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Altars of Sacrifice: Confederate Women and the Narratives of War

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Altars of Sacrifice: Confederate

Women and the Narratives of War

Drew Gilpin Faust

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

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

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

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