brother’s handled all slave management and the slaves handled all other menial tasks. By contrast, Sarah received a ten month education in order to learn ornamental skills of domesticity such as music and art. During the war, the death of her father, and the absences of her soldier brother’s, forced Sarah, her sisters and her mother to take up new responsibilities within the home that they had never been trained for. In order to maintain the Baton Rouge house, the Morgan’s class indicator, afloat, Sarah, “not a servant on the lot,…swept two whole rooms…ruined [her] hands at gardening…replaced piles of books, crockery, china…and discovered [she] could empty a dirty hearth, dust, move heavy weight [and] make [herself] generally useful and dirty.”

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33 Morgan, *Sarah Morgan*, 98.
35 Edwards, *Scarlett Doesn’t Live Here*, 82.
36 Ott, *Confederate Daughters*, 81-82.
reference to her hands especially shows that she wanted to maintain the outwardly gentle and pretty features. According to Drew Faust, many Confederate men expected young women, like Sarah, to retain their genteel characteristics despite wartime struggles. Sarah had to deal with the complicated aspects of trying to perform sacrificial duties in order to maintain gender norms, while at the same time sacrificing her own handsome womanly ideal in the process. Sarah’s struggle with performing new wartime roles led her to often complain about illness.

Sarah was unaccustomed to her new domestic role, and like many women, used illness as a way to control her own quickly changing role in society. After performing the many domestic tasks, Sarah assumed that she would be “laid up for ever after the fatigue of this past week.” Illness, a common theme in Sarah’s diary further demonstrated the confines of her femininity and class. In other moments, Sarah would begin to feel ill because the Union army was approaching or for other reasons that threatened Southern order. As Clara Junker argued, fatigue and illness allowed her ways to rebel against the new responsibilities and upheavals of Southern society. Instead of showing outward displays of anger, Sarah created a feminine space of confinement where she could take control in an unstable situation. Sarah’s outward silence during the war showed that public speech remained a masculine space. Sarah would show patriotism for the war effort, but her actions suggested that she needed to remain in a feminine space in order to save Southern society.

Sarah showed support for the Confederacy through small acts of a patriotism, but did not challenge traditional gender norms. During the Civil War, the Northern blockade and lack of material items caused household self-production to become a key patriotic duty. While Sarah

37 Faust, Mothers of Invention, 47.
38 Morgan, Sarah Morgan, 103.
does not write about a great amount of home production, possibly because she was a refugee, she
joined with other Southern woman to sew clothes for Confederate soldiers. Sarah described
sewing shirts for two Confederate soldiers; “Yesterday I was interrupted to undertake a very
important task…Mother and Lilly happened to be in a store where two officers were buying
materials for making shirts, and volunteered to make them…All day we worked, and when
evening came, continued sewing by the light of these miserable homemade candles.” In this
entry, Sarah juxtaposed her care for and participation in sewing for soldiers to the displeasure
with homemade candles. Just as Sarah controlled her illnesses, Sarah volunteered to sew shirts
which for Sarah, allowed the task to remain feminine. The act of sewing for a soldier still
symbolized a domestic confinement that submitted to males in society. By contrast, the act of
candle making marked Sarah’s own decreasing value in society. Unable to purchase candles or
other good like the Morgan family used to, Sarah resented the candles as symbols of a loss of
status. For Sarah, Sewing would represent her own ability to conform to gender norms while
saving the Confederacy. Sewing represented what Kimberly Harrison referred to as a non-
 rhetorical rebellious act. Because the act was silent, Sarah maintained her place in a Southern
feminine sphere. Sarah would show other small acts of patriotism, but rigidly disagreed with
women who displayed public outrage.

Sarah internalized Southern gender norms that forced her to be quiet and submissive.
Southern societal codes of honor dictated that women be submissive to and prudent towards men
in exchange for male protection. Sarah showed that she experienced and understood Southern
ddictates of honor and valued female rhetorical self-control. At the scene of her father’s death,

40 Faust, Mothers of Invention, 46 and 49.
41 Morgan, Sarah Morgan, 256.
42 Harrison, The Rhetoric of Rebel Women, 74.
43 Ibid., 25.
Sarah “could not stand it; but [she] remembered what father said when Hal died—that [she] had more fortitude than any woman he had ever seen.” 44 Even during the Morgan patriarch’s heartbreaking death, Sarah showed self-constraint and chose not to cry. Instead, Sarah allowed her sister’s Lydia and Miriam to grieve openly, for she promised herself the night before that ““To-day is mine, tomorrow is Miriam’s and mother’s” and “I did not shed a tear.” 45 Sarah’s ability to only grieve for one day, showed her ability to live up to her father’s expectations and maintain self-control.

Sarah’s devotion to her father’s wishes, and therefore patriarchal order, caused her to believe in the submission of married women. Through Father’s own example, Sarah believed that all “marriages as happy, all husbands as indulgent and kind, all wives as mild and submissive as father and mother” for “[she] look[ed] for a no more beautiful model.” 46 Here, Sarah showed that she understood that women remained inferior to men in order to receive male protection. Sarah and many other women’s understanding of Southern codes of honor became confused by war. During the war, the departure of men caused women to have to protect plantations and Southern honor, while still fulfilling gender expectations. While the entire order of Southern society shifted, Sarah managed to retain her self-control and submission to men of her same class status even in front of Union soldiers.

Although Sarah saw Union occupation of Baton Rouge and New Orleans as threatening to Southern womanhood, Sarah’s own notions of femininity prevented her from outwardly expressing her frustrations. After New Orleans fell to General Benjamin Butler in 1862, Confederate woman insulted Union soldiers through humiliation tactics such as spitting and

44 Morgan, Sarah Morgan, 19.
45 Morgan, Sarah Morgan, 18.
46 Ibid., 80.
negative remarks. In May, 1862, Butler issued General Order No. 28 which “ordered that…when any female shall, by word, gesture or movement insult or show contempt for any officer or soldier of the United States…shall be…held liable to be treated as a woman of the town.”\(^{47}\) Butler’s order treated women as prostitutes, and undermined the notion of Southern female honor and femininity.

Although a Northerner, Butler still equated femininity with reverence and submission, and was unwilling to treat women who lost self-control as ladylike. Sarah vented her anger towards Butler’s order within her diary and wrote that “women will not receive the slightest protection from the government, and the men will all be justified” and “if any man takes a fancy to kiss me, or put his arm around me, he will be upheld in the outrage if he only says I pulled my dress from under his feet?”\(^{48}\) While Sarah mentioned the fear of sexual assault that went along with the order, the real attack on womanhood came from the politicization of the Southern woman. Under the presumed idea that women would be protected within the patriarchal system, Sarah, and other Confederate women, did not believe they would ever bear Union punishment for patriotic behavior. While Butler created Order No. 28 in order to force women back into submission, the order pushed women into the political realm. Sarah did not like the order because it questioned all of her preconceived notions about Southern gender norms, and attacked her own sexuality. Society did not expect Southern woman to engage in political behavior, and therefore women could not be blamed or punished for such behavior. Yet, Sarah chose to attack the sexual implications of the order because it allowed her to retain a feminine inferiority. Traditional notions assumed that women were biologically inferior and weak, and therefore Southern women only wanted to claim that the Order was a sexual attack on women, and not a

\(^{47}\) Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 209.

\(^{48}\) Morgan, *Sarah Morgan*, 76.
Despite that Sarah grew angry at Union occupation, Sarah did not confront Union soldiers, and instead looked down on her fellow Confederate women who did.

In response to Union occupation, Sarah wrote in her diary that she wanted to speak out against officers; however, Sarah knew that Southern rhetorical norms prevented her from committing outward signs of rebellion. After the Union took Baton Rouge, Butler also outlawed public displays of Confederate flags and symbols. Out of defiance, Sarah claimed that she would “devote all [her] red, white and blue silk to the manufacture of Confederate flags. As soon as one is confiscated, [she would] make another, until [her] ribbon [was] exhausted” and she would “wear one pinned to her bosom—not a duster but a little flag—and to…the man who dare[d] attempt [to pull it off]—well! A pistol in [her] pocket will full up the gap.”

Clara Juncker described Sarah as a “phallic woman” because Sarah gave herself masculine power by threatening to defend herself against another man. Juncker did not take into account that Sarah silently discussed defiance within her diary, and also threatened the use of a gun because of her sexual vulnerability. If Sarah had actually approached a Union soldier and waved her gun in their face then Juncker’s argument would hold true. Instead, Sarah respected gender norms about submission and sexuality that only kept the thought of a pistol within her diary.

In fact, a few entries later, Sarah regretted her choice to wear a flag in the midst of many respectable Union soldiers. Sarah “with [her] flag again flying” went to the State House to protest the occupation of Federal Troops. At the State house, Sarah encountered “Federal officers…standing on the first terrace… [she] had not expected to meet them, and felt a painful conviction that [she] was unnecessarily attracting attention by an unladylike display of defiance”

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49 Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 211.
Sarah could not help but notice “what fine, noble looking men they were, showing refinement” and afterwards she went home and “hung [her] flag on the parlor mantle there to wave…in the shades of private life.” Although other women saw it as their patriotic duty to form collective resistance, such as Sarah performed, against Union officers and soldiers, Sarah felt that she needed to act under Southern codes of honor that dictated she retain self-control. The officers, whom Sarah described as polite, fit into her elite and white space, and therefore Sarah felt an obligation to refrain from outward hostilities. In response to Sarah’s respect, Sarah believed that the soldiers would protect her, just as Southern men protected women. At first, Sarah claimed that she would be defiant of Union occupation, but her acceptance of gender norms forced her to reconsider her acts, and the outspoken acts of other women around her.

