
BATTLE SCARS



GENDER AND SEXUALITY *in the* AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

EDITED BY CATHERINE CLINTON AND NINA SILBER

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Gender and Sexuality in the American Civil War

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2006

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Oxford University Press, Inc., publishes works that further
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Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.

198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

www.oup.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Battle scars : gender and sexuality in the American Civil War /

edited by Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13 978-0-19-617445-8 ; 978-0-19-517444-1 (pbk.)

1. Sex role—United States—History—19th century. 2. Women—
United States—History—19th century. 3. United States—History—
Civil War, 1861–1865—social aspects. 4. United States—Social
conditions—To 1865. 5. United States—Social conditions—
1865–1918. I. Clinton, Catherine, 1952– II. Silber, Nina.

HQ1075.5.U6B38 2006

305.3'0973'09034 2005048796

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

for Susan Ferber

CONTRIBUTORS

Thomas J. Brown is Associate Professor of History and Associate Director of the Institute for Southern Studies at the University of South Carolina. He is the author of *Dorothea Dix, New England Reformer* (1998), the editor of *The Public Art of Civil War Commemoration: A Brief History with Documents* (2004), and coeditor, with Martin H. Blatt and Donald Yacovone, of *Hope and Glory: Essays on the Legacy of the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Regiment* (2001).

Lisa Cardyn received her Ph.D. and J.D. degrees from Yale University, where she is now a Research Affiliate at the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition. She is currently revising the manuscript of her first book, a study of sexual terror and the Reconstruction klans. Her next project, tentatively titled *The Trials of Evelyn Nesbit*, takes up the contested meanings of sexualized violence in the context of one of the most notorious “crimes of passion” of the last century—Harry Thaw’s murder of the architect Stanford White. It is the subject of her most recent article, “Spectacles of Sex and Violence in Old New York: The Nesbit-Thaw-White Affair,” published in 2004.

Catherine Clinton is the author and editor of over twenty books, most recently *Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom* and *Hold the Flag High* (an illustrated book for young readers). She is currently working on a biography of Mary Todd Lincoln.

Jim Downs earned his undergraduate degree from the University of Pennsylvania; and his M.A. and Ph.D. from Columbia University. He is revising his dissertation, “Diagnosing Reconstruction: The History of the Medical Division of the Freedmen’s Bureau,” for publication. Downs is the coeditor of *Taking Back the Academy: History of Activism, History as Activism* (2004), and the editor of *Why We Write* (2005). He has published articles

in *The Southern Historian* and *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*. He is currently teaching in the Department of History at Princeton University.

Virginia Meacham Gould is an Adjunct Faculty Member at Tulane University. She is the author of *Chained to the Rock of Adversity: To Be Free, Black, and Female in the Old South* (1998) and co-editor of *No Cross, No Crown: Black Nuns in Nineteenth Nineteenth-Century New Orleans*. She has published numerous essays in books and journals, including "Piety, Social Activism, and the Dynamics of Race: The Foundation of the Sisters of the Holy Family," in *Free Women of Color in the Americas*, edited by David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine. She co-authored, "The Feminine Face of Afro-Catholicism," published in the *William and Mary Quarterly* and winner of the A. Elizabeth Taylor Prize from the Southern Association for Women Historians. She is presently writing a biography of Henriette Delille, the founder of the Sisters of the Holy Family in New Orleans.

Stephen Kantrowitz received his Ph.D. from Princeton University in 1995 and since then has taught U.S. history at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. He is the author of *Ben Tillman and the Reconstruction of White Supremacy* (2000), which won the Ellis W. Hawley Prize from the Organization of American Historians. This essay draws on the research for his new project, "Radical Reconstruction in the Deep North."

Elizabeth D. Leonard is the John J. and Cornelia V. Gibson Associate Professor (and Chair) of History, and the Interim Director of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, at Colby College in Waterville, Maine. She is the author of three books: *Yankee Women: Gender Battles in the Civil War* (1994); *All the Daring of the Soldier: Women of the Civil War Armies* (1999); and *Lincoln's Avengers: Justice, Revenge, and Reunion after the Civil War* (2004).

Anne Sarah Rubin is an Associate Professor of History at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. She is the author of *A Shattered Nation: The Rise and Fall of the Confederacy, 1861–1868*, a study of Confederate nationalism and identity. She is also a co-author (with Edward L. Ayers and William G. Thomas III), of *The Valley of the Shadow Project*, a multimedia history of the Civil War in two communities, which won the 2001 E-Lincoln prize. She is currently working on a study of Sherman's March in history and memory.

