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Ideal Darlings and Ministering Angels: Spheres of Action for Northern Women During the Civil War

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Although the Victorian women Anne C. Rose researched and included in her book, *Victorian America and the Civil War*, "were unusually affluent and accomplished," Rose remarked with surprise that so "much of their work was unpaid, unappreciated, and repetitive by virtue of rendering service rather than progressive in the sense of forwarding personal and public advancement" (70). This statement contradicts the assumption of many scholars that the Civil War afforded women the opportunity to leap "from their domestic sphere" and become more integrated into the public, and typically male, realm (Massey 3). This notion of a more fully integrated public sphere coincides with the purporting weakening of class and gender stratification, which many attributed to the increase of industrialization, as well as to other effects of the war. However, although northern women's participation in the public sphere increased during the Civil War, their participation was in many cases only an extension of their domestic ideologies, and therefore women were subject to the same regulations and restrictions of the domestic sphere.

Rather than view women's activities and involvement in the United States Sanitary Commission as proto-feminist labor (as the majority of that labor was still unpaid), several of the authors represented in this essay view these efforts as merely extensions of their antebellum organizations, which were usually rooted in evangelical societies. While the majority of northern women were content to knit socks for local women's groups, northern women such as Caroline Cowles Richards at Sanitary Commission hospitals, members of the Woman's National Loyal League, urged for more political involvement on behalf of women. These women rejected the Sanitary Commission's call for patriotic indifference and both of Lincoln's Inaugural addresses, it is clear they were more interested in the social aspects of hospital life in America. As a girl of twenty, Carrie enjoyed attending prayer meetings, and other community activities, but was more interested in the social aspects of these functions than anything else. While her diary is full of large events such as theLOOD of Lincoln, and both of Lincoln's Inaugural addresses, it is also full of Mrs. Grundy, the infamous caricatured upholder of Victorian restraint and propriety. Richards particularly enjoyed the social aspect of the work, however, the Commission's stay in the race was not a total homogenizing or unifying force among them.

I: *Darling Is Ideal:* Separate Sphere Ideology and Women's Notions of Domestic Patriotism

Michael P. Turner explained that "women's ability to assume new and burdensome responsibilities as breadwinners and heads of household" was vital to the war effort. "When they did this," Turner continued, "women stepped outside the "woman's sphere" to which nineteenth-century men had consigned them" (246). During the reign of Victoria, 1837-1901, both American and British cultures espoused an ideology which decried the notion of the "sacred place, full of pure, womanly virtue. This separation of the public (work) and the private (home) spheres emphasized the purifying influence of the home, as sanctified by women, on men who became subjected to the corruption of business and industry. While industrialization took men away from the home, "women began to reign supreme over the day-to-day activities of the family" (Venet 3). This ideology emphasized "women's alleged physical and intellectual weaknesses," while simultaneously labeling them "as divinely gifted with the virtues of purity, piety and domesticity" (Venet 3).

In a diary entry from January 1862, Caroline Richards, a recent graduate of a small girls' seminary in New York remarked that "It is wonderful that young men who have brilliant prospects before them at home, will offer themselves upon the altar of their country" (139). While this speaks volumes about the sacrificial language of war and the indoctrination of sacrifice into a national and homogenous ideal, the remarkable aspect of this diary lies in the juxtaposition of ideas. For instance, the next sentence contains "Carrie's" description of her new patriotic stationery, with all the colors of the flag. This juxtaposition suggests women like Carrie viewed their own patriotism, this case in the form of stationery, as parallel to the male sacrifice. In many ways, Caroline Cowles Richards's diary is representative of what it proclaimed to describe: "village life in America." As a girl of twenty, Carrie enjoyed attending prayer meetings, and other community activities, but was more interested in the social aspects of these functions than anything else. While her diary is full of large events such as theLOOD of Lincoln, and both of Lincoln's Inaugural addresses, it is also full of Mrs. Grundy, the infamous caricatured upholder of Victorian restraint and propriety. Richards particularly enjoyed the social aspect of the work, however, the Commission's stay in the race was not a total homogenizing or unifying force among them.

While this diary emphasized seemingly private events, it is important because, like so many throughout the period, it records the emphasis women placed on the sanctity of the home. The diaries of Samuel and Rachel Cormany also emphasized this sanctity. In contrast to Richards's diary, however, the Cormany's stay in the war became more central to Samuel's enlistment.

