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THE CREATION OF HISTORY AND MYTH IN MARY BOYKIN MILLER CHESNUT'S CIVIL WAR NARRATIVE

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

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* * * * *

The Ohio State University
1996

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ABSTRACT

The Civil War narrative of Mary Boykin Miller Chesnut interprets the events of this American crisis and shows readers what the war meant to white Southerners. At the same time, the text poses questions about what it means to be a woman during wartime and a woman writing history. Since C. Vann Woodward published his edition, titled Mary Chesnut's Civil War, the text has been accepted as a consciously constructed history of the Confederacy (particularly the South Carolinian aristocracy) that uses as its filter Chesnut’s own experiences and the experiences of her friends and family. Chesnut’s narrative records facts relating both to political events and personal experiences, fashions stories based upon rumors and the lives of her friends, and details major and minor undercurrents of the mores of the mid-nineteenth century South, all the while providing a self-conscious meta-narrative commentary on her words and ideas.

Chesnut’s goal was to publish her text, and it was the plan of placing her words before post-war white Southerners, whose experiences during Reconstruction had made them nostalgic, that guided her transformation of the wartime diaries into a narrative whose richness and complexity makes it unique among Civil War writings. By utilizing the form of a diary for her history, Chesnut re-enacts the war for her
readers, subjecting them to the vagaries of rumor. A critical reading of Chesnut’s literary construction of history in her record of the Confederacy reveals her ambivalence in the narrative toward the twin ideological pillars that supported the white Southern way of life and which made war with the North inevitable: the notion of aristocratic honor that Southerners employed in order to define themselves (not Northerners) as the natural inheritors of both American independence and European culture, and the issues of slavery and states’ rights that were the results of the Southern brand of independence. Chesnut’s interpretation of the politics of the Confederacy transforms several actual people (Jefferson and Varina Davis, John Bell Hood, and Sally Buchanan Preston) into heroic and symbolic literary characters through whom Chesnut offered a redemptive and compassionate interpretation of the Civil War.
Dedicated to my family and friends
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The literature of war has customarily been seen as the province of male authors: those viewed as most involved militarily or politically in a war become those who hold the authority to speak and write of it. Accordingly, military memoirs, written by and about combatants ranking from private to general or political figures ranging from small-town mayor to president, have come to fill the shelves of war libraries. Tucked between these chronicles of battle, though, are a handful of books written by women who question definitions of what it means to be involved in a war and to take part in a war effort. These first-hand accounts of war experiences demonstrate that although women have historically been denied direct access to the battlefield and to the council room, they nevertheless have played a vital role in a society at war. During the American Civil War, Southern and Northern women sustained their society by organizing and administering hospitals, nursing the wounded on and off the battlefield, supervising the production of food for soldiers and civilians, maintaining family farms or plantations, and coordinating what amounted to a cottage industry of sewing-circles to clothe the army. In the South, the work of women helped
the Confederacy, an alliance of rural and agricultural states, withstand the onslaught of the heavily industrialized Union as long as possible.

One of the most revealing and fascinating accounts of the Civil War was written by a South Carolina woman named Mary Boykin Miller Chesnut. This narrative, published in C. Vann Woodward’s edition as Mary Chesnut’s Civil War, is written in diary form. Rather than serving as an autobiographical account of her life, however, the text is a consciously constructed history of the Confederacy (particularly the South Carolinian aristocracy) and of Mary’s own life and of the lives of her friends and family during the Civil War. Mary Chesnut’s narrative records facts relating both to political events and to personal experiences, fashions stories based upon rumors and the lives of her friends, and details major and minor undercurrents of the mores of the mid-nineteenth century South, all the while providing a self-conscious meta-narrative commentary on her words and ideas. In this dissertation, I propose to examine critically Mary Chesnut’s literary construction of history and mythology in her record of the Confederacy. In Chapters 3 and 4, I shall investigate Mary Chesnut’s ambivalence in the narrative toward the twin ideological pillars that supported the Southern way of life and which made a war with the North inevitable. These two pillars are, first, the notion of aristocratic honor that Southerners employed in order to define themselves (and not Northerners) as the natural inheritors of both American independence and European culture, and, second, the problem of slavery with its accompanying issue of states’ rights which were the (logical, to many Southerners) results of the Southern brand of independence. In Chapter 5, I shall examine the
narrative's heroic and symbolic characters through whom Mary Chesnut offered a redemptive and compassionate interpretation of the Civil War. Throughout each chapter, I shall argue that it was Mary's goal of publishing her text and placing her words and ideas before post-war Southerners that guided her transformation of the wartime diaries into a narrative whose richness and complexity makes it unique among Civil War writings. Such a task must, obviously, begin with an understanding of the nature of Mary Chesnut's text in its published form.

Much confusion has arisen over Mary Chesnut's narrative, and almost all of the studies and articles that make it their subject have concentrated on questions about the text's authenticity and genre. The crux of the problem is that, at her death in 1886, Mary left behind multiple versions of a diary she kept during the Civil War. Her wartime diary begins in February of 1861 and runs through five volumes until December of 1861; two other volumes include material from January through February and May through June of 1865. Missing are volumes that cover the years 1862-1864 and the months of March and April of 1865. At least some of the missing sections of the diary are presumed to have been destroyed; on one occasion, for example, Mary was forced to burn large portions of her work because of the threat of a Yankee raid on Richmond. Since the beginning of the war, Southerners had been warned to be wary of allowing their personal papers to fall into the hands of Yankees because the Union army was known for seeking out and publishing any interesting Southern papers for the purposes of propaganda. Mary, well aware that her accounts of dissent within the Confederate leadership would have added spice to many a Northern newspaper,
nevertheless hesitated to destroy the pages into which she had poured so many of her observations and feelings. It was only after Molly, one of the Chesnuts’ slave maids, insisted that she take action, saying, “Missis, listen to the guns. Burn up everything. . . they’ll put in their newspapers whatever you write here every day,” that Mary destroyed the volumes of her work that were at hand. What little remains of the original diary was written for Mary’s eyes alone, and she often updated it weeks or months after an event occurred. Publication of this text, filled with personal thoughts, complaints, and self-congratulations, was clearly never her goal or intention, nor did she ever allow her husband (or her maid) to read it. These seven volumes, and perhaps a few more that were available to her but were subsequently lost, became the raw material that she would later use in writing her narrative.

Mary’s work on the revision of her Civil War narrative first began in the mid-1870s but was forestalled by the demands of everyday life in a society marked by defeat. When she finally returned to the project in 1881, she was aging and ill. The task she set before herself was to write a thorough revision of the diary, making major editorial decisions about what to keep, expand, or cut entirely. She worked chronologically, preferring to capture one event to her satisfaction before moving on the next, all the while deliberately removing references to herself from the text. The efforts of this final revision are painstakingly recorded in forty-eight copybooks. Financial difficulties interrupted Mary’s work, and, before she was able to return to her task, her husband, James Chesnut, Jr., became ill and died on February 1, 1885; eight days later, Mary’s mother also died. Reeling emotionally and financially from the
impact of these deaths, Mary was never again able to devote herself to her project before her own death a short while later in 1886.

After Mary’s death, nothing was heard of her work for almost a decade. It turned up, sometime in 1894, in the possession of Isabella Martin, a dear friend of Mary’s since the days of the Civil War, who subsequently stored the papers under the armoire in her bedroom. It was not until another decade had lapsed that Martin, under the sponsorship of Myrta Lockett Avary, a New York Journalist, was able to obtain a publisher interested in issuing an edition of Mary Chesnut’s narrative. In 1905, the publishers, D. Appleton, first arranged for a version of the narrative to be serialized in The Saturday Evening Post as A Diary from Dixie and then published their own copy under the same title and including an introduction written by Martin. Appleton’s in-house editors shortened Mary’s final text by more than two-thirds of the narrative’s actual length, and they edited it heavily to exclude anything contrary to the romantic view of the South that was so popular at the turn of the century. In 1949, novelist Ben Ames Williams published another edition of the narrative. Although his version contains more of Mary’s text, it was also heavily edited and contains a confusion of errors, omissions, alterations, and outright fabrications.

Finally, in 1981, C. Vann Woodward brought out what is considered to be the most reliable and complete edition yet published, and his work won the 1982 Pulitzer Prize in history. The problem with any edition of such a text is that editors must make decisions about what to exclude from publication. For example, George Hayhoe has claimed that the points of the narrative at which Woodward chose to begin and end his
edition may not be the best. Hayhoe notes that the two versions of *A Diary from Dixie*

began with an entry dated earlier than Woodward’s first one and that they ended with a

number of personal letters deleted from Woodward’s. Woodward counters with the

argument that Ben Ames Williams invented these passages entirely on his own and

that he himself is merely restoring the 1880s text to its pre-*Diary from Dixie* state. On the whole, Woodward’s editorial choices seem quite sensible: he begins his edition

of the narrative at the same point at which Mary began her actual diary, and he goes to
great lengths to include as much material as possible, frequently placing a selection
from the original diary next to its later incarnation in the revised text, thereby allowing
the readers to decide for themselves what Mary was trying to achieve through her
revisions. Because of such logical editorial decisions on Woodward’s part and
because his edition is scrupulously faithful to the revised text upon which Mary was
working at the end of her life, critics have reached a consensus and recognized the
Woodward edition of 1981 as the definitive text of Mary’s revised narrative.

It is only since the publication of Woodward’s edition that Mary Chesnut’s text
has been received as the literary narrative that it actually is. Mary herself never sought
to conceal the fact that she was completely overhauling her wartime diary, using it as a
source for an entirely different text and not simply correcting spelling or giving names
to characters previously identified only by initials; nor did she ever refer to her new
text as a diary. In fact, it was Isabella Martin, Myrta Lockett Avary, the editors at D.
Appleton, and those at *The Saturday Evening Post* who called the text a diary, claimed
that it had been written concurrently with the Civil War, and gave it the title *A Diary*
from Dixie. When Woodward revealed that Mary Chesnut had written her text well after the war, his news was greeted at first with anger by one or two critics, who then leveled charges of duplicity and deliberate misrepresentation against Mary Chesnut and against him. Kenneth S. Lynn is perhaps the most obvious example of one who misunderstood the nature of Mary’s work. He wrote a New York Times article entitled, “The Masterpiece that Became a Hoax,” which railed against this “fraudulent diary” that was “a trap for the unwary” reader and scholar. Of Woodward, Lynn says, “So anxious is he to embrace this nineteenth-century lady as a liberal Southern intellectual like himself that he cannot bear to admit that her diary represents one of the most audacious frauds in the history of American literature.” Of Mary Chesnut, he writes that she was “a deceiver,” an “ambitious but frustrated author” who “wrote a novel about the South during the Civil War and called it a diary.”13 Old impressions, like old habits, seem to die lingering deaths. Today, most critics have decided that Mary’s work is indeed, in Robert F. Sayre’s words, a “literary revision of early diaries”; they have called for a separation between the different versions and for critical examinations of the narrative as a literary text and of the wartime diary as a diary/autobiography.14

As yet, though, the narrative has been exposed only sporadically to critical attention as literary text. The most obvious reason for this inattention is that literary critics have been perplexed about the genre to which Mary Chesnut’s narrative belongs: how can one understand a text if one cannot decide what it is? It is not a diary, though it is written in diary form; it is not entirely non-fiction, though it is a
record of actual events; it is not a novel, though most of its material has been
dramatized; it is not a memoir or autobiography, though it is based upon the life andfiltered through the perspective of an actual person. C. Vann Woodward likens Mary
Chesnut's revised text to William Howard Russell's *My Diary in India in the Year
1858-1859* and *My Diary North and South* (about the American Civil War), both of
which present the journalist's reports in the form of diaries. Mary knew Russell and
quoted the first of these books in her own narrative, but her narrative goes a step or
two beyond Russell. In Woodward's terms, Mary's text manages to
combine historical with figurative and fictional truth and thus to
generate the coherence and irony she sought. [Mary Chesnut] does not
claim, or make a distinction between a world of historical fact and one
of figurative or fictional truth. Chesnut sought rather to make the two
coincide and illuminate the great experience she tried to express.\(^1^5\)

It is G. Thomas Couser who has come up with the best (if not most concise)
description of the genre in which Mary wrote; he calls her narrative "a novelized
chronicle in diary format" that is not the lifewriting of one woman, but "a collective
autobiography of the embattled Confederacy."\(^1^6\) While this form required Mary, as
Woodward points out, "to speak in the temper and mood of an earlier era, the time of
the war itself, and thus exempted her from the post-Confederate pieties, nostalgias, and
sentimentalities that cloyed much Southern writing about the war published in the
eighties,"\(^1^7\) it also allowed her to do something even more important. It is only
through the diary form that Mary is able to make her readers feel as if they are
experiencing the Civil War concurrently as she writes about it: we readers live the war
through her words. As we read, we overhear snatches of malicious conversation or
snippets of political intrigue. We are subject to the vagaries of rumor, which break in upon happy times and frighten us with stories about far-off battles and the deaths of friends or falsely raise our hopes about the survival of a relative. We too thrill to the news of victory at Manassas only to mourn over the carnage that each battle leaves behind, and the accidental death of Varina and Jefferson Davis' little boy interrupts our pleasure at Richmond entertainments. A diary format was, therefore, simply the most appropriate form for Mary's task of illuminating and reenacting "the great experience" of life during the Civil War.

Despite her inability to finish revising her narrative, the work that Mary left behind her is a brilliant record of Confederate life during the Civil War. Mary was an outspoken woman throughout her life, but she nevertheless had to reconcile her assessment of her own character with her society's view of women. As Drew Gilpin Faust observes, the world of the South was structured upon the plantation or farm; the plantation was both the "central economic institution" as well as the "primary site of social and political organization":

It functioned as the most important instrument of race control, and it similarly worked to institutionalize the subordination of white women, for the master was the designated head of what he frequently characterized as his "family white and black." . . . Male prerogative and male responsibility thus served as the organizing principle of southern households and southern society; white men stood at the apex of a domestic pyramid of power and obligation that represented a microcosm of the southern social world. The political necessity of defending this economy's fundamental need for slave labor also helped to make the South even more strongly conservative and patriarchal than the North, and, like many conservative societies throughout history, it demanded that
its women, particularly its upper class women, efface themselves from public life and devote their thoughts and actions to domestic concerns. Modesty, obedience, purity, silence, and tractability were as much the vital components of the female character for the women of the South as they were for the women of any other strongly patriarchal society. Even before the war, though, women were forced by circumstances to eschew the domestic sphere and take up some sort of public work. When men absented themselves from the plantation for political or economic reasons, as they so frequently did, women often shouldered the public responsibility of managing the plantation. The tension between preserving propriety while carrying out public duties was difficult for many women, and the war, with its urgent need for the fruits of female labor, only increased that tension.

Though Mary was more fortunate than most other upper-class Southern women in the sense that the Chesnut plantations made very few demands upon her time and energy, she was still a woman in a society controlled by men and thus had to contend with the South’s restrictions on women’s behavior. By claiming the authority to write about the war from her own first-hand experience, Mary must have been aware that she was stretching a boundary that defined what was acceptable for women and that separated men’s writing from women’s. Still, by the time of the Civil War, a number of Southern women had joined their Northern sisters, as Nina Baym has documented at great length, in pushing back the limits of that boundary by writing and publishing their own books about American history. Before Mary Chesnut even began to keep
her wartime diary, women who chose to write and to publish fictional, non-fictional, and poetic works of historical literature were

demolishing whatever imaginative and intellectual boundaries their culture may have been trying to maintain between domestic and public worlds. They were claiming on behalf of all women the rights to know and opine on the world outside the home, as well as to circulate their knowledge and opinions among the public. Their work both registered and significantly shaped the enormous general interest in history characteristic of the antebellum period.19

This was possible, Baym argues, because the line of demarcation between the “public” and “private” spheres was more blurred than twentieth-century historians and literary critics have previously thought: the home encompassed not only what is thought of as the traditionally private sphere, but it also overlapped with what is thought of as the public sphere. Such overlapping of the public and private came about as a result of “republican motherhood.” It was the duty of the women of the new republic to educate their children “not only in basic literacy (which had been part of woman’s work since the seventeenth century) but also in the rudiments of patriotism, republican values, and an understanding of civic virtue”; like their daughters and sons, husbands also became accustomed to hearing women discuss public affairs and to seeing them write about matters of public policy. Because of this process, Baym continues,

home and its satellite social spaces were no havens in heartless worlds, no sites for alternative human values to those predominating in official life, but the fountainheads of civic morality and thus essentially public in their nature. Home in this sense is obviously crucial to the formation of public opinion . . . and women were obviously participants. If women were not yet to be legislators, judges, cabinet members, or presidents of the nation . . . nevertheless their writing shows that they thought of themselves as part of the nonofficial public sphere and
intended to make themselves influential in forming public opinion, whether as writers or mothers or spouses or all of these.\textsuperscript{20}

While some might believe that influencing opinions at home (the "nonofficial public sphere") might not be as exciting and rewarding to a modern woman as arguing a case in court, the nineteenth-century home was still the site where the public and private realms met and merged, and it was the location of women’s interaction with public debate. Home was also the place where women wrote history.

Female accounts of American history covered a variety of subjects, and more than a few of them relied upon women’s own experience of historical events. One of the earliest of the female historical texts was Susanna Willard Johnson Hastings’ 1796 book, \textit{Narrative of the Captivity of Mrs. Johnson}, which, in addition to informing the reader about the months Johnson spent as a prisoner of a Native American tribe in the mid-eighteenth century, provides a first-hand account of events taking place during the French and Indian War. Hannah Adams’ \textit{A Summary History of New England}, published in 1799, concentrates on the American Revolutionary War, an event she calls, “‘one of the most extraordinary revolutions in history, replete with the most important consequences to mankind.’” Baym shows that, when Adams later rewrote \textit{A Summary} as a textbook for children, her version of American history, in which she casts the United States as the brainchild of New Englanders, came “to dominate schoolroom history for generations.” In 1855, when Mary Chesnut’s husband was serving a term as a South Carolina state Senator, a number of books by women were published that reflected the country’s growing concern with the issue of slavery. Among these, Baym singles out two as particularly good examples of the female
perspective on slavery: Elizabeth Lyon Roe’s *Aunt Leanna; or, Early Scenes in Kentucky*, which merges family history with an anti-slavery account of the political situation in Kentucky, and *Kansas: Its Interior and Exterior Life*, by Sara Tappan Robinson, the wife of Kansas’ Free-Soil governor, which similarly mingles personal history with a chronicle of Abolitionist efforts in the formation of that state. Also in that year, Augusta Evans, who later won great fame in the Confederate South and in the enemy North for her 1864 novel, *Macaria: Or Altars of Sacrifice*, published her first book, *Inez: A Tale of the Alamo*, a novelized history that was also anti-Catholic propaganda.

For Mary Chesnut, the boundary between the “public” and “private” spheres was even hazier than for other women writing history. As she declares in her diary during the first summer of the war, “My experience reverses all others—private life is wrangles & rows. . . . *Public* life has been peace & happiness, quiet & comfort.”

Most readers of the diary notice fairly quickly that Mary was more comfortable living in the eye of the public than rusticking in Camden, South Carolina, seat of the Chesnut family. The same is true of her narrative. In the later text, she extends this definition of her life:

My experience does not coincide with the general idea of public life. I mean the life of a politician or statesman. Peace, comfort, quiet, happiness, I have found away from home. Only your own family, those nearest and dearest, can hurt you. Wrangling, rows, heart burnings, bitterness, envy, hatred and malice, unbrotherly love, family snarls, neighborhood strife, and ill blood . . . I find them always alive and rampant when I go back to semi-village life. For after all, though we live miles apart . . . it amounts to a village community. Everybody knows exactly where to put the knife. (MCCW 176)
In Mary’s argument, private life is never truly private: one is always surrounded by one’s family, “those nearest and dearest.” Especially when it is lived upon a plantation, private life is like “semi-village life”: the home is actually an entire “village community” that teems with life.

It is important to note that Mary never evinces a similar feeling when she recounts her visits to her sister or mother. Nor does Mary ever mention that James Chesnut felt that life at Mulberry, the Chesnut plantation, could be described as the place where each family member “knows exactly where to put the knife”—but then, the Chesnuts were his family, and Mary was only a daughter-in-law who was on poor terms with most of her husband’s family. What Mary’s language reveals, then, is the fact that she felt most artificial and on display when she was on the plantation. Although Mary does not elucidate why she feels persecuted there, a reader can easily see that Mulberry was the location where she was pressured to assume a different personality—one that was more submissive and obedient and less opinionated and vocal. Of all the complaints that Mary voices about life on the plantation, the most frequent is that her thoughts and ideas are ignored, even rejected outright, by her (husband’s) relatives. Before returning to “the social desert” of Camden, she often has to gird her loins for battle (MCCW 273); at one point, she even writes, “We go home on Monday if I am able to travel. . . . Now for good neighborly hate” (MCCW 182). By expressing the idea that private life is not her natural domain in a text that she hopes to publish, Mary signals to her readers that she belongs entirely in the public eye. This impression is solidified with the lines, “My experience does not coincide
with the general idea of public life. I mean the life of a politician or statesman.”

Mary’s language, here, makes clear not only that she prefers to see herself primarily as a public person, but also that she considers herself to be one of these politicians and statesmen. The real Mary can most often be found wherever important events happen, important decisions are made, and important people meet—there, she does not act or play a role; there, she is most herself. Unlike most other politicians, though, she does not turn to her home life for comfort or respite because she obtains both from her interactions with friends and strangers. Even among her fellow politicians and statesmen, then, Mary is exceptional since she alone feels most at home in public.

This self-assessment might seem a little odd coming from a Southern woman of the nineteenth century, but it must be remembered that this passage was composed while she was revising her narrative. Other female historians who published their work included in their texts justifications of their writings. Some would include lengthy explanations, as did Mercy Otis Warren in her 1805 book, History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of American Revolution, to excuse their public speech: “Connected by nature, friendship, and every social tie, with many of the first patriots, and most influential characters on the continent; in the habits of confidential and epistolary intercourse with several gentlemen employed abroad in the most distinguished stations . . . I had the best means of information.” For this woman writer and others like her, justification came through contact with men. Others like Frances Manwaring Caulkins, the author of History of New London, Connecticut, from the First Survey of the Coast in 1612, to 1852, accounted for their actions differently: “It is
the ardent desire of the writer to engage the present generation in this ennobling study of their past history, and to awaken a sentiment of deeper and more affectionate sympathy with our ancestors. Thus, some women felt justified in writing history when they strove to teach American children about their past and to imbue in them a sense of the nobility of their nation’s progenitors. Mary Chesnut, though, never bothered to justify her historical writings because she defined herself as a public person all along. When the narrative reaches the end of the war, James Chesnut points to Mary and says, “Your sentence is pronounced—Camden for life” (MCCW 796). At first, the reader believes that Mary is being condemned to an undistinguished future of rural obscurity and familial discontent. Yet by the very fact that she writes this sentence in her narrative, the reader is aware that it was this same obscurity that gave Mary the time to learn the craft of literature and to write her own history and that it was the enforced time in the presence of her family that prompted Mary to labor to become a figure more public than other women of the Civil War South. Indeed, obscurity gave her the opportunity for a fame surpassing that achieved by her husband, her parents’ families, and her husband’s family. By redefining what it means to be a politician or a statesman, then, Mary compels her readers to accept her as a logical expert on the topic of the Civil War—someone naturally authorized to write and publish her own interpretation of the war and its events.

That Mary’s final goal was the publication of her revised narrative is unquestioned. In 1883, three years before her death, she mentioned her ongoing project in a letter to Varina Davis, the wife of the former President of the Confederacy:
Mary’s discussion regarding the writing process expresses both her hopes and her fears. Varina Davis was one of Mary’s best friends, and, during the difficult years of war and Reconstruction, when Mary’s family was struggling to survive and Varina was trying to rebuild some sort of life with her husband, Jefferson Davis, the two women had grown to feel that they could unburden their minds and hearts to each other without fear of betrayal or mockery. Thus, Mary could reveal to Varina just how much work she had put into “over hauling” her narrative and how much she hoped to see her writing in print someday; she neither had to feign a studied indifference or casualness toward her efforts, nor did she have to defend her dream of publication. Varina knew Mary, was fully aware that her friend was more than clever enough to write a good narrative of the Confederacy, and understood just how dedicated she was to her work.

At first glance, Mary’s statements about Jane Carlyle seem odd, not to mention very unfair, particularly given the fact that she too was an intelligent woman who, at least during her lifetime, was less well-known than her husband and who used her diary to vent some of her frustrations with him. Yet it seems likely that, looking back
over her life, revising her narrative, and, clearly, reading Carlyle’s Reminiscences (which includes his memoir of his life with Jane) and Froude’s biography of Carlyle (which made use of Thomas’ and Jane’s personal papers), Mary was struck by the similarities between the Englishwoman and herself, between the complaints Jane made in her diary about Thomas Carlyle and the ones Mary had made in her wartime diary about James Chesnut. Mary’s unkindness, then, is a result of one of her greatest fears—that she, like Jane Welsh Carlyle, might be judged harshly by her readers and then remembered by posterity as a bore, a woman whose creativity could not rise above the “homely details” of “house cleaning.”

During the war, Mary had considered herself to be a woman who labored under a number of disadvantages: she was childless, which detracted from her status as a woman in her society; she had often felt, in spite of her popularity with men, that she was too plain-looking—something else that would detract from her status as a woman; and she feared she was too old to be of much interest to young people. Yet if there was one thing that Mary prided herself on, it was her spirited wit—her ability to make ordinary life seem special and intriguing. Because she was fascinated by the drama of life, others found her fascinating in return. Whenever Mary appeared in public or gave a party, she attracted people of all sorts and all ages to her side. The most horrifying judgment of her work that Mary could imagine would be that she too had “piled on” tiresome details “ad nauseam” until her writing was boring, dull, or tedious. To avoid this, Mary spent years writing and rewriting her narrative.
The task of abbreviating or deleting those sections that were too personal and introducing other events and conversations that she found acceptable for the public eye was not a simple one. During the 1870s, James Chesnut had asked a friend, former U.S. Senator Robert M. T. Hunter, his opinion of Mary's narrative. Hunter had replied in two letters, saying, "if published just now by a So Ca lady, such a work might make the world a little too hot to hold her"; the trouble, it seems, was that Mary's work was "a little too spicy." 27 In the original diary, Mary records matters of a deeply personal nature: fights with and insults from her husband, compliments she receives, flirtations with other men, cutting remarks she makes about various people, as well as her radical thoughts on slavery and the trials of married life for women. Yet as a woman seeking to present a published picture of what life was like during the war, Mary felt the need to avoid becoming the object of derision that she perceived Jane Welsh Carlyle to be. Thus, in the process of revising the text of her narrative, she strove to draw less attention to herself and gradually excluded much of the personal and controversial material. In the final text, Mary presents herself as a more detached observer of facts. When she does not remove ideas of a controversial nature, she attributes her words and ideas to her young friend, Isabella Martin, or to other, often anonymous, women. The final result in the 1880s text creates a chorus of voices assisting her in making controversial pronouncements. 28 That these voices are still female, and thus able to be discounted by male society, seems to remove the sting from her observations, but the multiplicity of the voices lends power to those same observations. Mary uses such strategies to assist in her assumption of the authority necessary to interpret public
events for others and, since the writing of history is necessarily a creative process, in
the assumption of the authority needed to create history as well. As Woodward’s
edition, with its frequent inclusion of excerpts from the earlier diary, demonstrates,
Mary’s revision moderates some of the spiciness to which Sen. Hunter objected. By
toning down the personal aspects of her work, Mary eliminated some of the passion of
her original diaries in order to create a history of the Confederacy. Mary Chesnut is at
once a journalist picking out the threads of each event and reporting on them, a
novelist weaving the threads of those same events into stories, and an essayist defining
what the whole tapestry of the war meant to the South.
NOTES


2 Woodward, “Diary in Fact—Diary in Form” xvii-xviii.

3 Mary Chesnut, Mary Chesnut’s Civil War, ed. by C. Vann Woodward (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981) 453. All future citations in this dissertation of Mary Chesnut’s writing as it appears in C. Vann Woodward’s edition will be referred to parenthetically within the text as MCCW.

4 Woodward, “Diary in Fact—Diary in Form” xix.

5 C. Vann Woodward theorizes that Mary possessed more than those seven volumes at the time of her revisions:
   Some light on [this] question is provided by one of the first editors, Isabella D. Martin, who . . . remarked quite casually: “Unaccountably two or three numbers have got mislaid. I think considering all their journeyings and handlings it is well there are not more.”
   (“Diary in Fact—Diary in Form” xviin5)
Woodward goes on to speculate that these “numbers” were additional volumes of Mary’s original wartime diary, and their absence makes the examination of some sections of her final text difficult.

6 Muhlenfeld 196.

7 Woodward, “Diary in Fact—Diary in Form” xxiv. These copybooks are also located at the South Caroliniana Library in Columbia, South Carolina.

8 Muhlenfeld 209-210, 218.

9 Muhlenfeld 6, 226n5. The information about this, the first reference to Mary Chesnut’s work after her death, comes in a letter from Isabella Martin to Myrta Lockett Avary, which can be found in the Avary Papers at the Atlanta Historical Society in Atlanta, Georgia.