Nina Silber is Associate Professor of History at Boston University, where she specializes in classes on the Civil War, women's history, and the U.S. South. In addition to the original volume of essays on gender and the Civil War, *Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War* (co-edited with Catherine Clinton and published in 1992), her publications include *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865–1900* (1993); *Yankee Correspondence: Civil War Letters between New England Soldiers and the Homefront* (co-edited with Mary Beth Stevens and published in 1996); and *Daughters of the Union: Northern Women Fight the Civil War* (2005).

John Stauffer is Professor of English, History of American Civilization, and African and African American Studies at Harvard University. He received his Ph.D. in American Studies at Yale University in 1999, where he received the Ralph Henry Gabriel Prize for the best dissertation from the American Studies Association. His first book, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (2002), won the 2002 Frederick Douglass Book Prize from the Gilder Lehrman Institute; won the Avery Craven Book Prize from the Organization of American Historians; and was the Lincoln Prize runner-up. He is the editor of Frederick Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom*, for the Modern Library; the co-editor (with Zoe Trodd) of *Meteor of War: The John Brown Story*; and (with Tim McCarthy) of *Democratic Vistas: New Essays on American Abolitionism*. He is at work on a new book, *Dreaming of Democracy: American Interracial Friendships in History and Myth*.

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Thomas J. Brown

BATTLE SCARS

THESE DAYS

collaborating and self-censoring
Canadian and U.S. film industries

By Greg Kinnear

THEY SAY IT'S THE END OF THE LINE, the end of the American dream, the end of the American way of life. But in the world of the American film industry, it's just the beginning of a new era. The American film industry is now a global industry, and it's no longer just about the American dream. It's about the American way of life, and it's about the American film industry. The American film industry is now a global industry, and it's no longer just about the American dream. It's about the American way of life, and it's about the American film industry. The American film industry is now a global industry, and it's no longer just about the American dream. It's about the American way of life, and it's about the American film industry.

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INTRODUCTION

Colliding and Collaborating: Gender and Civil War Scholarship

Nina Silber

In the past fifteen years, since the initial appearance of *Divided Houses*, our original volume of essays on gender and the Civil War, scholarship on the sectional conflict has, in its own way, been nudged in new directions. Of course, a quick tour through the bookstore, or a glance at most television documentaries, will reveal that the dominant picture of the Civil War still revolves largely around leading generals, great battles, and famous political leaders. But, even if only occasionally, subtle hints emerge documenting a different kind of Civil War experience: news articles on women who cross-dressed as men and fought like soldiers; an occasional book exploring the exploits of a Civil War heroine; even a Hollywood film that devotes considerable screen time to the trials of women trying to survive on the homefront. And while Hollywood directors may not have always been the most assiduous readers of the latest historical writing, their future artistic creations might be enhanced by turning to the work of a growing number of scholars who have begun to complicate the traditional story-line of the U.S. Civil War by reminding us that significant numbers of Civil War-era Americans were not men. We can now read more carefully about the problems and contributions of a diverse corps of female nurses, the work done by women spies and soldiers in advancing the war's agenda, and the way that women writers crafted their own critical interpretations of wartime events. The study of emancipation, a pivotal development of the Civil War years, has also moved forward by leaps and bounds, again with far greater attention paid to the ways the

abolition of slavery uniquely affected the status of women, both black and white, in the Civil War era.¹

As our original volume made clear, and as this new collection continues to emphasize, the recent scholarly trend has looked not just at the experiences of women but also at the larger issue of gender. This perspective places the focus on the cultural and ideological systems that have shaped the behavior and activities of both men and women, and the interaction between the Civil War and that larger cultural framework about sex roles. Certainly these essays, as well as the new literature more generally, are interested in documenting men's and women's distinct experiences; but those experiences are put in the context of the ideas and expectations about sex roles and how those roles were sanctioned in American society. In other words, we look at how gender has been a cultural construction in American history and how that construction influenced the social, political, and even military landscape during the Civil War years. With this new volume of essays, we hope to explore ways in which considerations of gender have opened up new directions in how historians understand the era of sectional conflict and slave emancipation, exploring such topics as black and white abolitionists' conceptions of masculinity, the roles played by Catholic nuns in the Civil War South, and sexual violence during Reconstruction. In this introductory essay, we also aim to take stock of how this specific field of study has unfolded in the last few decades and what insights it has (and perhaps has not) brought to the study of the Civil War era.

