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“Defying the Tyranny of Precedent”: Female Civil War Nurses Challenging the Cult of
Domesticity

For hundreds of years a domestic barrier separated the lives of men and women and determined the role each should play in a growing society. The duties of a man were centered around working and politics, while women had their own responsibilities that included tending to the children and home (Hart 131). By the early 1800s, these characteristics of each gender had become the standard, especially for the newly rising middle class (Smith-Rosenberg). Such a concept became known as the cult of domesticity, or the cult of true womanhood, and proclaimed that in order to be a true lady, one must be pious, pure, submissive, and of course, confined to the home (Smith-Rosenberg). It was a woman’s duty to care for her husband and children and shape them to be prepared for society, which could only be accomplished by white, American-born, middle class females (Smith-Rosenberg). Within the home, women were inferior to their male companions, but religion held women responsible for the wellbeing of her family and country (Hart 132). Such a structured society was forever altered with the start of the Civil War when women would be given opportunities outside of their domestic realm. The work of Civil War nurses challenged the cult of domesticity, which created a separate sphere for middle class women within the home and defined the ideal woman.

Prior to the commencement of the war, "nurse" was a poorly defined term that could have multiple implications. Women would "nurse" their husbands and children within the home, and many would have nurtured a dying relative. The concept of nursing had been revolutionized with the work of Florence Nightingale in London during the Crimean War (Helmstadter and Godden). The Civil War freed nursing from its domestic shell and allowed it to pertain to medicine and professional careers by 1873 (Schultz 3). The help of Harriet Eaton and other female nurses assisted in this transitional period. With the war, there was a dire need for more nurses and women to help. Over three thousand women offered their services in nursing, while at the same time navigating a whole new world previously unknown to females (Chang 34). Prior to the Civil War, nursing was still considered a male profession (Chang 34). However, the women that came to serve were ready to challenge the status quo.

Becoming a nurse was not the easiest task for a woman as it required her to leave behind domestic life and embark on a journey typically pursued by men. There were numerous ways to become a nurse in the war, the simplest of which was to unofficially join a regiment and remain until disbandment (Zeinert). Another option was to join the Women's Central Relief Association, headed by Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman to complete medical school in the United States, in New York City (Zeinert). With the latter decision, a woman received training before being sent to care for the soldiers (Zeinert). The final choice was to become a member of one of Dorothea Dix's federal organizations (Zeinert). Here, women would also receive some training and work experience alongside the highly respected Dix, known for her determination and success in improving the conditions met by soldiers within the hospitals (Zeinert). Dix was the superintendent of female nurses for the Union Army, and she conducted a strict practice. To be

under her employment, a woman was required to be over thirty, wear plain clothes that would not snare the attention of a man, and most importantly, remember her place and duty (Wilbur 74):

My transit from The Gables to the village depot was a funny mixture of good wishes and good byes, mud-puddles and shopping. A December twilight is not the most cheering time to enter upon a somewhat perilous enterprise, and, but for the presence of Vashti and neighbor Thorn, I fear that I might have added a drop of the briny to the native moisture of—"The town I left behind me" (Alcott 12).

As with the case of Alcott, the idea of enlistment was thrilling to many women, but it did not undermine leaving behind their family and the new lifestyle that awaited them in the hospitals.

Finding a job as a nurse was a feat in itself, but actually leaving home was another. A woman depended on her husband in numerous aspects of life, one of them being travel. Most women had seldom ever traveled without their husbands, since on any long trip, the man of the house would always assist the lady (Schultz 46). In the journal that she kept, Harriet Eaton, a widow who would serve as a nurse for many years, describes the six hundred-mile trek she made by boat and train to serve as a nurse for the Army of the Potomac (Eaton 14). In addition, women had to leave their children behind. Some women had sons who were already in service and whom they wished to be closer to, but many had to leave their children with relatives or friends (Schultz 46). Furthermore, Eaton describes the struggle of leaving in her diary and how strongly she missed her precious kids. "Have written to my precious Agnes tonight, oh how I wish I could see the dear girl" (105). The holidays were often when homesickness struck the women most, and on a Thanksgiving day, Eaton's diary entry gives insight on the manner in which such a