While other women in Louisiana, including Sarah’s mother, felt that their patriotism allowed for outward displays of defiance, Sarah felt that it was more important to maintain gender norms than it was to perform patriotic duties. Aside from the fact that political unrest became unsafe for women, Sarah thought that women should not partake in politics because it reflected poorly on antebellum ideas of femininity. In New Orleans, Union soldiers confronted Sarah and her family members with the oath of allegiance. During her oath Sarah “half crying…covered [her] faced with [her right hand] and prayed breathlessly for the boys and the Confederacy, so that [she] heard not a word he was saying until the question “so help you god” struck [her] ear…[then] there came an awful pause in which not a lip was moved.” By contrast, Sarah’s mother would not take the oath because she had “three sons fighting against [the soldiers] and [they] had robbed [her], beggard [her]” Sarah did not support her mother’s actions but

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52 Morgan, Sarah Morgan, 68-69.
54 Faust, Mothers of Invention, 198-99.
55 Harrison, The Rhetoric of Rebel Women, 66.
instead called the action “rash conduct” and that “if she had” taken the oath “at first she would have spared [them] a most painful scene.” Sarah sacrificed her own outward loyalty to the Confederacy and she retained outward silence during the oath. By acting prudently, Sarah used her silence to protect her brother, a pro-Unionist living in New Orleans. Sarah’s mother acted against Sarah’s own ideas of proper, prudent behavior and sacrificed the safety of her family in order to get one moment of political catharsis in front of Union soldiers. For Sarah, it was more important to protect her family than to show outward expressions of loyalty to the Confederacy or her soldier brothers. Sarah’s faithfulness to gender norms and rhetorical rituals prevented her from seeing women engaged in public roles. For this reason, Sarah could only imagine herself in masculine spaces as a man.

Sarah’s inability to see women in public spaces caused her to wish herself a man in order to engage more vigorously in the war effort. Sarah understood perfectly well that women could not fight in war, but had to perform smaller tasks that contributed to war such as making shirts. In Sarah’s eyes, she saw her brother’s, who fought in the war as “worth something” but she believed that they would “die off” as “worthless women, of no value or importance… [would] live on.” Sarah also suggested that she saw herself as worthless because she could not fight and contribute to the war as her brother’s did. Sarah would constantly say the phrase, “if I was only a man” because she “groan[ed] over her misfortune in being clothed in petticoats” and questioned why women “c[ouldn’t]…fight as well as the men.” Sarah did not believe that her and her fellow women should go out in dresses and fight for the Confederacy. Instead, Sarah truly wished she was a man because she understood gender ideals that kept her confined to dresses and

56 Morgan, Sarah Morgan, 486 and 488.
57 Harrison, The Rhetoric of Rebel Women, 51.
58 Morgan, Sarah Morgan, 77.
59 Ibid.
domestic work. Sarah “kept a suit of Jimmy’s hanging in the armoire for six weeks waiting for Yankees to come, thinking fright would give [her] courage to try it, but…[she] was ashamed to let even [her] canary see [her].” Although Clara Juncker argued that cross dressing made Sarah a feminist, in reality, Sarah’s attempt to cross dress more greatly confined her to femininity. Sarah equated fashion and gender, and could not sacrifice her own gender in order to appear a man and do more for the war effort. As a woman, Sarah understood she could not cross dress or fight in the war, and she knew that she could only do masculine things, if she was biologically a male. Just as Sarah’s contempt for the female sphere did not make her a feminist, Sarah’s outrages against modern marriages supported her Southern identity.

By challenging marriage, Sarah upheld societal expectations that focused an entire young women’s life on finding an adequate husband. Southern women received educations in order to prepare them for domesticity. Upper and middle class women, such as Sarah, looked for a mate in their own socioeconomic group, and looked for someone who was strong and exuded masculine authority. Throughout the diary, Sarah struggled to find men that she felt adequate to marry, and often believed that she would not get married. Sarah described “Brother…with his six feet three and a half mortality, and that tremendous frame; his talents, manners and education” and did not understand “why are not the rest of the men as good, noble and true as” the Morgan boys. Sarah’s inability to find a man equivalent to her brother’s or father in strength and intelligence caused her to say that she “was not made for a wife; but [she] was destined to be old

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60 Faust, Mothers of Invention, 232.
61 Morgan, Sarah Morgan, 167.
62 Juncker, “Behind Confederate Lines,” 14 and Faust, Mothers of Invention, 221.
63 Ott, Confederate Daughters, 15.
64 Edwards, Scarlett Doesn’t Live Here,” 21.
65 Morgan, Sarah Morgan, 37.
maid in [her] cradle.”

Sarah’s awareness of the importance of marriage prevented her from settling on any man. If Sarah did not believe that she would marry, then she would have forsaken courting culture. Yet, Sarah’s courting practices, and her inability to find a compatible mate led her to think that she could not marry.

Although Sarah seemed like she challenged the idea of marriage, Sarah only wanted to get married if she felt that the man could uphold gender norms and protect her. Sarah engaged in courting rituals, just as any other Southern woman, and was not against marriage as she sometimes made it seem. The problem with some of these men, such as Colonel Morrison, who accompanied her on various horse rides, was that she would “infallibly have an extremely uninteresting companion… and would have very little pleasure beyond that derived from being in motion.” Instead, Sarah wanted someone like Colonel Beaux, although married, who “touched on [her] mind, and [she] listened entranced to him” and told her that “woman’s mind is the same as the man’s, originally; it is only education that creates the difference.”

Sarah was self-conscious that she had only received ten months of schooling, which was why she admired Colonel Beaux’s linguistic skills, and his want to put women, intellectually, on equal footing to man. After the interaction with Beaux, Sarah exclaimed in her diary, “Why was I denied education… with the exception of ten short months at school where you learned nothing except arithmetic, you have been your own teacher… I do not like even the darkness to see me in my humiliation.” Unlike Sarah’s unfounded contempt for marriage, Sarah clearly stated in her

66 Morgan, Sarah Morgan, 282.
68 Morgan, Sarah Morgan, 167.
69 Ibid., 290.
71 Morgan, Sarah Morgan, 290.
diary that she resented the fact that she did not receive the same education as men. Still, Sarah was not publicly making this outcry nor was she asking to change all gender ideas. Sarah’s attack on the lack of education for women spoke more to the value Sarah had for masculinity. Sarah wanted an equal education to men because she admired men’s linguistic skills, and wanted a marriage where she could communicate with and worship her husband without feeling ignorant. Sarah’s ideas about education and marriage may seem rebellious, but she founded the ideas based on her obsession with creating a perfect patriarchal order within her own marriage.

Sarah Morgan’s diary serves as proof to the complicated aspects of gender in Southern society, and how these issues became engulfed and exaggerated by war. During the war, Southern women began to inhabit new political and public spheres. Instead of joining in with the rebellious women, Sarah thought it more prudent and feminine to stay out of politics, and retain antebellum ideas. Sarah wanted to preserve Southern culture which submitted slaves to a benevolent institution, placed men in superior positions, and confined women to the domestic, genteel sphere. In holding on to traditional gender ideals, Sarah thought she could hold on to Southern society as it was before the war. After losing family members and her home, Sarah would have seen her gendered status in Southern society as the only thing that connected Sarah to her happy antebellum life.

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72 Whites, Review of *Sarah Morgan*, 387.
Chapter 2

Lucy Breckinridge

Conceivably, Lucy Breckinridge is not the most well-known diarist to come out of the Civil War. After reading her diary, the worth of her words becomes immediately understood. Miss Breckinridge’s views on womanhood match the writings of a learned and older woman, such as Mary Chesnut, but her innocence with regards to slavery reveals her young age. From 1862 until 1864 Lucy recorded her own, even if sheltered, wartime experiences. The Breckinridge’s were among the wealthiest members of Botetourt County, Virginia, and Lucy’s father, Cary, was a prominent County judge. While Lucy was an infant, the family moved to the estate of Grove Hill where they would reside for the remainder of Lucy’s life. The Breckinridge’s owned 131 out of the County’s 3,737 slaves. The Breckinridge slaves worked the Grove Hill farm and mill which produced tobacco, corn and other cash crops or necessities for family living. Throughout the war, Lucy maintained allegiance to the Confederacy through fasting, prayer and sewing clothes for soldiers. By the end of the war, Lucy had lost three brothers and had been engaged twice.

Lucy absorbed and tried to obey the patriarchal order of society, but she had a much stronger relationship with her mother, Emma, and her siblings than she did with her father. Like Lucy’s strained relationship with her father, Lucy seemed to maintain a complicated relationship with the patriarchal system in general. Within her diary, Lucy blamed marriage for ruining women’s freedoms and genteel nature. Also, Lucy declared herself an abolitionist, but mainly as a benefit to whites. In spite of Lucy’s comments, she was engaged to two men, one of whom she ended up marrying, and flirted with many others. Even though Lucy appeared to have more
affection for her mother, she reverently obeyed her father’s orders. Additionally, Lucy did not express dramatic outward emotions and used code, even within the confines of her diary, to disguise correspondence between her and her second fiancé, Lieutenant Bassett. While Lucy questioned the restraints marriage and husbands placed on women, and even slavery, Lucy never actively resisted Southern society. Even within her diary, Lucy did not question many gendered aspects of the South.

Throughout the war, Lucy maintained a diary that allowed her to discuss her innermost thoughts and life happenings. Despite Lucy’s devotion to writing, she wrote “my journal is such a stupid thing that I do not like to look at it. I never write in it except late at night when I am so tired and sleep that I cannot think.” Lucy did understand, as Faust mentioned, that authorship gave her independence and a new consciousness on life. Within her diary, Lucy could write down her own thoughts and feelings, and focus on herself as an individual, instead of as a part of the collective identity of the South. Lucy’s claim that she was not conscious as she wrote suggested that she was not responsible for what she wrote within the diary. Clearly, Lucy knew that she was breaking gender constraints within her diary by making comments on things like slavery and marriage. Just as Mary Chesnut returned to and edited her diary in order to protect Southern identity and norms, Lucy also tried to make an excuse for her independent prose. Although radical for the time, the comments Lucy made within her diary did not necessarily stray from gender norms. While she often ridiculed marriage and showed direct favoritism towards her mother and other female relatives, Lucy knew that her life depended on Southern patriarchal society.