12 Woodward, "Diary in Fact—Diary in Form" xxix.


17 Woodward, "Mary Chesnut in Search of Her Genre" 207-208.

18 Drew Gilpin Faust, Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996) 31-32

19 Nina Baym, American Women Writers and the Work of History, 1790-1860 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995) 1. Not incidentally, Baym questions the modern emphasis on the nineteenth-century "cult of true womanhood" and suggests that this paradigm oversimplifies the female situation (Baym 4).

20 Baym 4–6.

21 Baym 95, 96, 117, 108-109. Baym does not include a discussion of pro-slavery books within her study (nor does she discuss the work of more than a handful of Southern women), although she does mention Mary Howard Schoolcraft’s The Black Gauntlet: A Tale of Plantation Life in South Carolina as an example of such texts. Baym also stops her study of women’s historical writings before the beginning of the Civil War, so no examples from the war or from the post-war period are included.
22 Chesnut, Mary, The Private Mary Chesnut: The Unpublished Civil War Diaries, ed. by C. Vann Woodward and Elisabeth Muhlenfeld (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984) 146. All future citations of Mary Chesnut’s writing from her original diary will be referred to parenthetically within the text as PMC.


24 Baym 94.

25 Allie Patricia Wall, “The Letters of Mary Boykin Chesnut,” M.A. thesis, University of South Carolina, 1973, 83-84. Mary Chesnut never followed the rules of punctuation. She relied instead upon a complex system of dashes and spaces to separate phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. All work quoted in this dissertation is reproduced as printed in the twentieth-century sources on which I have drawn, with the exception of private letters, which appear just as she wrote them.


27 Robert M. T. Hunter to James Chesnut, Jr., July 12 and August 14, 1876 respectively. Quoted in Woodward, “Diary in Fact—Diary in Form” xxii. The letters are in the Williams-Manning-Chesnut Collection at the South Caroliniana Library in Columbia, South Carolina.

Like so many women of her time, Mary Boykin Miller Chesnut was usually defined by her fellow nineteenth-century Southerners in terms of the men, particularly her father and her husband, in her politically influential family. Mary was born into the planter class of South Carolina to Stephen Decatur Miller (1788-1838) and Mary Boykin (1804-1885). Miller was largely a self-made man, a lawyer who was admitted to the South Carolina bar in 1811, when he was twenty-three, and elected to the United States Congress in 1817, when he was twenty-nine. He had been married once before, to Elizabeth Dick; and the couple had had three sons (two of whom did not survive early childhood), but Elizabeth died in 1819. Within two years, Miller had courted and married the seventeen year old Mary Boykin, daughter of a prominent, well-established South Carolina family. Burwell Boykin, Mary Boykin’s father, had died in 1817. A veteran of the American Revolution, Boykin’s subsequent career on Mount Pleasant, his plantation located outside of Camden, South Carolina, was successful enough for him to bequeath a substantial inheritance to his daughter and her twelve brothers and sisters. Miller was welcomed into the family. Their first child, Mary Boykin Miller, was born in 1823, and the new family moved in 1824 to their own
plantation, Plane Hill, which was located barely one mile away from the Boykin family establishment. Though Camden was a small, quiet town approximately 30 miles from Columbia and 120 miles from Charleston, Mary's childhood was far from dull since she grew up in a typically large Southern family and was usually surrounded by dozens of relatives. It was her grandmother, Mary Whitaker Boykin, whom the little Mary remembered most for her kindness and competence. Mary Whitaker Boykin took the little girl in hand to teach her a woman's duties in the running of a plantation, and she also emphasized a belief in noblesse oblige, endowing her granddaughter with that sense of obligation toward those less fortunate that the elder lady believed was required of people who enjoyed the benefits of wealth.3

During this time, Stephen Miller's fame and fortune in national and state politics continued to grow. As a founder of the States Rights party, he was elected governor of South Carolina in 1828 and then served a term as a United States senator. From her earliest years, then, Mary Boykin Miller was cognizant of the realities of political life. Just before her ninth birthday, Mary wrote to her father in Washington, D.C., shortly after he gave a major speech in the senate.4

Plane Hill March 3 1832

My Dear Father
It gives me great pleasure to write to you every saturday when I come home. Mother says she received a letter from you this morning and says you have been speaking on the tariff I will read my Fathers speech when it is published . . . . Kitty says if she dont dare to ask you for things who can she ask are you not her Father she says and she will ask you as much as she pleases. You must think of me some times

Your affectionate Daughter
Mary B Miller5
Mary’s letter indicates her awareness, however immature, of her father’s participation in the Nullification controversy concerning the Tariff Act of 1832, a controversy that revealed to the nation how thoroughly Southerners disagreed with the economic policies of their Northern counterparts. Though few nine year olds could have realized the implications of the debate on the Senate floor, the words of Miller and his Southern supporters were fueling the fire of division that would eventually lead the next generation of leaders from South Carolina and her sister states to argue successfully for secession from the Union.

Beyond this, the letter reveals Mary’s early awareness of the demands a life in the public eye made upon politicians and their families. Much as Stephen Miller longed to be with his wife and children, he was away from home more often than not, and his involvement in family affairs was necessarily conducted at arm’s reach. Yet the Miller family left behind letters that detail only their support and love for Stephen with no sign of any bitterness they might have felt about his absence. Certainly, Mary, Kitty (her sister who was also nicknamed Kate), and the rest of the children missed their father, but even Mary’s final remark, “You must think of me some times,” indicates more of a pragmatic realization of the demands upon her father’s time than a lonely plea for his attention. Furthermore, Mary’s statement, “I will read my Father’s speech when it is published,” is far from a courtesy lie, told to reassure an absent father that his daughter still thinks about him. Politics, and the intrigue that accompanied it, were a life-long interest of Mary’s, and, after her marriage to another
politically active South Carolinian, she came to love being at the center of the maelstrom of state and national affairs.

In 1833, Miller resigned from the senate for reasons of ill health and returned to South Carolina; in 1835, he decided to move his family west to the frontier in Mississippi. As the eldest child, Mary remained behind in Charleston, enrolled at one of the most elite schools for girls in the South, Madame Talvande’s French School for Young Ladies. Madame Talvande’s educational standards were exceptionally rigorous. Not only did the young ladies in her charge learn the usual “female” subjects such as dancing and singing, but Madame also required her students to study history, rhetoric, literature, and natural sciences such as astronomy, botany, and chemistry. At school, Mary also learned to read and write French, German, and Spanish. Indeed, her French was so fluent that strangers would mistake her for a native of France. Mary thrived in this community of women, and her natural leadership flourished until she stood clearly above her fellow students. Madame Talvande seems to have made a favorite of Mary, and, during the renowned Bishop England’s weekly dinners at the school, she allowed Mary to remain sitting near her, only moving the girl’s chair one place down so that the Bishop might sit in the place of honor.

While in Charleston, Mary met James Chesnut, Jr. (1815-1885), a promising lawyer and the son of one of the wealthiest men in South Carolina. As their friendship strengthened, the young couple were seen enjoying public—and, as some pointed out, indiscreet—outings and walks on the Battery. Inevitably, rumors about the growing warmth of Mary’s and James’ interest in one another reached her father in Mississippi.
Such a relationship was, in Miller’s mind, far too improper for a girl of thirteen years to conduct, so, in the autumn of 1836, Mary was removed from Madame Talvande’s School and made the arduous, month-long journey westward to join her family. Even on the frontier in Mississippi, though, the young Mary continually proved to be far too attractive for her father’s peace of mind. Quite a few young men found her as irresistible as James Chesnut, Jr., had, but their fortunes and education were deemed to be much inferior to his. Charleston eventually seemed to her parents to be the lesser of two evils, and, after only six months, Mary was returned to Madame Talvande’s School in 1837. This time, however, Mrs. Miller accompanied Mary and remained in Charleston to keep a close watch over her daughter. Shortly before Mary’s fifteenth birthday, Stephen Miller died, and the family briefly returned to Mississippi to settle his debts. Upon Mary’s return to Charleston in 1838, she became engaged to James. The wedding was delayed by the illness and death of James’ brother, but the two were finally married in 1840, just after Mary’s seventeenth birthday.7

As a new bride, Mary spent most of her time at Mulberry, the Chesnuts’ beautiful and spacious plantation that, like the Boykin family home, was just outside of Camden, South Carolina. Life at Mulberry was at once both splendid and difficult for Mary. The Chesnuts were considered to be one of the first families of South Carolina. The patent for their land, which amounted to sixteen thousand acres at the start of the Civil War, had been granted by George II, and Colonel James Chesnut (1773-1866), Mary’s formidable, sixty-seven year old father-in-law, was one of the richest men in the state. Even in the middle of the Civil War, the Chesnuts were able
to procure luxuries such as vegetables, cream, eggs, wine, and coffee. It was a point of contention between the different generations of Chesnuts that, although Col. Chesnut enjoyed great wealth, he never helped his son establish himself economically; while the younger James was in charge of running the business side of the plantation, the profits were always returned in full to Col. Chesnut’s pocket.*

In spite of Mary’s own privileged background, she never felt truly accepted by the exceptionally wealthy Col. Chesnut or Mary Cox Chesnut (1775-1864), her sweetly domineering mother-in-law. Perhaps this feeling was, at first, partially caused by the great pride (a pride Mary would eventually share) that the Chesnuts took in their family history: the ancestors of both Colonel and Mrs. Chesnut had been significant participants in the formation of the new nation, and Mrs. Chesnut had had close ties to President George Washington’s family. Even more important, the cool, unruffled Chesnuts were quite different in temperament than the more outgoing Miller/Boykin clan, and this difference contributed to Mary’s occasional sense of alienation, a feeling that was exacerbated by the fact that Mulberry was an isolated plantation. Though the delights of the country had seemed perfect for Mary as a small child, Camden society offered little to interest her as an adult. The town was situated in the rural upcountry, far enough from the cultural activities of Charleston that Mary came to believe a stay in the country meant banishment from the excitement she craved. She even named her beautiful second house, which was located in Kirkwood, the more fashionable section of Camden, Kamchatka after the remote peninsula in Siberia. Perhaps, as Elisabeth Muhlenfeld suggests, the house’s name was a joking reference to how far Kirkwood
seemed to be from the center of Camden (the joke was that Camden was small enough that no section was distant from any other). Yet Mary always loathed Camden which she called “the social desert of [the] Sahara” or “that weary, dreary Camden!” (MCCW 273, 597), so it seems more likely that the name was a reference to how remote from the world of culture and excitement Mary felt herself to be when living in Camden.

To make matters worse, she also felt that some of her other new relations made a point of not welcoming her into her new home. This family strife fluctuated between periods of relative cordiality and times of open hostility throughout the remainder of Mary’s life, and she frequently mentioned it as a cause of much pain.

Mary and Col. Chesnut did develop an affectionate relationship, and he was particularly solicitous of her health during her many illnesses. Old Mrs. Chesnut, though, was another story. When Mary Boykin Miller married James, Mary Cox Chesnut was sixty-five years old, and the two women—one young, independent-minded, and lively, the other elderly, reserved, often invalided, but always in control—seemed to perceive each other as somewhat threatening. Like other young ladies of her social class, Mary Boykin Chesnut had been trained in all of the duties needed to manage a large plantation, but her skills were not required. The older Mrs. Chesnut had, over the years, developed a smooth, apparently effortless method of managing the house. At times, Mulberry seemed to run itself. Should Mary Cox Chesnut ever need any help in running the house, she could call upon her two unmarried daughters, Emma and Sarah, both at least a decade older than Mary and both of whom lived at Mulberry. Entering a household in which one eminently capable woman and her two
supportive daughters catered to every whim of the family patriarch was understandably
daunting for this young bride of seventeen. Though Mary admitted that life at
Mulberry was “peaceful” and “easygoing,” her forced inactivity proved to be a
constant source of frustration and irritation: “people are not like pigs; they cannot be
put up and fattened. So here I pine and fret” (MCCW 251).11

Mary was able to rely upon her great love of reading as an occupation to
alleviate her frequent boredom. She was extremely well-read, and, like many mid-
nineteenth century Southerners, her favorite writers were generally European. In fact,
a list of the authors whose work she mentions in her own writing reads like a survey of
British literature: Chaucer, Shakespeare, Sidney, Spenser, Donne, Milton, Dryden,
Swift, Pope, Sterne, Fielding, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Byron, Keats, Shelley, Scott,
Moore, Bulwer-Lytton, Austen, Charlotte Brontë, and Tennyson. In addition to British
writers, She enjoyed reading the works of Montaigne, Molière, Rabelais, La Fontaine,
Voltaire, Hugo, Sand, Dumas père, Schiller, and Goethe in the original, and then she
would test her interpretations by comparing them with published translations. During
the Civil War, she records reading quite a bit of George Eliot, Dickens and Trollope,
but her favorite novelists were always Balzac and, above all, Thackeray.12

The outlet that Mary found most engaging for her stifled mind was her
husband’s career. In 1840, James was elected as a representative to the South Carolina
state legislature. From the beginning, the relationship between Mary and James had
been a study in contrasts, and James’ political career only served to emphasize the
differences. Whereas other South Carolinian lawmakers were famous “fire-eaters” in
their militant insistence upon states' rights, James was, as Mary later wrote, a representative of the "moderate wing of the southern rights party." Such a description, however, does beg the question of context. While it is true that James made the Southern pro-slavery and pro-states' rights doctrine part of his own political position, that position was tempered by his personal beliefs, particularly his desire to free the Chesnut slaves, thereby making him a moderate in the eyes of his fellow Southerners. To Northerners (and, perhaps, to most modern readers), however, his personal beliefs were overshadowed by his public support for slavery and states' rights, and that support inevitably made him seem to be yet another Southern conservative. Nevertheless, Mary was correct in describing her husband as a moderate Southern politician. It was not so much James' political beliefs that drove Mary to distraction; though her childhood had been steeped in the doctrine of Nullification, she was herself no fire-eater, and her aversion to slavery, an aversion that surpassed that of her husband's, made her a willing convert to moderate views. Indeed, she helped her husband in any way she could, such as by polishing his speeches, writing his letters, and serving as a sounding board for his debates.

Rather, it was the method by which James pursued his career that caused her no end of distress. When other politicians loudly proclaimed the superiority of their positions, James sat back and waited to be asked his opinions. At heart, James was very much a Chesnut: always composed, polite, and quietly firm in his belief that self-promotion was contrary to honorable behavior. In her private writings, Mary often complained of her husband's profound reserve: "Sometimes I feel that we understand
each other a little—then up goes the Iron Wall once more. Not that for a moment he 
ever gives you the impression of an insincere or even a cold person—reticent—and like the Indian too proud to let the world know he feels” (PMC 32). Coupled with James’ emotional “reticence” was his tendency, which Mary also deplored, to “rate himself so low . . . [and] not demand what his position calls for” (PMC 153). As Mary well knew, to be a truly successful public figure, James would have to act less like a gentleman and more like a politician, actively persuading others of his merit and urging them to trust him with more and more responsibility. Mary tried to channel her energy into furthering her husband’s career, but James’ reserved nature proved to be more of an obstacle than she had imagined possible. In spite of his reluctance to put himself forward, though, James was very much respected for the soundness of his ideas, and he was seldom at a loss for a government office. It was just that the offices he was given were not prominent enough to suit Mary.

Mary’s own outgoing temperament was quite the opposite of her husband’s. She was never happier than when she was at a good party, especially when she was also the center of attention. Mary’s diary records her many social triumphs, from the times that she received more attention at an engagement than any other woman present to the specific number and composition of bouquets she receives from admirers. One particular bouquet, a “most glorious bunch of roses” sent by a Charlestonian on the day of her arrival in the capital city of South Carolina, inspires her to return the compliment to her temporary home, exclaiming, “A nice discriminating place Charleston is!!!” in celebration not only of the male inhabitants’ taste in floral
arrangements, but also of their keen eye for attractive women (PMC 48). Opinionated and flirtatious, Mary wrote, in an unguardedly arrogant moment, “I could make any body love me if I choose” (PMC 40). 15 Much to James’ recurrent dismay, other people—particularly men—loved to be in Mary’s company as well. Just before the Civil War began, Mary’s flirtation with John Manning, ex-governor of South Carolina, became so open that, in an ironic twist, James had to forbid Mary to “walk any more with men on the battery,” a pronouncement echoing that made by Stephen Miller when he heard rumors about the schoolgirl Mary walking in the same place with the young James Chesnut, Jr., some twenty-five years earlier (PMC 48). James, it seems had as much difficulty in restraining his wife as her father had experienced when she was a girl. Finally, it was an undeniable fact that it was Mary herself—not her husband—who was the born politician: had she lived a century later, her ambitions and her extroverted personality would probably have made her an energetic campaigner and a determined politician.

When Mary fell ill in 1845, the couple traveled to first to Saratoga, New York, and Newport, Rhode Island, and then, on the spur of the moment, on to England in search of a cure. The nature of Mary’s illness remains vague, but one may speculate that Mary had suffered a miscarriage. In a letter of credit, James Buchanan, U.S. Secretary of State and later President, introduced the couple to the American Minister to Great Britain as “Mr. James Chesnut, jr. of South Carolina . . . accompanied by his lady & child.” 16 The couple may have begun their journey in pleasant anticipation of becoming parents, but that hope never came to fruition. Mary and James never did
have children of their own, a fact which caused this woman who so loved children no end of pain. Her method of dealing with their childlessness was to “borrow” nieces and nephews from her relatives, and she became the family’s favorite “Auntie.” Though Buchanan may have made a mistake in believing the couple were soon to become parents, Mary drops a hint in the narrative that sheds further light on the situation. In speaking of the elder Chesnuts’ reaction to a letter from their grandson, Johnny Chesnut, she says: “At one time, [the Chesnut grandchildren] seemed all in all with him. That is, before they developed exactly what material they were made of, and hope told a flattering tale. We had no children” (MCCW 190-191). The “flattering tale” which Mary and James hoped would come true seems to be clarified in the following sentence—”We had no children.” When put beside Buchanan’s letter, this passage makes clear that at one time the young couple had reason to believe they were about to become parents and that their hope was soon dashed. Mary’s grief over her childlessness was exacerbated by the fact that a lack of children was also a social stigma for married women, and she recognized that she had become, in the eyes of her family, a woman who had not done her duty by producing an heir.

The couple’s journey to the North and to England, as was true of so many trips that removed Mary from Camden society, gave Mary back her physical health and good spirits. Her return to normal was buoyed by the couple’s move into Frogvale, their own house in Camden. For the first time in their marriage, Mary and James had a measure of independence from Mulberry. In 1852, James was elected to the state Senate in Columbia; he was elected President of the state Senate in 1856 and served
When James became a United States senator in 1858, Mary was thrilled by her move to Washington, though she expressed some dismay over the need to sell Kamchatka in order to raise the funds necessary for life in the nation's capital. Yet even the loss of her lovely house could not dim the pleasure she found in her escape from Camden and her foray (however brief) into the sophisticated social circles of the capital. Her time was devoted to the usual round of affairs that a senator's wife attended: outings, the theater, luncheons, dinners. Mary's fluency in French, German, and Spanish made her a highly desirable guest at events that foreign visitors were expected to attend. Even President Buchanan found her skills indispensable during affairs held in honor of foreign dignitaries, and he would often have Mary seated between a European guest and himself so she could act as his personal translator.

While in Washington, she became friendly with several women who were to become even more important to her after Secession: Charlotte Wigfall, the wife of Senator Louis Wigfall, and Varina Davis, the wife of Senator Jefferson Davis. Mary also enjoyed a close friendship with Mary Custis and Robert E. Lee, their sons, Custis and Rooney, and their nephew, Fitzhugh.

Mary's whole life changed in November of 1860 when she learned, returning by train from a visit to her sister in Florida, that Lincoln had been elected to the presidency. The crisis that had been threatening the stability of the United States began to boil over at the news. On November tenth, James Chesnut resigned his seat in the senate, reportedly the first Southerner to do so, and the Chesnuts returned to South Carolina. Over the next few months, most of the Southern states seceded from
the Union: South Carolina, to no one's surprise, led the way; it was followed by
Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Texas; after the firing on Fort
Sumter, Virginia, Arkansas, Tennessee, and North Carolina followed suit.\textsuperscript{21} It is at
this time that Mary began keeping a diary to record her experiences during the war.
The war years are the focus of Mary's narrative, and will therefore be discussed at
length in following chapters. In brief, Mary was again severely disappointed by her
husband's failure to promote himself to the Confederate policy makers and voters.
One of the worst blows for her ambitions came when James was passed over for an
appointment as a diplomatic representative of the Confederacy; Mary had longed for a
cosmopolitan life in London or Paris, and she found it difficult to reconcile herself to
remaining at home. Eventually, James was appointed Chairman of the Executive
Council of Five, which effectively controlled the state government of South Carolina;
in 1862, he became an aide to Jefferson Davis (who was also a Southern moderate),
and, in 1864, he was made a brigadier general.\textsuperscript{22}

Each promotion meant more work for James but a larger circle of activity for
his wife. She took on the duties of a political hostess with expertise and excitement.
Though she also put in many hours at local military hospitals, Mary's main function
during the war was to turn her rented accommodations—the drawing room, the dining
room, and, when space was at a premium, even the landing at the top of the stairs—
into a salon where lawmakers, soldiers, journalists, and their families could meet to
gather news, to discuss the war, or merely to pass the time. The national crisis, then,
made life more exciting for Mary than Washington ever was, and, although each new

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battle brought great sorrow and new losses to mourn, she loved being at the center of Confederate society.

After the defeat of the South, Mary and James returned to Mulberry and spent the remainder of their lives struggling to repair their home and to regain a sense of purpose. Old Mrs. Chesnut had died at the age of eighty-nine during the war, and her husband died in 1866 at the age of ninety-three. When James finally inherited his father’s property, the estate was so plagued by debt and damaged by Yankee attacks that he was never able to rebuild it fully. Like many other Southerners who had been well-born before the war and militarily or politically active during it, Mary and James found Reconstruction to be a difficult time, and, though the couple were fairly comfortable (the plantations, however understaffed, always provided the Chesnuts with food), they were never able to clear all of the debts accumulated by the Chesnut family during the war.23

During these first years directly after the war, Mary spent quite a bit of time reviewing her war diary, transcribing letters that might prove useful to her later, and looking back to the excitement and the pain of the Civil War. Like many men and women who had experienced the events of the war, she had recorded her more-or-less daily impressions in a diary. Unlike most other diarists, Mary would later use the information she had recorded to write an historical narrative of the rise and fall of the Southern Confederacy. Though she does not seem to have drafted a formal plan to revise her diary for publication yet, she did turn to her pen with the hopes of earning some much-needed cash. First, she took advantage of her linguistic skills by
translating the occasional French work. Given the fact that she was surrounded by successful writers such as William Gilmore Simms (prior to his death in 1870), Sue King, Louisa McCord, Paul Hamilton Hayne, and Robert Josselyn, it is hardly surprising that her next foray into the field of literature was her decision, in the 1870s, to try her hand at fiction in order to supplement the family income. Although none of her compositions from this period saw publication during her lifetime, her creative activity did give her the opportunity to hone the skills that she would later put to good use in the writing of the narrative. These years were, in a sense, a type of literary apprenticeship for her.

Her first attempt at fiction was a novel called “The Captain and the Colonel,” which has been described as “a kind of Vanity Fair of the Confederacy,” particularly in the sense that, like Thackeray (her favorite author), Mary uses war as a metaphor for love, thereby turning matchmaking into a “series of campaigns.” Loosely based upon the wartime experiences of Johnny Chesnut, the nephew of James Chesnut, Jr., the novel’s distinguishing feature is the realism of its dialogue. Around the time she was working on “The Captain and the Colonel,” Mary was also writing a broadly autobiographical story called “Two Years of My Life,” later “Two Years—or The Way We Lived Then.” Told in the first person, “Two Years—or The Way We Lived Then” is a description of various events that had occurred during a girlhood trip to Mississippi mixed with the drama of “frontier intrigue and vendetta.” The work is significant for the distinct improvement it shows in Mary’s narrative and descriptive ability. Another manuscript (this manuscript is untitled, but her biographer refers to it...
as “We called her Kitty”), this one about her beloved sister, Catherine (Kitty or Kate, as Mary refers to her in her diary and narrative) Miller Williams, seems to have been written to memorialize Kate after her death in 1876. Mary also left behind a handful of pages of a third novel, called “Manassas,” about which only the setting—clearly, the Civil War—is known.

After the mid-1870s, Mary turned her attention from working on her fiction to revising her 1860s diary of the Civil War. This period of revision was not lengthy and consisted mostly of editing out much that was very personal, expanding undeveloped notes, and polishing her prose. Around this same time, Mary wrote a sketch about the life of her husband, James Chesnut, Jr., for a book with the working title of “Sketches of the Lives of the Leading and Prominent Men of our State, from 1861 to 1865 inclusive,” but which was never published. Mary re-dedicated herself to work on the narrative in 1881. The time of the early 1880s was her most productive period in regards to the narrative, but, in spite of her efforts, financial difficulties intruded and called her away from her work. Mary responded by writing a story called “The Arrest of a Spy” that was published in the Charleston Weekly News and Courier in 1885. This story is the only recorded product of her literary efforts that was published during her lifetime, and it earned her the sum of ten dollars. Her death in 1886, closely following that of her husband and her mother, occurred before she was able to complete work on her narrative.
NOTES

1 Elisabeth S. Muhlenfeld, Mary Boykin Chesnut: A Biography (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981) 13, 14. All biographical information about Mary Boykin Chesnut in this dissertation has been taken from this one published biography and from Woodward’s introduction to her revised narrative. It is regrettable that Muhlenfeld’s is the only biography of Mary Chesnut and that so little material documenting Mary’s early life exists. Muhlenfeld seems to be so entranced by Mary Chesnut that her biography offers little in the way of dispassionate discussion. Perhaps this is the natural inclination of an author’s first biographer, and what is called for is a second, and much more critical, look at the sources that Muhlenfeld used to write her book. The only other text (one that virtually surpasses Muhlenfeld in the celebration of its subject) that uses original sources to document Mary Chesnut’s life is C. Vann Woodward, “Mary Boykin Chesnut, 1823-1886,” Mary Chesnut’s Civil War, ed. by C. Vann Woodward (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981) xxx-xlv.

2 Muhlenfeld, MBC 13.


4 Portions of Stephen Miller’s speech regarding the tariff, which was given in the Senate on February 21 and 23, 1832, and was published in the April 3rd and 17th editions of The Camden and Lancaster Beacon, are quoted in Allie Patricia Wall, “The Letters of Mary Boykin Chesnut,” thesis, University of South Carolina, 1973, 2-4. The following is an excerpt:

   Mr. President, if I were to consult my own convenience, or sense of propriety, I would rest the defence of the cause now to be advocated, with the able and eloquent arguments which have been made by those who have preceded me in this debate; but when it is recollected, that the position of the Union from which I come, feels a deep solicitude, (indeed, if I mistake not, the whole country is agitated by the question,) when it is recollected, that those whom I represent, are an agricultural people, . . . not deriving any benefit from this protecting system; on the contrary, the exclusive subjects and victims thereof, I trust the Senate will bear with me, while I present some considerations which, in my opinion, ought to influence its judgment in determining this matter. . . . For my part, I feel a settled conviction that these laws are unconstitutional, unjust, and unequal, that they ought to be modified, so to produce a revenue, only demanded for the constitutional uses of the government, and that this revenue should be raised on such articles, as
will subject the whole people of this nation to an equal portion of its payment. . . ."

For information on the Nullification Crisis and more on Stephen Miller's political career, see Chapter 4.

5 Wall 1.

6 Muhlenfeld, MBC 21, 25-27.

7 Muhlenfeld, MBC 29-40, 209.

8 Muhlenfeld, MBC 44, 81.

9 Muhlenfeld, MBC 62.

10 Muhlenfeld, MBC 43-49, 82.

11 Muhlenfeld, MBC 46, 43. Emma died in 1847, but Sarah outlived Mary by a three years (Muhlenfeld 54, 87).

12 Muhlenfeld, MBC 51-53.

13 Muhlenfeld, MBC 59. This quotation comes from an unpublished manuscript sketch of James Chesnut, Jr., written by Mary Chesnut for inclusion in a series entitled, “Sketches of the Lives of Leading and Prominent Men of our State, from 1861 to 1865.” The untranscribed manuscript of the sketch is in the Williams-Chesnut-Manning Collection at the South Caroliniana Library in Columbia, South Carolina. Evidence for James' wishes to free his father's slaves can be found throughout Mary Chesnut's diaries and her revised narrative. For more on James' political career, see Chapter 3.

14 For an examination of Mary's views on slavery, see Chapter 4.

15 Mary erased this statement from her diary, most likely because its overweening confidence dismayed her and because her ongoing argument with James about the inordinate attention she paid to her male attendants undercut that confidence. The erased passage was recovered by the text's editors.

16 Muhlenfeld, MBC 234n20.

17 Muhlenfeld, MBC 65.

18 Muhlenfeld, MBC 65.
19 Muhlenfeld, MBC 68.

20 Muhlenfeld, MBC 68-69.

21 Charles Robert Lee, Jr., *The Confederate Constitutions* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1963) 3-20, 138-139. (The four other Southern states—Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland, and Delaware—were forcibly kept in the Union.)