To a great extent, the study of gender and the Civil War represented a kind of collision between three different subdisciplines in the historical profession: traditional Civil War scholarship, the development of women's history, and a new emphasis on social and cultural history that dominated the historical profession toward the end of the twentieth century. Traditional Civil War scholarship, from the time the war ended and extending into the present day, has continued to be largely focused on military activity, political leadership, and, to a lesser extent, the interaction between battlefield developments and wartime politics. Certainly through the 1950s, virtually no Civil War study gave much attention to women, let alone to issues of gender. Indeed, as James McPherson noted in his foreword to *Divided Houses*, the biases of the traditional historians could be detected in the population more generally, perhaps most notably in the insistence on the part of Civil War Round Tables (gatherings where mostly amateur historians discussed the war), as late as 1976, on exclud-

ing women from membership. As one member of the Chicago Round Table explained, admitting "the ladies" would "inevitably lead to an erosion of the purpose of this organization." Traditional Civil War historians, in short, believed there was little overlap between their own battle-driven focus and "women's" concerns.²

But away from the Civil War limelight, beginning in the middle years of the twentieth century, a few pioneers began to study the question of women's place in the American past. These early historians, many working on the periphery of the historical profession, produced studies examining women's roles in industrialization and economic life, while also giving attention to the more prominent political declarations and activities of American women, especially those pursuing female suffrage. One of the few encounters between Civil War scholarship and the early women's history appeared in 1966 in the form of Mary Massey's pathbreaking volume *Bonnet Brigades: American Women and the Civil War*. Massey, like other women's historians of her generation, was largely interested in women's activities in the public sphere and in understanding how the war pushed women into spaces previously considered exclusively masculine preserves. Perhaps most of all, Massey was interested in the increased economic opportunities made possible by the military conflict. Along these lines, she documented women's inroads into professions such as teaching, nursing, and government service, as well as industry. "The economic emancipation of women," Massey concluded, "was the most important single factor in her [*sic*] social, intellectual, and political advancement, and the war did more in four years to change her economic status than had been accomplished in any preceding generation." To a great extent, Massey initiated (or perhaps confirmed) a view that would inform popular perceptions about women and the Civil War for many years to come: that the Civil War represented a liberating turning point for the women of the United States, north as well as south. In subsequent years, scholars would draw on Massey's abundant research and expand on many of her findings. Inevitably, too, they had to confront, and sometimes reassess, her emancipationist paradigm.³

In the 1970s and 1980s, historians brought a whole new range of questions and methodological tools to the study of the American past, including the Civil War, by drawing on new approaches in social and cultural history. Inspired in part by the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, scholars developed a new appreciation for the historical experiences of "ordinary" people, those who had not commanded armies or held political office or dominated American business but had spent their lives toiling

in factories, laboring in their homes, working the land, and supporting (but seldom leading) various types of political movements. Lacking the highly verbal documents traditionally used to examine the lives of elites, social historians often used quantitative methods to consider how groups of non-elites, including women, may have affected historical outcomes. Still, much of the early social history scholarship tended to overlook the Civil War altogether, reflecting the determination of these scholars to see American history from a new vantage point. Less focused on the crucial moments of the traditional political story of the American past, the new social history offered a different narrative, one driven more by changes in the industrial process or by experiences in local communities than by national upheaval and federal elections. In light of this tendency, one scholar, at the end of the 1980s, wondered if social historians had "lost the Civil War" altogether. Were American social historians, queried Maris Vinovskis, now going to the extreme of completely overlooking this pivotal event in their study of the past?⁴

This temporary blind spot notwithstanding, not all historians had "lost" the war. Some now began to bring a social history focus to the study of the conflict, quantifying recruitment activities in local communities or closely observing relief efforts at the community level. And, in the meantime, the new generation of women's historians was, on its own terms, finding its way back to the Civil War. The field of women's history had been rejuvenated with the new turn to social history, with numerous studies undertaken to document the ways that masses of women, as well as more notable females, had contributed to various social movements and historical developments. But the new women's history also began to strike out in new directions, going beyond the framework laid out by an earlier generation of women's historians and by the social historians of the 1970s and 1980s. More specifically, the new women's history began revisiting the central components of the traditional political narrative, using the profoundly different experiences of women to come to new assessments of critical watersheds and well-established turning points. Some, for example, reexamined the revolutionary era, documenting numerous instances of women's contributions during the American Revolution. In doing this work, they offered new ways to read the political culture of this period, calling attention to the conservative bent in republican thinking, especially with respect to female citizenship, by observing how a new type of ideology emerged that illuminated women's highly circumscribed civic status. By reading women's experience, and ideas about womanhood, back into the revolutionary period, women's historians suggested

new ways to think about the broader accomplishments, and limitations, of the American Revolution.⁵