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73 Breckinridge, Lucy Breckinridge of Grove Hill, 133.
74 Faust, Mothers of Invention, 162.
While Lucy had a close relationship with her mother and other female family members, Lucy obeyed Southern patriarchal society by seeing her father as the most authoritative figure. Unlike Sarah Morgan, who valued her father’s love and presence more than her mother’s, Lucy favored her mother. After Lucy’s mother had left Grove Hill to visit a relative, Lucy wrote “we miss Ma so much. The house seems so quiet and desolate when she is away. There never was such a sweet loving Mamma as ours. I wish I could be more industrious and useful for her sake… I am afraid Ma has nothing to comfort her about me.”\(^{75}\) While Pa oversaw work on the plantation, Lucy’s mother, Emma, looked after all domestic responsibilities. Because of Ma’s responsibilities and Pa’s frequent business absences, Lucy would have spent more time with her and been more emotionally attached to her.\(^{76}\) Although Pa, the patriarch, was home while Ma was away, Lucy felt that her mother’s presence and, not her father’s, completely shaped the dynamic of the house. Still, Lucy spent a lot of time with her mother precisely because her mother had to prepare her for motherhood and domestic duties. Lucy needed to form a special bond with her mother and not her father in order to be completely integrated into Southern patriarchal society. Similarly, Lucy’s close relationship with her female family members, especially cousin Kate Breckinridge, was accepted and encouraged by Southern society.

Lucy formed close ties to her sisters and female cousins, which gave her independence, but also maintained her ties to traditional womanhood. As “Cousin K was packing to go to Oaklands” Lucy wrote “It was a miserable day, and she was so sweet to me that the thought of separation was unendurable.”\(^{77}\) Because Lucy spent her time mainly in the presence of women, especially during the war, Lucy developed close bonds with many women around her. Ott

\(^{75}\) Breckinridge, *Lucy Breckinridge of Grove Hill*, 32.

\(^{76}\) Ott, *Confederate Daughters*, 21.

discussed the equality that close sisterhood bonds afforded young women such as Lucy, who were used to answering to superiors such as their parents. Ott’s analysis can be extended to Lucy’s relationship with Cousin Kate. If Lucy’s mother was to prepare her for womanhood and her father and male siblings were to control her life, Lucy needed a young, female outlet in order to discuss her emotions or other matters, considered by others to be trivial. Although Lucy’s relationship with female relatives may have granted her some escape from a male dominated society, the idea of kin networks was encouraged by patriarchal society.

Laura Edwards argued that by maintaining close relationships with family members, the girls would not treat themselves as individuals, but would see their own life as always connected to motherhood, sisterhood, cousinhood, and other female relationships. Furthering Edwards argument, the relationships isolated young women within their own families. By doing this, Southern society could monitor young women at all times, and make sure that they did not receive outside influences, such as young men, or learn to challenge any aspect of the patriarchal system. While Southern society saw these relationships as beneficial, they may not have intended Lucy to form such an intimate bond with a fellow female. In some ways, Lucy’s relationship could be looked at as straying from gender norms because she saw a more personal connection with her cousin Kate than she would see with any young man. At the time though, Southern society would have deemed her close relationship with female family members as beneficial to perpetuating the Southern patriarchal order. Lucy’s obedience to her father showed that her mother’s teachings and close kin networks did in fact teach her the rigid structures of patriarchal society.

78 Ott, Confederate Daughters, 23.
79 Edwards, Scarlett Doesn’t Live Here, 19-20.
Lucy may have had a more intimate relationship with her mother and female relatives, but she understood that her father had unyielding authority. In one account, Lucy wrote “I had decided last night to go to Richmond on Tuesday with Cousin Betsy to stay two days: it would have been charming, but Pa would not consent. I would give a great deal to see my precious Sallie, but it cannot be until next summer.” Lucy had a closer bond with her mother than she did with her father, but she recognized that her father had the ultimate authority. As Anne F. Scott discussed, young women’s obedience to their fathers, and later their husbands, maintained the patriarchal system and therefore the wealth of the plantation family. The Breckinridge’s wealth played a large role in perpetuating the Southern doctrine of paternal benevolence; Lucy believed that her father protected her and afforded her a high social status. In return for the protection and status, Lucy had to obey her father. The visit seemed and would have been very important to Lucy because of the importance of visiting with female relatives. The only reason Lucy was able to form close relationships with her mother and kin was because the relationships further educated her on patriarchal beliefs. From childhood, Lucy knew that she had to accept her father’s authority in order to keep her status. Just as Lucy obeyed her father for protection, she also believed that the family slaves gave up independence for protection.

Although Lucy had her doubts about the slave system, she ultimately believed paternal benevolence protected slaves and bound them to plantations. Many Confederate women, such as Sarah Morgan and Mary Chesnut, became upset when Union encroachment promoted slave’s to leave. In 1862, before the Yankees had reached Botetourt, Lucy wrote “George told us a conversation he overheard between Uncle Phil and some of the young servant men, Uncle Phil

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80 Breckinridge, *Lucy Breckinridge of Grove Hill*, 144.
telling the direction they must take when they wish to run off to join the Yankees. We always treated him like a friend rather than a servant, and his ingratitude is more disgusting than it would be in the others. Slavery is a troublesome institution and I wish for the sake of the masters that it could be abolished in Virginia."82 Lucy’s frustration with the slave, Uncle Phil, proved her indoctrination into the slave system. As with many Confederate women, Lucy considered her slaves to be family members, but more like inferior children. Lucy did not understand the complicated notions of slavery that entailed the suppression of human beings desires and wants. Instead, Lucy only understood that her family treated the slaves well, and therefore believed that the fair treatment should be reciprocated with obedience.

Realistically, the Breckinridge’s did not see Phil as an equal friend, and Lucy did not understand the horrors of slavery. The Breckinridge’s possibly rewarded Phil with some type of affections, and even possibly gifts; however, Lucy’s relationship with Uncle Phil would not have been a mutual bond of affection, as with Kate. Rather, Lucy would have viewed herself as a mother looking over a dependent.83 Lucy’s loss of faith in slavery did not have to do with the human rights issue involved, but with the common idea that slavery ruined the moral compass of Southerners. Both Mary Chesnut and Gertrude Thomas wrote about the immorality of slavery because it promoted sexual intercourse between white men and black women.84 Although Lucy did not approach the issue of sexuality, Lucy did share the idea that whites, and not the enslaved, suffered under slavery.

82 Breckinridge, Lucy Breckinridge of Grove Hill, 36.
83 Ott, Confederate Daughters, 32-33; Rable, Civil Wars, 33.
Lucy believed that she was taught to treat slaves with respect, which made it more difficult for Lucy to accept the departure of slaves. After many slaves had already fled, Lucy wrote “I find I am a true abolitionist in heart—here I have been crying like a foolish child for the last half hour because I saw Jimmy chasing poor, little Preston all over the yard beating him with a great stick, and Sister not making him stop but actually encouraging him…my blood boiled with indignation…I guess my sons had better not beat a little servant where I am! I am so thankful that all of us have been properly raised and never allowed, when we were children, to scold or strike a servant.”85 Southern women connected violence and slave control with men, and believed themselves to be good Christians. Lucy’s mother would have taught her how to deal with slaves, and her mother must have followed Southern guidelines that taught women to be maternal and sensitive with their dependents.86 Many plantation mistresses physically took out the stresses of war and the loss of male authority on their slaves. By contrast, Lucy’s mother, and therefore Lucy, practiced the Southern tradition of self-constraint. Furthermore, by Lucy representing a case of cruel slave owners, Lucy also painted her own family in a more positive light.

Although Lucy struggled with the moral consequences of slavery, she believed that her family protected and cared for their slaves. While her declaration that she was an abolitionist appeared radical, Lucy’s hate for violence and maternal instinct followed Southern ideals. Also, Lucy foreshadowed a time where she too would be a slave owner and teach her children moral codes. Lucy understood that slavery granted her wealth and status, and believed that her family appropriately managed slaves. The fact that Lucy was confused as slaves fled to Union lines confirmed that she understood slavery to be a paternalistic bond, and not a moral injustice.

85 Breckinridge, Lucy Breckinridge of Grove Hill, 211.
86 Rable, Civil Wars, 33-34; Faust, Mothers of Invention, 63-64.
Yankee mistreatment of slaves would have further proved to Lucy that slavery was a moral practice. After the Yankees finally entered Botetourt in 1864, Lucy wrote that “they talked dreadful of the negroes and said they took no care of them whatever. There was about 300 with them, the women and children just dropped, so tired and dirty, and yet 8 more of ours joined them…they took all of our horses and cattle…poor women had to march along almost naked and starving.”

From birth, Lucy’s family taught her that both slaves and women remained submissive to men in order to receive protection. Since the slaves did not conform to paternal benevolence, Lucy’s entire upbringing and lifestyle would have been called to trial. If the slaves did not listen to orders, than there was no telling what would become of patriarchal society, and Lucy’s status. Lucy had not only grown accustomed to a lifestyle void of menial labor, but she also grew up in accordance to paternal benevolence.