22 Muhlenfeld, MBC 113-119.

23 Muhlenfeld, MBC 131, 132-134.

24 Muhlenfeld, MBC 137.

25 Muhlenfeld, MBC 142, 148. For a thorough discussion of “The Captain and the Colonel,” see Muhlenfeld 141-159. The manuscript is in the Williams-Chesnut-Manning Collection at the South Caroliniana Library in Columbia, South Carolina. A transcription of the novel can be found in Elisabeth Muhlenfeld, “Mary Boykin Chesnut: The Writer and her Work,” diss. University of South Carolina, 1978.

26 Muhlenfeld, MBC 172-173. For a thorough discussion of “Two Years—or the Way We Lived Then,” see Muhlenfeld, MBC 171-183. The manuscript is in the Williams-Chesnut-Manning Collection. A transcription of the novel can be found in Muhlenfeld, “Mary Boykin Chesnut: The Writer and her Work.”

27 Muhlenfeld, MBC 28-36. The untranscribed manuscript of the text Muhlenfeld refers to as “We Called Her Kitty” is in the Williams-Chesnut-Manning Collection.

28 Muhlenfeld, MBC 187-189. The untranscribed manuscript fragment of “Manassas” is in the Williams-Chesnut-Manning Collection.

29 Woodward, “Diary in Fact—Diary in Form” xxi.

30 Muhlenfeld, MBC 171. The sketch about James Chesnut, Jr., is in the Williams-Chesnut-Manning Collection.

31 Muhlenfeld, MBC 206.

32 Muhlenfeld, MBC 209, 210, 218.
CHAPTER 3
REMEMBERING THE SOUTHERN GENTLEMAN

As Mary Chesnut revised her wartime diary, she was living in a world markedly different than that which she portrayed in her Civil War narrative. In the mid-nineteenth century, the South’s traditional ways of life had been disrupted first through war and then through the political realities of Reconstruction. By the 1880s, many white Southerners, among them Mary and James Chesnut, were still in the first stages of climbing up from poverty. The freeing of the slaves was perhaps the most obvious of the challenges to the old social order, and it was a reality that all of the Jim Crow laws that white Southerners established in response could not change. Their world was now one of political marginalization in which the concerns of the South were subsumed into the needs of an expanding United States. Although the South was still largely an agricultural region, the days of the plantation as the primary unit of production were waning. Industrialization, which had begun slowly before the war, now took hold rapidly, and the growth in the number and scope of manufacturing interests was unprecedented. Not surprisingly, labor began to organize, and strikes became less unknown. In opposition to the old focus on rural plantation life, the new industrialization led to a focus on the cities and towns as places of importance.
Facilitating this focus was the growth of the railroads, which also linked the South to other American regions (during the 1880s alone, the number of rail miles doubled). After all of these changes, many white Southerners, especially the older ones, did not recognize the world around them and nostalgically looked back to the South of the antebellum and Civil War years. Even those who welcomed the changes were loathe to criticize the old world of the South, and reminiscing about the Confederacy became a favorite pastime. What these Southerners saw in their memories was seldom an accurate picture of Confederate life; instead, post-war whites invented a romantic view of the war and the people who had fought it.

Mary Chesnut was well aware of this pervasive nostalgia. Indeed, she shared in it: nearly all of her writings have to do with her recollections of the Civil War. The war was, for Mary, a time when ordinary life became more intense and individual people assumed heroic or larger-than-life roles. One of the most symbolic figures in post-war memory was that of the wealthy Southern Gentleman, and in Mary Chesnut's narrative, her father-in-law, old Colonel Chesnut, comes to represent all of the qualities of this figure that died out with the defeat of the Confederacy. This Southern Gentleman, found in South Carolina and Virginia but emulated by men throughout the South, was defined by his ideas about patriotism and independence, by the myth of the aristocratic and Cavalier heritage that he invented for himself, and by a strong valuation of a code of behavior that he developed based upon his understanding of honor and chivalry. Mary is as ambivalent about the image of the Southern Gentleman—as a woman living in a patriarchal society, she does not accept whole-heartedly an image that so embodies that
patriarchy—as she is about her father-in-law himself, but her attitude toward Col. Chesnut and her manipulation of his character in the narrative demonstrate that this image, and the power that it gave to a man, was a fundamental part of Southern culture. An examination of the components of the figure of the Southern Gentleman that post-war white Southerners remembered so fondly—independence, presumed aristocratic derivation, honor, and chivalry—followed by a close analysis of Mary’s descriptions of Col. Chesnut in her original diary and the changes she made in those descriptions in the final draft of her narrative reveals how post-war ideas guided her writing.

Like many Southerners, rich and poor, Mary and the Chesnuts took great pride in the role of the South in the creation of the United States. The very heart and soul of the Republic, they believed, was Southern, as evidenced by the overwhelming number of Southerners considered to be a driving force behind the Revolutionary War. Indeed, it was often pointed out that four of the first five presidents and seven of the first ten were from Southern states; this was seen as unmistakable proof that patriotism ran strong and deep in the Southern people. Anyone connected with those founding fathers stood to gain a great deal from the alliance; the Chesnuts, for instance, were much respected by their neighbors because of their close ties to the Washington family through old Mrs. Chesnut.

Yet the patriotism evinced by Southerners of the nineteenth century was of a strain peculiar to that time and place:

The Southern concept of patriotism was constructed upon faithfulness to a particular place and people and their past, not upon some abstract idea such as “democracy” or “freedom,” principles generating few sparks in ordinary men’s minds unless they were conceived as synonyms for
personal and familial security and self-regard. . . . It was never the abstraction of “liberty” that animated Southern patriotism, but rather the concrete determination to uphold personal and community independence from overt or insidious attempts to destroy it.  

Whereas the nation’s founding fathers, the Virginian Thomas Jefferson in particular, were acclaimed for their philosophical celebration of the unalienable rights of man and their insistence that a government’s role is to secure and promote such rights, Southerners of the nineteenth century (only a few generations later) were unique in that they largely discounted or overlooked philosophical notions of independence, preferring to concentrate instead on how those notions applied to their own lives. The grand ideas of independence or freedom or liberty were meaningful, then, only in their application to everyday life.

Needless to say, this notion of independence was unique unto white males. A Southern planter, for example, valued the concepts of liberty and independence inasmuch as he was free to trade with anyone he liked, his activities were unconstrained by any person or law, and his ownership of slaves was unquestioned. Because of his rejection of abstract considerations of freedom, he was able to meet what he saw as gross impositions—taxation, tariffs, regulation of trade, suggestions of the abolition of slavery—with a ready answer: that idea or law which sought to restrict his actions was wrong, regardless of how it might benefit other individuals, communities, or the nation as a whole.

Sometimes, the rejection of the abstract had to do with political expediencies. Mary Chesnut had little patience for abstractions that were used to justify empty
political rhetoric. In her narrative's "entry" for June 6, 1861, she is the implied speaker, "boldly declaring": "If we ever have a man who will simply state the business in hand, go direct to the point at issue, and not try to enlighten the universal world by a long speech about everything else, he will be our leader. Can no man be found to spare us Madison, Jefferson, Monroe?" (MCCW 367). The inability of many Confederate leaders actually to address the issues and problems of establishing a government and a military, let alone to make decisions and act upon them, caused Mary and many other Southerners no end of frustration, and her narrative does not spare the feelings of those post-war readers who wish to forget that. The sense of impatience that she displays as the days drag by and nothing remarkable is achieved, however, is a trait esteemed by Southerners. Action is valuable; deliberation is ignoble, contemptible. The dichotomy that grew to separate action and thought was also a reason for the Southern disdain for education: too much time spent thinking took away from the time available for valuable activity. Mary, whose favorite employment was reading literature and whose childhood was spent happily and productively at school, by no means shared in this disdain, yet it was common among other families. The origin for this devaluation of education can be found in another of the major influences in Mary Chesnut's society, the South's code of aristocratic behavior.

One of the Southern attributes that was remembered most by post-war Southerners (some eventually succeeded in recapturing it) and which exerted a great influence over Mary's life and work, was the aristocratic code. Its strength belied the fact that only a handful of antebellum planters—generally those in Virginia and South
Carolina—had the resources necessary to be considered even remotely patrician. While nostalgic Southerners tried, after the war (and even after the time during which Mary was writing), to improve upon harsh reality by creating their “moonlight and magnolia” legends, in which the enormous wealth and aristocratic leisure of the Old South were the birthrights of just about every white person, such a situation was never really the true state of things. Those few families who did possess wealth, however, firmly insisted that they were the last stronghold of “the country-gentleman ideal,” standing as the direct cultural inheritors of the traditions and manners of the English aristocracy and gentry. Those who envied these patricians also emulated them.⁵

Underlying the conviction of aristocratic derivation lay the myth of the Cavalier, which permeated all levels of the South in the nineteenth-century. According to this myth, Puritans dissatisfied with England had moved to the New World and spawned a race of people who mirrored their own image. These offspring were the Northerners, particularly New Englanders—cold, humorless, industrious, theoretically fastening their eyes and their efforts on the glories of the hereafter but justifying their pursuit of “the almighty dollar” by claiming that financial success was merely a sign of God’s approval. On the other hand, according to the myth, groups of Cavaliers from seventeenth-century England moved to the New World and established settlements in its southern latitudes, and it was their blood that ran through the veins of Southerners. Perhaps these Cavaliers sought to escape the rule of Cromwell, or perhaps they were simply younger sons; the reasons for their journey were presumed to be lost in the all-concealing mists of time. These Cavaliers also begat a race that mirrored their own image, and the people
of the South were their cultural as well as natural descendants—courtly, chivalrous, warm-hearted, honorable, concerned more with gracious living on large estates than with the pursuit of "filthy lucre."

The supposition that Northerners and Southerners constituted two distinct races, with two distinct bloodlines, was an indisputable part of this myth, and it was just as popular after the Civil War. Few words could have such implications in the South as did "race." It appeared in various contexts, and it was generally used in order to distinguish the speaker or writer from another group of people. Thus, one might hear it used to differentiate between Northerners and Southerners as in this case, the English and the French, whites and slaves, men and women, those who were educated and those who were not, or even wine-drinkers and bourbon-drinkers. As an exclusionary technique, it had the power to convince the listeners or readers who were included in each definition of race not only that they were exemplary because of their inclusion, but also that human beings could be categorized and sub-divided like plants or other animals on the basis of any difference, large or small.

Many Southerners, before and after the war, managed to overlook the obvious failings of the Cavalier paradigm. Why, for instance, would worldly, refined Cavaliers have forsaken civilized Europe for the wilds of Colonial America? Gentlemen, whether they were younger sons of titled fathers or true Cavaliers threatened by the Puritan government (not to mention their ladies), were used to the civilized comforts of England, where even the remotest tracts of land were far more congenial than the primitive conditions of life in the Colonies. Certainly, these men would prefer to move
to the Continent where they could be assured of leading a life that was fairly similar to their former one. There, they could await the restoration of the English monarchy or pursue a career as a courtier in another kingdom.

Research, of course, has revealed the failings of this myth, and most books of Southern history take pains to raise the question of the Cavalier/Puritan paradigm only to dismiss its applicability. While statistics do seem to imply that a few gentlemen probably did come to America along with people from the lower classes, especially as adventurers or political prisoners sent for punishment to the colonies, those gentlemen remained a rarity. What is important, then, is not so much the falsity of the myth as it is the Southerners’ need to believe that they truly were the natural descendants of the English aristocracy. Indeed, such a belief seems to have been part of antebellum and post-war Southerners’ most fundamental sense of identity. Some facts are undeniable: South Carolina and Virginia in particular did maintain close ties with Britain, some planters’ families in these states did eventually achieve great wealth, and those with enough money did manage to create their own aristocracy. Yet the money they made and the aristocracy they so loved were created in America for Americans.

At first glance, Mary Chesnut seems to contradict herself with her use of the Cavalier myth in her narrative, on one page employing it uncritically to describe a person or incident while on the next poking fun at it. Her attitude toward the myth, though, is largely decided by her mood and the specific situation she is narrating. Her faith in the romantic tales of Cavaliers and British nobility transplanted into America seems to be activated largely by an emotional impulse: when she describes an incident
that moves her or stirs up her warlike spirit, she tends to write in equally romantic
terms, calling one man a “knight” or dwelling upon her belief that “every Confederate
soldier [is] a hero. Sans peur, sans reproche” (MCCW 509, 120). These terms are
largely literary and are used as a metaphor for bravery, graciousness, and military or
political accomplishment. When Mary’s emotions move her the most, when she is
proud, afraid, angry or happy, her language is heroic, and it is used to re-awaken her
readers’ glorious memories of the Confederacy, “our old regime—gallant, gay,
unfortunate” (MCCW 425).

When her emotions are not touched, Mary is frankly rational, and her use of
heroically inflated language is accompanied by an ironic sense of detachment. She
especially enjoys deflating the claims of pretenders to European grandeur, as she does in
her brief history of the Shannon and McWillie families. As a trick played upon his
much-hated sister-in-law, a man named Abram McWillie visited the Scottish heraldry
administrator and obtained a fake coat of arms and pedigree which showed that his
family, whom he “discovered” were formerly named the McGillies, were descended
from the Lords of the Isles and the Stuarts. Choosing to change the family’s name to
McGillie was a stroke of genius on Mr. McWillie’s part because the name, translated
from the Gaelic, literally means the son of the horse boy—hardly a name to inspire
thoughts of aristocracy and honor. This news flattered his sister-in-law’s vanity so
much that she “bit eagerly at this painted fly” and bored everyone whom she met one
summer with her tales of “the pathetic adventures of her children’s forefathers, the
unlucky Stuarts” (MCCW 140).
Abram McWillie's prank, to Mary's amusement, revealed even more pretentiousness when his sister married a man named Captain William Shannon who, because of his wife's presumed lineage, developed "a clear case of genealogical, aristocratic mania" (MCCW 140). Mary contrasts Capt. Shannon with his sensible, unpretentious father:

Hitherto these Shannons, sturdy self-made people like most Americans, stood firmly on their own feet—relied upon their pluck, energy, brains, and manliness. They had businesslike, getting-along-in-the-world ways. . . . [Capt. Shannon's father] has no nonsense about him. He has made his own fortune and is proud of the fact. (MCCW 140)

As a foil for this upstart with his "aristocratic mania," Mary goes on to discuss the true background of the business partner of Capt. Shannon's father, a Mr. William McDowall. McDowall's wife, Susan Kollock (Witherspoon) McDowall, was the granddaughter of John Witherspoon, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, and it is this lineage that Mary Chesnut calls "our patent of nobility" (MCCW 141). The implication is that Capt. Shannon and Mr. McWillie's sister-in-law are foolish and snobbish social-climbers, while the McDowalls' demonstrate the unassuming dignity and quiet patience in the face of lost fortune that is natural to true aristocrats. Thus, while Mary does value respect for visiting European aristocrats who can prove their assertions of nobility, her lesson for the reader is that acclaim for New World aristocrats should be reserved for those whose family members have done something to promote America or the South.

In spite of Mary's separation of European and American gentility, the question still remains: why did Southerners like Capt. William Shannon and Mr. McWillie's
sister-in-law feel such a need to create or embrace an aristocratic heritage for
themselves? The question does not seem to have engendered much attention from
historians, although a few critics do interrogate the Cavalier myth as it was used in the
plantation fiction of the 1830s. One possible answer might have something to do with
human nature and the tendency to create a hierarchy within a given community. In
much of Western society, members of various communities have classified themselves
into different groups; the basis of selection could be anything from military prowess,
birth, and wealth to physical appearance, education, or intelligence. In the South, the
factor that came to distinguish a man from his neighbors was his economic success in a
respectable business (agriculture and publishing are two examples). If a wise man had
managed to make a great deal of money on his land, and an attachment to the land was
always an important part of the equation, he used the profits to buy up as much of the
surrounding country as possible. In this way alone, the system of the great plantations
developed. Once this wise, hard-working man had built up a substantial holding,
perhaps he no longer wanted to be reminded of his ancestors, W. J. Cash's
"redemptioners and convict servants." So, he decided to aggrandize them instead,
imbuing them with the characteristics and trappings of nobility, and thus was born the
Cavalier myth. After the war, such a need to prove aristocratic connections remained,
and the myth served to alleviate the emotional distress of defeat.

The Cavalier myth, however it began, was widely accepted among Southerners.
Along with this acceptance, they developed a great respect (in spirit, if not in practice)
for the manner and behavior of the English aristocracy, and many of the planter families
ordered their lives according to what they imagined were the habits of the landed
English. Thus, although they were probably not the blood descendants of English
aristocracy, they made themselves the cultural inheritors of that social tradition,
privileging certain aspects of English culture. An integral aspect of this adopted culture
was the Southerners' valuation of the ancient notion of honor. Honor is a highly
complex quality, defined differently at various times. As Bertram Wyatt-Brown argues,
while honor is an attribute of an individual man, it is also essentially an "evaluation of
the public" designed to help order and structure society:

... honor is reputation. Honor resides in the individual as his
understanding of who he is and where he belongs in the ordered ranks of
society. . . . It is, at least in traditional terms, both internal to the
claimant, so that it motivates him toward behavior socially approved, and
external to him, because only by the response of observers can he
ordinarily understand himself. The internal and external aspects of honor
are inalienably connected because honor serves as ethical mediator
between the individual and the community by which he is assessed and
in which he also must locate himself in relation to others.

Honor is therefore self-regarding in character. One's neighbors
serve as mirrors that return the image of oneself. 9

In the South, then, the idea of honor, adopted from stories about Medieval times,
cemented relationships between members of a community. A planter knew he could
make use of a lawyer's services (or a legislator's, or a shopkeeper's) because that lawyer
had previously demonstrated his merit, integrity, courage, and trustworthiness, and his
town or state had responded by assessing or judging him to be honorable. Conversely,
for that same planter to transact business with a man reputed to be less than honorable
was to allow similar aspersions to be cast upon himself. As the years passed and such

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transactions were repeated over and over again, honor became a filament, a web of reputation, that connected people to their community.

Since honor and reputation are public values and community assessments, they can easily be lost; should a community make a mistake in depriving one of its members of reputation, however, that community must make amends to him. Mary Chesnut demonstrates the difficulties of honor and public assessment in a story about Colonel Beaufort Watts. Col. Watts had been commissioned by his state to convey a great deal of money, in bank notes, across the state and to deposit it in a specific bank. He was unable to travel the entire distance in a single day and so was forced to spend the night in a private home. When he retired for the evening, Col. Watts locked his door, placed the roll of bank-notes on his bedside table, and went to bed. In the morning, the roll of bank-notes had disappeared; despite a thorough search of the house, the notes could not be found. Although the Colonel had previously been considered honorable enough by the state leadership to be entrusted with the money, “a cloud rested on him” for years because of its loss (MCCW 52). Although “All who knew him believed him, of course,” Col. Watts’ colleagues “blasted his character” in order to deny any share in his dishonor (MCCW 52). They feared his dishonor because loss of reputation, in their minds, was a rapidly spreading contagion.

Col. Watts’ reputation suffered for many years until the house was torn down and it was discovered that rats or mice had dragged the roll of bank notes through the wainscoting and into their nest. Upon receiving convincing proof of the Colonel’s innocence and remembering the intervening years during which he suffered with quiet
dignity, the leaders of his state heaped diplomatic honors on him throughout his old age. Not only did the state try to repair the damage done to the Colonel, but the citizenry also tried to make amends by calling attention to the gentleman’s virtues. Mary writes of her “knight errant”: “He was the soul of honor. And his eccentricities were all humored. His misfortune had made him sacred. He stood hat in hand before the ladies and bowed as I suppose Sir Charles Grandison might have done” (MCCW 52). The community not only gives Colonel Watts back his reputation, but it makes him into another Sir Charles Grandison, the famous Samuel Richardson literary character who personified English gentlemanly honor, in order to repay its debt to him. To Mary and this community, Col. Watts himself thus becomes a second embodiment of gentlemanliness and honor.

Linked as the man of honor was to other men of repute in his community, one of his duties was to protect the reputation of his family, for “the cardinal principle of honor was family defense.” He kept order in his family the same way he helped to keep order in his larger community. In the conservative world of the great landholders of South Carolina and Virginia, the family was structured along traditionally hierarchical lines. The man of the house—the husband and father—was the head of the house, and everyone else, including his wife and his heir, was subservient to him. In his daily life, he prided himself on his civility, but should a serious threat be posed to any of his dependents or property, he had to meet and overcome it lest he lose his neighbors’ assessment of honor and his reputation for reliability. That threat could come in many forms, ranging from the disobedience of a child to the rumor of a slave insurrection. While the danger of insurrection was clearly greater in an immediate sense and the
smallest rebellion threatened the stability of the economy of the whole South, even the
disobedience of a child could mask a dangerous willfulness that might threaten the
security of the family or its business years ahead. Each threat, large or small, had to be
met and defeated.

In extreme cases, such as when a particularly formidable threat to the stability of
a family or community arose, references to honor and reputation made great use of the
language of strength. Wyatt-Brown quotes a twentieth-century ironic parody of Christ’s
Sermon on the Mount to sum up the nineteenth-century Southerner’s need, for strength:

Blessed are the rich, for they possess the earth and its glory.
Blessed are the strong, for they can conquer kingdoms.
Blessed are they with strong kinsmen, for they shall find help.
Blessed are the warlike, for they shall win wealth and renown.
Blessed are they who keep their faith, for they shall be honored.
Blessed are the open-handed, for they shall have friends and fame.
Blessed are they who wreak vengeance, for they shall be offended no
more, and they shall have honor and glory all the days of their life
and eternal fame in ages to come.\textsuperscript{12}

Even if he were not involved in an actual war, then, an aristocratic Southern patriarch
needed a reputation for being able to defend his property from any menace. The value
of a good reputation and a good family name was incalculable; in fact, family
connections could never be emphasized too much in either the antebellum or post-war
South. A person was judged by his or her family, and a person with “kinsmen” strong
in resources and reputation was able to achieve more recognition than others. As Mary
Chesnut observed, “If you have stout hearts and good family connections, you can do
pretty much as you please” (MCCW 380). This habit of doing pretty much what one
pleased was made much easier, however, if one behaved amiably toward others.
In his daily life, the Southern gentleman was renowned for his chivalrous behavior toward people who were weaker than he. In fact, the list of qualities attributed to him in social histories and private accounts of journeys through the South reads like an index in a Renaissance conduct book for well-bred men. As long as nothing threatened or offended him, the Southern gentleman was said to be courteous, gallant, polite, respectful of others’ feelings, kind, gracious, and solicitous of those weaker than himself. To strangers and friends alike, his generosity and the hospitality of his home were legendary, and his manners were always polished, refined, and elegant almost to excess, particularly when he was in the company of ladies. Though it may seem contradictory, a number of these men held their slaves in esteem and even behaved with consideration toward them. On Jefferson Davis’ plantation, as a case in point, the overseer was an African-American, and the only punishment meted out to slaves was that handed down from a court with a jury comprised entirely of fellow slaves. Davis treated his overseer, James Pemberton, with respect, and he never shortened Pemberton’s name to Jim because he believed “It is disrespect to give a nickname.” While such treatment, of course, seems absurd in light of the fact that those same African-Americans were enslaved by that same plantation owner, it is nevertheless a striking illustration of how much chivalrous behavior could be valued by a Southern gentleman.

In the male schema, the practice of chivalry became a method by which one man was distinguished from another, and, as with the charges of dishonor, neither birth nor previous reputation could clear a man’s name from charges of unchivalrous behavior.
John Chesnut, Mary's brother-in-law who died just before her marriage, had had six children, the youngest of whom were James Chesnut, III, a landowner in Florida, and Johnny, Mary's favorite among the Chesnut nieces and nephews. Before the war, Johnny had bought his brother's house in Camden, but, in the transaction, the stipulation that all of the furniture in the house still belonged to James was not made clear. In October of 1861, Johnny lent this house to Mary's sister, Kate, not realizing that he did not own the furniture that remained there. When James III found out that Kate and her children were occupying his former home, he sent a list to Johnny and insisted that all of his furniture be removed if the house were indeed inhabited. The list included every last piece of furniture in the house, and, after James' wagons arrived unannounced at the house, Kate was left "on bare boards" with "only her trunks and her children" (MCCW 223). James' behavior, subjecting a defenseless woman and her children to unnecessary hardship, made Mary furious, and she called it "hard on the chivalry" (MCCW 223).

Even if all four participants were strangers, courtesy would be due to an unprotected woman and her dependent children, but the insult was compounded by the fact that James, Johnny, Mary, and Kate were triply related. James was not only Mary's nephew, but he was also the husband of her first cousin, Amelia McCaa, and the first cousin of Kate's husband, David Rogerson Williams. Thus, in terms of chivalry, James' behavior was an affront to the entire family.

James' final offense was that his attack was leveled against the wife of a man who was away fighting a war in which James refused to participate. As Mary wrote, she and Kate speculated about what David Williams, "that pride of cavaliers and gentlemen
would say to such boorish conduct” (MCCW 223). Mary thus forges a comparison between her brother-in-law, David Williams, and her nephew-in-law, James Chesnut, to comment to her readers on the difference between good and bad men of the Civil War South. One is a cavalier, a gentleman, a defender of his country, his family, and helpless women and children everywhere, while the other is a “boorish” lout, a shirker in the war effort, and a selfish relative who refuses to help family members in times of need. One was an officer and a gentleman who had a strong possibility of becoming another representative of the Southern Gentleman ideal, and the other was clearly a counter-image, conspicuously devoid of honor, chivalry, and courtesy.

Mary’s narrative contains hundreds of similar incidents in which she observes and comments upon the Southern aristocracy, but it is through her depiction of Col. Chesnut—the patriarch of the Chesnut family and thus the man most required to be an example of the ideal—that her commentary coalesces into an assessment that upholds the idea of the Southern Gentleman in spite of Mary’s own very deep ambivalences about it. These ambivalences are quite clear in the private diary, and, even though Mary tried to conceal her true feelings in the revised narrative that she intended to publish, her final portrait of Col. Chesnut as the ideal Southern Gentleman is one colored by qualifications. In the wartime diary, Mary describes her father-in-law with a combination of affection, exasperation, and barely-repressed anger. The qualities that distinguish his personality in this text are unchecked authority, stinginess, emotional distance in spite of his fondness for his children, a refusal to believe the Confederate government and military would ever succeed in breaking away from the Union, and a
shameful interest in the charms of slave women. In short, the Colonel is a difficult, selfish, and querulous old man whom Mary loves and admires almost in spite of himself.

In both diary and narrative, Mary first mentions Col. Chesnut in late February of 1861, after South Carolina and a handful of other Southern states had seceded but still prior to the outbreak of actual hostilities: “We laughed over the piece in the Herald to day—which said James Chesnut, Jr., was the only son of one of the wealthiest Carolinians. His father owned a thousand negroes & could not in a day ride over his lands!” (PMC 15). This information, reported in the February 23, 1861, edition of the New York Herald, was somewhat less than factual. Although Col. Chesnut literally was “one of the wealthiest Carolinians” (he was, in fact, one of the wealthiest Southerners), in truth he had less than half that number of slaves. What is most notable about this excerpt is the obvious fact that, though this portion of the article purported to concern itself with the words and actions of James Chesnut, Jr., even this former U.S. senator was seen in the light of his family connections. Despite her laughter over the exaggerations of the report, Mary’s decision to feature it so prominently in both her diary and her narrative is one of the first signs of her great pride in the Chesnut family’s power within South Carolina. From the beginning, then, Mary defines Col. Chesnut as a wealthy Southerner whose riches take the form of land, slaves, and family.

When Mary feels charitably toward her father-in-law, her diary makes many references to her affection for him, a feeling that Col. Chesnut seemed to share. This attachment survives even through the worst of her anger, and it generally takes the form
of keeping the Colonel apprised of his son’s actions and accomplishments. Such a correspondence was a much needed task because Mary and James were so often absent from Camden on official business. Mary’s diary records numerous letters written to and received from her father-in-law, to whom she generally gives the formal title of “Mr. Chesnut”; in addition to her own letters, Mary sought out newspaper articles about James’ activities to send to him. Furthermore, the Colonel’s letters to Mary reassure her that her fondness for him is returned, as in one occasion early on in her diary: “Had a delightfully affectionate long letter from my husband’s father—refreshing to find he likes me so well” (PMC 29). Their correspondence is, perhaps, the place where Mary and the Colonel feel most comfortable admitting their affection for one another. Unlike their actual meetings, both Mary and Col. Chesnut can use private letters to focus on their friendship and ignore, even if only temporarily, the problems between them.

The strongest impression about her father-in-law that Mary creates is that of his absolute authority over all of the money and goods that were available to the Chesnuts. Col. Chesnut’s control over the family resources was so complete that Mary’s affection was constantly at war with her resentment of him, a conflict shared by almost every other family member. At times, Mary represses her resentment, not allowing herself to complain even within her own diary, but her loyalty struggles with her anger. Occasionally, the result of this struggle is a passive form of attack. For example, since Mary includes only a public discussion of Col. Chesnut’s wealth, via the New York Herald, it is fitting that her first criticism of the Colonel’s refusal to share that wealth
with his only son and heir also comes from a detached observer, Varina Davis, the wife of the Confederate President:

Mrs. Davis told me "every body described my husband’s father as an odd character—a Millionaire who did nothing for his son whatever, left him to struggle with poverty," &c. I replied, "Mr. Chesnut Senior thinks himself the best of fathers—and his son thinks likewise. I have nothing to say—but it is true, he has no money but what he makes as a lawyer," &c. (PMC 43)

By placing this criticism of Col. Chesnut in the mouth of Varina Davis, Mary allows herself the pleasure of noting that the Colonel’s neglect of James and herself is so obvious that even outsiders have noticed it—and have had discussions “describing” it—while at the same time giving her sense of loyalty the pleasure of defending her father-in-law to his detractors. The fact that she agrees with the public’s consensus that the Colonel’s behavior is “odd,” unfair, and unkind is clear from her remarks following this excerpt, where she states in frustration that men like her father-in-law are “the social evil!” (PMC 43).