And so, it seemed only logical that if scholars might revisit such a fixture on the historical landscape as the American Revolution, they might do the same for the U.S. Civil War. By the 1980s, a number of scholars had begun to do just that, an impulse that was captured, in part, by the essays that appeared in the original *Divided Houses*, and by subsequent work that was spawned by that volume. Some of that work has continued to pursue the methods of social historians by looking at specific groups of women (and men) and considering how their experiences intersected with the disruptions of wartime. Other scholars, including many whose work appears in this volume, have pushed their work into the realm of cultural history, raising questions about how notions of gender—as a cultural ideal—have been redefined in the course of the sectional conflict.⁶

Among the most enduring questions, for both social and cultural historians, is the one that was central to Mary Massey's interpretation of women in the Civil War era: how should we evaluate the experience of women in this period? Did the war encourage advancements in women's status, or did it have little effect on the standing of American womanhood and on established gender roles more broadly? Of course, as many recent scholars have acknowledged, any type of answer to these questions would require a more detailed investigation into the numerous other factors that shaped women's lives—especially variables such as race, class, and region. Region, in particular, has been a crucial determinant in studies of Civil War women. Most historians have assumed that notions and practices associated with gender have differed considerably in the Southern states, where slavery was a dominant factor in daily life, and the Northern states, where it was not. Most see evidence of a more deeply rooted patriarchal system in which white male plantation owners stood at the pinnacle of a clearly gendered chain of command. And as most students of history realize, Southern women obviously experienced the war itself in very different ways from Northern women. Closer to the chaos of the battlefield, frequently subjected to the constraints of Union occupation, and often shaped by the trauma of defeat, Southern women felt the repercussions of war far more directly than Northern ones. In fact, perhaps the drama and trauma of Southern women's wartime experience has also been one reason why more studies have focused on women of the South than on their Yankee sisters. The South, after all, produced (even if only in its imagination) a Scarlett O'Hara, while the North has yet to create her Yankee counterpart.

As a result, Southern women have, especially in recent years, received considerable scrutiny in the historical literature. But even among women of the South, their wartime experience varied considerably, as well as their standing both during and after the war, depending on whether they were free or slave, white or black, Union or Confederate supporters. While women's historians may have once used the experience and voices of privileged women as a way to understand and represent the world of "women" more generally, most scholars today recognize how much class and race, in particular, have significantly shaped the lives of their historical subjects. Indeed, even while scholarship still tends to focus more on women of means, historians today are more conscious of understanding the privileged status of their subjects. To some extent, in fact, the turn away from "women's history" and toward "gender history" has allowed scholars to give greater attention to crucial variables of class and race. By studying the power and influence of gender ideology, historians recognize how different groups of women and men, depending on their social and racial status, often experience that gender ideology in very different ways.

Not surprisingly, recent scholarship has often delivered very different pronouncements about the wartime experience of white slave-owning women than about the experience of Southern women who were black and enslaved. White plantation women, many have found, frequently showed a keen awareness of the privileges they had to lose and were sometimes reluctant to make the kinds of sacrifices that might jeopardize their prewar gender status, that is, as "ladies." Some historians, in fact, have even suggested that Southern plantation women eventually felt betrayed by the Confederate enterprise for the way it compromised their positions of privilege. Yet, the desire to protect privileges was, in many cases, offset by a growing sense of autonomy that even wealthy women gained during the war, some of which they put to use in the post-bellum era in creating new types of organizations and various forms of political expression. Perhaps most notable among these postwar activities—as many scholars have observed—were the efforts of elite Southern white women to construct and preserve the memories of the South's Civil War experience.⁷

Enslaved men and women, by contrast, experienced the war through the prism of emancipation, a revolutionary event that dramatically transformed their status both politically and domestically. As several recent studies have suggested, black female slaves actively participated in advancing liberation for both themselves and their children and in establishing themselves in new social and household positions. Former slaves could, for example, make new claims as legally recognized husbands and wives