In some ways, the Yankees poor treatment of African Americans did conform to Lucy’s beliefs. According to Lucy’s understandings, the slaves would not be awarded protection by others if they left their masters. Still, the issue remained that the slave did in fact leave their masters despite Lucy’s notions about benevolence. Lucy, like many Southern women, turned a blind eye to the fact that African Americans suffered under slavery. As a reminder to the terrible conditions of enslavement, Laura Edwards wrote that slaves and their offspring were property that could be sold at any moment. Female slaves, especially, lived at the sexual disposal of their masters. As Mary Chesnut mentioned, many young women pretended to be ignorant of the relationships their own husbands and male relatives had with female slaves. Lucy may have been one of these women, and did not want to bring up the issue within her diary. Lucy’s life of

88 Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 77.
privilege was formed around the idea of paternal benevolence. The slaves’ departure marked a
turning point in Lucy’s life that threatened her own class status and understanding of Southern
society. The war transformed Lucy’s notions of slavery and Southern womanhood, and would
also affect her ideas about marriage.

Lucy appeared to challenge traditional Southern gender roles by questioning women’s
roles in marriage. In the beginning pages of her diary, Lucy wrote that “very few people can
expect happiness after they are married…the wife’s love grows, becomes deeper, more patient
and fonder…the husband’s almost invariable cools down into a sort of patronizing friendship…if
they care for their wives at all it is only as a sort of servant.” Lucy was not the only young
Confederate women to have qualms about marrying. Ann Firor Scott mentioned many women
had romanticized ideas of Southern manhood, and grew disappointed at the reality of the
prospects of men, especially during wartime. To take Scott’s argument further, Lucy, like many
young women, would have also enjoyed her life of leisure that involved incessant reading,
writing and going out with friends. If Lucy were to marry, she would have to sacrifice her
current lifestyle and submit to the demands of her husband. According to Southern gender ideas,
women were the more sympathetic sex, and therefore more capable of loving. In Lucy’s
comment, she used that traditional notion, but made women seem like the better spouse for being
able to love more. Lucy had some issues with traditional marriage roles, but would not sacrifice
her own wealth and protection in order to act on such notions.

During the war, Lucy courted three men and became engaged to two others. Lucy’s
distaste for marriage proved to be short lived and societal pressures placed a heavy burden on her

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decisions. In speaking about her first engagement, Lucy wrote, “though I am engaged to
Captain Houston, I have no idea that we shall ever be married.”93 Yet on the next page, Lucy
also wrote “my whole heart shall be [Captain Houston’s].”94 Wartime further complicated
Lucy’s relationship with marriage notions. Before the war, women attempted to extend courtship
in order to hold off marriage.95 The war placed a great amount of pressure on women to court
and marry quickly out of fear that the lack of men would hurt their opportunities. Lucy may have
rushed into engagements with people like Captain Houston, who she did not seem to be fully
committed to, because she feared the marginalization of bearing old maid status.96 Women,
Rable argued, only looked forward to marriage because of their limited opportunities in
society.97 Lucy’s opportunities were in fact bleak; she could either stay a dependent of her
parents or become a dependent of her husband. Either option gave Lucy protection, but marrying
protected her from societal ostracism, and gave her something in her life to control and look
forward to.

Marriage did submit women to inferior roles, but courting culture gave women power and
independence. Lucy listened to her parent’s comments regarding whom she should marry.
Lucy’s obedience did not stop her from entering into frivolous engagements, and forming secret
codes. In place of saying things like “I engaged myself to Lieut. Bassett this week and do love
him very much,” Lucy said “I will write the private parts of my journal now in figures…8 57

93 Breckinridge, Lucy Breckinridge of Grove Hill, 56 and 167
94 Ibid., 58.
95 Ott, Confederate Daughters, 32.
96 Rable, Civil Wars, 8.
97 Ibid; The South did have jobs available to women such as teaching, but the jobs were limited
and paid poorly. Southern society made sure that women like Lucy could not survive without
marriage.
Lucy’s statement showed that young women did have a control over the length of their courtships and their future marriages. Before the war, Ott suggested that women prolonged courting practices and would push off marriage. Women would have wanted to delay marriage in order to prolong dependency. By contrast, courting gave young women some extent of independence and freedom. Southern society deemed it acceptable for women to go out and talk with young men, and the war gave even more freedom to the courting culture. Because fathers and brothers went off to war, the young women received less supervision, and could have more privacy with who they courted. In Lucy’s case, her family did not feel like deprivations of wartime, and her parents remained fairly involved in her life. Lucy’s father was often absent, but when he was home, he read Lucy’s mail. Thus, Lucy wrote her feelings for the Lieut. using numbers and letters in order to hide the relationship from her family. Ultimately, Lucy’s manipulation of courtship rituals gave her independence, and choice. Even if prolonged, courting was a tactic that ended in marriage to a suitable mate. Lucy needed to find a mate that she could depend on to protect her.

Lucy’s quest to find an attractive and suitable mate proved that she did not wish to openly challenge societal norms. Lucy and her sister, Eliza, constantly received male visitors, often Confederate soldiers stationed nearby, at their home or at other estates they would visit. In one instance, Lucy met Dr. Archer and Dr. Holloway at the Oakland’s, another estate, where she described the men as “most attentive gallants” who “flattered and petted me so much that I was right much spoiled” Lucy enjoyed courting rituals and the attention she received from Southern men. Lucy’s need to marry and conform to Southern culture was why she would scrutinize men

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98 Breckinridge, *Lucy Breckinridge of Grove Hill*, 157; the letters and numbers are the code Lucy used within her diary and with letters to Basset to describe their relationship.
100 Ibid., 115.
like “he has some qualities I admire very much… I always wanted to love someone upon whom I could lean, someone to protect me, to be firm for me, and help me to do what is right.”  

Lucy’s relationship with the men she courted and flirted with depended on specific characteristics, such as their physical strength, intelligence and handsomeness. In a review of Lucy’s diary, James Sweeney argued that Lucy’s distaste in marriage and her difficult in finding a perfect man made her pessimistic about Southern society. Lucy’s initial fears about marriage may have stemmed from her ability to find a mate that she could depend on, and found intelligent. The pessimism Sweeney believed Lucy felt was more due to her frustrations about not being able to live up to Southern societal expectations and find someone she could depend on. In a society where women had no other alternative than to marry and bear children, Lucy had to find the perfect mate. At first glance, Lucy appeared to be challenging marriage. Yet, Lucy conformed to Southern society and looked for a mate because she knew she depended on the Southern patriarchal system.

Although Lucy ultimately decided to remain a dependent on Southern society, Lucy frequently commented that her wartime role at home was useless and unfulfilling. During the war, Lucy discussed that she sat around reading, sewing and writing letters. Lucy would often write things like “I must stop writing my journal now and write to Emma and Eliza. But for my companions, the Japonica, Luna and violets, and my beloved friends, Addison, Steele, etc., I think I should die of ennui… The Spectator is constantly before my eyes.” As Ott mentioned, before the war, young women received an education that promoted fragile activities and prepared

103 Rable, *Civil Wars*, 53; Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 102.
them for domestic life.\footnote{Ott, \textit{Confederate Daughters}, 18.} Furthermore, Lucy’s wealth and location shielded her from the deprivations of war. For those reason, Lucy involved herself in the war through reading newspapers and writing about events and battles. War did not greatly transform Lucy’s genteel lifestyle, and she was able to continue doing the activities she performed before the war. Yet, Lucy’s reading of the Spectator and indirect involvement in the war, through her brother’s service, made her obvious to other’s sacrifices. Lucy saw her as her own brother’s sacrificed their lives for war, and reflected on her own inability to do the same.

Lucy fulfilled Southern expectations by taking on the role of a domestic patriot, but wanted to do more for the war effort. For example, Lucy said “I wish women could fight, and I do think they might be allowed to do so in the mountains and in the fortified cities. Their lives are not more precious than men’s, and they are made to suffer—so a leg shot off or a head either wouldn’t hurt them much. I would gladly shoulder my pistol and shoot some Yankees if it were allowable.”\footnote{Breckinridge, \textit{Lucy Breckinridge of Grove Hill}, 133.} As Rable argued, Lucy’s statement seemed advanced because she called for the fighting of Confederate women; however, Lucy followed up her statement by presenting women as impassive sufferers.\footnote{Rable, \textit{Civil Wars}, 151-52.} In reality, Lucy was not looking to defy gender customs and find her place in the armed forces. Southern society pushed women to be patriots, but many women, like Lucy, found it difficult to simply sew for soldiers. Even if Lucy wanted to be a man, she knew that Southern society would not let women leave the domestic front.\footnote{Faust, \textit{Mothers of Invention}, 232.} Lucy did not defy gender constraints, and even showed that she understood women had to suffer at home and perform domestic duties. Lucy’s acceptance of traditional female roles showed in her stoicism, even when discussing death.
Within Lucy’s diary, she followed Southern gender expectations and refrained from writing about strong emotions. Lucy explained a situation where “I was breakfasting with [Dabney Carr Harrison’s] father at Miss Deborah Couch’s when we received a dispatch informing him of the death of a young and beautiful daughter whom he was just going to see and half an hour later received another dispatch telling him that his noble and talented son…was killed… I am always interested in observing the emotions and passions, I thought without any reflection on the subject that Mr. Harrison’s grief would be doubled… he could not apply his mind and feelings sufficiently to either one to feel the same intensity of grief… Eliza will be here tomorrow.”

Lucy’s commentary on death appears cold and unemotional. Confederate women had to deal with constant death and struggle, but society expected them to remain passive sufferers. Lucy experienced the death of her three brothers, and witnessed as many other families lost male family members. By removing herself from the emotional aspect of Mr. Harrison’s sadness, Lucy controlled her own emotions. Lucy may not have encountered Union soldiers until 1864, but death remained a constant in her life. Numbness and desensitization to death could have also led Lucy to remain stoic in sad situations. When Lucy did feel the stresses or anxieties of war, she, like other women, developed a coping mechanism.