situation challenged the norm. “I have not had a great deal of time to think of my precious family. I trust them. I know they think of mother and home” (46). When one thought of a woman, she was envisioned laboring around the home or raising children. Society placed women outside of the work world and, by pursuing a career, most people within the town consequently disapproved. A woman running off to pursue a male-dominated profession was highly frowned upon by a society whose framework was the cult of domesticity. These nurses would often have to face the disapproval of family, friends, and neighbors, but they decided servitude was worth the social scorn (Schultz 46).

Despite the opposition, countless women went off to pursue a life of danger and the unknown. The daily life of a female nurse was filled with chaos and poor conditions that were not suited for a woman in the 1860’s. Women rose early and often worked late into the night. Clara Barton, who would go on to found the American Red Cross and often served on the front lines of the battlefield to help soldiers, served in such a position at the battle of Antietam, which claimed over twenty thousand lives (Chang 43). “Covered with blood and grime, she moved from soldier to soldier, carving out bullets with her pocket knife and wrapping wounds” (Chang 44). Another influential women in this time, Louisa May Alcott, worked as a Union nurse for multiple years until she contracted typhoid fever (Chang 38). While working, she kept a log of daily life in a book that became known as *Hospital Sketches*. Her logs gave a first hand account of what life was like for a nurse. In section three, she illustrates what a typical day would look like:

Wash, dress, feed, warm and nurse them for the next three months, I dare say.

Eighty beds are ready, and we were getting impatient for the men to come. Now

you will begin to see hospital life in earnest, for you won't probably find time to sit down all day, and may think yourself fortunate if you get to bed by midnight. Come to me in the ballroom when you are ready; the worst cases are always carried there, and I shall need your help (31-32).

Alcott was not alone with her outlook on a typical day, as this was the norm of hospital life. There was constantly someone to tend to or more casualties on the way. Such work was quite different from the daily routine and security a woman would have had in her own home.

Being a nurse did not make daily encounters any less dangerous than being on the field; women were often exposed to bullets and even deadlier modes of destruction, diseases (Schultz 85). Women were in constant contact with illness and unsanitized locations. Many a time, as in the case with Louisa May Alcott, a woman would become sick and have to return home (Chang 38). Even with the hard work of nurses such as Dix, hospitals were breeding grounds for germs. In her diary, Eaton portrays some of the horrific conditions she encountered, "Started early to visit Smoketown Hos., was quite disgusted with the place. Stench and filth are dreadful. Men do not have enough to eat. Dirty rags and other filth meet you at every turn" (cited in Eaton's diary 71). Eaton also goes on to describe the congested hospitals, or often houses, and how she would have to sleep on the floor in the corner of an attic full of soldiers just to attempt to gain a few hours of rest (Eaton 71).

Women were constantly surrounded by death as they fulfilled their nursing duties. Clara Barton and Mary Newcomb were both nearly killed by bullets while assisting soldiers, and in both cases, the men they aided succumbed to their wounds (Schultz 85). Conditions such as these were not what a typical middle class lady was used to enduring, but these were the unknown

encounters they were met with. (Eaton and Schultz 148). Being a nurse was eye opening to many naive young women. Cornelia Hancock, a volunteer nurse from New Jersey, described her experience, “ We went... to one of the churches, where I saw for the first time what war meant. Hundreds of desperately wounded men were stretched out on boards laid across high-backed pews as closely as they could be packed together” (cited in Chang 39). The magnitude of war was unlike anything most women had encountered.

