

Dressing the Part

A review of

*Mothers of Invention:
Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War*
by Drew Gilpin Faust

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Will I ever have my dear husband at home any more or am I doomed to fight & buffet my way through this friendless world alone. God forbid indeed I do not think I could unless necessity were to make a different woman of me.¹

Judith Davidson's lamentation on the opening page of Drew Gilpin Faust's *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* reflects the complexity of experience in the Civil War South. Faust's thorough analysis of southern womanhood and its changing dimensions during the four year conflict asserts that Davidson and her peers struggled mightily with the roles that the war forced upon them. Born out of necessity, the women of the Confederacy transformed the social, economic and political foundations of southern society. In the process, they tentatively redefined themselves within this new order.

During the antebellum, period the elite women of the south enjoyed a life of comfort and privilege at the expense of subordination to the patriarchal order of their society. The war required women to navigate in a world that they were ill-prepared to handle. White male power controlled and defined all of the relationships within the hierarchy of southern society. Confederate conscription legislation effectively removed three-fourths of the white male population by requiring their service in the Confederate Army. The resultant power vacuum left women responsible for societal management and economic production for the remainder of the war.

According to Faust, not only were women challenged by the new roles that were required of them, they struggled with how these roles would affect their identities as women. For example, the idea of meting out physical punishments to recalcitrant slaves was abhorrent to most women of the elite classes. One might assume that this was based on Christian ideals or some sense of the immorality of corporal punishment when in reality any physical behavior was

¹ Julia Davidson, September 8, 1863, Epigraph, quoted in Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 2.

considered inappropriate for a woman, especially an elite woman. However, slave control demanded these actions and those who could not find someone else to discipline their slaves often worried that they were becoming like men.

Concerns over stepping into the masculine world were not confined to the maintenance of plantation society. The lack of male population also required that women work outside of their homes for the first time. Some elite southern women worked in informal social groups that produced supplies such as bandages and socks for the troops. Others worked in factories that made uniforms and clothing. It would seem to the twenty-first century reader that these tasks were in keeping with the 'woman's sphere' of work, but Faust points out that in the middle of the nineteenth century these jobs were normally carried out by men or female slaves. As a result, the textile production needed to supply the Confederate cause challenged women's racial, as well as gender, definitions.

Perhaps most distressing to the southern woman's sense of identity came with her entrance into the political realm. Forced by deprivations and hardships to petition and beg Confederate leaders for help, women were thrust into the most public arena in society. Southern women also began to express their frustrations with the war in letters to newspapers. In addition, women worked in government departments such as the Treasury (because of their attractive handwriting for Confederate currency notes). Faust cites numerous diary entries lamenting that the purity of their feminine reputations were at risk because of this intrusion into these masculine strongholds of power.

Interestingly, while Faust paints a vivid and in-depth portrait of female influence on a changing southern society, the author underscores the thesis with how angry and disappointed these women are with their new roles. Essential to southern womanhood, even if unspoken, was

the idea that men were obligated to ensure their safety and security. In exchange, women accepted subordinated duties and responsibilities. The Civil War proved that not only were individual men unable protect their women because of their absence, it also proved that Confederate leaders were incapable of providing any help. Therefore, women felt betrayed by the very people southern society reared them to trust.

By the end of the war, the hardships and suffering that southern women had endured was unprecedented. The men in their lives, if they came home alive and unharmed, were forever altered by their war time experiences. Farms, plantations, homes and livelihoods were destroyed by warfare and neglect. Political structure was ineffective or nonexistent. The comfortable definitions of race, class and femininity that shaped their world no longer applied.

Under Faust's careful, insightful and thoroughly annotated tutelage, the reader is provided with an excellent understanding of the deeply personal challenges that southern women faced during the American Civil War. These understandings are fostered not just by the examples previously cited but by the author's dissection of every facet of community life. Throughout the work, Faust gives voice to previously unheard and under researched narratives. What emerges from these stories is the strong sense that these women were forced to put on a costume and play a part that they were not at all comfortable with. In fact, Faust's epilogue encourages the premise that after the war, southern women, however resentful and distrustful they were about male leadership, chose to take off the costumes and restore whatever they could of their former lives.

In conclusion, this reviewer recommends Faust's exhaustive work, *Mothers of Invention*, for a number of reasons. From the scholarly position, the author meticulously cites sources and provides an excellent bibliographical note. In addition, the majority of the sources are primary

source documents such as letters, diaries and news accounts that lend to an authentically personal narrative. Students of history will be interested in delving into the largely unwritten arena of women's Civil War history. As Faust mentions in the preface, this area of research continues to expand, particularly in the south. Along this line, the roles of southern women in the war and their resentments in the aftermath offer connection to the development of a society rebuilt on a racial hierarchy. The development of the Jim Crow south and the resulting Civil Rights Movement are given context by Faust's exploration of southern society. Lastly, Faust states in the preface that she wanted to write a book that her mother and grandmothers would want to read. As a result, *Mothers of Invention* is a thoroughly researched but nonetheless enjoyable read.

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