Like many Confederate diarists, Lucy used illness as a way to assert control in wartime. In many of Lucy’s entries, either herself or her female friends and family were constantly overcome with illness. In one entry, Lucy commented that “They [the Yankees] have whipped our forces and are advancing in this direction. I felt very low spirited last night…I sat by myself and was miserable… Eliza has a very bad sore throat tonight.”

The war brought women great stress and anxiety. Women had to idly watch as their male relatives and friends fought and died

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110 Ibid.
in order to protect the Southern way of life. While Rable suggested that Southern society dictated that stress was a female quality, the way women could deal with that stress also defined their womanhood.\textsuperscript{111} Faking and exaggerating illness gave women a way to control some aspect of the war, and deal with their new wartime roles. As mentioned, women could not show outward emotions, and illness provided them a way to silently and independently stress about death and war.

Lucy’s illnesses never surmounted to serious diseases, but lasted only a day or so. In one entry, Lucy wrote “I was sick all day and could not sit downstairs and see Mr. Woodbridge. Late in the evening I went downstairs and found the family had resorted to the garden, so Edwards and I determined to follow. We feasted on grapes and returned to the house.”\textsuperscript{112} Lucy’s quick recoveries proved that she associated illness with stress, and not with an actual disease. When Lucy felt stressed about war or upset about death, she did not want to talk to anyone or deal with the real world. By saying she was sick, Lucy would be left alone by people, and could control who she saw and how she spent her time. Illness allowed Lucy to maintain gender customs by controlling her emotions. Yet, Lucy could also use illness to control her own life and defy dependency restrictions of the South.

Lucy Breckinridge’s diary reveals a young woman’s ability to manipulate the Southern patriarchal system, while attempting to stay within the confines of gender norms. In her diary, Lucy developed close bonds with women, especially her mother. Because Lucy had such a close relationship with women, she disagreed with submissive role of many women in marriages. Lucy challenged gender norms further by questioning her own role during wartime. While men could

\textsuperscript{111}Rable, \textit{Civil Wars}, 58.
\textsuperscript{112}Breckinridge, \textit{Lucy Breckinridge of Grove Hill}, 48.
contribute to the war through enlistment, Lucy could only sit idly at home. Lucy and other Southern women used illness as a way to escape problems and create their own spaces of control within a male dominated society. In spite of Lucy’s issues with Southern norms, she displayed her understanding and acceptance of gender expectations. Lucy accepted her father’s dominance in the household as well as the idea of paternal benevolence as it applied to herself and slaves. Lucy argued against marriage and the brutality of husbands, but did not hesitate to seek attractive men for engagement. Certain aspects of Southern society caused Lucy to speak out within her diary and question the role of women. Still, Lucy, in and out of her diary, stayed true to Southern gender norms and did not look to transform Southern culture.
Chapter 3

Mary Boykin Chesnut

Perhaps Mary Chesnut’s diary is the most famous and controversial diary to be born out of the Civil War. Many argue that Mary’s diary is not a diary at all, but a work of fiction pieced together by her own journals and embellishments of actual accounts. During the war, Mary kept a journal that was not intended for public viewing. In the 1880’s, Mary used her journal to create this wartime diary, that has been edited two times. Unlike the other two versions, which were heavily abridged and edited, the 1981 and most recent edition by C. Van Woodward looked to restore Mary’s diary as close to its original form as possible. Woodward chose to include experts from Mary’s 1860’s journal which show revisions that Mary had made, and help expand on certain scenes and comments. Although Mary maintained many of her ideas and opinions in the 1880’s version, she chose to leave out important comments, especially in regards to slavery. Clearly, Mary wanted to construct a diary of a Southerner’s way of life and feelings during the war, but made sure to stay conscious of societal norms and expectations. After the war, Mary claimed that she wanted to publish a diary that did not tarnish her fellow countrymen’s images. Mary’s journal and diary differ in content, dates and events, but both establish the same story. The story of an upper class, highly intelligent, married woman who challenged yet needed to accept planter class dictates of class and social strata.

Before marrying James Chesnut, a Southern man many years her senior, Mary grew up in Camden, South Carolina. Mary’s father, Stephen Miller, was a South Carolina senator and governor where he spread his views regarding the benefits of slavery. As a child, Mary lived on a plantation with many slaves, and her father’s wealth granted her access to one of the best female
boarding schools in Charleston, South Carolina. At the age of 17, Mary married James, who received an education from Princeton and who was the sole heir to his father’s large South Carolina estate. After marriage, Mary moved to Mulberry, the Chesnut plantation, and lived with her in-laws who often tested Mary’s tolerance and patience. James’ societal connections and high education, allowed him access to the U.S. senate, where he met and befriended Jefferson Davis, future president of the Confederacy. James’ connection to prominent politicians, who would later be powerful members of the Confederacy, allowed Mary access to politics and high society which granted a unique and close perspective to Confederate politics. Mary’s fortunate upbringing and marriage granted her a greater voice and role in society than most females living in the South at the time. Yet, Mary’s immersion into the planter elite and Confederate politics prevented her from wanting to transform the society she lived in. In his introduction to the diary, C. Vann Woodward said Mary had “abolitionist leanings and [was a] militant feminism.” Woodward also said Mary’s writings represented “bold feminism and defense of oppressed womanhood.” In reality, Mary’s educational and wealthy upbringing caused her to want to marry and forced her to depend on the work of slaves. Like East’s introduction for Sarah, Woodward over emphasized the extent to which Mary argued against Southern society. Without slavery or marriage, Mary would not have had the opportunities to speak in public or to enjoy luxuries in the midst of the war.

During wartime, Mary’s educated upbringing and marriage to a wealthy statesman offered her political access and comfort. As a young girl, Mary attended a prestigious school in South Carolina that encouraged her to read and understand literary references. In her diary, Mary

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114 Ibid., xlvi.
often made used novel references to explain events or people, and constantly shared that she was
reading a new book. Mary used reading as a way to escape from the horrors of war. In one entry
she wrote, “it is a painful, self-imposed task. Why write when I have nothing to chronicle but
disasters? So I read instead. First Consuelo, then Columba. Two ends of the pole certainly. And
then a translated edition of Elective affinities.”

Many wealthy diarists’ like Mary, used reading
as a way to escape and pass by the monotonous depression of war. Faust suggested that women became so engrossed in reading that fictional characters became just as real as the diarists friends and family. Arguably, Mary could make connections between literary characters or events and reality, which allowed her to quote literature as she wrote.

Mary easily inserted sentences from poems, such as “Bingen on the Rhine,” into her diary because she could quickly make connections to her own life. For instance, Mary critiqued women who refused to sew for soldiers and stated “they have seen no ragged, dirty, sick and miserable soldiers lying in the hospital, “no lack of women’s nursing, no lack of women’s tears”.” In Mary’s 1880’s revisions, she added many of the literary references, especially the 
non-biblical quotes. Although Mary constructed her diary after the war, Julia Stern rightfully argues that Mary planned on returning to her 1860 journals in order to more greatly embellish on her literary quests. Other diarists like Sarah Morgan, also used reading to escape the realities of war, and often quoted from the things they read. Sarah, though, did not think her vast literary knowledge granted her equal intelligence to that of learned men, and looked down on her own educational background. By contrast, Mary’s political connections allowed her to have confidence in her intelligence, and make bold statements about the uneducated.

115 Mary Chesnut, *Mary Chesnut’s Civil War*, 333.
Mary connected her own intelligence and education to a higher social status, which allowed her to critique her neighbors as well as Yankees. An unnamed friend of Mary’s asked her to overlook “a letter from a girl crossed in love” where “her parents object[ed] to the social position of her fiancé, in point of fact forbid the banns.” The girl wrote “I am miserable” and called her sister a “mean retch.” Mary wrote “for such a speller I said a man of any social status would do. They ought not to expect much for her. If she wrote her “pah” a note, I am sure that “stern parent” would give in.”\textsuperscript{118} Here, Mary speaks to not only the importance of education for social status, but also for women in general. Just as women were expected to find intelligent mates, Mary believed that women too had to be educated enough to deserve a husband. Just as Mary believed she was intelligent enough to be with a South Carolina Senator, she believed that other women must have educated backgrounds in order to be of the upper class or marry into the upper class. Mary even makes sure to contrast her own intelligence, by stating in the next entry “I am miserable, too, today— with one s and one l.”\textsuperscript{119} Mary’s connection to education and class may have stemmed from her own intelligence, but her diary also showed a connection between the uneducated and the Yankees.

In Mary’s diary, she often commented on the unintelligence of Yankees and the failure of Northern schools. Mary’s husband’s prominent political status allowed Mary to look at Yankee documents and letters found in the camps. In 1861, Mary recounted “They brought me a Yankee soldier’s portfolio from the battlefield…one might shed a few tears over some of his letters. Women—wives and mothers—are the same everywhere” but “what a comfort the spelling was. We were willing to admit their universal free school education put their rank and file ahead of us.

\textsuperscript{118} Mary Chesnut, \textit{Mary Chesnut’s Civil War}, 166. 
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid.
literarily. Now, these letters do not attest that fact. The spelling is comically bad." Like many diarists, Mary tried to relate to the plight of Union soldiers and their family members. Still, Mary saw herself as superior to Northern women, and in turn saw the South as superior to the North. Southern women associated Northern women with wage labor and the public sphere. By contrast, Southern women, by in large, did not enter the workforce, and appeared to look down on Northern women because of their inability to stay in the domestic sphere. Seemingly, Mary looked at the Northern women or the North in general as inferior to the South precisely due to their industrial society which allowed for free schools. Furthermore, Mary need the reaffirmation that the South was the superior side, even in an intellectual way, that made them stand out from the North. It was acceptable for Mary to relate the Southern plight to the North as long as the South dominated their enemies as well as the war.