By quoting Varina Davis’ words in her diary, Mary seems to have broken the ice of her own reserve, and she thereafter allows her own criticism of the Colonel full rein. One of the things that upsets Mary most about Col. Chesnut is his continual stinginess and tight hold on the family purse-strings. In April of 1861, James was appointed one of the three men who served as General P.G.T. Beauregard’s envoys negotiating with Major Anderson, the commander of the garrison inside Fort Sumter. Tensions were running high, and most of the participants in this drama realized that the war was about to begin in the middle of Charleston harbor. Mary writes: “Mr. Chesnut has sent his
only son, at such a time, a mean, common, cold blooded brute of a horse. . . . What a cold hearted [man]—mean” (PMC 58). Evidently, Mary believes that, “at such a time,” Col. Chesnut’s duty is to equip his son in a manner that befits what (she hopes) will be his historic role in the coming battle. She later explains herself more fully, repeating the idea throughout her writing that, “his father . . . does not show love as I would by doing things for him” (PMC 79). Her pride in Colonel Chesnut’s wealth and power is distinctly qualified, then, by what she interprets as his abuse of that wealth and power.

In addition to Col. Chesnut’s financial disregard of his son, Mary feels that he is guilty of emotional inattention too. Immediately after the bombardment of Fort Sumter and the official beginning of the war, James and Mary return home for an emotional reunion with their family. Mary writes that “Old Mr. Chesnut begged my husband never to leave him again—until he died” and then copies an unidentified poem into her diary that begins with the lines:

. . . steel thine aching heart,
To act the martyr’s sterner part,
And watch with calm unshirking eye
The darling visions as they die. . . . (PMC 71)

Mary sees her family as united by the need to sacrifice their hopes, their “darling visions” of the future, to the war effort. Together, they can find the strength necessary to “steel” their “aching heart[s],” to “act the martyr’s sterner part,” and calmly to face both the need to send James to the war and the risk of loss of life and property.

A short week later, however, this sense of the family bravely meeting adversity together has died, and Mary writes angrily in her diary:
Alone at Sandy Hill . . . This is the end of the farce & sentimental talk of Mr. Chesnut’s family. “They could never bear him out of sight”; “he must never leave them.” “Just recovering [from] the shock of his joining Beauregard,” & now, three days after his return for so short a rest at home, go to spend a week with Mrs. Reynolds who . . . never since she was made sacrificed one instant or one wish to their pleasure, & leave us alone at Sandy Hill. I am happier far without them—but for the life of me can not help wondering at such bare face[d] cant, &c. (PMC 74)

Col. Chesnut had pleased Mary by requesting that James return home, but that changed when he and Mrs. Chesnut decide to visit Mrs. Reynolds, their daughter and James’ sister. Mary, who prides herself on her straightforward honesty even when her words win her nothing more than the family’s disapproval, views their talk of love for James as “bare faced cant” and their behavior as a betrayal of her husband. Instead of bringing them all together—Col. Chesnut, Mrs. Chesnut, James, Mary, the Reynoldses, and the rest of the family—the visit home seems to accomplish, in Mary’s mind, nothing other than reminding her that the Colonel’s emotional support of his son is as meaningless as his financial support of them both.

On a few occasions, Mary perceives Col. Chesnut’s attitude toward her as being much worse than emotionally detached, as when he levels an unkind attack against her for her inability to bear children, a fact that is a tremendous source of pain for Mary throughout her life. One day, when she is at home, her mother-in-law brags about her twenty-seven grandchildren in front of Mary, who calls herself “a childless wretch” (PMC 44). Col. Chesnut, proud of the large number of his progeny, overhears the conversation and says to his wife, “You have not been a useless woman in this world” (PMC 44-45). In the Colonel’s mind, a useful woman is defined as one who provides
her husband with a large family; correspondingly, a useless woman is one who is unable to do so.

Mary, the "childless wretch," pours her pain out into her diary, writing: "& what of me! God help me—no good have I done—to myself or any one else—with the [power] I boast so of—the power to make myself loved. Where am I now. Where are my friends. I am allowed to have none" (PMC 45). Mary recognizes in the Colonel's words the rebuke he intended to convey so quickly because at times such as these her abilities pale, in her own eyes as well as in the eyes of others, before what she feels is her one great inability. While Mary concentrated her maternal energies on her nieces and nephews or, when no relatives are available, on the various young people, such as the Preston girls, around her, she could never rectify this social failing. That she was so successful in forming and keeping friendships among all sorts of people is a testament to her kindness, her great sense of fun, and her consideration of others, but that wonderful talent of hers, "the power to make [her]self loved," means very little in the practical world of the nineteenth-century South where a woman's greatest duty is to provide children for her husband.

Mary retaliates only through her writing, by counter-attacking her father-in-law with a charge of the one great sin of the plantation owner. She follows her cry of loss with a strongly emphasized parenthetical comment, "(He did not count his children!!)" (PMC 45). Her declaration clearly implies that Col. Chesnut has children through other women and that his infidelity to Mrs. Chesnut is well known, though perhaps not discussed, by the family. Only a few months after this incident with her father-in-law,
she writes of him, "How dare men mix up the Bible so with their own bad passions. Merciful God! forgive me if I fail. Can I respect what is not respectable. Can I honor what is dishonorable. Rachel—& her brood—make this place a horrid nightmare to me" (PMC 82). Now, Mary has moved beyond accusing Col. Chesnut of having illegitimate children to accusing him of practicing miscegenation. As the editors of the diary point out, Mary is making a distinct reference to the Bible’s fifth commandment, which enjoins Christians to honor their fathers and mothers. Mary’s problem, the fact that she has had to show respect and honor to her father-in-law even when she does not feel it, is complicated by her affection for him. While it is doubtful that Mary ever directly accuses Col. Chesnut of miscegenation, the fact that it upsets her is undeniable. His actions are not simply a betrayal of Mrs. Chesnut, but also of Mary’s esteem for him. That Mary privately considers her father-in-law’s sin to be so terrible as to be unmentionable is evidenced by the necessity she feels to write of it, even to herself, in parentheses and in metaphors. The practice of miscegenation was something that a good Southern woman like Mary was never supposed to see; should she catch a glimpse of it in other families, let alone in her own, she was obliged to remain silent on the subject. It is a measure of the Colonel’s power, as a man and as a father, that he is able to accuse Mary of not doing her duty while escaping any charges of dishonorable behavior himself. In this eminently respected family, the issue is swept under the carpet and never mentioned to anyone.

During the course of the war, Mary comments only briefly on Col. Chesnut’s Unionist sentiments in her original diary. Directly after the Confederate victory at the
First Battle of Bull Run (Manassas), Dr. Gibbes, the Surgeon General of South Carolina, reports to Mary that the Southerners have captured much of the Union forces' baggage, among which they have found thirty thousand pairs of handcuffs intended for members of the Confederate government. Mary is pleased to be promised at least one pair, saying, “I shall send them to my respected father in law—an old Union man” (PMC 106). Only a few days later, Mary again relishes the rout of the Federal troops, remarking, “I hope Col. Chesnut will be satisfied now that we have seen some of his northern kin” (PMC 131). Both of these comments signal Mary’s pride in the Confederate army, and she seems to feel as if she has scored a victory over her father-in-law that parallels the South’s victory over the North. Only through these two offhand comments does Mary mention the Colonel’s support of the Union army; most of the time, she describes him as being far removed from true knowledge of political and military affairs.

At the end of the war, Mary takes the time to write a character sketch of her father-in-law during what turned out to be his last year of life. Mary pities him, calling him “Poor old Col. C.,” because, now well into his nineties, he has become deaf and almost blind and has lost his wife; in the next breath, though, she describes him as “a wonderful wreck” since he retains all of his personality (PMC 248). When he is in a good mood, he is still able to behave chivalrously, showing “Great hospitality—& beautiful, courtly manners”; when crossed, the Colonel becomes “brusque, sneering, snarling, [and] utterly unbearable” (PMC 248). While Col. Chesnut’s personality is still characterized by a “great shrewdness—& wonderful quickness to perceive the minutest
harm to his earthly possessions (his God),” Mary believes that his refusal to turn over control of the plantations to James demonstrates a “Perfect blindness to their ruin from his own neglect or want of power to take care of them” (PMC 248). Here, toward the end of his life, the Colonel’s insistence upon retaining his full authority over his family and property has endangered both. The Confederacy has failed and the South has come again under the government of the Union; all of those, like Col. Chesnut, who had gambled on the Confederate economy have lost their investment money.19

With that ever-present mixture of affection and anger, Mary ends her private sketch of her father-in-law with admiration for his courtliness, sorrow for his physical deterioration, and a frustrated exasperation at his selfish refusal to face their declining fortunes. In an interesting turn of phrase, Mary says of the Colonel that “he did patriarch united with grand seigneur magnificently” (PMC 248). Mary implies, in this short sentence, that the Colonel is just an ordinary man who, though blessed with great wealth and good manners, has merely assumed the role of patriarch and grand seigneur. Despite the fact that he has performed, that he “did,” those roles “magnificently,” they are, nonetheless, simply the roles that his society has expected him to play.

The final view of Col. Chesnut that Mary provides in her diary resembles her picture of “Poor old Col. C.” more than it does his image as patriarch and grand seigneur. The Colonel’s other relatives have been badgering him to make a new will giving them more of his money, and Harriet Grant, Col. Chesnut’s granddaughter and Mary’s niece, has been particularly active in her manipulation of him. Mary makes no attempt to conceal her loathing for Harriet, even going so far as to dub her niece Hecate.

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In the last days of the war, Mary writes, “Hecate” had hoped that James, “that detestable person, her Uncle,” would be killed so that the Colonel would have to change his will, perhaps in her favor (PMC 263). Now that James is returning home safely from the war, Mary observes that Harriet and her side of the family are furious. The pages of Mary’s wartime diary close with this sad picture of Colonel Chesnut: “They had managed that poor old blind man so long they could not bear the return alive of the men of the family” (PMC 263). At the end of his life, then, even the Colonel’s role-playing has lost its power, and he is no longer considered to be one “of the men of the family”; he is just “that poor old blind man.”

It is very obvious in the diary that Mary is conflicted in her feelings toward her father-in-law. As a Southerner, she is acutely implicated in her society’s valuation of honor, chivalry and aristocracy. As a Southern woman, her allegiance is owed to her husband’s family, and Mary is extremely proud of the Chesnut family name—prouder even than she is of the name of her own father, a famed (within South Carolina) former governor of the state. She also takes great pride in the reputation that the Chesnuts have for their wealth and power throughout the South, a reputation that, according to the New York Herald article, politically observant Northerners seem to be aware of, too. It is Colonel Chesnut who is the patriarch of the family, and thus he is the family’s main representative as well. That his character can be described as honorable, noble, and chivalrous is another matter of great pride to Mary since a man’s family shares in his reputation. Yet all of the Colonel’s good qualities cannot erase the problems that Mary has with other parts of his personality. Since he is the patriarch, he is also in control of
the family money and land, and he alone decides how those resources shall be used.
Certainly, a daughter-in-law has no control over the patriarch, and so Mary remains
frustrated, resentful, and, above all, dependent upon his good will. The fact that Col.
Chesnut can get away with playing emotional games of see-saw with her and with her
husband is likewise a source of much frustration to Mary. When his emotional
inattention becomes an attack on Mary for her childlessness, her rage increases and her
ability (and, at times, her desire) to conceal that rage shrinks. In short, Mary is a person
who enjoys her position of importance within Southern society, but at the same time she
is also an independent-minded woman who resents the limits that that same society
places on her. It seems both natural and logical, then, for her to find in Col. Chesnut,
her family’s representative of Southern society, both the things she loves and hates
about her world.

The picture of Colonel Chesnut that Mary creates in the revised narrative differs
radically from the one that emerges in her wartime diary. Mary transforms this man,
presented in her original text as egotistical and lordly, often peevish and sometimes
gracious, into the model Southern Gentleman of the Civil War years. During the
transition, much of what Mary wrote about Col. Chesnut in her diary, with the exception
of the excerpt from the New York Herald about his wealth, is either eliminated or
fundamentally altered. The final portrait that Mary gives to her readers is one that caters
to post-war fantasies of a South that never really existed but also one that is unable to
contain all of her own anger about her father-in-law. Even the Colonel’s faults, those
few that Mary actually mentions in her revision, become symbolic of his time and place.
In re-writing her father-in-law, Mary has tried to excise or repress much of the anger that she privately expressed about his control over the family, but it still bleeds into her narrative.

Early on in the text, it is important for Mary to document Col. Chesnut’s credentials as an ideal Southern Gentleman. She needs to remind her politically marginalized readers that Southerners helped to colonize the United States and that they are the Cavaliers, the true inheritors of European aristocracy. Even among his fellow Southerners, then, the Colonel is seen to have come by his aristocratic life honestly, as Mary just happens to prove when she casually mentions, “George the II’s name is attached to the Mulberry patents. . . . There are only two or three of such [large plantations] in every district” (MCCW 249). Col. Chesnut is clearly no upstart, but a gentleman born and bred, and he is thus entitled to the aristocratic life that he leads.

Although the revised Col. Chesnut is still a difficult person to live with, Mary stresses that this patriarch is a benevolent one: “The master is kind and amiable when not crossed. Given to hospitality on a grand scale. Jovial, genial, friendly, courtly in his politeness. As absolute a tyrant as the czar of Russia, the khan of Tartary—or the Sultan of Turkey” (MCCW 261-262). The first part of the ideal Southern Gentleman that Mary shows to her post-war readers, those Southerners who were only beginning to take control over their lives, is one in which a man’s will was law. Here, Col. Chesnut is a czar, a khan, and a sultan; his power is legitimate and unquestioned. Furthermore, should he become anything but “kind and amiable” or “friendly” or “courtly,” it is only because some unwise inferior has crossed him.
Mary also takes pains to feed the post-war longing for the aristocratic behavior and wealth of the older South, and she endows her portrait of her father-in-law with all the necessary qualities. His manners are always impeccable: courtly, gracious, chivalrous. He is hospitable and generous to strangers, and his wealth allows him to assist his neighbors in exceptional ways: when a group of gentlemen lose their land during the war, he is able to furnish them with some of his own until they are able to regain their fortunes (MCCW 240). He has so much leisure time that he must invent ways to pass the time, such as “driving out with a pair of spanking thoroughbred bays which have been trained to trot as slowly as a trot can be managed” (MCCW 203). Despite his advanced age, the Colonel is known for his sophistication and for being “wise in women and wine” (MCCW 658). Even his refusal to say grace before dinner becomes indicative of an astute business man; as an explanation for waiting until after he has finished his meal before giving thanks for it, the Colonel replies, “My way is to be sure of a thing before I return thanks for it” (MCCW 770).

Mary links the Colonel’s prosperity directly to his ownership of slaves, an issue that is fraught with meaning to her readers. Many white Southerners of the 1880s were convinced that the freed African-Americans had been happier and better off when they were slaves; the idea was that people with black skin (or black blood) were incapable of caring for themselves and that, if given independence, they would either flounder and starve or turn to crime. Ownership of slaves had been the basis of the great wealth enjoyed by planters like Col. Chesnut in the antebellum South primarily because the economy was founded upon agricultural production, a system that demanded large
numbers of cheap laborers. Mary calls her father-in-law “a prince of slaveholders,” a man who personifies the good planter who owns so many slaves that he is unable to give them all regular employment (MCCW 255, 203). 22 This picture of a plantation so well managed and well staffed that even the slaves are under-employed is one to which Mary returns many times and which she uses to prove that the Colonel’s authority over his slaves is as benevolent as his control of his family. This is also Mary’s way of trying to strike a balance between four points: Col. Chesnut owned slaves, Mary herself hated slavery, Southerners of the 1880s knew that slavery was gone, but they also felt little retrospective guilt over it. In factoring these different points, the one that is left out of the portrait of Col. Chesnut is Mary’s perspective because it is the one that does not fit. 23 Mary represses the anti-slavery arguments that she makes so freely elsewhere in the text. When she refers to her father-in-law, she may speak of his interactions with individual slaves, but she is generally silent on the issue of slavery. Col. Chesnut is kind even to slaves whom he does not realize are his own, such as when he stops his carriage to give a ride, as well as some food, to a dirty, “ragged little black urchin” who sits crying alongside the road (MCCW 297). Though this action “spoiled the symmetry” of his equipage, Mary notes that “it was a character touch” that defines her father-in-law’s gracious behavior (MCCW 297). Col. Chesnut, according to his daughter-in-law, extends the requirement for the ideal Southern Gentleman to be chivalrous and gallant toward those who were weaker than he to include gallantry to slaves—after all, she seems to say, no other group of people held less power. At the same time, the argument of this passage agrees with the intended post-war readers’ idea.
that African-Americans, such as this little boy, fared better under the protection of a
white man like the Colonel.

To continue her portrait of a benevolent patriarch, Mary tries to make Col. Chesnut’s stinginess disappear in a cloud of generosity. Instead of the wartime diary’s study of his meanness and his unwillingness to “show love . . . by doing things” for his family, the revised narrative struggles to reconstruct the Colonel’s financial habits. At the end of the war, Mary writes:

We have lost what we never had. We have never had any money, only unlimited credit—for J.C.’s richest kind of a father ensured us all manner of credit. It was all only a mirage at last. It has gone—just as we drew nigh to it.

Old Mr. Chesnut never gave. Sherman took away. Blessed be the name of the only son of his father. . . . (MCCW 752)

Thus, Mary tries to make Col. Chesnut into a figure of the munificent father, generously bequeathing his children with largesse in the form of the credit that they need to establish themselves. In this text, credit is even more important than financial support because it forces James to become independent of his father. The implication is that if Col. Chesnut were simply to pay all of his son’s bills, he would be foolishly remiss and his son would never achieve the true independence that is so important for a Southern gentleman. Instead, he becomes the “richest kind of a father,” one whose bequest to his son is independence and who wisely looks out for that child’s best interests. Mary’s only regret seems to be that their inheritance disappears like “a mirage” just when James and she are approaching it.
The second paragraph of this passage, however, exposes Mary’s ambivalence toward her father-in-law, an ambivalence that this adjusted picture of the Colonel’s munificence cannot conceal. The words, “Old Mr. Chesnut never gave. Sherman took away,” construct a startling connection between her father-in-law and General Sherman, the man who succeeded in bringing South Carolina to its knees. Both men wield absolute power over others, the policies of both have to be obeyed by ordinary people, and the punishment for insubordination to either is financial or physical destruction. Not incidentally, Sherman was perhaps the man most hated by Southerners after the war; by aligning Col. Chesnut with Sherman, Mary succeeds in revealing her anger and resentment of her father-in-law. Furthermore, the final sentence, “Blessed be the name of the only son of his father,” also seems bitterly ironic in light of Mary’s true feelings about the Colonel. The sentence does succeed in imparting two seemingly contradictory perspectives of Col. Chesnut. The Colonel’s refusal to support his son financially converts him metaphorically into both a sort of God sacrificing his son for the greater good (the war effort, James’ own financial independence) and an Abraham sacrificing his only son on the altar of what Mary has called, in her original diary, “his earthly possessions (his God).” What is not surprising about this passage is the fact that Mary is unable to repress completely her true feelings about the Colonel in terms of finances, an issue that has angered her greatly. Whether she compares him to Sherman, God, or Abraham, Mary’s resentment of her father-in-law’s absolute control creeps into and colors what should have been an ideal portrait of Col. Chesnut’s generosity.
Mary also betrays herself through an allusion to the Colonel’s displeasure over her childlessness. Although the narrative does contain Col. Chesnut’s proud acclaim for his wife’s twenty-seven grandchildren, gone is any implication of an attack on Mary, as well as her angry accusation of miscegenation. By no means would she allow the hint of her father-in-law’s dalliance to invade a work written for publication: not only would it bring shame to the family to admit publicly to such disgraceful misbehavior, but it would also be inconsistent with the character that Mary was developing for him in her narrative.

The single reference the narrative makes to the Colonel and the subject of childlessness in the revised narrative comes when she hands him a letter from his grandson, Johnny Chesnut. Mary writes, “We had no children. They were to carry on his line and inherit the estates he loves so well. Now he is under no delusion. He said, as he folded up the missive from the seat of war: ‘With your husband we die out. He is the last of my family’” (MCCW 190-191). At first, Mary appears not to feel a sting in her father-in-law’s statement, “we die out,” perhaps because he omits any reference to women’s usefulness. Yet the first three sentences read as if she were steeling herself against the pain brought by an acknowledgment of the truth, that she feels unable to provide the family with the son required of her. Her words appear to be a sort of personal litany that she schools herself to recite in order to handle her grief. First, she reminds herself of the simple fact, “We had no children”; then, she makes herself accept the fact that the Colonel, as well as the rest of her world, is no longer under any “delusion” that the situation might change.
Undoubtedly, Mary’s prospective readers were well aware that few subjects could be as important to a Southern aristocrat as ensuring that the family line would continue, strong and unbroken, after his death. In this, Col. Chesnut’s concern with Mary and James’ lack of offspring could be seen as simply typical of a man in his position. Yet, it is an interesting comment on the familial hierarchy of the South that Col. Chesnut did not consider Johnny Chesnut, the son of his own dead son and James’ heir, a direct enough descendant to carry on the family name. Presumably, only James’ own son could carry on a truly unbroken line, and any temporary bend in the family tree, even if only to encompass a nephew, made it less august, less perfect.

The narrative also transforms Col. Chesnut’s belief in the strength of the Union and its troops, which had been a source of amusement and disbelief for Mary in her wartime diary, into an indication of his vast wisdom. Mary’s readers are all-too cognizant of how strong the Union forces were; their experiences during and after the war drove home the realization that the United States was a more powerful country than the Confederacy had been. Since it would have been impossible for a text that spanned the entire Civil War to ignore the Union’s overpowering strength and eventual success, Mary uses that information to make the Colonel seem omniscient while never actually discrediting the worth of the Confederacy. Mary causes her father-in-law to repeat his opinions about the ultimate results of the war over and over throughout the text: “One thing seems to rush out of old Mr. Chesnut’s mouth unbidden as he walks up and down this large hall. He stops, throws up his hands, which are usually clasped behind him: ‘Napoleon said numbers will tell in the end’” (MCCW 250). In this picture of Col.
Chesnut, Mary has fashioned him into a sort of oracle of a vanishing world through whom the truths about the Union’s victory and the final defeat of the Confederacy “rush . . . unbidden” as he paces the halls of his temple. No longer does Mary write of obtaining captured handcuffs for him or of her own satisfaction in the outcome of the Southern soldiers meeting his Northern “kin” at Bull Run. Though she might chafe at what she does not wish to hear, she does show a great deal of respect for his wisdom. Such a change is significant for the revised text because the character of Col. Chesnut that Mary is creating is one that her readers should perceive as worthy of esteem and respect, not humor or mockery; the best way to accomplish that is for her as a writer to grant and shape that respect herself.

Mary does make sure to show, however, that his belief in the Union is due strictly to political expedience rather than to any cultural preference. Though he believes that the United States will triumph, the “Union” is not a synonym for the “North,” and his Unionist stance comes about merely through a wish to preserve a Southern institution:

I was always a Union Man. The world’s against us. But for the strong powers of the United States—repressing insurrections and keeping the hands of outsiders off—we would not keep slavery a day. The world will not tolerate a small slave power with our long frontier and freedom the other side of it . . . We are out-of-date. . . .Outside barbarians—that’s what they think of us. . . . (MCCW 249)

Mary shows her readers that this “Union man” is also a wise “Southern man” who holds firmly to that very idea of independence so unique to the Southerners. It is not an abstract belief in the indivisibility of the Union itself that he wants to perpetuate but the
security promised by the “powers of the United States” that make it possible to protect, in Wyatt-Brown’s words, his own “personal and familial security and self-regard.” Col. Chesnut does not believe that the Confederacy could ever be a viable sovereign state, that, for example, Britain or France would ever establish formal diplomatic ties with it, because he recognizes that the “world will not tolerate a small slave power.” Only under the protection of the government of the United States could Col. Chesnut remain a great slave-owner with successful plantations. Removed from the Union, he realizes, the Southern states will soon be economically destroyed. In this, too, the reader recognizes that the Colonel’s words are prophetic.

Mary’s revised narrative rarely allows her readers glimpses of her father-in-law’s personal side, his involvement in the lives of others, as were shown in her diary. Other than in her description of his kindness to the little boy along the side of the road, she writes very little about his affections for others. Were it not for one particular episode, the Colonel would seem not just emotionally distanced from his family, but completely immune to any emotional attachment. The episode in which Mary allows him to show great feeling is easily his most tragic moment of the war, if not of his life. First, Mary recounts her father-in-law’s daily habit of walking down the passageway to his elderly, deaf wife’s room early in the morning, carrying his hairbrush so that he might conclude his morning toilette in her company. Mary describes him brushing his hair as Mrs. Chesnut’s maid attends to hers,

He had the voice of a stentor. And there he stood, roaring his morning compliments. The people who occupied the rooms above said he fairly shook the window glasses. This pleasant morning greeting and ceremony was never omitted. . . . (MCCW 610)
This “never omitted” ritual points to a man whose deep love for his wife is, by virtue of his loud voice, common knowledge between family and friends. Should anything alarm or upset Mrs. Chesnut, her husband would rush to rectify the matter.

Then, Mary recounts how Mrs. Chesnut’s death in 1864 deals a terrible blow to the Colonel. Mary relates how,

This morning, as I passed Mrs. C’s room, the door stood wide open. And I heard a pitiful sound. The old man was kneeling by her empty bedside, sobbing bitterly. I fled down the middle walk—anywhere out of reach of what was never meant for me to hear. (MCCW 610)

That Col. Chesnut deeply feels the loss of his wife—and thus that he is capable of strong emotional attachment—is unmistakably revealed by Mary’s description of his bitter sobs as he kneels by the empty bed. Just as important, however, is Mary’s revelation that strong emotions are not meant to be shared with others. The issue is not that the Chesnuts do not care for one another but that Mary refuses to write publicly of their affection for one another. Mary truly believes that emotions are “never meant for [her] to hear” or to see. So if Mary feels that this scene is one which she is not intended to witness, why does she include it in her narrative for everyone to read? Why is such sorrow the one emotion she allows her father-in-law to feel so intensely?

The answer can be found in a pattern to which Mary returns again and again throughout the latter part of her text. After the battle at Gettysburg, the Confederate forces began their downhill slide toward defeat, a fact of which Mary’s readers were unavoidably aware. At this point in the narrative, Mary begins to color her history with a sense of impending doom and loss—and her readers would be quick to apprehend
what she was doing. Although Mrs. Chesnut is a much smaller figure in the diary and narrative than her husband, she too is made to represent the ideal model of the Southern Lady. This bedroom is the place where Mr. and Mrs. Chesnut, the Southern Gentleman and the Southern Lady, have created and brought to birth their world, the world of the antebellum and Civil War South. Now, Mary uses this scene, with Col. Chesnut mourning over his dead wife's empty bed, to symbolize the loss of that undeniably pleasant world and easy life. That Mary shares in his grief is unmistakable in the understated pathos she uses to describe his bitter weeping, and her flight away from the room echoes her wish—and the wish of her readers—to flee the harsh realities of the world in which they are living, the unfamiliar world of the South after defeat and Reconstruction.

Before she concludes her portrait of Col. Chesnut as the ideal Southern Gentleman, she re-writes the sketch that she made of her father-in-law's personality at the end of her diary. Now, Mary says of him, "Partly patriarch, partly grand seigneur, this old man is of a species that we will see no more. The last of the lordly planters who ruled this Southern world" (MCCW 815). No longer is Col. Chesnut merely acting, no longer is he playing the part of patriarch and grand seigneur; now, he is the embodiment of them both. Though he is old and feeble, while he still lives he will remain a ruler of the Southern world that he helped to create. Col. Chesnut has also managed to retain both his beautiful manners and his fierce independence despite his blindness and deafness. Mary goes on to describe this splendid wreck... whose will has never been crossed... Sometimes this old man will stop himself just as he is going off in a fury because
they try to prevent his attempting some impossible feat. In his condition of lost faculties he will stop and ask gently: "I hope that I never say or do anything unseemly..." At every footfall he calls out, "Who goes there?" If a lady's name is given, he uncovers and stands, hat off, until she passes. He has the old world art of bowing low and gracefully still. (MCCW 815)

Mary's words, then, become a celebration of Col. Chesnut's "old world" virtues, and even those characteristics that make him a difficult man to live with, most notably his constant assertion of power and will, become admirable signs of his spirit of Southern independence.

The final glimpse of Col. Chesnut in the narrative comes during the summer after the end of the war. Mary says that he is "wild with 'homesickness.' He wants to be at Mulberry" (MCCW 834). The Mulberry for which the Colonel is homesick, however, no longer exists as he remembers it, nor does the South that he so loved. Similarly, the Col. Chesnut that Mary has created does not belong in the new South that the Reconstructionists are creating. He has become a man who has outlived his time. Born during the reign of George III and only a few years before the American Revolution, the Colonel's life ends in the year after the collapse of the South. He has lived almost the entire span of his life between two wars that were fought to define what independence means and what kind of country the United States would be. In the end, though, his definitions and his views become obsolete.