The diaries began during the courtship of Samuel and Rachel while at Otterbein and culminated with Samuel's return at the end of the Civil War, though perhaps the most interesting observations are those describing their honeymoon. Within five days' worth of entries, Samuel only references Rachel by name once; otherwise she is "Darling" (124-5). In their entries, both Cormans emphasize the spiritual link of their marriage, which is a thread that runs throughout the entire diary, as devotion to spiritual growth and harmony. Samuel describes Rachel as "darling," and writes elaborately the "sacred character" of Rachel's life as an educated, accomplished, and ideal woman, however, becomes largely restricted to the domestic realm.

Initially, this "darling" describes her post marital state with Samuel in terms of ownership. In one of the entries of 1860, she remarked that she does not "regret that she has [given] herself to such a noble man" and with the comment that "I love him more every day" (135). While Samuel works as a clerk in his brother-in-law's store, Rachel and her sister Lydia "commence the bonnet and dressmaking" of their "linen business" (125). Interestingly, Samuel works with his brother-in-law in the front of the store while Rachel and Lydia work hidden away and unseen in the private realm. After Samuel enlists in 1862, Rachel's entries are even more completely the language of confinement.

During his wartime involvement, Rachel does not enter the public sphere, but continues sewing for other soldiers, but says she will support herself and her child. Her place is unquestionably in the private sphere, as she is literally forced to occupy the "back room" of her husband's family home. She repeatedly questions this arrangement in her diary, wondering why she was brought here among strangers and rather than a month's visit was left here in turn of strangers-in-a back room, fighting with my babe" (287). Although Rachel, unlike most southern women, remained sheltered from actual fighting for the duration of the war, she suffered economically as well as morally; she interacted with almost no one besides her child for the remainder of her husband's service.

II. The United States Sanitary Commission: The Appropriate Outlet for Women's Patriotism

Livermore described her time as a leading officer of the Commission as a "variety of experience not often gained by a woman" (8). Patriotism, and specifically the kinds of organized patriotism practiced by the Sanitary Commission "nourished the self-sacrifice of women, and stimulated the collection of hospital supplies and to brave the horrors and hardships of hospital life" (Livermore 109). As far as Mary Livermore and other Sanitary Commission officers were concerned, this self-sacrificing (and centralizing) patriotism was preferred for women. As "the great channel, through which benevolence" flowed into the army, the Commission was responsible for raising and distributing the "liabilities" aid societies and centralized the domestic work of knitting socks, sewing uniforms, etc. Much of this "benevolence" received by national society was in fact unpaid, domestic labor.
In her memoir, Livermore argued that through this benevolence and self-sacrifice Northern women experienced, "the fetters of cast and conventionalism broke do other... patriarchic and plebian, Protestant and Catholic, and scraped lint, and rolled bandages, or made garments for the poorly clad soldiery" (111). Women who contributed their unpaid labor, all of which could be done in the privacy of their homes, or in the society of other "ladies," were truly patriotic. Livermore's statement does support the idea that these women had a homogenized volunteer experience, but also that it provided women with valuable experiences which they were able to exercise later on, towards the goal of enfranchisement. However, Livermore wrote her memoir in 1899, nineteen years after the 1870 appearance of the Fifteenth Amendment, which granted women the right to vote. Considering her retrospective lens, it is difficult to determine how deeply Livermore considered women's experiences at the Sanitary Commission as relevant to the enfranchise-

Livermore linked the initial lack of male organization in the army and on the battlefield with the lack of women's organization in relief aid. The local and regional women's Relief Societies were directly connected to the South and was "out of this chaos of individual benevolence and abounding patriotism" that the Sanitary Commission "finally emerged, with its carefully elaborated plans and marvelous system" (122). The women's patriotism and the women's sphere as complimentary and paralleled the male patriotism and the public sphere.

Yet, Livermore all but condemns the thousands of unknown women who disguised themselves as men in order to face combat during the war. She condemned a few notable exceptions such as Mrs. Katie Brownwell, who accompanied her husband, the 2P Rhode Island Regiment into battle. When Mrs. Brownwell's husband was pronounced physically unfit for further service and discharged, she also sought a discharge and rejoined the Union army as a "ministering angel" (qtd. Ross 103). These lower class servants also served women aboard this transport hospital did not wash their own laundry or that of the men they cared for. While not all hospitals provided such easy superintendence to the Sanitary Commission's efforts were geared towards creating a "ministering angel" atmosphere and often resulted in the care of inpatients transferred from hospitals to the war, there were also cases of mistaken identity resulting from the Sanitary Commission's development of a "ministering angel" atmosphere and often resulted in the care of inpatients transferred from hospitals to the war, there were also cases of mistaken identity

According to Catton, cornelia experienced a largely male reaction to the war; it could be assumed also that her response to the battlefield would be a largely "male" one, active, aggressive and un-flinch-

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1. The above sentences are quoted within the text from Documents of the United States Sanitary Commission.