In June of 1862, as Mary also documented fighting near the capital at Richmond, she also recorded reading another Yankee epistle. Mary wrote “Comfort. Free schools are not everything…Yankee epistles found in camp show illiterate they can be, with all their boasted schools. Fredericksburg is spelled “Fretrexbug,” medicine “met-son,” “to my sweat brother.”

In the earlier entry, Mary poked fun at the Yankees inability to spell, but still, like many diarists, tried to relate to struggling Northern women. By later in the war, Mary further protested the superiority of free schools, and was even willing to attack the spelling of a northern women’s rendering of “sweet brother” instead of attempting to relate to the North.

Like Eliza Rhea Fain who wrote, “a designing political aristocracy have considered our overthrow… [the Union is an] oppression threatening the extinction of the whole Southern

120 Mary Chesnut, *Mary Chesnut’s Civil War*, 108.
121 Faust, *Mothers of Invention*, 81.
122 Ibid., 358.
population,” Mary believed that the North had the potential to ruin the Southern way of life. In the later entry, Mary would have been more fearful of a negative outcome of the war. Mary witnesses government quarrelling’s and recounted the Northern occupation of New Orleans. As the war raged on, Mary needed to know that the South stood superior to Northerner’s in education, and therefore in class. If the South could not win, Mary wanted them to retain their superior intelligence and social status. For Mary, the young girl’s inability to spell would have connected her to the North, and would have challenged Mary’s own presumptions about Southern intelligence. Mary needed the young girl and all Southerners to stay superiorly educated to northerners in order to be patriotic and disassociate themselves from the North. Mary’s frustrations with spelling speak to her own desire for the South to reign superior, but also her own self-consciousness of the possibility of a Northern victory. Mary wanted to maintain an overt patriotism for the Southern cause in order to maintain her own high position in society.

During wartime Mary’s wealthy upbringing along with her marriage to an upper class politician allotted her many luxuries. Unlike many plantation owners’ wives, Mary did not have children and lived a life of leisure. Although she was not “‘boarded” in Washington” as Anne Firor Scott described the wives of Congressman, Mary frequently attended gatherings that included government officials and was close friends with President Davis and his wife. Even before the war approached, Mary recounted that “twice last year I was scolded for South Carolina—by proxy…Captain Porter blew me up at Mrs. Sidell’s garden party, where we had a long talk…At Hoboken, were Mary Stevens was married, General Scott took a shot at me. He

123 Fain, Sanctified Trial, 11.
124 Stern, Mary Chesnut’s Civil War Epic, 110.
126 Scott, The Southern Lady, 29.
thundered and threatened, and I did not heed his warning. I knew it was coming and I dreaded it. But I answered as best I might for my side.”

In this case, Mary attended government functions where she met up with future Federal generals. Mary may not have “thundered” back at the Generals, but she held enough of a powerful position for them to see her as the face of South Carolina. The Generals did not only see Mary as the face of a state, but seemed to be blaming her, to some extent, for the imminent secession that she refused to imagine. Within her Diary, Mary acted as though she practiced the first actions of patriotism through self-control and support of the South. By keeping calm while in a public setting, Mary showed the men that she was still an honorable woman, who would support her country through careful articulations. Unlike many women, Mary inserted herself into her husband’s political life, and maintained a public role. Still, Mary knew to watch how she spoke when discussing politics with men.

As a senator’s wife, Mary engaged in political conversations with government officials and leaders, but understood that gender restricted her public role. Unlike Sarah Morgan who complained about women discussing politics, Mary Chesnut enjoyed talking politics and being submerged into public life. Mary wrote “My experience does not coincide with the general idea of public life. I mean the life of a politician or statesman. Peace, comfort, quiet, happiness, I have found away from home.” The Civil War forced many women into the public sphere by forcing them to be good Confederates through public displays of patriotism and interactions with Union soldiers. Mary had a different experience to that of many Confederate women because she was already a member of the political and public sphere through access gained by her husband’s job.

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128 Ibid., 31.
130 Rable, *Civil Wars*, 33.
The war only exacerbated Mary’s access to politics, and she had an even closer relationship with President Davis, than she would have had with government heads in DC.

Although Mary enjoyed her access to the public sphere, she also understood Southern gender norms. For instance, Mary wrote “it is pleasant at the president’s table. My seat is next to Joe Davis…There is a great constraint however. As soon as I repeated what the North Carolina man said on the cars—that North Carolina had 20,000 men ready…the president caught something of what I was saying and asked me to repeat it, which I did, although I was scared to death.” President Davis then said to Mary “Madame when you see that person tell, tell him his statement is false” and Mary wrote in return “Silence ensued, of the most profound. When I take my seat my grace is a prayer to God that I may not put my mouth in at the wrong place—or time.”\textsuperscript{131} In some ways, Mary’s ability to sit at a table with the president and other prominent Confederates placed her outside of the traditional gender limits. Unlike many women, Mary could speak equally about certain political topics, and she could listen in on important political discussions. Still, Mary understood that she could not go beyond many gender expectations that required her stay prudent and watch her tongue around men. As Faust mentioned, many women, like Mary, would speak out in public, but then censor or reprimand themselves within their diary. Mary enjoyed a greater amount of time in public than most women, but still stayed true to gender expectations. The war pushed Mary and other women into a greater public and political role; however, Mary could not comprehend the Union army’s treatment of women who became more public.

Because Mary spent a lot of time in the public sphere, she resented the fact that the Union army unsexed women due to their new public roles. Confederate women entered the public

\textsuperscript{131} Chesnut, \textit{Mary Chesnut’s Civil War}, 85.
sphere through overt acts of patriotism that involved harassing Union soldiers and defying Union laws of dress. Women entered a new political realm that they had been deprived of before the war, but many women considered their new role to be under the guise of traditional womanhood. Through political actions, women felt that they upheld the morale of the army and defended the southern patriarchal institution which granted women wealth and protection. At the beginning of the war, the South made the war about womanhood, and the threat to gender norms. For instance, Southern newspapers and the government called the South a she, and frequently invoked the fear of black men raping white woman if the North were to win. Mary’s proximity to the Confederate capitol would have made her aware and concerned about this issue. If the war was about women, then their own public acts could be read as protecting themselves and womanhood, and not just stepping outside gender boundaries.

Because women believed they were fulfilling gender duties, and would therefore be protected as women, Mary did not understand how Union soldiers could treat women like men. In 1861, Mary noticed that “women who come before the public eye are in a bad box now. False hair is taken off and searched for papers…all manner of things, they say, come over the border under the huge hoops now worn…so think the poor creatures coming this way are humiliated to the deepest degree…women can only stay at home, and every paper reminds us that women are to be violated, ravished, and all manner of humiliation…to men—glory, honor, praise, and power if they are all patriots… to women—daughters of eve—punishment comes still in some shape, do what they will.” Mary believed that like men who fought on the battlefield, women too entered the public eye in order to be patriots. Yet, Mary struggled with accepting that like men,

132 Rable, *Civil Wars*, 33.
women now had to be subjected to stricter treatment by Union soldiers. The Union treatment of women who entered the public sphere suggested, contrary to popular opinion, that overt female patriotism was not fulfilling traditional gender ideals.\textsuperscript{135} If the Union army targeted other public women as unfeminine, than Mary too would be classified as unfeminine, and the entire Southern patriarchal system would be overthrown. Mary seemed to be an independent woman who enjoyed public life, but she knew that a Union threat to patriarchal society would destroy her own wealth and protection.

While Mary enjoyed a public life, and would object to slavery, she benefited under the Southern patriarchal system. Mary only enjoyed the luxuries of attending political and public events because of the prominent position of James. By September of 1863, when many women in the Confederacy struggled to feed their families, Mary wrote from Richmond “Turkeys were thirty dollars apiece, but Laurence [Chesnut slave] kept us plentiful supplies. Molly [Chesnut slave] cooked admirably. We live well—kept open house indeed. Our friends the soldiers from the army breakfasted, dines and supped at the corner of Clay and 12\textsuperscript{th} Sts... about once a month a man come on with all that the plantation would furnish us.”\textsuperscript{136} Also, in October 1863, Mary “gave a party...Mrs. Davis very witty. The Preston girls very handsome. Isabella’s fun fast and furious. No party could have gone off more successful, but J.C. decides we are to have no more festivities. This is not the time or the place for such gaieties.”\textsuperscript{137} Even though Mary lived in a temporary house in Richmond, she relied on her slaves to cook and clean for her in order to maintain all the comforts she had in South Carolina. Additionally, Mary’s ability to travel to Richmond and still live in a sizeable home with slave quarters and enough to eat showed that her

\textsuperscript{135} Harrison, \textit{The Rhetoric of Rebel Women}, 62.
\textsuperscript{136} Chesnut, \textit{Mary Chesnut’s Civil War}, 434.
\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., 492.
husband’s political status granted the Chesnut’s access to more comfortable lives than most Southern families. The only reason Mary was discouraged from having parties was because her husband did not deem the parties appropriate, and not because the Chesnut’s did not have the financial means. Faust suggested that Mary wrote about comfort and performed rituals of wealth in order to show the preservation of her class privilege at a time when the Union greatly threatened the survival of the planter elite. Yet, Faust contradictorily stated that Mary’s assertion of her own class negated from the idea of women as self-sacrificing, and therefore went against traditional Southern gender norms.\textsuperscript{138} Through Mary’s obsession with keeping her husband’s powerful position, Faust’s statement cannot hold true. Mary did not want to be self-sacrificing, and give up her wealthy lifestyle, because that would have admitted a defeat of the patriarchal system which had granted her wealth and protection.

