

The Rhetoric of Rebel Women: Civil War Diaries and Confederate Persuasion

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Review

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Harrison, Kimberly *The Rhetoric of Rebel Women: Civil War Diaries and Confederate Persuasion*. Southern Illinois University Press, \$40.00 ISBN 9780809332571

How Diaries Shaped The Civil War Era

Kimberly Harrison returns to the favorite historical source for studying southern women during the American Civil War: the diaries of elite white women. An associate professor in English at Florida International University, Harrison takes a new approach to examining such diaries by analyzing the rhetorical devices purposely employed by these women to control their understanding of their own lives and the greater conflict in which they and their country were engaged.

Women's diaries recorded public as well as private rhetoric, shedding light on how women interacted with others and the meanings that they gave those interactions. Harrison argues that these rhetorics contributed to the "complex culture of the Confederate home front" and demonstrate how women "took part in defining what it meant to be, and to behave as, a Confederate" (4).

Because of their class, elite southern women believed that their words shaped community standards, and thus they were very careful in choosing those words. They often used their diaries to practice and record the words they used with others, both as reflective of their feelings and beliefs and to reinforce and convince themselves of those beliefs. Southern women believed that their public and private expressions of their patriotism were crucial for supporting the Confederate men and their cause. Direct, public speech was but one means of supporting the war; revising rules of etiquette to snub Union soldiers, private conversations within the home, and even silences all served as opportunities for women to exert their rhetorical power. Confederate women stepped beyond the antebellum expectations to enter into discourse about politics and war, but they maintained rigorously gendered decorum that reinforced their elite status and

thus preserved the ideals for which the southerners were fighting.

Women defined appropriate rhetorical strategies for dealing with all types of interactions--from those with Union soldiers to public settings to extended family members--and celebrated their abilities to uphold those strategies while upbraiding themselves when they failed. Harrison finds that women were most likely to fail in their rhetorical strategies when interacting with slaves. The changes that the war brought to the institution made slave management more difficult, but it also made former ideals about rhetorical interactions with slaves nearly impossible to uphold.

At the war's end, women's writing in their diaries changed. Many of the diarists quit writing altogether, either due to the significant increase in work as a result of emancipation or due to depression at the loss of their dreams and ideals. Many women stopped writing because their diaries no longer could reflect their efforts to build and maintain a Confederate ideal. Those who continued to write attempted to provide succor to the men returning and to return to the antebellum ideals, including limiting the roles for women and de-emphasizing the importance of women's rhetoric. In the longstanding historiographical debate over whether the Civil War caused a significant shift in southern women's roles, Harrison firmly sides with those historians who point to continuity rather than change. She does, however, point to the places in women's rhetoric where they had to re-establish antebellum expectations of women's expressions which had been challenged by the war.

Harrison's study of the rhetoric of one hundred white Confederate women's diaries is an interesting contribution to the subject of women in the American Civil War. While not adding much new about what women did during the war, it delves deeply into what southern women's words meant to themselves and the power they wielded through their rhetoric, ascribing to these women's words the authority that the women who wrote them believed that they had.

Angela Boswell is Professor of History at Henderson State University. She has published and edited books and essays on Texas women's and southern women's history, and is currently co-editing a collection of essays on Texas women during the Civil War.