Another issue arose surrounding the states of the men that nurses would care for. Numerous people, including other male nurses and surgeons, felt it was inappropriate for a woman to see a man in such an intimate state and be surrounded by cursing and vulgar language, as it would taint the precious purity of a woman that was prized by society (Zeinert 40). In addition, one of the major themes of the ideal woman was her sexual ignorance. Placing a woman in an environment with partially dressed and exposed men had the potential to awaken a desire in her that society worked to suppress. Women were constantly bathing, examining, and dressing the wounds of soldiers (Alcott 58). However, many women saw this as an opportunity to be a friend and comforter to those suffering. Alcott describes her situation:

Now I knew that to him, as to so many, I was the poor substitute for mother, wife, or sister, and in his eyes no stranger, but a friend who hitherto had seemed neglectful; for, in his modesty, he had never guessed the truth (Hospital Sketches 58).

Many men were grateful to be under the care of a lady who would soothe and calm them as they suffered.

The longer men spent on the battlefield, the more obvious it was becoming that women were challenging the framework of the cult of domesticity. Women were adjusting to their new

positions, which became evident through their new attitudes and emotions. They were determined to persevere through the difficult conditions, but this would not occur overnight. The first battle to conquer was within themselves to achieve a strong state of mind (Schultz 75). Nurses had to steel themselves against the constant urge to cry and emotionally breakdown at the gruesomeness of the wounds or the enormous loss of life (Schultz 75). Many were rendered useless until they achieved a relatively calm mentality; both women from the South and the North were known to faint at the sight of amputated limbs and gruesome wounds fresh from the field (Chang 40). These emotions had to be bottled up until they could be released in private (Schultz 76). However, these women did indeed persevere:

Custom insures the most sensitive person to that which is at first most repellent, and in the late war we saw the most delicate women, who could not at home endure the sight of blood, become so used to scenes of carnage, that they walked the hospitals and the margins of battle-fields, amid the poor remnants of torn humanity, with as perfect self-possession as if they were strolling in a flower garden (Twain and Warner ch. 15).

These changes were drastic for a woman, but they demonstrated her powerful resilience and dedication.

Women were not the same when the war was over and many found it difficult to return to their former lives. Jannie Fyre discusses her nursing transition, saying, "How naturally we accept this strange daily life! and yet, how unnatural it would have seemed two years ago" (cited in Schultz 121). Fyre goes to tell of how the war changed her, and her response sounds similar to one of a soldier when he returns home:

I sometimes feel I hardly know myself, what effect this army life is having upon me... We become familiar with sorrow, suffering, and even death- it changes us somewhat-it cannot be otherwise... We feel a change some way has passed over us and that we shall ever be just as before, you do not understand me quite- it is hard for one to who has not been in such a place (cited in Schultz 121-122).

Women were not the same fragile beings when they returned home from nursing in the war. Though nurses did not physically participate in combat, they constantly encountered and were left to cope with the results of warfare, which often included death (Schultz 122). Furthermore, in response to the criticism of society, many ladies developed stronger attitudes and were not content to abide by customs. In 1863, Kate Cummings, an exceptional confederate nurse, lost her patience with societal standards for a woman. "A lady's respectability must be at a low ebb," she protested, "when it can be endangered by going into a hospital." (cited in Schultz 50). No longer was she going to stand for women being treated in such a way.

Arguments from nurses, such as Kate Cummings, gave way to a new identity for women and a challenge to pre existing gender roles in the workplace. They had the confidence to challenge male nurses and surgeons, who were often tired and intoxicated while working (Chang 165). Dorothea Dix found a male surgeon not performing his duties and aided in his release from the army, and when he appealed to the general, he was told Ms. Dix outranked him and there was nothing he could do (Chang 165). Dedicated women such as Dix were among those who assisted in making female nursing a professional medical career. In 1873, the first national nursing school was founded by Marie Zakrewska and in 1892 Congress recognized the work of Civil War nurses by providing pensions (Weatherford). Female Civil War nurses actually

received pay, allowing women to truly feel part of the workplace. Union nurses were paid approximately forty cents per day and were given food rations (Schultz 39). Though such pay gave women a sense of independence from the men they so often relied on, as their confidence grew, women began to challenge such insufficient pay (Schultz 40). Some even resigned from their posts for they felt they were not being treated fairly; they felt being female did not make them any less skilled from men in their work (Schultz 40).