Mary discussed the pressure she put on her husband to maintain his job in the government, and to stay close to President Davis. Mary and her husband’s extravagant lifestyle depended on the family maintaining their position in the slaveholding class.\textsuperscript{139} Mary’s husband was especially tied to the patriarchal system because he received his power from the Confederacy whose foundation rested on the subordination of slaves and women. In 1861, Mary grew frustrated with her husband’s political complacency and wrote “I do not see what Mr. C means. He writes to no one—knows nothing that is going on… if he has one active friend in the state I do not know it…in the meantime at these fiery times he is as peaceful here, and as secure!… JC dashing aside letters and not answering them as if he was heir apparent to the throne and the world and his election certain…I feel so depressed for my country and for myself and for

\textsuperscript{138} Faust, \textit{Mothers of Invention}, 245.
\textsuperscript{139} Ott, \textit{Confederate Daughters}, 32.
my future political hopes.” Mary understood that she could not achieve political success on her own, but needed her husband to keep his job in order to maintain wealth and influence. Without her husband’s position, Mary could no longer sit amongst Confederate elites and hold an unusual female position in public.

Mary’s only form of power in a male dominated society stemmed precisely from the male of her household, her husband. As Catherine Clinton mentioned, Mary attended Davis’ social and political gatherings but “her gender meant that she could only press her nose up against the glass.” Although Mary discussed politics with government officials, her words had no value, and the most power she could garner was from listening and having knowledge about government happenings. Mary was not looking to independently garner a political career, but in fact enjoyed the comforts that her husband’s own job granted her. Mary’s obsession with her husband’s career suggested that she had married him for his success. In order to maintain her wealth and strengthen her position in society, Mary had to conform to traditional gender notions regarding marriage.

Within Mary’s marriage, she showed her devotion to Southern patriarchy, but also challenged the submission of women within marriage. Despite Mary’s seeming independence in Southern society, she conformed to societal ideals by marrying James. Mary had a good education and could have resisted marriage, as many women did, but knew that marriage,

140 Chesnut, *Mary Chesnut’s Civil War*, 203.
142 Rable, *Civil Wars*, 49.
especially to a prominent man, would allot her comfort and protection.\textsuperscript{143} For Mary, her marriage to James granted her more political power and knowledge than most Confederate women.

Although Clinton argued that the Chesnut’s had a loving marriage, Mary’s comments about her and her husband’s relationships with others suggested otherwise.\textsuperscript{144} Despite her husband’s jealousy, and being 38 years old, Mary flirted with or allowed other men to dote on her. Mary wrote that “Mr. Chesnut made himself eminently absurd accusing me of flirting with John Manning, and I could only laugh” but the next day John showed up at Mary’s bedroom door and exclaimed “Oh…I thought it was Rice’s room. That is my excuse. Now that I am here, come go with us to Quinby’s. Everybody will be there.” Mary followed John Manning, the ex-governor whom she called “the [my in the 1860’s entry] handsome ex-governor” and afterwards John came to Mary’s house because “Mr. C came home so enraged with me staying home he decides to glare until John’s leaving.”\textsuperscript{145} James’ jealousy seemed to be well founded considering that Mary initially wrote possessively about the governor. Additionally, the governor’s nervous entrance into her room showed that he liked Mary as well. Mary did not seem to take James’ jealousy seriously and laughed at his frustration.

Southern marriages entailed that women remained submissive to men in order to receive protection. Confoundedly, Mary received her husband’s protection and wealth, but seemed to show no concern over maintaining allegiance to her spouse and ideas of submission. Mary did not listen to James’ wants for her to stop flirting or stay away from John, and simply brushed his comments aside. Mary’s decision to defy her husband’s wishes went against and threatened the

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 8.
\textsuperscript{144} Clinton, “Queen Bee of the Confederacy.”
\textsuperscript{145} Chesnut, \textit{Mary Chesnut’s Civil War}, 39.
entire slave owning and patriarchal system.\textsuperscript{146} The Chesnut’s marriage displays a complicated relationship where Mary looked to marriage in order to preserve her own status in patriarchal society, but at the same time challenged the submission of women and the core of Southern society.

Mary’s frequent concern and discussion of childlessness reflected her inability to contribute to Southern gender expectations. After marriage, Southern society expected women to have frequent and many pregnancies that would last the entirety of their childbearing years.\textsuperscript{147} C Van Woodward and Julia Stern demised that Mary may have referenced a miscarriage in her writing, and was therefore unable to bear children.\textsuperscript{148} Like other estate heads, who wanted their wife or child to reproduce in order to have heirs to their fortunes and plantations, Mary’s father in law coldly remarked “with your husband we die out. He is the last of my family.” Mary would have understood that her inability to bear children made her an anomaly to Southern society and disrupted the slave holding order. After her father in law said that, Mary even commented that “now, this old man of ninety years was born when it was not the fashion for gentleman to be a saint. And being lord of all he surveyed for so many years—irresponsibly—in the center of his huge domain, it is wonderful he was not a greater tyrant.”\textsuperscript{149} Already upset at her inability to bear children, Mary had to face scrutiny from society, especially her in-laws. Despite that Mary thought her father in law was a bad person, and even a slave molester, his comments clearly affected her for she constantly attempted to justify childlessness.

\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., 17.
\textsuperscript{147} Rable, \textit{Civil Wars}, 9.
\textsuperscript{148} Stern, \textit{Mary Chesnut’s Civil War Epic}, 51.
\textsuperscript{149} Chesnut, \textit{Mary Chesnut’s Civil War},191.
\textsuperscript{150} Ibid.
Within her diary, Mary obsessed over her inability to bear children, and often tried to justify her childlessness. In one instance, Mary wrote “I did Mrs. Browne a kindness. I told those women that she was childless now, but that she had lost three children. I hated to leave her all alone. Women have such contempt for a childless wife. Now they will be all sympathy and kindness.” As Julia Stern argued, Mary may have brought up this small encounter, or even fictionally conjured the entire conversation, in order to justify her lack of children. In a society that based female accomplishments on number of children, Mary needed to uphold her own reputation, and show that women could be respectable without children. Furthermore, the conversation suggested Mary’s own insecurities over miscarrying. Southerners would not understand from glancing at Mary that she had a miscarriage, so it was important for her to state that not all women, like her, chose to go against society and not have children.

Mary’s insecurities and guilt over not being able to bear children showed through interactions she decided to include within her diary. Mary remarked that Mr. Preston said to her “And now Madame, go home and thank God on your knees that you have no children to break your heart. Mrs. Preston and I spent the first ten years of our married life in mortal agony over ill and dying children.” To which Mary responded, “I won’t do anything of the kind. Those lovely girls I see around you now—they make your happiness. They are something to thank God for—far more than anything I have not.” In the encounter, Mary used Mr. Preston, a prominent Southern man, to suggest that Southern society did not necessarily benefit from great numbers of children. Also, Mary could have used a prominent Southern man to symbolize the Southern patriarchal system’s acceptance of her childlessness. Mary made sure to include her response to

151 Ibid., 28.
152 Stern, Mary Chesnut’s Civil War Epic, 53.
153 Chesnut, Mary Chesnut’s Civil War, 372.
Mr. Preston which showed her own appreciation for children, and her disdain for not having any. The conversation acted as if society accepted Mary’s childlessness, but on the premise that Mary wished she had children. Clearly Mary had guilt over her inability to reproduce, but perhaps, just as she defied marriage regulations, she chose not to have children. Mary challenged the patriarchal system and its negative effects on women, and may have not wanted to contribute to its existing order.

Mary challenged the slaveholding order, but felt greater sympathy for women than she did for the African Americans. Throughout her diary, Mary discussed the negative impacts of the patriarchal system on black and white women. Mary wrote “so I have seen a negro woman sold—up on the block—at auction. I was walking. The woman on the block overtopped the crowd. I felt faint—seasick. The creature looked so like my good little Nancy….you know how women sell themselves and are sold in marriage, from queens downwards…you know what the bible says about slavery—and marriage. Poor women. Poor slaves.”¹⁵⁴ At first glance, Mary’s comment appeared to sympathize with slave women. In reality, Mary acted as if the humiliated African American woman was a child, just as she saw her own slaves as children. Like many Confederate ladies, Mary also compared the plight of slaves to white, upper class women.¹⁵⁵ Despite that Mary considered women bound under the patriarchal system as slaves, the truth was that white women had more freedom than African Americans, and often managed the slaves on their own plantation. Just as Mary made a superiorly maternal connection to the slave on the auction block, all white Southern mistresses claimed and showed a moral authority over slaves. Mary made bold anti-slavery statements, but her convictions did side with the plight of the

¹⁵⁴ Chesnut, Mary Chesnut’s Civil War, 15.
¹⁵⁵ Scott, The Southern Lady, 50.
slaves. Instead, Mary saw slavery as a burdensome institution for white people, and saw the slaves as inferior and immoral.

Like many Confederate women, Mary disliked slavery because of the harmful impacts on white people, and not for the mistreatment of African Americans. Although Mary’s own husband did not appear to take slave mistresses, Mary witnessed as many white men sexually assaulted and impregnated their female slaves. In her 1860’s journal, Mary boldly wrote “we live surrounded by prostitutes...Like the patriarchs of old our men live all in one house with their wives and their concubines, and the mulattoes one sees in every family exactly resemble the white children—and every lady tells you who is the father of all the mulatto children in everybody’s household, but those in her own she seems to think drop from the clouds or pretends to think. Good women we have, but they talk of all nastiness—tho’ they never do wrong...but they are, I believe, in conduct the purest woman god ever made.”

Mary further wrote that Southern men were “no worse than men everywhere, but the lower their mistresses, the more degrade they must be.” Mary’s comments criticize her own fellow plantation mistresses for being blind to the hypocrisy and immoral behavior of the patriarchal system. And yet, Mary does not discuss the fact that the patriarchs commit rape, or that the slave women suffer. In fact, Mary called the slaves “concubines” and “prostitutes” and stated that the white men of the South are only worse than others because they take immoral mistresses.