Although Mary has made Colonel Chesnut a sympathetic character, she has revealed quite a bit about herself through omissions and unguarded comments. Her resentment and anger at the Colonel's control over the Chesnut finances is still present,
if muted. One must also wonder why she brought up the point of her childlessness and Col. Chesnut’s implied reprimand, “With your husband we die out,” when the whole situation had caused her so much pain. Correspondingly, the statement “He is the last of my family” is hardly a logical conclusion for the grandfather of two healthy young men to have made. Perhaps (and this is pure speculation) Mary included this scene, complete with its illogical statement, in her narrative in order to make a veiled criticism about the illogic of a patriarchal system that treated women as brood mares who were useful only if they produced a husband’s offspring, particularly when the more serious problem of white men having illicit sexual relations with slave-women was going unmentioned. Furthermore, her failure to criticize Col. Chesnut for his ownership of slaves makes her complicit in that horrible practice; though she does say much against slavery throughout the narrative, she must still retain some complicity because of her enjoyment of the material things and the pleasant life that the labor of the slaves has bought for her. Though she believed in much that the figure of the Southern Gentleman represents—honor, chivalry, an aristocratic way of life—she did not agree with it all, and, in striving to create a picture of this ideal that her post-war readers would accept, Mary had to compromise some of her own ideals and expose some of her own failings. The result was a highly ambiguous portrait, one that demonstrates both the weaknesses of unchecked authority and of the romanticization of the past.
NOTES

1 Gaines M. Foster, Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South, 1865 to 1913 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) 79-80, 85-86.


3 Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982) 112.

4 Historians agree that white males shared in this feeling of independence and freedom virtually regardless of their socio-economic status. While the living scratched out by the poorest white man barely kept him alive, even he proudly pointed out his obligation to no one but himself. Such independence was, of course, not shared by women or slaves; as will be discussed in Chapter 4, this social insistence upon complete and total freedom from outside interference helped perpetuate slavery long after it lost its economic feasibility. For further information, see W. J. Cash, The Mind of the South, 1941 (New York: Random House, Inc., 1991). See also Wyatt-Brown.


6 Cash 3-28, passim. See this section also for the examination of success in early America compared to social class that follows.

7 William R. Taylor's Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character (New York: George Braziller, 1961), does address the question, but its answers are relevant only to this antebellum plantation fiction, which Taylor examines wonderfully. For further studies of plantation fiction, see also Michael Kreyling, Figures of the Hero in Southern Narrative (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987); J. V. Ridgely, Nineteenth-Century Southern Literature (Lexington, KY, 1980); and C. Hugh Holman, The Roots of Southern Writing: Essays on the Literature of the American South (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1972).

8 Cash 6.
Like the freedom and independence discussed above, this notion of honor was exclusive to the white male, too. Wyatt-Brown also breaks down his evaluation of honor into three fundamental elements:

Honor has three basic components, none of which may exist wholly independent of the other. Honor is first the inner conviction of self-worth. . . . The second aspect of honor is the claim of that self-assessment before the public. . . . The third element is the assessment of the claim by the public, a judgment based upon the behavior of the claimant.

Like the precepts of those Renaissance conduct books, however, stories about Southern honor and chivalry could very well be more prescriptive than descriptive. An investigation into this matter would make an interesting contribution to the study of Southern honor.

Mary takes pains to excuse James' non-participation in the war when anyone else accuses him of cowardice, even when those accusers are also family. Mary records such an instance when she is speaking with Mrs. Thomas Jefferson Withers—Mary's aunt and James' aunt-in-law—and Mary (Withers) Kirkland—Mrs. Thomas Jefferson Withers' daughter, Mary Chesnut's cousin, and James' cousin-in-law. (Relationship in the Chesnut/Boykin family, as well as in the rest of the upper class South, are convoluted enough to impede easy identification; suffice it to say that everyone seems to be related at least once to everyone else.) In this case, Mary defends James against what she perceives to be the other two ladies' insult and slander of him (MCCW 281).

There is no evidence for blaming Mary and James' lack of children solely upon Mary. Her relatives simply assumed that their childlessness was her fault.

This is unfair of Mary. Neither she nor James would have been likely to invest their money in anything but a Confederate venture either. This simply reads as
another veiled criticism of Colonel Chesnut for not turning control of the Chesnut finances over to James.

20 Mary Boykin Miller, the mother of Mary Chesnut, does not even enter into the equation of family reputation—unless, of course, she were to do something stunningly good or greatly transgressive.

21 Wilson 102-103. The rest of this chapter, “Morality and Mysticism, Race and the Lost Cause,” is particularly pertinent. See also Foster 23-24 for how little guilt most white Southerners felt about slavery, even those who accepted emancipation.

22 There is no evidence to indicate that Colonel Chesnut was not a kind slave-owner.

23 See Chapter 4 for an extended look at Mary’s ideas about slavery.

24 C. Vann Woodward, the editor of Mary’s revised narrative, chose to include Mary’s written response to Col. Chesnut in which she hints at miscegenation for the sake of readers who are unacquainted with the text of her original diary; however, as Woodward stresses, Mary definitely removed that response from the final 1880s text. See MCCW 32.

25 Nor was this statement apocryphal, written with the hindsight of twenty years. Johnny Chesnut did die during the same year that Col. Chesnut himself died, but Mary records the same statement (as well as her confusion about it) in her original diary. See C. Vann Woodward and Elisabeth Muhlenfeld, PMC 156.

26 It would be illuminating to read what Mary said about her mother-in-law’s death and father-in-law’s grief at the time, but that section of the diary is missing, and no letters or other papers exist to take its place.

27 Johnny Chesnut’s older brother, James Chesnut, III, who had taken the furniture away from Kate Williams and her children, was also still alive, though why Johnny was the heir of his uncle is another mystery.
CHAPTER 4
THE SOUTH'S PECULIAR INSTITUTION

By the mid-nineteenth century, slavery was a practice and an institution ardently defended by its beneficiaries, a group whose number was legion throughout the South. Linked with slavery in the minds of Southern politicians, the belief in states’ rights (or state rights, as it was sometimes called) was an issue that would come to divide the United States and plunge it into civil war. In her writings about slavery, Mary Chesnut, the daughter of a pro-slavery Nullifier, the wife of a United States senator opposed to Northern Abolitionism, and the daughter-in-law of one of South Carolina’s largest slave-owners, positions herself firmly in the camp of ambivalence where she is joined, not incidentally, by many other Southern women who dislike slavery and the work of Abolitionists equally and deplore the inhumanity of the system while enjoying its benefits. Not to lend her unquestioning support to the pro-slavery arguments that surrounded her must have been a difficult decision for her. Not only were members of Mary’s own family deeply committed to the practice of slavery and to the belief that a state had the right to ensure slavery’s continuation, but her home state of South Carolina had itself long been recognized as the voice that unrelentingly and often violently promoted both slavery and states’ rights. An understanding of
Mary’s seemingly contradictory views about slavery requires an examination of the debates about slavery and states’ rights during the first part of the century. It was this continuing, but in the eyes of the South never satisfactorily resolved, argument that shaped public opinion and that made a war between the states possible.

From the very beginning of her narrative, Mary identifies herself as an inheritor of a divisive tradition: “My father was a South Carolina Nullifier—Governor of the state at the time of the [Nullification] row & then U.S. Senator. So I was of necessity a rebel born” (MCCW 4).¹ Nullification, as Stephen Decatur Miller and his associates saw it, was the idea that a state government had the right to decide that an action of the federal government could be nullified or negated within its own boundaries. Mary’s childhood had been steeped in this doctrine; in fact, the letter she wrote to her absent father when she was nine years old contains her promise to read one of his speeches outlining the South’s need to support Nullification in response to the tariff question.²

This doctrine, and the “row” to which Mary refers there, arose from a disagreement about the Constitution and its allocation of power to each state and to the national government.

The first formal plan for the government of the United States had been presented in the Articles of Confederation, adopted in 1781.³ The second Article asserts that, “each state retains its sovereignty, freedom, and independence, and every Power, Jurisdiction and right, which is not by this confederation delegated to the United States, in Congress assembled.”⁴ In this plan, the government was confederal, meaning that the states functioned as separate units and that the central government
had to operate through them. Thus, a person who lived in New Jersey would owe allegiance to his or her home state, and then that state would work in concert with its sister states in order to transact the business of the entity called the United States. The main work of government, then, was to be conducted at the state level, and the national or central government was to have much less power than that of the individual states. It was, simply put, a coalition of loosely aligned sovereign and independent states, a form of government that seemed to be the logical choice for a nation of largely rural communities, whose members distrusted strong national governments.

After only a few years, though, this coalition proved to be unwieldy and ineffective, particularly in matters of economic and foreign policy.

When the current Constitution replaced the Articles of Confederation in 1789, much of the power held by the individual states was given instead to the newly strengthened national government. The form of government became federal instead of confederal, meaning that, while each state managed its own internal business, the national government was given the power to “operate directly on the individual.” Now, that person living in New Jersey owed his or her allegiance simultaneously to two governments, that of New Jersey and that of the United States. No longer did states have “sovereignty” and “independence.” Yet the division of these powers was never fully delineated; the members of the Constitutional Convention feared that ratification of the new plan would never be achieved if they transferred too much of the states’ powers to the national government. Thus, the Tenth Amendment in the Bill of Rights, which went into effect in 1791, declares, “The powers not delegated to
the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to
the States respectively, or to the people," once again muddying the waters by
suggesting that the states have the power to "prohibit" the national government from
claiming a power not specifically outlined in the Constitution. The result was an
ambivalent text, and arguments over the lines of authority held by the states and by the
federal government continue to this day.

In many ways, the impulse toward strengthening states' rights that became so
popular in the South was the desire to return to the form of government laid out in the
original Articles of Confederation. That Southern interpretation of independence and
liberty was, as always, limited to the personal. What good would a discussion about
freedom and liberty bring to a South Carolinian planter, such as Mary Chesnut's
father-in-law as he appears in her narrative, particularly if those concepts were to be
applied to his slaves? What good was his state government if it could not secure the
blessings of slavery against the onslaughts of Abolitionists in the Congress? Those
ideas—freedom, independence, and liberty—were only useful as long as he was able
to define them. Recognizing that some form of government was necessary, that
planter was much more willing to submit to the rule of a state government, where he
was likely to have some influence, than to the decisions of a government that was
composed largely of strangers and located in far-away Washington. Wasn't that, the
planters asked themselves, what the whole Revolutionary War was about?

It is no surprise, then, to find that the new nation of Southern states that
seceded from the United States in 1861 was named the Confederate States of America,
nor is it surprising that Southerners tended to call the Civil War by names such as The Second War for Independence or The War for Southern Independence. In their constitution, the Confederates gave most of the power back to the individual states, thereby drastically weakening the central government. This distinction is made clear throughout the Confederate Constitution (using language that is almost an exact copy of the United States Constitution), particularly in the Preamble, which declares that "each State [acts] in its sovereign and independent character."¹⁰

The United States Constitution was also ambivalent about slavery, and it was the combination of these two issues, states’ rights and slavery, that made possible the great debates between Northerner and Southerner legislators during the antebellum period. As with the problem about states’ rights, the founding fathers had also been forced to compromise in the Constitution on the issue of slavery and its future role in the newly created United States. The compromise that they made assured Americans, in the words of the Declaration of Independence, that although all men are created equal and have the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and happiness, some have been created less equal than others.

The “Three-fifths” Clause in the original Constitution, for example, not only withheld those unalienable rights from a section of the population, it also strengthened the power of the political faction that would devote decades to the protection of the institution and practice of slavery by adding to its numbers.

Representatives . . . shall be apportioned among the several States which may be included within this Union, according to their respective Numbers, which shall be determined by adding to the whole Number of
free Persons, including those bound to Service for a Term of Years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three-fifths of all other Persons.\textsuperscript{11} William Lee Miller calls attention to the almost comical “circumlocutory verbosity” that this clause uses to explain the calculations that decided the number of representatives each state sent to the U.S. Congress while avoiding any formal acknowledgment of the existence of slaves. Since the number of representatives from a state was proportional to its total population, one counted “the whole number of free persons, including those bound to service for a term of years” and excluded those “Indians not taxed.” Then, one counted the leftover persons: those who, as the language of the clause implies, were not free and who were bound to service forever, not just “for a term of years.” Though slaves are never mentioned, it is clear that they are what is meant by “all other persons.” From that number of leftover persons, two-fifths was subtracted; the remaining three-fifths was added to the total of free persons. The final figure was the political population of a given state, and it was the figure used to determine the number of representatives each state would send to congress.\textsuperscript{12}

This clause was of the utmost importance to the South, whose white population was smaller than that of the North. In addition to increasing a slave-state’s influence in the U.S. congress, the clause enabled that slave-state to carry more weight in presidential elections: the number of votes a state had in the electoral college was decided by combining the number of its senators and representatives. Finally, since the president had the executive power to appoint federal judges, the “Three-fifths” Clause helped slave-states to gain more power over the Supreme Court as well.\textsuperscript{13}
Nor was this power theoretical. A quick glance at a list of the presidents, speakers of the house, presidents pro tem, cabinet members, and Supreme Court justices prior to the Civil War reveals that Southern slave-holders held these positions for many years more than did men from the Northern free states. The Constitution ensured that, although slaves could not cast votes for congressional representatives or president, their very existence was used to perpetuate their own enslavement by augmenting and enhancing the power of the pro-slavery forces in the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of the federal government. All this, in a document whose purpose was to "establish Justice" and "secure the Blessings of Liberty" for Americans.

Yet the very omission of the word "slave" within the Constitution is significant. Whether here in the "Three-fifths" Clause or later in the Slave Importation and Fugitive Slave Clauses, the writers deliberately chose to use phrases such as "Person held to Service or Labour" to refer to a slave and "the Party to whom such Service or Labour may be due" to refer to slave-owners. Most scholars of the Constitution believe that such "circumlocutory verbosity" indicates the framers' discomfort with the issue of slavery. While many of them disliked slavery and wanted to end it (even though more than a handful were slave-owners themselves), enough refused to ratify the Constitution unless the issue remained untouched. The result, as with the issue of states' rights, was an ambivalent text. Over the next eighty years, many statesmen would claim that the Constitution protected the institution and practice of slavery—even demanded that it remain healthy and prosperous—and that
Congress had no right to interfere, limit, or abrogate it. Others would claim that the Constitution did nothing of the sort. This, coupled with the framers’ attempts to balance the authority of the federal government with the rights of the individual states, made the Civil War virtually inevitable.

The first challenge by a states’ rights group came in 1798 from Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, and it did not concern the issue of slavery. In response to the Alien and Sedition Acts, Jefferson and Madison initiated the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions of 1798. Their response was significant for introducing the theory that, if a state believed that an act of Congress was unconstitutional, it could “interpose” itself against the act within that state’s borders. Thus, that action of Congress would no longer apply to a state that had rejected it.

The most important development of this theory came three decades later; Nullification was the South’s response to the 1828 Tariff, often called the Tariff of Abominations, and to the 1832 Tariff. Both of these tariffs levied heavy taxes on imported goods (the second was only slightly more favorable in the eyes of Southerners), a bitter burden to a region that was still bruised by the economic crises of the 1820s. Southern planters were angry. Their rage over the Congress’ economic policies, their fear of the burgeoning movement against slavery, and their frustration over what they perceived as the North’s habitual exploitation of the South all made the idea of state sovereignty more and more attractive. John C. Calhoun, who, though Vice President under Andrew Jackson, was losing his political influence to Martin Van Buren, understood these worries and became the voice of protest.
Writing about the arguments over the 1828 Tariff, Calhoun compounded the Southerners’ complaints into a justification for states’ rights:

I consider the [1828] Tariff, but as the occasion, rather than the real cause of the present unhappy state of things. The truth can no longer be disguised, that the peculiar domestick institutions of the Southern States, and the consequent direction which that and her soil and climate have given to her industry, has placed them in regard to taxation and appropriation in opposite relation to the majority of the Union; against the danger of which, if there be no protective power in the reserved rights of the states, they must in the end be forced to rebel, or submit to have their paramount interests sacrificed, their domestick institutions exhausted by Colonization and other schemes, and themselves & children reduced to wretchedness . . . the more universally the state is condemned, and her right denied, the more resolute she is to assert her constitutional powers. . . .

Though a handful of radicals believed Nullification to be the first step toward secession even as early as the 1820s, Calhoun saw it as a means by which to preserve the Union. Nullification held that a state must be allowed to escape a tyranny of the majority by rejecting any legislation that was disadvantageous to its well-being, unless the remaining states were able to propose and ratify an amendment to the Constitution. Only if Southern states were allowed to secure their integrity, in Calhoun’s words their “paramount interests” and their “domestick institutions,” against the Northern leaders (who were joined by a few Southerners seen as traitors to their region) could the Union be preserved.

Nullification found its strongest supporters in South Carolina, where pro-slavery advocates were most vocal. William Freehling speculates that nowhere was slavery more hotly defended than in South Carolina because nowhere else was there the same demographic structure. During the winter months in the low country, for
example, South Carolina’s population was 85% slave and only 15% white; during the
summer, when malaria, a disease that seemed to affect European-Americans more
harshly than African-Americans, ran rampant, the population was 98% slave and 2%
white. Furthermore, the strength of their numbers enabled South Carolinian slaves to
retain much more of their African heritage than slaves in other states. The slaves’
alien language and culture, combined with their overwhelming numbers, made whites
more apt to fear the results of manumission or the possibility of insurrection and thus
more apt to insist upon shoring up and strengthening their own authority.23

Stephen Miller, Mary Chesnut’s father, was Governor of South Carolina during
the discussion about the 1828 Tariff, and, agreeing with Calhoun, he defended a state’s
right to nullify Congressional legislation. In a time when slavery was still described as
a necessary evil, Miller anticipated the “positive good” theory of slavery by a decade
and a half, claiming, in an 1829 speech, “Slavery is not a national evil; on the contrary
it is a national benefit. . . . Upon this subject it does not become us to speak in a
whisper, betray fear or feign philanthropy.”24 Later, in a speech on the Senate floor,
Calhoun elaborated upon this idea, paradoxically claiming that true democracy, in
which “the defence of human liberty against the aggressions of despotic power” was
most successful, could be found only under a government that supported slavery.25
Also paradoxically, James Henry Hammond asserted that this democracy, based on
slavery and found only in the South, was also an aristocracy:

I accept the term. . . . Combining all the advantages, and possessing but
few of the disadvantages, of the aristocracy of the old world, without
fostering to an unwarrantable extent the pride, the exclusiveness, the
selfishness, the thirst for sway, the contempt for the rights of others,
which distinguish the nobility of Europe, it gives us their education, their polish, their munificence, their high honor, their undaunted spirit. Slavery does indeed create an aristocracy—an aristocracy of talents, of virtues, of generosity and courage.26

These three men and their pro-slavery rhetoric defined those concepts of honor and aristocracy so important to the South Carolinian, concepts that Mary Chesnut, as we have seen, used in her portrait of Col. Chesnut as the archtypal planter.

Thus, slavery is good because it permits and promotes what Miller, Calhoun, and Hammond see as the best form of government, and what the modern reader sees as an oxymoron: an aristocratic democracy in which the independence of one group of people is secured and guaranteed by the enslavement of another. Moreover, according to Hammond, those who enjoy such independence are blessed with natures and characters that are unselfish, ungrasping, careful of the rights of others, educated, polished, munificent, honorable, spirited, talented, virtuous, generous, and courageous. In short, it is slavery that allows wealthy Southerners to pattern their lives after the aristocratic ladies and gentlemen of Britain whom they so admire, all the while claiming that their government is the best version of democracy that is possible.

Over the next few years, the zeal that Stephen Miller felt for states’ rights grew even stronger. After his term as governor lapsed (South Carolina allowed its governors to serve only one two-year term), Miller ran for the U.S. Senate on a typically Southern slogan, one that mixed the South’s understanding of independence with violence: “There are three and only three ways to reform our Congressional legislation, familiarly called, the ballot box, the jury box, or the cartridge box.”27
Miller’s campaign touched the hearts and fears of South Carolinians, and he shortly found himself in Washington.

Slavery became even more inextricably intertwined with Nullification after publication of William Lloyd Garrison’s *The Liberator* began on New Year’s Day, 1831, an event that was closely followed by Nat Turner’s Revolt a few months later. The juxtaposition of these two events was not coincidental in Southerners’ minds; many believed that each Abolitionist was a dangerous agent provocateur. Still, most Southern leaders avoided open debate in the Congress about slavery. As James Hamilton, Jr., future governor of South Carolina, stated, “however we might be united at home, we should have few confederates abroad—whereas on the subject of free trade and constitution rights [ie: states’ rights], we should have allies throughout the world.” Wisely or unwisely (depending upon the point of view), the Nullifiers heeded Hamilton’s words and submerged much of their pro-slavery rhetoric into the general argument for states’ rights.

After the passage of the 1832 Tariff, politicians opposed to the new law began to move quickly to strengthen their position. South Carolina’s legislature formed a convention that drafted and passed a Nullification Ordinance declaring that both the 1828 Tariff and the 1832 Tariff were unconstitutional and that they were null and void within South Carolina. During this convention, Calhoun resigned from the Vice Presidency (effective in February, 1833) to join Miller in the U.S. Senate. Shortly thereafter, Henry Clay proposed a compromise tariff that progressively reduced the taxes on imported goods over the next ten years, and both Calhoun and Miller voted to
support it. Finally, in March of 1833, the South Carolina convention that had nullified the previous tariffs voted to revoke its Ordinance and accept this compromise, which became known as the Tariff of 1833.  

While this was the end of the Nullification Controversy, it was by no means the end of the debates about states’ rights and slavery, and members of Congress dedicated much of the next decade to an argument about whether the Constitution forbade them from “arguing about slavery.” Mary Chesnut’s father retired from politics, but her childhood had already been steeped in the doctrine of Nullification; truly, she was “a rebel born.” By the time Mary and her husband were ready to become involved in politics (Mary through James, of course), the national dialogue about slavery that their generation inherited had been fueled by these acrimonious and often violent debates and was now even more polarized between two irreconcilable extremes.

The opposition to the Southerners who were still supporting the “positive good” argument were legislators like Charles Sumner or private citizens, mostly from the Northern states and led by Garrison and Theodore Weld, who made appeals for the immediate abolition of slavery. That Weld and his fellow Lane seminarians wanted to abolish racism along with slavery made them radicals even among the Abolitionist circles. During the decade preceding the Civil War, Abolitionists’ hopes for a peaceful emancipation of the slaves began to die, as Eugene D. Genovese points out, because of a seemingly contradictory reform taking place in the South. This reform, “at once conservative in its preservation of the social order and liberal in its flexible response to altered conditions,” ensured that:
The condition of the slaves worsened with respect to access to freedom and the promise of eventual emancipation; it got better with respect to material conditions of life. The same men who fought for the one more often than not fought for the other. Their position made perfect sense: Make the South safe for slaveholders by confirming the blacks in perpetual slavery and by making it possible for them to accept their fate.\textsuperscript{32}

Part of the Southerners' process of "confirming the blacks in perpetual slavery" meant eradicating the influence of people like Garrison, Weld, and Sumner in the slave states by controlling the legislatures, the post office, the press, and the churches. At times, of course, anti-Abolitionists did turn from the language of violence to the tactics of terrorism to achieve their goals, and acts such as tarring and feathering or lynching were not unknown.

Mary Chesnut first establishes her position on the issue of slavery in a letter to her husband. South Carolina sent James Chesnut to discuss the future of slavery in the United States at the Nashville Convention in June of 1850.\textsuperscript{33} During his absence,

Mary wrote to her husband

\begin{quote}
I am not sound on certain important topics now so constantly discussed—indeed so very heterodox am I—that I principally hate the abolitionist for their cant & abuse of us—and worse than all their using this vexed question as a political engine & so retarding beyond all doubt the gradual freeing of our states which seemed to be working its way down in Maryland & Virginia . . . I think I am in danger of turning a regular somerset in my politics & transferring my allegiance from Mr Calhoun right away to Clay—particularly as I am not the hearty lover of slavery this latitude requires. . . . \textsuperscript{34}
\end{quote}

This letter is the earliest surviving record of Mary's views on slavery. After the traditional female disclaimer about a lack of knowledge, of not being "sound on certain important topics," specifically the legalities of slavery as they applied to the
business of the Nashville Convention, Mary seems comfortable in admitting and
articulating her "heterodox" beliefs to her husband.

What are these beliefs that are beyond the pale of Southern dogma? Mary
dislikes, rather "hates," the Abolitionists not because they wish to end slavery, not just
because they condemn and "abuse" all Southerners for the crime of slavery, but most
of all because she believes that their politicization of the issue has ensured that
Southern leaders will dedicate themselves even more firmly to the protection and
promotion of slavery. Mary thinks that the Abolitionists are mistaken in their
impressions about the future of slavery and that, if the South were to be left alone,
Southerners themselves would make sure that slavery disappeared. Her choice of
words is intriguing. Instead of picturing the progressive manumission of the slaves,
she writes of the manumission of the Southern states: "the gradual freeing of our
states." To her, slavery is a terrible cancer upon the South just as she imagines the
combination of captivity and exploitation to be a terrible curse upon the slave.

Most revealing is Mary's claim that she is "not the hearty lover of slavery this
latitude requires," a claim that is only partly true. Before the war, Mary's husband,
like other politically influential or wealthy white men, gave his public support to the
practice of slavery; in private, though, James was known for his desire to free the
Chesnut slaves after he became their owner, and a number of the Chesnuts' friends
also wished to see the end of slavery (MCCW 53, 84). Many privileged white women
like Mary surpassed their husbands' and fathers' detestation of slavery, and their
attitudes about it ranged from shocked abhorrence to weary resignation. In spite of
the fact that Mary’s social circle professed to loathe the institution, none of them spoke out against it in public; none of them became an Angelina or Sarah Grimké. Because of her husband’s position, Mary was particularly silent on the issue in public. If she were to make her “heterodox” views known beyond her family and immediate friends, James’ career, which he had committed to a political position of pro-slavery and states’ rights, would have suffered and he himself would have become an object of undignified ridicule. Thus, she kept quiet. This dynamic—Mary writes about her hatred for both slavery and Abolitionism and then about her frustration at male demands for her silence—is one that she repeats time and again in both her diary and narrative.

In 1858, James Chesnut was elected to the U.S. Senate, and Mary accompanied him to Washington. James’ most noteworthy speech there was on the issue of slavery and was given in response to Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner’s famous 1860 address, “The Barbarism of Slavery.” After Preston Brooks’ vicious assault on Sumner, which took place on the Senate floor just after the Massachusetts Senator’s “Bleeding Kansas” speech in May of 1856 and which was an ignoble, but typically violent, attempt to defend Southern “honor,” the knowledge that a senator had been crippled because he had dared to stand up against slavery had helped to move many Northerners toward Abolitionism. Now, Sumner had more reason than most to deplore slavery and to despise slave-owners.

Sumner’s speech is based upon the belief that slavery is immoral, unconstitutional, and destructive. Like Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence,
Sumner claims that, according to the “Law of Nature,” liberty is a basic human right:

“every human being has complete title to himself direct from the almighty... A man may be poor in this world’s goods; but he owns himself.” Thus, it is nothing less than flying in the face of God and of the Law of Nature for one person to hold another in bondage. The integrity of the law itself, according to Sumner, is weakened and compromised by slavery:

The denial of all rights in the slave can be sustained only by disregard of other rights, common to the whole community, whether of the person, the press, or speech. Where this exists there can be but one supreme law, to which all other laws, statute or social, are subordinate,—and this is the pretended law of Slavery.

The South’s attempts, by fair means or foul, to stop Abolitionism had led to the repression of civil discourse, a Constitutionally protected right. The result, as Sumner asserts, is that the “pretended law of Slavery” had taken precedence over the Constitution itself, an assertion borne out by such legislative tricks as the 1840 Gag Rule in which the United States House of Representatives made it illegal to present citizens’ petitions for eradicating slavery and even to discuss the issue in the Congress.

Sumner went on to examine the character of the men who were most implicated in the practice of slavery, the “Slave-Masters”:

unconscious of their true condition, they make boasts which reveal still further the unhappy influence. Barbarous standards of conduct are unblushingly avowed. The swagger of a bully is called chivalry; a swiftness to quarrel is called courage; the bludgeon is adopted as substitute for argument; and assassination is lifted to be one of the Fine Arts.
This cut the Southern senators to the quick! These were men who prided themselves upon being Southern gentlemen with the very qualities that Sumner was questioning: their chivalry, their courage, and the strength with which they asserted their rational (in their minds) interpretations of liberty and independence. To this man and to his associates, they were no longer gentlemen of principle and strength, but swaggering bullies and assassins.