In addition to the advancement of nursing as a profession, the Civil War work of female nurses gave way to a new voice for women in challenging pre existing gender roles. Phoebe Yates Pember, a co-worker of Kate Cummings, felt that a woman in a position to help a man was no reason to undermine her work:

There is one subject connected with hospitals on which a few words should be said- the distasteful one that a woman must lose a certain amount of delicacy and reticence in filling any office in them. How can this be? There is no unpleasant exposure under proper arrangements, and even if there be, the circumstances which surround a wounded man, far from friends and home, suffering in a holy cause and dependent upon a woman for help, care and sympathy, hallow and clear the atmosphere in which she labors... A woman must soar beyond the conventional modesty considered correct under different circumstances (cited in Schultz 52).

The opinions of many women such as Pembers sparked the beginning of a period of change for women as those in the workplace challenged traditional gender roles, an idea new to society.

It is well known that after the war, women lost many of the positions and changes within the domestic realm that had been acquired during the war (Schultz 146). This is in fact true, but it

is also essential to note that many women retreated to their domestic lives on their own as men returned home from the war and back to their jobs (Schultz 147). A stronger female identity was only in its initial phase of development, and it was a shift in the ideals for everyone, including women (Campbell). Such a society was not accustomed to the reversal of gender roles that were encountered when female nurses cared for the wounded and incapacitated male soldiers (Campbell). Men were not used to such vulnerability and being at the mercy of a woman, just as the women were not used to such power (Schultz 148). It was a change that would not fully be addressed until the women's rights movement was in full force, but it was the female nurses that sparked the beginning of the momentous movement (Schultz 147-148).

Although both women from the Union and the Confederacy served as nurses during the war, their experiences were quite different as northern women often had more of an opportunity to step outside of their domestic lives. For instance, the majority of the war was fought on southern soil, so Confederate women did not have to go far to find themselves in its midst. (Schultz 36). Consequently, these women did not have to make travel arrangements or leave their children, but it may have meant their home being converted into a makeshift hospital (Schultz 36). In addition, the aspects of a separate sphere for women were not as clearly defined in the South. While women were still considered inferior to men and were in charge of the children and the home, much of southern culture was focused on ideology and race rather than gender (Campbell). This is not to say southern women did not face challenges when it came to being involved as a nurse. Female nurses were not even hired by the Confederate government until September 1862 after the battle of Antietam; all work until that point was state-sponsored (Schultz 36). Despite the fact that there were many enthusiastic southern women who

volunteered to nurse, often times slaves or much poorer women did the majority of the work (Campbell).

Two women who are clear exceptions and are still remembered for their service and dedication are Kate Cummings and Sally Tompkins. Cummings served as a nurse for three years and worked at various general hospitals in the South, and she is remembered for the journal she kept on the life of a Confederate nurse (Wilber 76). Tompkins was the only woman commissioned in the army for the Confederates during the Civil War, and her work was so respected that she got permission from President Jefferson Davis to keep her hospital open when all others were ordered to be closed in 1861 (Eggleston 176). Severely wounded soldiers were brought to her as often as possible for the greatest chance of survival; of the thirteen hundred men she cared for, only seventy-three died (Eggleston 177). She served as a nurse for the entire war and continued charity work after the war (Eggleston 178).