As George Rable suggested, Mary shared the belief with most of the South that black women were immoral creatures, who sexually lured white men into sin. Mary’s problem with patriarchal society rested in the idea that whites had to live among the immorality of mixed racial

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156 Chesnut, Mary Chesnut’s Civil War, 28-31.
157 Ibid., 31.
158 Rable, Civil Wars, 36.
children and sexually depraved black women.\textsuperscript{159} Mary wrote that the real victims of such an immoral system were the virtuous white women, who had to share their husbands and their homes with undignified slaves. As much as Woodward believed Mary was “moved by their [the slave’s] plight,” the truth was that Mary only wanted to get rid of slavery in order to save the morality of her beloved nation.\textsuperscript{160} Mary could not see the slave women as having a voice in the situation because she did think slaves had the intelligence or capabilities to have a voice. Through Mary’s discussion of slave loyalty and insurrection, she showed that she believed slaves were inferior and dependent beings.

The fear of slave insurrections and alleged disloyalty caused Mary to defend benevolent paternalism and prove her own slaves’ obedience. After slaves murdered her Cousin Betsey Witherspoon, Mary wrote “‘her household negroes were so insolent, so pampered and insubordinate… [Betsey] knew…that none of her children would have the patience she had with these people, who had been indulged and spoiled by her until they were like spoiled children.’”\textsuperscript{161} Mary further feared for her own safety and said “hitherto I have never thought of being afraid of negroes. I had never injured any of them. Why should they want to hurt me? Somehow today I feel that the ground is cut away from under my feet. Why should they treat me any better than they have done Cousin Betsey?’”\textsuperscript{162} Like many slave mistresses, Mary thought the protection she offered her slaves would be returned with loyalty. Although Mary wrote that she was anti-slavery, she feared the loss of her own power if the slaves revolted.\textsuperscript{163} In Mary’s discussion of the revolt, she called the slaves ungrateful and childlike which showed her inability to

\textsuperscript{159} Faust, \textit{Mothers of Invention}, 73.
\textsuperscript{160} C. Vann Woodward, Introduction to \textit{Mary Chesnut’s Civil War}.
\textsuperscript{161} Chesnut, \textit{Mary Chesnut’s Civil War}, 198.
\textsuperscript{162} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{163} Ibid., 117-18.
understand that corruption of paternal benevolence. The slaves had human emotions and responses, and Mary, just like most of the South, shared the same ignorance that slaves, especially if they were treated as she put not “injured”, would want to stay with their masters. In her own experience, Mary’s slaves chose to stay with the family, even after emancipation, furthering her idea that paternal benevolence and slave inferiority was true.

After the South’s defeat, Mary’s believed her own slaves were loyal because they resisted Union lines. Sarah Morgan shared Mary’s satisfaction with the loyalty of her own slaves as she watched other slaves flee plantations to Union lines. In 1865, Mary wrote “how the negroes flocked to the Yankee squad which has come. They were snubbed, the rampant freemen. “Stay where you are,” say the Yanks. “we have nothing for you” and they sadly peruse the way… the women dressed in their gaudiest array carried bouquets to the Yankees. It was a jubilee. Now in this house there is not the slightest change. Everyone has known he or she was free for months, and I do not see one particle of alteration. They are more circumspect, politic and quieter, that’s all. All goes on—in status quo antebellum.”164 In spite of Mary’s reservations about slavery, she knew that patriarchal society granted her a high societal position. Mary critiqued the Yankees inability to provide for the African Americans, who their government had recently freed. Additionally, Mary poked fun at the dress and reaction of the formally enslaved women. Mary knew that the African Americans ran off of plantations rejoicing, but that they would meet soldiers who would not and could not care for them. Throughout the war, Union soldier’s treatment of newly freed African Americans did in fact cause many slaves to stay on their plantations. It was not that Mary’s slaves did not want to be free; it was that they did not have anywhere to go. By staying with the Chesnut’s, the slaves confirmed Mary’s previous held ideas

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that slaves should stay loyal to masters in exchange for protection. Mary made sure to note that despite freedom the slave’s behavior barely changed, just as war did not change the principles of Southern society. If the slaves did not change, that meant that the Union army had really not won, which also meant that Mary would still, despite the loss of most of her wealth, maintain her status. Despite Mary’s anti-slavery convictions, she was dependent on her slaves and resented Yankee encroachment.

As the war went on, Mary realized that, despite her reservations about slavery, she could not live comfortably without her slaves. Mary did not feel the lifestyle constraints of wartime until the end of the war, when she was relocated as a refugee to North Carolina. Still, unlike many Confederate women, she was able to reunite easily with her husband, find a place to live and maintain many of her slaves. In February, 1865 when Mary was staying in Lincolnton, North Carolina, she wrote “I would be so thankful to know it never would be any worse with me. My husband is well and ordered to join the Great Retreater. I am bodily comfortable, if somewhat dingily lodged, and I daily part with my raiment for food…Ellen is a maid…and if I do little work it is quite enough to show me how dreadful it would be without her if I should have to do it all.” At a moment in the war when slaves were gaining and realizing their new independences, Mary realized how difficult her life would be without slavery. George Rable said that many historians overemphasize Mary’s anti-slavery comments because she reaped the benefits of slaveholding society. Before and during most of the war, Mary’s slaves cared for her and followed her from her South Carolina plantations to and from Virginia and eventually North Carolina. Even in 1865, Mary’s complaints about wartime hardships did not compare to those of

165 Faust, Mothers of Invention, 61.
166 Chesnut, Mary Chesnut’s Civil War, 733.
167 Faust, Mothers of Invention, 61.
168 Rable, Civil Wars, 32.
Sarah Morgan who had to walk to get to other towns, whose home was burnt down and who had to confront Union soldiers with only her female relatives. Mary lived a comfortable life, and it was precisely because of the slave system. Even Mary, who claimed anti-slavery views, did not discuss a definitive future without slavery, but only a life without slavery if her slaves decided to leave her. Most likely, Mary believed because she treated her slaves well, that they would, despite freedom, stay with the Chesnut family. Slavery afforded Mary a comfortable lifestyle, and the Union army directly threatened her status. Because of the Union's promise of freedom, Mary greatly resented Northern views about slavery.

Northern incursion into the South represented a threat to Mary’s lifestyle and status. Southerners believed that African Americans were, by nature, submissive and obedient; therefore, the slaves would only want to leave their masters if pressured by an outside force. Stephanie McCurry argued that Southern politicians feared Northerners would incite slave uprisings and use the slaves as pawns in order to win the war.169 Furthermore, Southerners believed that slaves relied on whites, and believed that the enslaved did not have the resources or mental capacities to incite political rebellion.170 The murder of Betsey Witherspoon confirmed the politician’s fears, and incited Mary’s hatred towards the Union. In 1861, not soon after the start of the war, Mary wrote “we want to separate from them—to be rid of Yankees forever at any price. And they hate us so and would clasp us—or hook us, as Polonius has it—to their bosoms with hooks of steel. We are an unwilling bride. I think compatibility of temper began when it was made plain to us that we get all the opprobrium of slavery and they all the money there was in it—with their tariff.”171 Mary pushed much of the blame of slavery and the war onto

169 McCurry, Confederate Reckoning, 30.
170 Chesnut, Mary Chesnut’s Civil War, 33.
171 Ibid., 84.
the Union side. Furthermore, Mary wanted readers to understand that the Yankees may have entered the South, inciting slaves, and trying to demolish the Southern system, but that the Yankees shared the guilt of slavery with the South. Mary made the South appear as innocent victims, who the Yankees violently tried to cling onto. The Union troops may have preached that the South was immoral for having slaves, but the reality, for Mary, was that the North needed the South. Mary’s contempt for the Union stemmed from the fact that the federal army denounced Mary’s way of life, and threatened her own social order. The loyalty of Mary’s slaves confirmed the lack of success of the Northerners, despite their victory, and reassured the morality of the South.

Both Mary Chesnut’s journal writings and her 1880’s diary capture the controversial aspects of being an upper class white woman in the Confederacy. In some place within the diary, Mary asked for and acted on radical changes in Southern society such as abolition, marriage, and politics. Unlike Sarah and Lucy, who mainly kept their critiques and issues within their diary, Mary freely interacted with politicians and other men. Still, Mary understood the connections between her upper class lifestyle and the patriarchal system, and did not want to pose as great of a threat to the system as her words somehow made it seem. Despite Mary’s ideas about abolition, Mary depended on her slaves and needed them in order to maintain comfort. Mary may have had political debates and discussions with prominent men, but she understood that her gender confined her to prudence. Instead of speaking out to these politicians about her views, Mary only wrote within her journal. While for some things, Mary claimed she did act on, such as her flirting habits with other men, Mary still respected her husband and needed his political power in order to maintain comfort during the war.
Conclusion:

All three women, Sarah, Lucy and Mary used wartime diary writing to foster greater self-awareness about their new roles in Southern society. Each woman lived in a different Southern state, had a different relationship status, and experienced different wars. And yet, all three diarists, as well as the four others examined, had very similar themes running within their journals. The Civil War brought issues of race, gender and class to the forefront of women’s minds. The diaries showed that the war caused women to challenge their own roles in society. Any radical statements made within the diaries did not call for direct action, and never turned into anything more than a written word. Even when women appeared to go against gender norms by referencing switching genders or abolition, the comments usually stayed within the guidelines of Southern code. The women allowed themselves to be critical of their nation’s identity, but only in a way that upheld their societal status. Confederate diarists could not exist under modern day definitions of feminism because achieving sexual equality would put their own life, as well as the life of the entire white Southern race, in jeopardy. For Southern women, their own antebellum national identity could only survive if Southern society maintained the status quo.
Bibliography


