

Wielding the Pen: Margaret Preston, Confederate Nationalistic Literature and the Expansion of a Woman's Place in the South.

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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"Would that I may be able to wield my sword when in battle, as you wield your pen!" Confederate lieutenant colonel John T. L. Preston wrote to his wife, Margaret Junkin Preston, on December 23, 1861. "Have you ever thought of the conquests you have made by your pen?"¹ Shortly after reading these words, Margaret Preston resumed a successful publishing career that she had abandoned five years before. The Northern-born Preston had ceased publishing because her new society, including her future husband, had disapproved of her violation of traditional norms. Beginning in 1861, however, the war reconfigured Southern notions about woman's proper place. John Preston realized that pens as well as swords could serve the Confederacy, and Margaret Preston began writing Confederate nationalistic works even though she was privately conflicted about the struggle. The Civil War provided Preston with the opportunity to become a published author, and she therefore created a public, professional life that was at odds with her personal feelings. Preston's private and public selves would eventually converge, with the trials of war causing her to identify herself as a Southerner and, eventually, to become devoted to the Confederate war effort.

Historians have explored the effects of the Civil War on Southern white woman's place and noted the increase in women's writing during the war; what is necessary is an understanding of the connection between the two—of how this writing represented an expansion in woman's place, a positive change in the types of activities considered socially acceptable for women.² Scholars such as George Rable and Drew [End Page 221] Gilpin Faust, while disagreeing on the degree of change in Southern white woman's place during and after the war, have concluded that any changes were largely unwelcome. Southern white women wished to cling to prewar assumptions of male protection and female submission. These historians assume that women authors viewed their writing endeavors as necessary evils.³ They fail to recognize the level of success attained by some women, and the positive impact this development had upon their lives and the lives of other women. By war's end Preston had achieved national, even international, recognition while maintaining a level of propriety never afforded her in her prewar years. During and after the war, authorship was one means by which Southern women could safely venture onto the public stage, and many made the attempt. Preston's experience indicates that the war brought significant changes that women welcomed. Southern women took advantage of opportunities to assume a more public role in their society, and maintained their expanded place after the conflict had ended.

Just five years before Colonel Preston invited her to resume her career, Margaret Junkin had complained bitterly about her constricted place in Southern society. Born in Pennsylvania in 1820, Junkin had published her first poem in 1841. By 1848 she had become a regular contributor to newspapers and national magazines like the *Southern Literary Messenger* and *Neal's Saturday Gazette*. She also had begun to appear in anthologies of American women poets.⁴ That same year, the Junkins moved to Lexington, Virginia, so that the family patriarch, Dr. George Junkin, could accept the presidency of Washington College (now Washington and Lee University). During her first six years in Virginia, Margaret Junkin remained an active author. Her poems, stories, and translations appeared in *Graham's American Monthly Magazine of Literature and Art* and *Sartain's Union Magazine of Literature and Art*. In the *Southern Literary Messenger* alone, her name appeared eighteen times between February 1849 and February 1853. Junkin and her closest friend, her sister Eleanor, enjoyed their new home, and, shortly after moving, Junkin wrote a tribute to Virginia, "The Old Dominion: A Ballad," that was published in the *Southern Literary Messenger*. In the poem, she made...

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1. John T. L. Preston to Margaret J. Preston, Dec. 23, 1864, in *Life and Letters of Margaret Junkin Preston*, ed. Elizabeth Preston Allan (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1902), 126–27. For Margaret Junkin Preston's life, see *Life and Letters* and also Mary Price Coaling, *Margaret Junkin Preston: A Biography* (Winston-Salem, N.C.: John F. Blair, 1992).

2. This article does not enter into the debate regarding the strength, or existence, of Confederate nationalism. Those who doubt its existence acknowledge that there was a "pretend nationalism."



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