The attack on the slave-owners continued as Sumner moved beyond questioning their characters:

Long ago it was fixed certain that the day which makes man a slave “takes half his worth away,” . . . Nothing here is said of the human being at the other end of the chain. To aver that on this same day all his worth is taken away might seem inconsistent with exceptions which we gladly recognize; but, alas! it is too clear, both from reason and from facts, that, bad as Slavery is for the Slave, it is worse for the Master. Sumner has reached a logical conclusion: society considers those who behave well and honorably to be good and honorable people; those who behave poorly and dishonorably are shunned by respectable society as disreputable pariahs. In these terms, the slave-owners not only cease to be gentlemen; now, Sumner says, their own humanity has been degraded so much that they should be treated with contempt by the rest of society.

The Southern senators took the speech as an intolerable insult. After it concluded and Sumner resumed his seat, James Chesnut, Mary’s husband, rose to give the South’s reply. James explained that he and the other Southerners who were the
target of Sumner’s rebuke sat quietly during the tirade in order to avoid inciting the Massachusetts man any further:

After ranging over Europe, crawling through the back door to whine at the feet of British aristocracy, craving pity, and reaping a rich harvest of contempt, the slanderer of States and men reappears in the Senate. . . . We know what is expected and what is desired. We are not inclined again to send forth the recipient of PUNISHMENT howling through the world, yelping fresh cries of slander and malice . . . and [thus] we can take no other notice of the matter.42

The only way to deal with such a malicious slanderer, it seems, is to ignore him. To argue with him, to impugn his character, or to counterattack would be injurious to one’s own dignity, honor, and intelligence.

Of the two speakers in the Senate that day, James appears in the worse light. Sumner’s words are carefully balanced between straightforward facts and righteous indignation, while James’ speech is a violent explosion of hotheaded bile. The implication that no true gentleman would stoop to argue with a man so clearly not a gentleman rings hollow, and James’ pose of quiet disinterest is belied by his words: clearly, no one who labels his opponent a crawling, whining, pitiful, contemptuous, malicious slanderer is truly disinterested. If this is an example of the courtesy of the Southern gentleman, then Sumner’s descriptions were unflinchingly accurate.43

The public debates about slavery and states’ rights were, of course, always conducted by and for the benefit of men, as were the discussions about secession, which began in earnest immediately after Abraham Lincoln’s election to the presidency. Mary Chesnut, who was barred from taking part in these debates and who left behind no record of her response to James Chesnut’s attack on Charles Sumner,
poured out her own ideas and beliefs in her letters and her diary; eventually, she
allowed those ideas to become public in her revised narrative. Mary’s situation was
unlike that of the majority of wealthy Southern women. Since her elderly mother-in-
law still oversaw the management of the plantation house, she was blessed with few
domestic duties. Mary was also fortunate that James frequently encouraged her to
accompany him—to Washington before the war, and to Alabama and Virginia during
it—when he was called away from home by political business. Consequently, Mary
had two luxuries that were given to very few women: an extraordinary amount of free
time and a central position from which to observe the daily business and intrigue of the
Confederate government, and she put both of these gifts to good use in her work.

It is important to remember that Mary Chesnut revised her original material
well after the conclusion of the Civil War, first in the 1870s and then in the early and
mid-1880s. As she revised the narrative, she was certainly aware of the South’s post-
war attitudes about slavery, and her later text subsumes her own critical voice and
instead articulates the values, fears, and racist attitudes of the South’s dominant white
male culture. Although Mary still conveys some of her political leanings, her
rebelliousness, and her compassion for the plight of the slaves, the final narrative is a
deeply ambivalent text on the issue of slavery. This makes Mary and her work an
ideal example of what Elaine Showalter has identified as the way women write. As
Showalter explains, “women’s writing is a ‘double-voiced discourse’ that always
embodies the social, literary, and cultural heritages” of the dominant (white male)
tradition and that of the subsumed female experience. Women authors, then, are not
"inside and outside of the male tradition; they are inside two traditions simultaneously." While Mary's own experiences and thoughts incline her to write solely from her own perspective, she realizes that she must find a way to express her arguments in a way that does not seem too revolutionary to the dominant white Southern culture; in trying to do both, she seems to contradict herself and to undercut her own arguments.

Specifically, while she never swerves from a stance of opposition, Mary does make sure that her statements about slavery in the narrative are more restrained than those in her wartime diary, a change that is much lamented by virtually every critic of her work because it ensures that her racism (which will be discussed below) is more pronounced. In her diary, for example, she records a story told to her about a freed slave who visited his former master at the end of the war and was introduced as a gentleman. According to Mary, the freedman, who was seated in the drawing room, "said he had a handsome house, was living very comfortably—and had called to offer his assistance & protection to his former master—who when he had the power was kind. He offered money or services generally as a security generally against Negroes & Yankees" (PMC 239). When Mary reworks the story for her narrative, she keeps the thrust of the freedman's purpose—to offer his gracious assistance from a position of power to his former, and now powerless, master—but the tone is entirely different. This time, she causes the "old negro" to speak to "his master," saying, "'When you-all had de power, you was good to me, and I'll protect you now. No niggers nor Yankees shall touch you. If you want anything, call for Sambo. I mean, call for Mr. Samuel—"
that's my name now" (MCCW 807). Mary here demotes the freedman from a position of power and respectability, "a gentleman" (a title bearing great significance in the South; emphasis Mary's), to a mere "old negro." Even after his emancipation, then, the freedman is defined solely in terms of his relationship with a white man, and all of the power that he has attained is stripped away. Even worse is the speech that Mary puts into the freedman's mouth: clearly, no gentleman, and thus no man that Southern society would have to take seriously, would speak in such a dialect. To add to the insult, Mary makes the man refer to himself as "Sambo," which, even if he does immediately rename himself as "Mr. Samuel," conjures up caricatures of antebellum slaves who are depicted as being happy in their oppressed state. This naming of Mr. Samuel as "Sambo" again returns him psychologically to the bottom of the plantation hierarchy. The Mary who wrote with approbation, and not a little awe, about the kindness with which a newly independent man offered his services and protection as a patron to his former owner has couched the previous description in terms that she knew were more acceptable to the South of the 1880s.

It must also be remembered, then, that Mary was writing for publication. She was well aware of the fact that she would need to tone down the tenor of her more nonconformist arguments and to make her views seem less radical in order to achieve this goal. Not only would her own career as a writer have been endangered should she have decided to retain the tone of her earlier descriptions: James Chesnut had hopes of continuing his role as a legislator after Reconstruction, and his political career would also have been damaged if Mary were too outspoken. Perhaps, too, she was aware of
the fact that even those anti-slavery views that she allowed herself to include in the narrative were still more condemnatory of Southern society than its typical members were accustomed to hearing from a fellow white Southerner. In a society whose fearful resentment and lingering hostility allowed it to invent and support the Ku Klux Klan, the picture of an African-American charitably offering his assistance and protection to a powerless white man would indeed have been a shocking, and perhaps inflammatory, sight. Thus, while both texts make clear her opposition to slavery and her approval about its end, there is a marked difference between what Mary says about it in her private, wartime diary and what she says in her revised narrative.

In the years during which Mary revised her diary, the status of the former slaves had become a source of great anxiety for many white Southerners, even those who had come to accept, if not embrace, the end of slavery. Aside from radical changes in the economic and political situation, many Southerners believed that emancipation had removed the system of discipline that had regulated the behavior and morals of African-Americans. One of the arguments that they had long employed to justify (if only to themselves) and defend their peculiar institution had held that God had chosen white Southerners to care for and to Christianize the African-Americans. In the turmoil brought about by the destruction of the Confederacy, these white Southerners gazed longingly back to the antebellum South, a world structured by a much more orderly hierarchy. Then, public men such as Bishop Richard Wilmer explained, African-Americans had derived as much advantage from slavery as had white people. These “heathen savages” had benefited not only because their owners
looked out for their physical well-being (a dubious claim, indeed), but also because "[t]heir habits of subordination to their earthly master inclined them to an easier submission to the will of God," thereby making them more likely candidates for heaven. After the war, though, the emancipated slaves no longer had an "earthly master" to govern them; the result, in the minds of many white Southerners, was the dangerous threat of social chaos.

White Southerners responded to this presumed threat with fear and with nostalgia. After the orderly bonds of slavery had been broken, Southerners believed, the former slaves began to walk a path of "moral retrogression" and their liberty turned into licentiousness. Many historians have noted the "deep fear" that white Southerners felt for what they imagined to be the unrestrained sexuality of African-Americans, particularly the fear felt by white Southern women and the corresponding anger and violence to which their men resorted in order to protect them from any hint of danger. Robert Lewis Dabney, a Virginia minister who was never one to moderate his views, gave a speech shortly after the end of the war in which he argued that the United States government sought to add to the South's debasement through interracial unions:

Yes, sir, these tyrants know that if they can mix the race of Washington and Lee and Jackson with this base herd which they brought from the pens of Africa, if they can taint the blood which hallowed the plains of Manassas with this sordid stream, the adulterous current will never again swell a Virginian's heart with a throb noble enough to make a despot tremble.
Such fears of and anger about miscegenation troubled Southerners both before and during the war, but those fears increased greatly after the liberation of the slaves. While Mary Chesnut was also troubled about miscegenation, and thus her narrative retains the condemnation of the practice that can be found in her wartime diary, she never expressed much concern over any pollution of the blood-lines. The fear of the former slaves that permeated Southern society, however, did cause her to remove her strongest anti-slavery statements and to create an undercurrent of fear in the narrative.

Southerners also responded to the perceived threat with nostalgia for the orderliness of the antebellum and wartime South. One of the strongest pillars of the Lost Cause mythology was Southerners' belief that the slaves had stood by their masters' families throughout the trials of the Civil War, serving them faithfully to the end. The loyalty that many of the slaves seemed to feel for their white owners became, in retrospect, "the sublimest vindication of the institution of slavery." The argument held that, since slaves helped the South's war effort in so many ways—for example, in producing and distributing food, in guarding those whites who remained on the plantation, and in assisting in military fortifications—they were clearly happiest, safest, and most productive when they were living and working under the orderly guidance of their white owners' families. What this argument ignores, of course, is that it was often to the slaves' benefit to perform these tasks so they could have food and shelter; it also overlooks the fact that slaves were often coerced into serving their masters on the front lines. After the war, the obedience of these slaves was enshrined in Southern novels, stories, poetry, and essays, and the stereotypical
mammy or uncle became the Southern version of Western literature's archetypal loyal, garrulous servants. Mary Chesnut's narrative avoids caricaturing any of the Chesnut slaves whom she knew so well, but it does celebrate their faithfulness and loyalty.

In general, Mary uses her diary either as a sounding board for her impassioned critiques of both slavery and Yankee interference or as an archive of personal information. In her revised narrative, these remarks are often transformed into incidents which she uses either to demonstrate the individuality and the humanity of the Chesnut slaves or to create and intensify a particular mood of fear, affection, or anger. For example, after South Carolina’s Port Royal falls to Samuel Du Pont on November 7, 1861, an event that would lead to the successful blockade of the strategically important ports of Charleston and Savannah, Mary’s tone is matter-of-fact as she relates that John DeSaussure, a relative, came to Camden “like some one crazy—he is so frightened. They say . . . that the Negroes are in a state of exultation at our defeat” (TMC 198). In her revised narrative, Mary also documents DeSaussure’s alarm, saying that he was “in a state of abject fright because the negroes show such exultation at the enemies making good their entrance at Port Royal” (MCCW 233). Neither Mary nor her family shared this fear in her wartime diary, but in the narrative she makes DeSaussure’s fear the occasion for commentary: “Cannot see any change in them myself. Their faces are as unreadable as the sphinx. Certainly they are unchanged in their good conduct. That is, they are placid, docile, kind, and obedient” (MCCW 233). Thus, DeSaussure’s visit becomes an opportunity not only to
examine the inscrutability of the Chesnut domestics, but also to build an atmosphere, as shall be examined below, of white isolation and fear.

The wartime diary is, of course, much more personal than the narrative, and Mary uses it to record thoughts and events that she would never reveal publicly. The most interesting of these personal revelations often concern her complaints about slavery. One day immediately prior to the opening of the Civil War, Mary confesses to her diary,

I wonder if it be a sin to think slavery a curse to any land. Sumner said not one word of this hated institution which is not true. Men & women are punished when their masters & mistresses are brutes & not when they do wrong. . . . (PMC 42)

This is an extraordinary statement for the wife of James Chesnut, the man who responded so angrily to Sumner's speech, to have made. The very fact that she was driven to make such a statement, even if strictly for her own eyes, clearly indicates her true feelings regarding the "hated institution." Among other reasons, the institution of slavery is so hateful to Mary because it permits slave owners to wield unchecked authority over other human beings. If a form of noblesse oblige is one of the tenets of the Southern code of honor, one that is supposed to inhibit any inclination on the part of those in positions of power and strength to abuse the weak, Mary believes that it sometimes fails to restrain the darker side of human nature. To that end, she tells the story of Adam McWillie who, many years after his death,

is said to ride around Camden still, a veritable ghost. He was in the flesh a slave-owner—comme il y en a peu. A savage, he put negroes in hogsheads with nails driven in all around it and rolled the poor things downhill. The negroes say they know the devil would not have him in hell, he was too bad. So his spirit is roaming about where he made a
little hell of his own while he was alive. (MCCW 776)

Truly, her story makes a strong case against the evils of the "hated institution."

Furthermore, it demonstrates that Charles Sumner was correct in his assessment of the evils of slavery: it is a brutal institution that dehumanizes the master along with the slave. In Mary's terms, it is McWillie who is the "savage" of this story, and the "poor" slaves are the victims not only of McWillie's viciousness, but also of the failure of society to stop him. McWillie's slaves are indeed punished simply because their master is a brute, and, because the law allows them no rights, not even citizenship, they are unable to demand that their wrongs be redressed or avenged; at the same time, their master and his evil pleasures are legally protected.

Just as Mary is not a "hearty lover of slavery," she is also not blindly devoted to the doctrine of states' rights. Though she claims to be "a rebel born" and her father dedicated his political career to the fight for states' rights, it is Mary, and not her father, who actually has to live in this new nation founded upon the doctrine. Her observations of the workings of the rebel government, as well as her intimate knowledge of the temperament of South Carolina's legislators, make her very much aware of the danger this doctrine poses to the Confederacy. The Confederates wrote their constitution to ensure that each state would remain sovereign and that the national government would derive its authority and legitimacy only through those same states. Yet a government created in the name of states' rights could never be entirely stable, for the men who urged their states to secede from the United States could just as easily decide that they should likewise secede from the Confederacy. The
result would be (to use an anachronistic term) a Balkanization of the South, with an ever increasing number of governments to whom allegiance was owed by an ever diminishing constituency. Mary believes strongly that the worst thing these legislators could do would be to toy with the idea of seceding from the Confederacy before the Civil War—a war that Southerners were fighting in defense of states’ rights—has been won. Yet this is exactly what happens. Mary’s narrative is less than four months into the war when she includes a conversation that she had with William Trescot, the former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State. Trescot declares his hatred of Jefferson Davis, and claims that he is joined in his loathing by his fellow South Carolinian politicians, namely Lawrence Keitt, William Boyce, and James Henry Hammond, Stephen Miller’s fellow states’ rights advocate. Trescot reportedly says of the Confederate government that “disintegration has already begun” (MCCW 121). Mary is frustrated by such divisiveness and writes angrily, “Seceding can go on indefinitely with the dissatisfied seceders” (MCCW 121).

Nevertheless, Mary does believe wholeheartedly that the South has a legitimate right to secede from the United States; she simply abhors what she sees as the irresponsible bandying about of the doctrine of states’ rights without regard to the consequences. She uses the metaphor of an unhappy marriage to describe the relationship between the two halves of the United States: “We separated because of incompatibility of temper. We are divorced, North from South, because we hated each other so. If we could only separate—a ‘séparation à l’agréable,’ as the French say it, and not a horrid fight for divorce” (MCCW 25). Mary’s comparison is intriguing.
Divorce was a legal remedy for misalliances to which few couples resorted, but it was possibility if one had the courage and financial resources to approach the courts. Here, Mary compares secession to divorce in order to underscore the both the seriousness of the Constitutional ramifications and the firmness of the South’s resolution.

In her view, not only are states legally justified in removing themselves from the Union, but there is also a question of what the Union owes to those same states upon secession. During the first summer of the war, Mary discusses this aspect of states’ rights with Captain Duncan Ingraham, a South Carolinian who had resigned his position as a United States naval commander in favor of becoming a captain in the Confederate navy. Mary argues that, upon his defection from the U.S., Ingraham should have sailed to the South in full possession of the ships that he commanded.

“That would have been treason,” Ingraham protests, but Mary disagrees:

No, not more than coming yourself. The ships were ours as much as you were ours. Half of everything was ours. We paid our taxes and cotton and protected factories of it—kept up the revenues... We were a copartnership. When we dissolved it, we had a right to divide assets. Our money helped to build ships, &c&c. And the tariff in some inscrutable way took all our money. We had a right to share and share alike profits and public property. (MCCW 135)

The Constitution, then, is like a business contract; it is a “copartnership” that was drawn up with the agreement of all parties involved. Like a business agreement, the profits that have accrued during the lifetime of the states’ copartnership must, after the corporation is “dissolved”—after the various parties have reached a “séparation à l’agréable,”—be shared equally.
No one has denied, Mary points out, that the Southern states have borne the cost of the various undertakings (she specifies shipping interests) in which the United States has engaged, and Southerners have carried out their civic duties by paying their taxes, protecting industrial ventures and factories, and keeping up revenues. Southerners have, in fact, shouldered more than their fair share of the burdens of the copartnership: however “inscrutable” may have been the federal government’s reasoning, it saw fit to ask the South to bear a disproportionate share of the losses. “Half of everything,” she reasons, obviously and logically belongs to the South, ergo he should have brought his ships with him.

Capt. Ingraham’s reaction is predictable to Mary: “He smiles in pity at a woman pretending to understand things” (MCCW 135), and, through his unwillingness to offer no counter argument to a mere woman, Mary’s logic triumphs. Her business metaphor amuses Ingraham. Had she employed the divorce metaphor to explain her position, Mary might well have shocked him. The two metaphors, however, are mutually enlightening. Mary’s impression is that a typical marriage resembles a business corporation—an image that is certainly not unknown in British and American literature. What with complicated legal negotiations and dowry payments, not to mention the fact that a married couple was seen as one person or entity in the eyes of the law, the marriage of a man and a woman paralleled the formation of a business partnership. Thus, Mary uses two types of metaphor to describe the disintegration of the United States, one domestic and the other mercantile, and each metaphor invests the other with meaning. While a divorce takes place
between private citizens, it has financial ramifications that affect the lives of the divorcing couple, their families, and any commercial entities of which they are a part. Meanwhile, although the dissolution of a business is largely understood as a public event, its consequences reach deeply into the private lives of all who were involved in it. Through these metaphors, Mary’s text argues that the disintegration of the political union that makes up the United States must be understood in similarly domestic and commercial terms because it affects every single aspect of the lives of its current and former citizens.

In her writings about slavery, Mary often goes beyond the connection between the “hated institution” and states’ rights to concentrate upon forging a connection between slavery and the subordination of women. Before the war, most Southern plantation women resisted the example set by some of their Northern sisters, who were publicly challenging and reevaluating women’s role in society; not infrequently, these Northern women were also crusaders for the cause of Abolitionism. In spite of their reluctance to imitate the women of the North, those Southern women who expressed their thoughts and feelings about slavery, in diary or letter, likewise tended to link slaves’ subservience to their master with their own subordination to their husbands, fathers, and even brothers. Thus, though they usually denied any similarity and though the impulse was much stronger and more vocal in the North, Southern women were beginning to question male authority.⁵⁷
In the narrative, Mary’s first reference to slavery and to her feelings about the subject is occasioned by her observation, during a stroll, of a slave auction where bidders vie for the woman standing on the block. Mary writes,

I felt faint—seasick. The creature looked so like my good little Nancy. She was a bright mulatto with a pleasant face. She was magnificently gotten up in silks and satins. She seemed delighted with it all—sometimes ogling the bidders, sometimes looking quite coy and modest, but her mouth never relaxed from its expanded grin of excitement. I daresay the poor thing knew who would buy her. (MCCW 15)

Mary’s description of the scene is moving; plainly, she is greatly upset by what she has seen. The horror of the auction is compounded for her by the fact that no matter how much she tries to objectify this woman on the auction block as a “creature,” Mary ultimately sees her as a human being, one who closely resembles Nancy, her own (slave) maid. Mary is also distressed by what she perceives as the slave woman’s participation in her own degradation, “sometimes ogling” the men surrounding and bidding upon her, other times “looking quite coy and modest,” but always grinning excitedly at the man who, Mary believes, will pay for her services.

Yet even this description is much less moving than the one found in her wartime diary. The original version is introduced by a disjointed statement that is broken up by uncompleted thoughts and illegible words: “I saw something to day which has quiet unsettled me. I was so miserable . . . one character in the world is lost—it knocks away the very ground I stand on—but away night mare—” (PMC 20-21). The description trails off before Mary finishes it, as if she could no longer bear to contemplate the reality and the implications of what she had seen. Her next two
paragraphs concern a dinner that she attended, “strongly spiced” political gossip, and a record of social calls she had paid the previous day (PMC 21). Finally, Mary seems to have regained her courage while writing of other matters, and she returns to the subject of the slave auction. She tries to focus on the inappropriateness of the behavior of the slaves, for example expressing her surprise over the “silk dresses” they wear, perhaps a response natural for a woman brought up in a state that had sumptuary laws regarding what slaves could (homespun) and could not (“silks and satins”) wear. But Mary’s thoughts remain locked upon her abhorrence of the situation: “my very soul sickened—it is too dreadful” (PMC 21).

The reader is often frustrated by the decisions that Mary made as she revised her diary and crafted it into a narrative. Along with her need to moderate the tone of her anti-slavery views in order to publish her work, another of Mary’s main concerns, again, was to remove herself as much as possible from her text. By doing this, she sought not only to avoid censure, but also to transform her personal recollections into a history and a public account of Southern life during the war. Mary thus removes or tones down many of the references to herself from this passage. Instead of saying “my very soul sickened—it is too dreadful,” her narrative reports simply that she felt “faint—seasick,” thereby smoothing psychological and spiritual revulsion into physical shock and discomfort. By concentrating on what actually happened rather than upon her reaction to what she saw, Mary’s narrative turns this portrait of a single slave auction into a symbol for all interactions in which human lives and bodies are
traded for money. As in other passages, Mary achieves this by immediately relating the condition of slaves to that of all women:

I sat down on a stool in a shop. I disciplined my wild thoughts. I tried it Sterne fashion. You know how women sell themselves and are sold in marriage, from queens downward, eh? You know what the Bible says about slavery—and marriage. Poor women. Poor slaves. Sterne with his starling. What did he know? He only thought—he did not feel. (MCCW 15)

Like this single slave woman, Mary firmly believes that countless other women have been sold by their keepers (their families) and bought by new owners (their husbands). Many have even reveled in the experience, have sold themselves, in effect. Whether women are allowed to choose their husbands or their families choose for them, whether they long for marriage or resist it as long as possible, the marriages that Mary sees all around her are all variations of bondage. Her mother-in-law is tied to a man who regularly betrays her by having affairs with slave women; she knows women whose husbands abuse them when in drunken rages (MCCW 169); and her own marriage suffers from what she perceives to be James’ high-handedness. This causes her to ask, in her diary but not in her narrative, “I wonder if other women shed as bitter tears as I. They scald my cheeks & blister my heart” (PMC 41).

The “Sterne fashion” to which Mary refers reveals a great deal of the helplessness that Mary feels about both slavery and the lot of women. A particular passage from A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy was often quoted as an allusion to slavery in the South during the first half of the nineteenth century, and Mary’s use of it is one more example of how she takes her own experience and makes
it more universal. In Sterne’s novel, an Englishman named Yorick visits Paris without a passport. Threatened with the Bastille, Yorick shrugs off the idea of incarceration until he, like Mary Chesnut, happens upon an enslaved creature. This creature, a starling, was caught in England and taken to France, where it was encaged and taught to speak English. There, Yorick overhears its cries:

'I can’t get out,’ said the starling—God help thee! said I, but I’ll let thee out, cost what it will; so I turned about the cage to get to the door; it was twisted and double twisted so fast with wire, there was no getting it open without pulling the cage to pieces. . . . The bird flew to the place where I was attempting his deliverance, and thrusting his head through the trellis, pressed his breast against it, as if impatient—I fear, poor creature! said I, I cannot set thee at liberty. . . . Disguise thyself as thou wilt, still slavery! . . . thou art a bitter draught; and though thousands in all ages have been made to drink of thee, thou art no less bitter on that account.

Struck by his inability to free the little bird, Yorick causes his servant to purchase it for a bottle of wine, but, upon his return to England, Yorick sells the bird to another man.60

The obvious significance that this story holds for Mary is her perception that no matter how one cloaks slavery—in a gilded cage or in “silks and satins”—it remains “a bitter draught’’ that thousands are still made to drink. When Mary thinks of the number of slaves bound to their masters throughout the South and then adds to them the number of married women, “from queens downward,” the final total staggers her. This story is also important because it reveals Mary’s awareness of her own powerlessness in the face of social structures. Even the alliances that supposedly “free” people have forged have become cages that are “twisted and double twisted,”
and many relationships have come to resemble slavery. Try as she may, Mary does not have the strength to open them. Even if she did have the strength, she recognizes that a “séparation à l’agréable,” whether it concerns a married couple, a state that is unhappy with the Union, or a person bound in slavery, is unusual because such a radical change may prove to be destructive to society, that it may be impossible to open a cage “without pulling [it] to pieces.” The struggles that Southerners like Mary endure during the war and the battles that they fight in order to separate themselves from the United States prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that the status quo is not something that can be changed easily. In the end, Mary forces herself to acknowledge the fact that, like Yorick with his caged bird, she too is capable only of writing about her wish to free the slaves while at the same time enjoying the pleasure their unwilling sacrifice brings to her life.

Directly after she condemns the “hated institution” of slavery and announces, in the privacy of her diary, that she agrees with Charles Sumner, Mary addresses the issue of miscegenation that so distressed Southerners:

God forgive us, but ours is a monstrous system & wrong & iniquity . . . like the patriarchs of old our men live all in one house with their wives & their concubines, & the Mulattoes one sees in every family exactly resemble the white children—& every lady tells you who is the father of all the Mulatto children in every body’s household, but those in her own, she seems to think drop from the clouds or pretends so to think. . . . Thank God for my country women—alas for the men! No worse than men every where, but the lower their mistresses, the more degraded they must be. . . . Mr. Harris said it was so patriarchal. So it is—flocks & herds & slaves—& wife Leah does not suffice. Rachel must be added, if not married. & all the time they seem to think themselves patterns—models of husbands & fathers. (PMC 42-43)
In Mary’s understanding, then, the practice of miscegenation is facilitated and even caused by the patriarchal structure of Southern society and its reliance upon slavery. In turn, such a practice has, over time, come to reinforce the patriarchal nature of society. The result is a system that strengthens, reinforces, and perpetuates itself.

Furthermore, as her language reveals, Mary believes that miscegenation dehumanizes everyone involved. The white and black women are turned into animals, “flocks & herds,” that may be controlled and led about according to the whim of their powerful male shepherds. Like sheep, the purpose for which these Leahs and Rachels are sheltered and fed is to increase the “flocks & herds” by giving birth and thereby increasing their owners’ wealth. Mary’s patriarchs and shepherds, the fathers and husbands, are god-like in their ability to compel women to pretend to the absurd notion that the products of an interracial union, the children who “exactly resemble” the white children, appear out of nowhere, almost “drop from the clouds.” Yet, according to Mary, they too are debased by the system and practice of miscegenation, since “the lower their mistresses, the more degraded they must be.” As Catherine Clinton points out, it was commonplace for white women to shift the blame for an interracial coupling away from their husbands or fathers and onto the exploited slave woman. Such blaming of the victim made knowledge of extramarital affairs supportable. Frequently, a white woman might even vent her anger and sense of betrayal by physically abusing her man’s unwilling partner. While this physical abuse is something in which Mary never engages, her writing does show that her anger can be misdirected toward those who are most exploited by such affairs, those female slaves
whom she calls, at one point, the “facile black women” (MCCW 169). Here, Mary is like Sterne’s starling in its cage: she is too thoroughly contained by her society to assign the largest portion (if not all) of the blame for interracial affairs consistently to the powerful white men.

To base an argument against slavery upon the evils of miscegenation was dangerous and difficult for a woman. As Mary was well aware, to discuss it publicly, no matter how delicately and discreetly, was to open oneself to accusations of impurity. A good woman, a proper wife or daughter or sister, would, of course, never know anything about such matters; the very idea was inconceivable. As Mary says, “The ostrich game is thought a Christian act,” and “pure minded ladies never touch upon [these matters], even in their thoughts” (MCCW 54). For a woman to admit that she knew about them was to brand herself bad and improper. Thus, the women whose male relatives practiced miscegenation found themselves caught in a triple bind: they were forced to watch their husbands and fathers engage in illicit affairs, they were compelled into a fearful silence upon the subject, and their silence made them unwillingly complicit accessories to the abuse of slave women.