2. Massey and Ross both describe women nurses who regarded their situation as one requiring special stamina. Also, cornelia wrote in a letter to her niece that "I am doing all a woman can do to help the war along, and, therefore I feel no responsibility about [not being able to read the newspapers]. If people take an interest in me because I am a heroine, it is a great mistake for I feel like anything but a heroine" (qtd. Ross 103). cornelia's response is unclear whether she actually wrote this letter or not. The letter also reveals the concern others felt about women's virtue. Therefore, while these women, according to Mary Livermore, learned to disregard class and creed resulting from their work in the shared channel for the patriotism of all women, women abroad this transport hospital did not wash with the officials or that of the men they cared for. While not all hospitals provided such easy superintendence (indeed not all volunteer units were composed of members of the social elite), it seems clear that the heart of the Sanitary Commission's efforts were geared to
during the Peninsular campaign. Female superintendents, like wormeley and other men on board, "were expected to oversee the linen, the patients' clothing, take a count of the men and women, and to fulfill the function of having the charge of other nurses in their wards (Ross 101). The floating hospitals (under the supervision of General Secretary of the Commission and abo-

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terms of morality and virtue, which parallels the stra-

time a gifted politician, urged women's activism in 100,000 signatures in February, 1864, they were ex-

nor bullets to ensure the consideration of the point of then to present that petition to Congress. As Venet's initial objective was to collect petitions from every state pation in the political sphere" (Venet 102). The League's very-and would be based on the idea of female partici-

Woman's National Loyal League, the first national organization of the radical women's movement as it continued the Angel of Justice

sion advocates gathered in New York City to form the Sanitary Commission. While this organization served as a na-

his advocacy for enfranchisement by patriotically supporting the war effort, by becoming informed on political questions, and by exercising their political right of petition on behalf of the slave (Venet 116). The issue of slavery had an extremely broad moral appeal to women, however, the important aim of the petition, for Stanton, was to prove women as responsible, socially competent citi-

rather even from the supervision of such work, as she had no desire to stand with women in the steam all the time," doing the grueling menial labor. Usher, as a member of the middle-class remained sepa-

provide sisterly (or maternal) companionship for the wounded soldiers," which were deemed too indecorous for the white "nurses" superintending (Leonard 261). While superintendents such as Rebecca Usher of Maine simply "became . . . acquainted with and provided[s] sisterly (or maternal) companionship to the men that surrounded [them]'' the "other women" served as cooks or laundresses, standing "there in the steam all the time," doing the grueling menial labor. Usher, as a member of the middle-class remained separate even from the supervision of such work, as she had no desire to stand with women in the steam "arranging [the work and seeing] that it goes on well" (259-258).

IV. Tempering the Ministering Angel of Mercy with the Angel of Justice Although this can only be a very limited discussion of the radical women's movement as it continued throughout the Civil War, it is important to note that the goals of women's rights advocates such as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were almost in direct opposition to those of Mary Livermore and the Sanitary Commission. In May 1863, Stanton, Anthony and several other radical women's enfranchise-

ment advocates gathered in New York City to form the Woman's National Loyal League, the first national po-

political women's network. The organization, as Stanton and Anthony envisioned, "would not call upon women to knit socks, roll bandages, or make jam or jellies for the wounded soldiers" (Venet 102). Instead, the League "was dedicated to a radical principal of abolition of slavery and the idea of female participa-

tion in the political sphere" (Venet 102). The League's initial objective was to collect petitions from every state of the Union calling for the abolition of slavery, and then to present that petition to Congress. As Venet's title so eloquently states, women had neither ballots nor bullets to ensure the consideration of the point of view; thus their petition campaign was their only means of penetration into the governmental arena.

While this essay is not the place to describe the radical protests against Stanton, and particularly, An-

thony, it is worthy to mention that while they raised 100,000 signatures in February 1864, they were ex-
tremely difficult to obtain (Venet 121). Stanton, by this time a gifted politician, urged women's activism in terms of morality and virtue, which parallels the strat-

egy for recruitment undertaken by the Sanitary Com-

committees of women, as represented by those women who joined the Woman's National Loyal League. These women used patriotism as a springboard for political activism for women's enfranchisement; they became increasingly active and disruptive of gen-

determinant to incorporate women. While Northern women's contributions to the war were all valuable, it is im-

portant to understand the complexity of their range of po-
sitions and experiences in order to avoid generalizing them into a unified entity.

Bibliography

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