One definitive aspect of the cult of domesticity that female nurses during the Civil War did not challenge was the devotion to religion. For many women, it was their spiritual duty to go to war and help those in need (Schultz 83). Harriet Eaton describes her spiritual inspiration, "Thus far the Lord hath led me, I desire to trust all to the control of a kind father, my own will swallowed up, and I purified, this poor sinful body made a meet temple for the Master's use" (84). Even if her faith had not led her to the war, a women often used her spiritual beliefs to get her through the day (Shultz 83). Another nurse, Rebecca Pomroy, also describes how she allowed her faith to be her guide and motivation, "How could I do what I am called to, if I was not strengthened by an unseen hand and fed daily and hourly with the bread of heaven." (Schultz 76). Such nurses attended church whenever they could and would have prayer sessions with the

soldiers they were tending to (Schultz, 76). It was a way to keep them tethered and control their emotions (Schultz 76). Union nurse Harriet Eaton was a critical example of the embodiment of spiritual motivation. Eaton used her religious aspirations as means to free herself from the restraints of society; she could let go of republican motherhood ideals and actually become involved (Schultz 76). Noted by Jane E. Schultz, "Women like Eaton were summoned to war, charged to patriotism" (Schultz 2). Such female aid soon became a critical aspect of the war.

Though a change was seen towards the attitude of women in the workplace during the war years, the postwar years were a time when women were encouraged to retreat back into their domestic realms (Campbell). A society with men home from war was not one in which women were needed to work. Men saw women in the workforce as competition and a threat to their masculinity (Campbell). The public expressed such opinion in that these brave soldiers, who had fought for four long years, should have their workplace superiority returned to them (Schultz 147-148). For former nurses like Emily Parson, it was difficult to envision a life after servitude. "I wonder what I shall do with myself when the war is over. I never can sit down and do nothing... I never expect to live at home again, I shall always be working somewhere or other, I hope. Work is my life. I cannot be happy doing nothing." (Schultz ch. 5). There were certainly some women who could not return to domestic life. They had found their calling, and it was outside the realm of the home world; they would not except their old domestic boundaries. These women were exceptions to the norm. Mary Ann Bickerdyke, known as Mother Bickerdyke, is a notable example (Eggleston 165). She worked for the Sanitary Commissions and became a chief of nursing (Eggleston 165). After the war ended, she continued her career by advocating for the rights of war veterans (Wilber 77). Another example is Annie Etheridge, who was the only

woman to remain with her regiment throughout the entire war (Schultz 157). She went on to serve in the Treasury department (Schultz 157). Perhaps one of the greatest examples is the work of Clara Barton. In 1865, immediately following the cease of war, Barton, with approval from President Lincoln, searched for the missing persons of the Civil War (Eggleston 169-170). She identified as many as she could, both so they could be recognized and so their families could be at peace (Eggleston 170). Barton also went on to establish the American National Red Cross, which was officially recognized in 1881, and she remained the president until 1904 (Eggleston 172).

For the majority of the women who returned home, there were still a few acceptable ways for women to work in society. Many military hospitals closed, which meant there was a huge decrease in nursing jobs available (Schultz 146). Therefore, many women turned to relief work or teaching during the postwar years (Hart 128). Though society still challenged female nurses and women in the workplace overall, the idea had been planted (Schultz 149). In years to come, nursing schools for women would be opened and nursing would be made a respected medical profession for women (Weatherford). The women's rights movement would also take root in the U.S. and further diminish the power the cult of domesticity had on the lives of women.

Though it would take time, the dedication and devotion of thousands of women over the Civil War years would become proof that the ideal image of a woman could indeed change. Countless women stepped out of their comfort zones to be of aid to soldiers and they demonstrated that being a woman did not undermine the quality of work one could complete. The dedicated efforts of women including Alcott, Barton, Tompkins, Dix, and many more whose work goes undocumented, truly changed society. Foundations, such as Barton's American Red

Cross would go on to help millions of people long past her era. Finally, women found themselves on the road to feminine involvement in society as it is known today. From now on women would be a part of the workforce and begin the push towards greater gender equality. Significant advancement pertaining to rights loomed ahead in the not so distant twentieth century. Nursing would in time grow to be a respectable profession for women and the hardships of nurses like Alcott would simply be inspiring documentations of the past.

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