James Henry Hammond, that ubiquitous South Carolinian and acquaintance of Mary’s father, made use of this female dilemma in his Letter to an English Abolitionist, which was later published as a pamphlet. Hammond’s essay was so popular with the slave-owners that it became part of the pro-slavery canon, and it allowed his political influence to spread well beyond his home state and into the far reaches of the South. In this work, Hammond castigates “ladies of eminent virtue” for
publicly denouncing slave owners who abuse their power by making mistresses of slave women: “The constant recurrence of the female abolitionists to this topic, and their bitterness in regard to it, cannot fail to suggest to even the most charitable mind, that ‘Such rage without betrays the fires within.’” This charge not only speaks to the South’s most basic fears of interracial sexual relations, but it is also an ad hominem assault that avoids addressing the source of the complaint, attacking instead the character of the accusing women. Since these women are willing to make public their complaint, Hammond implies, they are far from being either ladies or eminently virtuous. Even more damaging to the reputation of these women is Hammond’s thinly veiled accusation that their complaints only reveal the fires of passion and unladylike lust—perhaps even the desire for slave paramours of their own—raging within their hearts. Any female accuser, then, would likewise damn herself and thoroughly blacken her character in the eyes of Southern society by acknowledging and calling attention to the exploitation of slave women.

It is thus unsurprising that most statements about miscegenation in Mary’s revised narrative are cloaked as thoroughly as possible and thereby lend an ambivalence to her anti-slavery stance. She too plays the “ostrich game.” One way in which she makes her point while avoiding potential charges of impurity is to put her words into the mouth of another person. Mary re-works the passage from her diary about “the patriarchs of old” and gives it to Mrs. Middleton, an Englishwoman with whom she periodically crosses verbal swords:

The Englishwoman hit the patriarchal system heavy blows. It hardly sounded decent: she scarcely found the patriarchy less degraded than
their flocks and their herds, their Leahs and Rachels—and L and R’s maidservants and their children, all dwelling under one tent. It was turned off by a remark as to its impossibility in that hot climate.  
(MCCW 76)

Mary thus allows the point about the degradation of miscegenation, which was so important in her private writings, to be made while publicly protecting her own reputation as a proper lady. “It hardly sounded decent,” she cries protestingly, and then, like a proper lady, modestly and gracefully “turns off” the threatening subject with an assiduous discussion of the weather, that least threatening of all conversational topics.

The moment at which Mary allows her views the most latitude comes in response to an article in which William Howard Russell, the London Times correspondent, expressed his indignation about the frequency with which he encountered unchaste slave women during his travels in the South. Even on this occasion, however, Mary must couch her words in obscurity. Rather than agreeing with Russell’s observation, Mary laughs at him by saying that slave women “behave as well as other people. . . . They take life easily. So do their class everywhere” (MCCW 168). Then some unnamed person, presumably a woman, launches into an attack on male authority via a condemnation of slavery:

“I hate slavery. . . . What do you say to this? A magnate who runs a hideous black harem and its consequences under the same roof with his lovely white wife and his beautiful and accomplished daughters? He holds his head as high and poses as the model for all human virtues to these poor women whom God and the laws have given him. From the height of his awful majesty he scolds and thunders at them, as if he never did wrong in his life.” (MCCW 168)
To a reader familiar with the wartime diary, these words, and the ideas that they communicate, are obviously Mary's. Yet the fear of sounding indecent, the charge with which she accuses Mrs. Middleton, restrains Mary from acknowledging her own ideas. The laws of decency, as explained by this unknown woman, are defined by the men to whom God has given ownership of "these poor women," and any "lovely white wife" or "beautiful and accomplished" daughter who dares to question or break these laws will be subject to a thundering and awful retribution.

Another unnamed speaker elaborates upon the position of women: "His wife and daughters in the might of their purity and innocence are supposed never to dream of what is as plain before their eyes as the sunlight, and they play their parts of unsuspecting angels to the letter" (MCCW 169). This speaker, again mouthing Mary's argument, underscores the artificiality of the arrangement. Of the women whose men indulge themselves in this fashion, few are so blind or foolish that they cannot see what is happening in their homes. The very men whom they love, though, force them to turn their eyes from the truth that is "as plain . . . as the sunlight" and to become accomplished actresses who must "play their parts of unsuspecting angels to the letter." These women do not wish to close their eyes to reality, to pretend or to play-act, but they feel that they have no choice. In fact, this entire passage is an example of such play-acting. In order to avoid censure, Mary has been forced to turn her views into a dialogue between unnamed characters who play out the white Southern woman's dilemma. No one is named, not the least of all Mary, so no one can be blamed. The short play ends with another character, also a woman, saying, "Seems to
me those of you who are hardest on men here are soft enough with them when they are present. Now, everybody knows I am ‘the friend of man,’ and I defend them behind their backs, as I take pleasure in their society” (MCCW 170). The curtain falls upon the scene, then, with a return to conventional platitudes: I love men, and I will stand as their advocate when they are not present to defend themselves, ergo I am “‘the friend of man’” and thus a good woman. The transgression has been contained, and the topic is safely turned once again, but Mary has made her point.

Mary is always a woman of her time and place. She never carries her anti-slavery views to a public forum, nor does she ever renounce the comforts of wealth in order to pursue a life of activism or leave the South to escape moral contamination. In the narrative, she always remains a privileged white Southern woman in a slave society. Mary’s writing reveals what seems, at times, to be a contradiction between her anti-slavery views and her personal pleasures. While she appreciates and enjoys the individuality and humanity of the Chesnut family slaves, she also cares very deeply about what they do for her. Like other women whose families keep servants, the life of privilege, comfort, and ease is something that she has always thoroughly enjoyed:

Your own servants . . . know your ways and your wants; they save you all responsibility, even in matters of your own ease and well-doing. Eben the butler at Mulberry would be miserable and feel himself a ridiculous failure, were I ever forced to ask him for anything.

(MCCW 488).

This statement betrays a sort of wistful nostalgia; after all, at the time Mary is writing, she is reflecting back upon the luxuries of a lost world. Yet this life, with its “ease and well-doing” and its lack of responsibility for one’s own comfort, had been made
possible only by the unpaid labor of slaves. In addition to being a butler, Eben is a
slave, and any sense of accomplishment that he takes in his work is an instance of
personal pride and dignity asserted in the face of adversity. Mary, then, is in the
ethically equivocal position of requiring the attention of servants but detesting the
terms of their service, a position that is further complicated by the fact that she is
allowed no voice in establishing those terms of service. The perfect situation for
Mary, it seems, would be for her to retain the advantages of wealth and rank while
avoiding the moral taint of slavery.

No critic should ignore the fact that Mary’s narrative contains descriptions and
attitudes that disclose her racism and which modern readers find repugnant. During a
discussion of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Mary tries to justify her attitude toward most slaves
by saying that unlike fictional characters, real people (meaning herself) “can’t love
things dirty, ugly, repulsive, simply because they ought, but they can be good to
them—at a distance. You see, I cannot rise very high. I can only judge by what I see”
(MCCW 308). At one point, she writes that the Chesnut slaves are “as lazy and dirty
as ever” and that “It takes these half-Africans but a moment to go back to their naked,
savage animal nature” (MCCW 233, 642). Mary also relates Constance Cary’s story
of the “toy boy” owned by Fitzhugh Lee (a nephew of Robert E. Lee) whose dancing
to “corn-shucking tunes” is “the delight of Richmond salons” (MCCW 590). Of
Martha Adamson, a woman of mixed blood known for her beauty, Mary says, she is
“as good-looking as [such women] ever are to me. I have never seen a mule as
handsome as a horse—and I know I never will—no matter how I lament and
sympathize with its undeserved mule condition" (MCCW 243). The story (quoted above) in which a freedman is literally converted into a caricatured Sambo is a clear example of racism. Furthermore, when she discusses miscegenation (in a passage quoted above), writing about a "hideous black harem" that is kept in the same house as a man's "lovely white wife," her choice of words further betrays the fact that her complaint is not simply the result of the "hideous" things white men do to black women, but it also reveals her racial perspective on the world: black women are hideous; white women are lovely.

Like most white Americans of her day, Mary found it difficult to conceive of the equality of people who are not of European (or, perhaps more accurately, Anglo-Saxon) decent. Her language betrays this attitude. Yet she, as well as most members of the planter class, did draw the line at racial epithets, particularly that "brutal, violent word," namely, "nigger." The first time she heard this noxious term was during her visit to London when Gansevoort Melville, an assistant to the United States Ambassador to England and Herman Melville's older brother, said to a relative of the Ambassador, "'Oh, Miss McLane, look, there is a genuine nigger.'" Mary writes of her shock, saying, "Now it is in everybody's mouth, but I have never become accustomed to it" (MCCW 729).

It is in the narrative's stories and anecdotes that Mary Chesnut's racism can best be found. In her wartime diary, for example, she records a story told to her by the Chesnuts' overseer, James Team. It seems that a slave owned by a man named Powell McRae was "driven to despair" by McRae's overseer. According to Team, she was
last heard of “tying her baby on her back & walking into the river. Found drowned—
baby still strapped to her back—& said Team, ‘The man who caused it was not
hung!” (PMC 214). In the narrative, Mary fundamentally changes the story:

Team said, “Slavery . . . does not make good mothers—teaches them to
expect other people to take care of their children.” Then told a tale of a
woman so lazy she tied her child to her back and jumped in the river.
She said she did not mean to work—nor should her child after her.

(MCCW 256)

In the original story, the poor slave wins the sympathy of many readers. One can
surely imagine that the crushing burden of slavery and oppression could cause a person
to kill herself out of despair and to kill her child in order to save it from a life similarly
filled with cruelty and injustice. Mary chooses, however, to change the story in her
narrative by making the impulse for the suicide/murder arise out of sheer laziness.
Even to a reader unfamiliar with the diaries, the later story rings false. Laziness is so
horribly ludicrous a motive for suicide and infanticide that Mary’s decision to
substitute it for despair, the true motive for the death of the two slaves, speaks strongly
not only of her need to placate anxieties of her post-Reconstruction audience, but also
of her own racism toward African-Americans.

One of the primary roles for white plantation women was, as Catherine Clinton
has explained, to be the slaves’ “guardian,” and it was quite common for these women
to regard their families’ slaves as “childlike, dependent, and of diminished
responsibility.” Slaves thus could be seen (if only by some) as grown-up children:
inferior, as are children who are not yet as mature or civilized as adults, but
nevertheless truly human. Mary, too, seems to have shared in this view of slaves as
children. She wrote in her diary (in the passage about Sumner's correct assessment of slavery, quoted above), "Men & women are punished when their masters & mistresses are brutes & not when they do wrong," suggesting that slaves are like children who do deserve to be punished when they have behaved badly but also deserve to be rewarded when they behave well. In many ways, it served the slaves' best interests to seem "childlike." If slaves managed to appear to be irresponsible children, then they were often able to appeal to many a mistress's natural instinct to protect the innocent. The result was a trade-off: some slaves were willing to tolerate their mistress's patronizing attitude, which resulted from their own (assumed) guise of dependency and childlikeness in exchange for the ability to escape some of the harsher duties and punishments so often meted out to them. Eventually, though, such patronizing white attitudes became racist assumptions about the nature and character of the slaves.

Though Mary Chesnut's racism is clearly inexcusable, it is not unusual. Her narrative serves to reveal the hypocrisy or disguised racism that she shared with many Northerners and more than a few Abolitionists. As Eugene Genovese observes, one of the by-products of Southern slavery, that combination of a paternalistic class system and racial subordination, was a brand of racism that was widely accepted and practiced by the vast majority of Americans, whether they were Southerners or Northerners. At the same time that Americans were willing to overlook the hypocrisy behind the assertion that "all men are created equal," they were also willing to accept as factual the beliefs that African-Americans were inherently lazy, inferior, and primitive. Mary was thus able to exclaim against the brutality and atrocity of slavery and
simultaneously write about the “savage animal nature” of slaves, seeing, as did few Americans, no contradiction between these two perspectives. In her world, racism did not invalidate anti-slavery arguments.

The anti-slavery attitudes that Mary did find unconvincing were those of Northerners who had had no real experience with slavery and daily plantation life. She writes of Abolition activists,

“Ye who listen with credulity to the whispers of fancy,” pause and look on this picture and that. On one side Mrs. Stowe, Greeley, Thoreau, Emerson, Sumner, in nice New England homes—clean, clear, sweet-smelling—shut up in libraries, writing books which ease their hearts of their bitterness to us, or editing newspapers. . . . What self denial do they practice? . . . Bookmaking which leads you to a round of visits among crowned heads is an easier way to be a saint than martyrdom down here, doing unpleasant duty among them. (MCCW 245)

These Northerners are not people whom Mary truly hates; on the contrary, with the exception of Thoreau, whom she ignores, she writes of them with respect. Sumner she agrees with; she turns to Emerson’s work for relief from her fears about the ensuing battle of First Manassas (MCCW 72); and she typically writes with cordiality of Horace Greeley, perhaps because he shows a healthy respect for the military prowess of the Confederate army (MCCW 170).

While many Southerners hated Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin and thought that the Northern woman had gone much too far in her assessment of slavery, Mary claims that Stowe did not go far enough. The worst thing that she says about Stowe is that her novel is “coarser” than a French play (MCCW 390). Mary uses Stowe’s novel to further her own anti-slavery arguments, particularly her position
decrying miscegenation, and she returns again and again to one theme: "Mrs. Stowe did not hit the sorest spot. She makes Legree a bachelor" (MCCW 168). In addition, Mary pays Stowe the high compliment of comparing the pathos of her work's most violent scenes to those in the work of Dickens and Shakespeare: "A man send his little son to beat a human being tied to a tree? It is bad as Squeers beating Smike in the hack. Flesh and blood revolts... it is too bad—or the pulling out of eyeballs in Lear" (MCCW 381).

Rather than dismissing or insulting these Northern literary figures, Mary invokes their names in order to explain why their arguments fail in the South. These people, she believes, are too far removed from the arena of slavery to have any effect on the slave-owners. Safely ensconced in New England's "clean, clear, sweet-smelling" homes and libraries, Abolitionists have the luxury of thinking, writing, and speaking out against slavery without having to take immediate action in order to relieve the plight of the slaves. It is not a difficulty, nor is it self-denial, for Stowe, Greeley, Thoreau, Emerson, and Sumner to denounce slavery if they are able to do so without coming to the South, with its distinctly non-New England heat and pestilential air, where the effects of slavery are actually experienced in one form or another, she believes, by both blacks and whites.

In contrast to these Northerners, whom she believes have been incorrectly canonized as anti-slavery saints, Mary offers the women of her family as an example of those who have honestly won their martyrdom:

Now, what I have seen of my mother's life, my grandmother's, my mother-in-law's: These people were educated at Northern schools
mostly—read the same books as their Northern contemners, the same daily newspapers, the same Bible—have the same ideas of right and wrong. . . . They live in negro villages. They do not preach and teach hate as a gospel and the sacred duty of murder and insurrection, but they strive to ameliorate the condition of these Africans in every particular. . . . And they hate slavery worse than Mrs. Stowe.

(MCCW 245)

Mary’s female relatives, then, are the true adversaries of slavery’s evils because they add action to sentiment. Reared in a manner not dissimilar to Northerners, these women do not simply dislike slavery, but they also find ways to “ameliorate the condition,” to help relieve the spiritual and physical pain suffered by slaves. The care of the slaves—the maintenance of their health and general well being, the resolution of their disagreements, the disciplining of guilty parties, the sewing of their clothing, and the medical attention that they require—is the responsibility of the plantation women. Conspicuous in their absence from Mary’s argument are the men in her family, even her own husband whose wish for emancipation was common knowledge among the Chesnut slaves; they are absent from the catalogue because it is the white men, even those who are unwilling participants, who gain from the exploitation of the slaves. Still, she concludes with a rousing declaration: “I say we are no better than our judges North—and no worse. We are human beings of the nineteenth century—and slavery has to go” (MCCW 246).

At least Harriet Beecher Stowe, Horace Greeley, and their fellow Abolitionists work for the end of slavery. Mary’s experience with other Northerners teaches her to have little patience with Yankees, many of whom make no attempt to hide their intentions toward the slaves. In September of 1863, the Louisiana plantation of Martin
Gordon is destroyed. Mr. Gordon tells Mary that, after his slaves had left the ruined plantation, many of them fell ill and began to starve. When he asks a Federal officer for help, the man replies,

“All right. It is working as I expected. America for the white race—improve negroes, Indians, &c, off the continent. Their strong men we put in the army. The rest of them will disappear like cotton after a frost.” (MCCW 467)

This Yankee is, by no means, alone in his white supremacist beliefs, and the narrative offers various examples of others seeking to “improve negroes, Indians, &c, off the continent.” What makes these passages so striking is that they come from the lips of those presumably bent upon freeing the slaves and, at least in the narrative, not those of Southerners. Instead of jubilant salvation, the Chesnut slaves find that the best response to the Northern soldiers is a guarded wariness. When John Walker, one of the Chesnut slaves, realizes that the Yankees are more interested in taking what little he possesses than in helping him begin a new life, he says calmly, “This is not at all what we expected” (MCCW 818). Eban, the Chesnuts’ “butler,” at first greets the news of his freedom with great joy. He “dressed himself in his best and went at a run to meet his Yankee deliverers.” When the Yankees steal his watch and chain, “the pride of his life,” Eban returns to the Chesnuts “a sadder and a wiser man” and says, “Well, I thought maybe better [sic] stay with ole Marster that give me the watch and not go with them that stole it” (MCCW 823-824). Familiar with the inscrutable selfishness of whites, some of the newly freed slaves—at least those, like the
Chesnuts', who had been treated relatively well—wisely choose to continue their outward mask of subordination in the presence of whites.

Though her anti-slavery views are strong, Mary believes that most of the North's Abolitionism is mere propaganda and that it confuses the issue of why the war is being fought: "This war was undertaken by us to shake off the yoke of foreign invaders. So we consider our cause righteous. The Yankees, since the war has begun, have discovered it is to free the slaves they are fighting—so their cause is noble" (MCCW 410). Like most Southerners, both during and after the war, Mary does not doubt for an instant that this Yankee reasoning—that "it is to free the slaves they are fighting"—is nothing more than a political expediency that the United States government "discovered" after the beginning of the war. Of the Confederates, Mary observes, "not one-third of our volunteer army are slave-owners—and not one-third of that third... does not dislike slavery as much as Mrs. Stowe or Greeley" (MCCW 153). Perhaps Mary is too cynical about the intentions of the U.S. government, but many of the individual Yankee soldiers she and her fellow Confederates encounter make clear the fact that their perspective differs enormously from the official position of the United States government. After the war, a Yankee captain stationed in Camden, South Carolina, gestures to the recently freed slaves and says to Johnny Chesnut, "I did not fight for these. I fought for the Union" (MCCW 835).

In spite of receiving brutal treatment at the hands of some of the North's soldiers, many slaves in the narrative show what Mary calls "a natural and exultant joy at being free" (MCCW 801) and clinging to the hope that the Union army has indeed been
sent to free them. Such a hope was logical, following, as it did, the long-standing argument that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” Even if the Yankees cared little about each slave personally, they did seek to destroy the Confederates and, along with them, the system of slavery that had kept so many in bondage. Accordingly, the slaves often trusted that their interests would best be served by supporting, however secretly, the Union army. White slave-owning families were well aware of the trust that their slaves gave to the Yankees, and their ever-present fears of slave insurrections grew during the war. Such fears were also logical. Reports of increasing black assertiveness and actual rebellions were common throughout the Southern states, and they multiplied when the Federal forces won skirmishes and battles and after Abraham Lincoln announced the Emancipation Proclamation.  

Carrying out a successful rebellion had always been difficult for slaves: the eyes of the whites were turned upon them at all times, examining their actions, speech, and attitudes. With the outbreak of war, however, Southerners had been forced to turn their attention toward the approach of Federal troops and away from their slaves. On many plantations, the only remaining whites were women, most of whom were alarmed by the prospect of being the sole voice of white authority for miles around, and, as the number of men left on the plantation dwindled, their alarm grew. They held that their apprehensions were justified. At a time when women depended heavily upon the family slaves for their abilities and for companionship, the slaves, in Drew Gilpin Faust’s analysis, felt that there was a “diminishing motivation for work or obedience.” Like any oppressed people, they responded to the approach of those they
believed to be their saviors, the Northerners, with increasingly aggressive behavior
directed toward their captors, who were by default the women left on the
plantations.\textsuperscript{72}

Women were afraid, but they were unable to face their fears, as Faust notes:

women often denied or repressed these profound fears of racial
violence, confronting them only in the darkest hours of anxious,
sleepless nights. . . . Some women in fact regarded their slaves as
protectors, hoping for the loyalty that the many tales of “faithful
servants” would enshrine in Confederate popular culture and, later,
within the myth of the Lost Cause.\textsuperscript{73}

It seems that women had enough difficulty acknowledging the dangers that their men
were facing in a war where the Southerners were so greatly outnumbered and
outgunned. To add a fear of the slaves to the anxiety they already felt about the lives
and health of their husbands, fathers, sons, and brothers would have been
insupportable—especially for those women who themselves looked forward to the end
of slavery—so they refused to admit it. Instead, these women turned to the comforting
notion that, while others might have unmannerly slaves, one’s own slaves were
nothing but faithful, loyal, and trustworthy.

Yet these stories about ““faithful servants”” were not always false, nor were
they always the product of post-war nostalgia. The Chesnut slaves demonstrate their
loyalty to Mary, James, and the rest of the family many times, as recounted in the
wartime diary. In both the diary and the narrative, they repeatedly express their
concern over the Chesnats’ safety. They also take better care of their masters’ money
than do the Chesnuts themselves. When Mary and James are in Richmond after the
first Battle of Bull Run, they continually worry about Yankee raids. Mary decides that it is “injudicious” for their money to lie about, unattended, so she sews a money-belt for use “upon an emergency” (MCCW 132). Laurence, James’ personal servant who has previously been the holder of all of the Chesnuts’ money, is not insulted, and he accepts the new arrangement without complaint. When Mary forgets to lock the belt in her trunk or leaves it under her pillow in the morning, he admonishes her, “You oughten to do so, Miss Mary” (MCCW 165). Even after the Confederate rebellion has begun its decline into defeat, Laurence, who is still given the cash needed to procure food and goods, faithfully returns unused money to Mary instead of using it to fund an escape to the Union forces (MCCW 552). Later, although General William Sherman and the troops that follow him lay waste to Mulberry and destroy the Chesnuts’ cotton, it is the family’s slaves (with only one exception) who intercede with the Yankees and save the house and outbuildings (MCCW 757). The narrative (and the diary) contain many more illustrations of the slaves’ loyalty toward and concern for the Chesnuts, but it is true that these examples are always filtered through Mary’s own perspective. Laurence, Molly, Betsey, and the other Chesnut slaves leave behind no record of their thoughts and feelings. In addition to their loyalty and devotion to the Chesnuts, these slaves are also likely to be concerned for their masters’ money and property because the realities of war force them to continue to rely on the Chesnuts for food, shelter, and clothing. In the end, it is in the slaves’ own best interest to protect the means of obtaining these things.
Even though Southerners trusted their slaves, however, an undercurrent of fear lurked below the surface of daily life. If one were to judge entirely by her original diary, Mary is remarkably free from any fear of the slaves, but, as Faust has observed, this is common among women’s wartime writings. In the narrative, however, Mary creates an atmosphere of misgiving, suspicion, and disquiet. She writes, “I am always studying these creatures. They are to me inscrutable in their ways and past finding out” (MCCW 113-114). This is the dynamic that Mary establishes for the rest of the narrative: she studies the slaves for a reaction to the events of the day, and they respond by removing any betraying emotion from their faces and demeanor; this whets Mary’s interest in uncovering their feelings, which, in turn, causes the slaves to become ever more “inscrutable.” Mary’s emphasis on the inscrutability of the slaves makes the readers feel that it is anger which could lead to danger and violence that the slaves are hiding behind their masks. Indeed, these references are generally connected to rumors of slave rebelliousness. When news reaches the Chesnuts that “they are hanging negroes in Louisiana and Mississippi, like birds in the trees, for an attempted insurrection,” Mary comments, “Watch the sudden deadening of their faces [and the] utter want of any possible expression” (MCCW 234).

At regular intervals over the course of her narrative, Mary records white apprehension and black inscrutability. On April 13, 1861, the day after the bombardment of Fort Sumter, Mary writes,

Not by one word or look can we detect any change in the demeanor of these negro servants. Laurence sits at our door, as sleepy and as respectful and as profoundly indifferent. So are they all. They carry it too far. You could not tell that they hear even the awful row that is
going on in the bay, though it is dinning in their ears night and day. And people talk before them as if they were chairs and tables. And they make no sign. Are they stolidly stupid or wiser than we are, silent and strong, biding their time? (MCCW 48)

The summer of 1864 brings General Sherman’s army to Atlanta, and the people of Columbia, South Carolina, fear that they will soon be attacked. The Chesnut slaves, however, seem unaware:

They must know what is at hand if Sherman is not hindered from coming here. “Freedom! My masters!” But these sphinxes give no sign, unless it be increased diligence and absolute silence—as certain in their action and as noiseless as a law of nature when we are in the house. (MCCW 641)

As always, fear prompts Mary to examine the countenances of the slaves, and the slaves respond by “deadening” their faces to any emotion. Mary is convinced that this is a deliberate act, a conscious refusal to give way to that “natural and exultant joy” at the slightest hint that salvation might be at hand. A protective facade, it seems, must always be maintained in the presence of the whites. Even after General Robert E. Lee’s surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia in early April, 1865, when Mary would expect the slaves to celebrate their freedom, Mary documents that the slaves’ countenances remain impassive “The shining black mask they wear does not show a ripple of change—sphinxes” (MCCW 794).

Mary’s narrative also records a variety of incidents in which slaves, those belonging to the Chesnuts and to others, are suspected of engaging in dangerous, and criminal, activities. In a passage dated June 10, 1861, Mary chronicles the discovery of guns among the Chesnuts’ male slaves (MCCW 78). For January 11, 1862, she
recounts a story, told to her by General William Harllee, South Carolina's lieutenant governor and a major general in the militia, about a slave mutiny. Gen. Harllee had recently sailed on the ship that carried the bodies of the two white male victims:

"These dead men had been bringing negroes from the coast—negroes who did not want to come. They laid down their guns and went to sleep. The negroes took the guns, shot the owners of them, and went back to the fleet" (MCCW 277). Not all of the slaves, it seems, had been faithful to their white owners during the war, Lost Cause mythology to the contrary. A passage for July 13, 1862, describes an encounter between a troop of Southerners, a group of insurgent African-Americans on the coast, and one "good" slave:

[T]he troops were gratified to find the negroes in such a friendly state of mind. One servant whispered to his master, "Don't you mind 'em—don't trust 'em." So the master dressed himself as a Federal officer and went down to a negro quarter that night. The very first greeting: "Ki! Massa, you come for ketch rebels?"

"We can show you whey you can ketch thirty tonight."

So they took him to the Confederate camp—or pointed it out, then added for his edification, "We kin ketch officer for you whenever you want 'em." (MCCW 415)

The purpose of these accounts is to point out the danger that perpetually hides beneath the calm and impassive demeanor favored by the slaves. Just as a Southern woman recoils at the suggestion that any of the slaves on her family's plantation might be the product of her husband's (or father's, or son's) affair with a slave woman, so too the average Southern slave-owner hates to admit that any of his slaves might be arming themselves for a rebellion. Such a refusal to face the truth and deal with the evidence that is revealed, Mary's narrative implies, can lead to that very rebellion.
The terrible and violent results of a too-long delayed confrontation with insubordinate slaves is the subject of the most dramatic instance of white fear in Mary’s narrative. Through her rewriting of the Witherspoon murder and by making this private story very public, Mary also critiques the post-war South’s false nostalgia about slavery. This instance is the 1861 murder of Elizabeth “Betsey” Boykin Witherspoon, the first cousin of Mary Boykin Miller (Mary Chesnut’s mother) and the mother-in-law of Mary Serena Chesnut Williams (the niece of James Chesnut, Jr., and the sister-in-law of Kate Miller Williams). Mrs. Witherspoon was well known for her indulgent treatment of her slaves:

Her household negroes were so insolent, so pampered and insubordinate, that she lived alone and at home. She knew, she said, that none of her children would have the patience she had with these people who had been indulged and spoiled by her until they were like spoiled children. Simply intolerable. (MCCW 198)

Such “pampering” and “spoiling” of one’s slaves was considered by Southerners to be “deviantly kind treatment.” The argument is that, since the slaves are as savage and uncivilized as children, to spoil them would be as destructive to their characters as it is to spoil little children. According to more than one slave-owner, “To neglect strict, undeviating discipline . . . led directly to poor performance, then to resentment upon correction, and finally to insurrection.” This is exactly what happens to Betsey Witherspoon.

The basic facts of the murder can be found in Mary’s wartime diary. On September 19, 1861, the Chesnuts hear that their relative had been “quite well” when she retired for the evening but was found dead in the morning and “had been dead
several hours.” At that time, Mary speculates that Mrs. Witherspoon, like two other
Witherspoons, has died because of some sort of “family trouble” (PMC 159). A short
while later, on September 21, the Chesnuts are horrified to learn that Betsey had been
attacked by a group of her slaves, who were led by a fellow slave named William.
After a fight that left her body bruised and scratched, the group successfully smothered
her. On October 9, Mary writes that two of Betsey’s slaves, Rhody and Romeo,
confessed and implicated two other slaves, William and Silvy, in the murder. The
following day brings the news that the slaves had decided to kill Mrs. Witherspoon
because her son had found out that, in his mother’s absence, they had had a party and
used her silver and linen. Angry at their insubordination, John Witherspoon
threatened to punish them on the following day, but William, the ringleader, urged the
other slaves to listen to him, saying, “Do as I bid you & there will be no whipping here
tomorrow” (PMC 174-175). Also on the tenth, Mary is shocked to hear of the
ritualistic manner in which the murder was committed:

They went in one by one. Wm. stood at her head with the counterpane
& Rhody at her feet & Romeo & Silvy at each arm. She struggled very
hard & a long time. After they thought her dead she revived—& they
commenced their hellish work again. Next day while Molly was so
scared, Rhody saw her cap was bloodied & changed it—& she saw that
the counterpane on the crib was bloodied & showed it herself that she
might not be suspected. (PMC 175)

The guilt of the four slaves (the “Molly” who is “so scared” is never identified by the
editors of the text) is established, and, on October 23, Mary announces that they were
hanged (PMC 186). On October 27, Mary appends a postscript to the effect that the
slaves of Sarah Chesnut, James Chesnut’s sister, wished to attend the hanging, saying,
"It will be good warning to us all," a statement which Mary takes as proof that the slaves "know we are afraid of them" (PMC 190).

Mary expands the account of Mrs. Witherspoon's murder in her narrative by adding a great deal of further information and description. In her entry for September 19, 1861, when she announces the "painful" news of Mrs. Witherspoon’s death, and before she reveals the slaves' criminal act, Mary eulogizes her relative in the narrative. Mrs. Witherspoon is no longer an unknown figure to the reader: now she is "a proud and high-strung woman," who possessed "a warm and tender heart"; unable to do anything "shabby in word, thought, or deed," she was the embodiment of "truth and uprightness itself." Mary sums up her description by saying, "Few persons have ever been more loved and looked up to," as much as this "very handsome old lady of fine presence, dignified and commanding" (MCCW 195-196).

This catalogue of Mrs. Witherspoon's character is very important to Mary's account of the murder. After all, a reader might well ask, in the midst of a terrible and bloody war, what is the importance of one woman's death? Even if she were murdered, what is her death compared to that of so many others? By describing her cousin in such detail, Mary has made her a real person to the reader; no longer faceless, Mrs. Witherspoon seems to live and breathe on the page. If Mary were to limit her description to good qualities, her cousin might seem to be either a bore or too good to be true; if she were to say that the older lady was merely a "proud and high-strung lady," a reader would care much less about her death. However, as described by Mary, Mrs. Witherspoon becomes a sort of Everywoman, fundamentally kind and
good and well-meaning, but possessed of a few faults that help to give flesh to an otherwise exemplary portrait.

One of Mrs. Witherspoon's faults was more serious than the others. As Mary writes upon first hearing of her relative's death, Mrs. Witherspoon had "indulged and spoiled" her slaves until they were "like spoiled children" (MCCW 198). This, within the context of Southern society, is a moral weakness: she was a slave-owner incapable of disciplining her slaves for their own (and her own) good. A judge might argue that it was this weakness, this indulgent permissiveness, that killed her. A harsher judge might determine that it was this weakness that also killed the four slaves. If Mrs. Witherspoon had been a male slave-owner, this accusation might well have been leveled at her. As a widow, however, she was not expected to be as strict with the slaves as her male relatives would be, and, indeed, it is her son, John, who belatedly attempts to restore order to the inverted hierarchy that exists on his mother's plantation.

Mary compresses her story into a few pages, an authorial decision that increases the Chesnuts' sense of urgency and fear, and she develops and expands other aspects of the murder in her narrative for the same reason. In this version, the readers learn that William, the ringleader of the murderous gang, had already attempted escape unsuccessfully. Instead of simply threatening the slaves, Mary causes John Witherspoon to promise them that he will "give every one of you a thrashing" the next day (MCCW 209). She also includes a number of supporting stories in which slaves attempt and are erroneously thought to attempt to poison their white owners, as well as
the tale of Mrs. Cunningham, the wife of another indulgent slave-owner who is
smothered and then hanged by her slaves in an attempt to make her appear to be a
suicide.\textsuperscript{75} The result of these additional stories is to make the readers feel as
encompassed by the threat of violence as did the actual participants.

The narrative's atmosphere of tension and fear is greatly amplified by four
major changes that Mary makes to the tale, each of which alters the perspective of the
story. First, she devotes quite a few paragraphs to the fear that is felt by her sister,
Kate Williams, and herself. In the diary, Mary mentions feeling afraid of the Chesnut
servants, but only briefly and as if unwilling to dwell upon it. In the narrative, that
reluctance is gone. She claims never to have been afraid of any slaves before this
event simply because she has always felt herself to be their champion: "Two-thirds of
my religion consists in trying to be good to negroes because they are so in my power,
and it would be so easy to be the other thing" (MCCW 199). Yet Mary worries that, if
Mrs. Witherspoon was "a saint on this earth" and was still murdered by her slaves,
what hope does she, who openly admits that she is far from being a saint, have? Such
an admission of Mary's own fear effects the same response in the narrative's readers,
since, after viewing the events of the war through her eyes over the course of two
hundred pages, the reader has come to accept much of her perspective on events.
Mary's fear for herself and her family thus becomes the reader's fear for all of the
Chesnuts, and for Mary in particular. When Mary illustrates the overwhelming dread
that her sister, the good Kate, feels about sleeping in a strange room with only her
slave maid to accompany her and the terror of "Those black hands strangling and

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smothering Mrs. Witherspoon’s gray head under the counterpane” that haunts her (MCCW 199), the tension increases even more. Good women, women who are kind and who dislike slavery, it seems, have as much cause to be afraid as those women who are less compassionate of the slaves. In the narrative, then, it is simply women who are the main target of slave rebelliousness.

A short while later, Mary includes a rather strange episode in her narrative. The saintly Mrs. Witherspoon is no longer silent, as she was in the wartime diary. In the revised narrative, Mrs. Witherspoon displays her permissive approach to the management of the plantation through her discussion of the slaves’ impending punishment with her grandson: “I do not intend John to punish these negroes. It is too late to begin discipline now. It is all nonsense. I have indulged them past bearing, they all say. I ought to have tried to control them. It is all my fault. That’s the end of it” (MCCW 209). Mrs. Witherspoon’s speech is surely apocryphal. Instead of the opening to an argument with her son, her words read more like a speech that, like a final confession of wrong-doing, one would make on a deathbed. Furthermore, Mary does not mention, in either diary or narrative, that she has spoken to Mrs. Witherspoon’s grandson, the only person who would have heard that particular declaration. It seems clear, then, that this “deathbed” speech was created by Mary Chesnut for the purpose of further arousing the reader’s sympathies and fears for Mrs. Witherspoon, a woman who was reluctant to apply traditional standards of discipline to her slaves.
A further alteration created for the narrative is the description of the discovery of Mrs. Witherspoon’s murder, which Mary recounts from the point of view of the victim’s family. The Witherspoons first become aware of the unusual nature of their mother’s death when they see that her face and body are covered with bruises, a condition that is curious, to say the least, for a woman who is supposed to have died in her sleep. With growing apprehension, one member of the family touches the candlestick atop the bedside table and finds “blood upon their fingers” (MCCW 209-210). Upon examination, the candlestick turns out to be covered with bloody fingerprints, as is the underside of a counterpane, which had been turned face-down atop a bed in the entry of Mrs. Witherspoon’s bedroom (MCCW 210). The family’s nightmare now begins in earnest.

At this point in the story, Mary Chesnut decides that, rather than simply telling her readers what happened, she will dramatize how the family’s reluctance to believe that their mother was murdered was at war with their growing suspicion that such was the case. This decision heightens the atmosphere of dread:

Rhody was helping Mary Witherspoon a little apart from the rest. Mary cried:

“I wish they would not say such horrid things. . . . “To think any mortal could murder her. Never! I will not believe it!”

To Mary’s amazement, Rhody drew near her, and looking strangely in her eyes, she said: “Well done! Miss Mary. You stick to dat, my Missis. You stick to dat.”

Mary thrilled all over with suspicion and dread. She said nothing, however. (MCCW 210)

Mary Chesnut has set her scene quite effectively, and a reader might even regret the narrative’s diary format since this passage would have been a wonderful piece of
foreshadowing had it come unexpectedly in a novel. The other "clues" that she reveals almost immediately—the fact that the body was dressed in new nightgown that had been locked in a trunk in a closet, the theft of Mrs. Witherspoon's gold, the detective's arrival, and the discovery of bloody rags that had been hidden away—are all prefigured by Mary Witherspoon's interaction with Rhody. Mary's deft hand with dialogue transfers the readers' attachment to Mary Witherspoon. We too wish to disbelieve the truth, we too "thrill all over with suspicion and dread," and we too feel a frisson of foreboding at the confrontation between a horrified, but unknowing, Mary Witherspoon and a guilty, but defiantly secretive, Rhody.

It is interesting that Mary Chesnut twice makes reference to Mrs. Witherspoon's family having "bloody fingers" (MCCW 210). In most stories involving murderers and blood stains, it is the guilty party who finds blood on his or her hands; Lady Macbeth is the classic example of this, and her obsessive hand-washing is the outward manifestation of a mind distracted by guilt. Here, though, the hands on which the blood is found are those of the victim's family, and, though investigators find blood splashed elsewhere in the room and the house, not one of the slaves later implicated in the murder has a speck of blood on him or her. Nor is Mary constraining herself to what actually happened. In the passage from Mary's diary entry of October 10, quoted above, she wrote, "Next day while Molly was so scared, Rhody saw her cap was bloodied & changed it." Again, the editors of the text do not identify this Molly, though, on another occasion, they report that the Witherspoons did have a slave named Molly (PMC 83), nor is the text clear about which woman had a bloody
cap. In spite of this confusion, the fact still remains that one woman who participated
in the murder bore the marks of that crime through part of the next day. By eradicating
this fact from her narrative and concentrating instead on the Witherspoons’ bloody
fingerprints, Mary seems very subtly (after all, they are relatives) to be accusing them
of a neglectful complicity in their mother’s death, implying that they had sinned
toward her. Had the men, in particular, of her family been more active in the
management of her slaves, had they insisted that either she needed to take a firmer
hand with the slaves or taken it themselves, perhaps Mrs. Witherspoon would never
have been murdered. The implication is that the Witherspoons sinned against their
mother not by commission, but by omission through their heedless reluctance to take
charge of her slaves.

The murder itself is an encounter that Mary Chesnut’s narrative relates from
the point of view of the murderers, a decision that is the final major alteration to the
story. Mary obtains the information about the murder from the report of the detective,
who convinced Romeo to confess. After John Witherspoon threatened the slaves and
left the plantation, William expressed his defiance, saying to his accomplices, “You-all
follow what I say and he’ll have something else to think of beside stealing and
breaking glass and china and tablecloths” (MCCW 210). After they celebrated and
“slept the sleep of the righteous” (MCCW 211), William awoke them, and the group
began their work:

They smothered her . . . But after Rhody took her keys and went into the trunk and got a clean nightgown . . . she came to! Then she begged them hard for life. She asked them what she had ever done that they should want to kill her? She promised them before God never to tell on
them. Nobody should ever know. But Rhody stopped her mouth by the counterpane. William held her head and hands down. And the other two sat on her legs. (MCCW 211)

Mary’s decision to enact the murder, to cause her characters to play out their role on the pages of her narrative, once again brings the story to life. No longer is it a dry story of a woman who was killed. Now, the readers see Mrs. Witherspoon spring miraculously back to consciousness after the first attempt at suffocation and hear her “beg hard for life.” They then become one with Mrs. Witherspoon, tasting the cotton of the counterpane as it is thrust into her mouth and feeling the weight of the slaves on her head, hands, and legs. After all of this, the readers thoroughly understand Mary Chesnut’s conviction that she “will never sleep again without this nightmare of horror haunting me” (MCCW 211).

One final aspect of this story remains to be examined: why did Mary make the Witherspoon murder, the tragedy of one private family, an important part of her very-public narrative? Clearly, Mary was sending a message to her presumed readers—the post-war white Southerners whom she hoped would be her audience. The message says that these Southerners, wrapped up in nostalgic dreams of their previous lives, are unable to see that the outbreaks of slave insurrections that had caused so much fear were in a sense the inevitable, indeed natural, result of racial oppression and that it was the absence of the Confederate men that made women the targets of slave anger. An insurrection like that which led to the death of Mrs. Witherspoon was the fruit of years of white oppression. The words of the slave owner who said, “To neglect strict, undeviating discipline . . . led directly to poor performance, then to resentment upon
correction, and finally to insurrection," could be rephrased by one sympathetic to the
slaves, rather than to the slave-owners, as, "to treat slaves like adult human beings led
to reasonable expectations of further humane treatment, then to anger when those
logical expectations were not fulfilled, and finally to a rebellious assertion of will and
a quest for justice."

Unlike whites, slaves owned very little; in some places, they could not legally
possess any personal property at all. In all cases, no slave could even "own" him- or
herself: the law made each slave, a human being, the property of another person. To
surround a people who held claim to nothing, not even the products of their own labor,
by great wealth—to tell them, in fact, that they are considered to be part of that great
wealth—was to create a potentially explosive situation. No one can wonder at the
slaves' anger and hostility toward their white captors. Nor can one wonder that, at
times, the slaves would try, if only briefly and secretly, to relieve the monolithic
oppressiveness of their lives with various entertainments. Mary Chesnut later
corroborates this when she writes about two of the Chesnut slaves who are the perfect
"servants" when she and James are at home, but who are known to have "sung,
laughed, shouted, danced," when they are elsewhere. As Mary explains, "I am so glad
the poor things relieve their feelings while we are away. It must be an awful bore to be
deaf, dumb, blind, and go about with yellow sphinxlike faces. I often pity the awful
self-control servants must practice" (MCCW 619).

The incident that triggered the Witherspoon murder was the slaves' use of
Betsey's silver, china, and linen, objects that symbolize the wealth and power of the
upper classes. While it might have bothered both Betsey and Mary (if the same thing were to have happened to her) to have their tableware borrowed without permission, their response would most likely not have been as drastic as that proposed by John Witherspoon. The narrative argues that both women would have seen this temporary appropriation of the household tableware as one method by which the slaves were trying to “relieve their feelings” and to relax their “awful self-control.” Mrs. Witherspoon had all along been “indulgent” of Rhody, Romeo, Silvy, and William, had treated them less like slaves and more like members of her own family. Obviously, the slaves had formed expectations leading them to believe that this more humane treatment would continue. John, however, seems to have viewed their actions as a deliberate usurpation of white dominance, a grievous sin for slaves to have committed and one for which they should be punished harshly. When he threatened them with this punishment, the four grew angry at being treated like slaves and sought to assert their will by claiming their own sort of justice. Mary writes that, immediately following their decision to murder Mrs. Witherspoon but before carrying out their plans, the four slaves “slept the sleep of the righteous,” a phrase that implies her awareness of the fact that Rhody, Romeo, Silvy, and William all believed they were justified in their rebellion. Through all of the narrative’s references to slave insurrection, but particularly through the story of the Witherspoon murder, then, Mary seems to be saying that insurrection is a natural concomitant of oppression. Antebellum and wartime whites who believed that they owned other human beings and that they were right in using and treating these slaves as property should have expected
those slaves, those human beings, to rise in anger and turn to violence as the only means by which to exert their will.

This story also makes the point that it was often women who paid for the injustices of an institution that had been established by white men. If Mary conveys nothing else about Mrs. Witherspoon, she certainly makes clear the fact that the older woman hated to treat her slaves like slaves; it was John Witherspoon, not Betsey, who threatened the slaves with punishment. After John left the plantation, his threat led William to organize the murder with the words, “You-all follow what I say and he’ll have something else to think of beside stealing and breaking glass and china and tablecloths” (emphasis mine). Clearly, William wanted John to realize that when the slaves deprived him of his mother, it was an action that paralleled his plan to deprive them of the remarkable (to Southerners) amount of liberty they enjoyed; John was taking away something the slaves valued, so they would take something of value to him. Betsey thus becomes one of John’s possessions, much as the silver and china were her possessions. As many historians have pointed out, the antebellum South was a paternalistic society that justified its subordination of women by emphasizing their physical weakness. Only the strength and protection of men stood between women and the slaves, those “demonic” savages who were apt to commit any number of horrors if given the chance. Betsey’s situation sums up the dilemma that white Confederate women faced when men were away at the war. While it is true that Mr. Witherspoon was dead and not simply gone to war, Mrs. Witherspoon’s experience nevertheless represented everything that women feared when they were left alone and
unassisted on their plantations. Though Mary never criticized these men who had left
their families to fight the war (truly, she only criticized those who failed to do so), her
narrative argues that by leaving the women alone, Confederate men had exposed their
wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters to a force possibly more dangerous to them than
the Union army: the anger of the slaves, mistreated for years and now ever more
anxious for freedom. No longer were the men around to protect their women, and it
was thus women whom Mary believed suffered the consequences of male power.

Mary is as ambivalent about this message as she is about almost everything
else regarding slavery in the narrative. The strong tone of fear that can be heard
throughout her description of the Witherspoon murder serves to alarm the readers just
as she herself was frightened when it happens. When she writes of Betsey’s “insolent”
and “pampered” slaves (a situation she calls “Simply intolerable”), she seems to be
toeing the line of the dominant (largely male) culture’s attitude toward slaves.
Running alongside of this conventional speech, however, is the sound of her true
voice, the one that articulates what Elaine Showalter would call the message of the
muted (largely female) anti-slavery perspective. This voice says that slavery was
wrong on many counts and that post-war readers need to rouse themselves from their
nostalgic slumber to admit that the preservation of slavery was a cause unworthy of the
otherwise honorable and glorious Confederacy. For those who, like Mary Chesnut,
hated slavery, the very suggestion that the South was fighting the North in order to
save slavery was an intolerable idea; it was an idea that Mary herself resisted
vehemently. It was also women’s powerlessness, their inability to end slavery coupled
with their vulnerability, that made the institution doubly loathsome to them. Even women like Mary who supported the related issue of states’ rights or secession were, in the final analysis, powerless. They might express their thoughts and ideas about politics, economics, and other “male” topics, but very few of them could actually escape the restrictive shelter of the plantation and take up the cudgels for their own ends. Oddly enough, it was the equally hated North that allowed Mary to write, from the distance of many years, “If anything can reconcile me to the idea of a horrid failure after all to make good our independence of Yankees, it is Lincoln’s proclamation freeing the negroes” (MCCW 407). It was thus only the violent and brutal defeat of Mary’s beloved Confederacy that was able to bring about the legal end of the even more violent and brutal institution that she so hated.
NOTES

1 The actual date of the composition of this passage is unknown. While it is presumed to have been written during the war, C. Vann Woodward and Elisabeth Muhlenfeld, the editors of The Private Mary Chesnut, speculate that it was written well after the date (February 18, 1861) to which Mary Chesnut assigned it. As the editors point out,

Strongest evidence [of the passage's later composition] is internal: first, the tone of the first several pages of the entry— that of a conscious, introductory essay—differs considerably from that of the remaining 1861 entries; second, Chesnut's general discussion of the coming war suggests that she may be writing after the war has started; third, the entry is written almost entirely in past tenses. External evidence includes the poor quality of paper used for this segment similar to paper used by Chesnut later on. (PMC 3n1)

Woodward and Muhlenfeld believe that this passage is actually an introductory essay designed to set the stage for the events that follow. Furthermore, Woodward decided to use this essay as the opening for his edition of Mary Chesnut's narrative because, although Mary began to rework the passage three (at least) times, her early death left each of the revisions either incomplete or mutilated (MCCW 3n1).

2 See Chapter 2.

3 For a study of the issues under discussion during the writing of the Constitution, as well as an examination of the documents that preceded it, see John R. Vile, A Companion of the United States Constitution and Its Amendments (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993) 1-22.

4 Vile 11.

5 Vile 91-92.


7 Vile 92.

8 Ellis 4.

9 United States Constitution. Tenth Amendment.

11 United States Constitution. Article I, section 2, paragraph 3. This clause was changed by the Fourteenth Amendment which was ratified on July 9, 1868.


13 Miller 18,

14 Miller 13.

15 United States Constitution. Preamble. Of course, full representation for all Americans was far in the future for groups other than slaves.

16 United States Constitution. Article IV, section 2, paragraph 3. This portion of the text is the Fugitive Slave Clause which reads, in its entirety,

No Person held to Service or Labour in one State, under the Laws thereof, escaping into another, shall, in Consequence of any Law or Regulation therein, be discharged from such Service or Labour, but shall be delivered up on Claim of the Party to whom such Service or Labour may be due.

This clause was changed by the Thirteenth Amendment which was ratified on December 6, 1865. The Slave Importation Clause, found in Article I, section 9, paragraph 1, reads,

The Migration or Importation of such Persons as any of the States now existing shall think proper to admit, shall not be prohibited by the Congress prior to the Year one thousand eight hundred and eight, but a Tax or duty may be imposed on such Importation, not exceeding ten dollars for each Person.


18 For a complete look at both the economic and political motivations that led to the Nullification Ordinance of 1832, see Ellis; and William W. Freehling, Prelude to Civil War: The Nullification Controversy in South Carolina, 1816-1836 (New York: Harper & Row, 1965). For an exhaustive study of the other events that led to the Civil War (such as the Missouri Compromise and the Compromise of 1850), see William W. Freehling, The Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay, 1776-1854 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

19 Freehling, Prelude 259.

20 Ellis 192-193.
Freehling, Prelude 262.

Vile 98.

Freehling, Road 215-216, 230.

Freehling, Prelude 81.

Miller 133.

Miller 134-135.

Muhlenfeld 18.

Freehling, Prelude 251, 258. This is not to say that South Carolinians were unanimously supportive of Nullification, and Freehling documents the Unionists' dissent.

Freehling, Prelude 262-264; Ellis 168, 175-177.

William Lee Miller recounts this congressional battle in precise and fascinating detail in Arguing about Slavery.

See Miller 85-92 for more about the Lane Seminary. The school was founded in Cincinnati during the autumn of 1833 by Arthur and Lewis Tappan under the direction of Theodore Weld; its first president was Lyman Beecher, and it counted both Weld and Calvin Stowe among its faculty. When a series of debates, held in February of 1834, radicalized most of the student body on the issue of slavery, the more conservative faculty members demanded that the students cease all political activities. In response, Weld and fifty-one of the students “seceded” from the seminary. Many of these seminarians moved a short distance to the north and again took up the Abolitionist cause at Oberlin College.


Muhlenfeld 59; Freehling, Road 481-486.


Catherine Clinton, The Plantation Mistress (New York: Pantheon, 1982) 185. See also Drew Gilpin Faust, Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding

36 For an examination of Brooks' assault and the idea of honor, see Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Southern honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982) 198.

37 Charles Sumner, “The Barbarism of Slavery,” Charles Sumner: His Complete Works Intro. George Frisbie Hoar (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1900). 131-132. Sumner’s speech is quite long: it took approximately four hours to deliver, and the published version of it runs to 125 pages, including epigraphs. The most famous and oft-quoted passage of the speech is the argument of his “First Assumption”:

> Founded in violence, sustained only by violence, such a wrong must by sure law of compensation blast master as well as slave,—blast the lands on which they live, blast the community of which they are part, blast the government which does not forbid the outrage; and the longer it exists and the more completely it prevails, must its vengeful influence penetrate the whole social system. Barbarous in origin, barbarous in law, barbarous in all its pretensions, barbarous in the instruments it employs, barbarous in consequences, barbarous in spirit, barbarous wherever it shows itself, Slavery must breed Barbarians, while it develops everywhere, alike in the individual and the society to which he belongs, the essential elements of Barbarism. In this character it is conspicuous before the world. (Sumner 126-127)

38 Sumner 162.

39 For an exhaustive study of the events leading up to and following the Gag Rule, see Miller.

40 Sumner 162-163.

41 Sumner 163.

42 Sumner 237.

43 After James had concluded his speech, Sumner regained the floor and said, “I expose to-day the Barbarism of Slavery. What the Senator has said in reply I may well print as an additional illustration.” To this further insult, James Henry Hammond
retorted, "'I hope he will do it'" (Sumner 238). There is no record of Mary Chesnut's response to her husband's speech.


45 For an examination of African-American English dialects during the nineteenth century, see "The Language of Class and Nation" in Genovese, 431-441. Genovese looks closely at the word "nigger" and its usage in the South, particularly the fact that the word was used mostly by slaves to refer to themselves.


47 Wilson 102.


49 Wilson 106.

50 Foster 31.

51 Wilson 107.

52 Faust 60.

53 Wilson 104.

54 At the faintest hint of public disapproval sparked by James' laconic, often taciturn, legislative style, Mary's loyalty to her husband triumphed over her agreement with Sumner. On November 14, 1861, she wrote, "The papers said JC would not have Sumner now in the Senate to rouse him from his close & quiet attention to business. So today I read Sumner & JC. I must confess JC was very bitter & Sumner deserved it" (PMC 201-202). Never, though, does she recant her opposition to slavery.

55 This story is dated April 1, 1865, in the narrative. It is unfortunate that Mary Chesnut's diary for the month of April in 1865 is lost; a comparison of this passage in the two texts, if it were possible, should prove to be interesting.

56 For a discussion of divorce in the South, see Clinton 80-85 and Wyatt-Brown 244-246, 283-292, 300-306.
Faust 5-6; Scott 48-52. See also Clinton 180-198 and Fox-Genovese 290-333. Many, if not most, of the other Southern women who wrote about slavery expressed their frustration and hatred of the institution, but most explained that their dislike of slavery was caused by the difficulties they had in controlling the slaves, by the work that they perceived the slaves' maintenance caused them, and by the amount of energy they felt they expended in caring for the slaves.

Fox-Genovese 307. Fox-Genovese's reading of Mary Chesnut's diary and narrative offers a strikingly different view of Mary, but she is unable to give any textual evidence for her startling claims—that Mary's comments about her hatred of slavery were prompted merely by disagreements with her husband, that her revulsion about this particular slave auction was occasioned by some social unpleasantness, and that old Colonel Chesnut was ultimately responsible for Mary's childlessness, etc. In fact, Fox-Genovese's reading is predicated upon the belief that to be an upper-class woman was also to be a supporter, however unconsciously, of slavery and that unless one publicly renounced the benefits of a life of ease in favor of a life of activism, one's claims to be against the institution of slavery were necessarily false and often deliberately deceptive. Thus, Mary's comments about how much slavery appalled her are taken as evidence that she is either remarkably self-deceptive or cynically hypocritical. This belief is perhaps unsurprising given Fox-Genovese's Marxist approach to the subject, but its premise—that wealth always equaled a fundamental, if hidden, pro-slavery position—fails as a standard by which to judge the women of the mid-nineteenth century South.

A reader might speculate, though there is no actual evidence for such a speculation in the text, that Mary's reaction to the slave girl's "ogling" of the white men and her "coy and modest" looks presented a sexual threat to white women like Mary and her mother-in-law.


Leah and Rachel are the wives of Jacob, the son of Isaac and Rebekah and the grandson of Abraham and Sarah, and their story can be found in Genesis 29-30. Jacob, having contracted with Laban (brother of Rebekah and father of Leah and Rachel) to marry Rachel after seven years of service, is instead given Leah as his wife. Unhappy with Leah, Jacob arranges to serve Laban for another seven years in order to gain Rachel as his second wife. The two women engage in a sort of contest in which the winner is the wife who bears Isaac the most children.

Clinton 188-196. Clinton takes pains to cite Mary Chesnut as an example of a white woman who seldom blames the victim of miscegenation.

Genovese 437.

Clinton 195.

Genovese 3-6.

Clinton 187.

By no means do I wish to suggest that Southerners had had some miraculous epiphany which caused them all to hate slavery and work toward racial harmony. What I do wish to argue is that, according to the narrative, most Northerners whom Mary Chesnut met were far from being the saviors of the former slaves. Certainly, any history of the Reconstruction period will include more and stronger examples of white Southern cruelty to African-Americans, and most people automatically and correctly link the white supremacist movements with the South. Mary, however, seems to have been fortunate enough to know, or to admit into her circle, very few of those resentful and hostile whites during the war.

Mary Chesnut’s estimation of slave ownership is remarkable accurate. According to the 1850 census, the average number of white slave-owners was 33.7%. In the region known as the Border South (which included Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri) approximately 22% of the white families owned slaves; in the Middle South (Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas), 36% of the white families owned slaves; in the Deep South (South Carolina, Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas), 43% of the white families owned slaves. It is also interesting to note that, among the white families that owned more than 100 slaves, such as Col. James Chesnut, Mary’s father-in-law, 85% were located in the Deep South while only 1% could be found in the Border South. For more statistical information on slave-owners, see Freehling, Road 18.

Faust 57-58.

Wyatt-Brown 404.

Faust 51, 57, 61. For a complete examination of women’s apprehensions of the management of slaves during the war, see Faust 53-79. One distinction that Faust makes is that, though often afraid of the task that had been thrust upon them and afraid of their family’s slaves, the majority of these women were more than capable of running their plantations. Their successful accomplishment of this task helped to end some (though clearly not all) of the paternalism that had governed their lives.
The story in which slaves poison their master, a Dr. Keitt, can be found in *MCCW* 218-219; the false-poisoning involved the Chesnut family, and is in *MCCW* 217-218; and Mrs. Cunningham's story is in *MCCW* 211.

This passage is told about Mary by Mary Preston, a narrative strategy that serves to emphasize that Mary's intimate friends well knew her thoughts and feelings about slavery.

Faust 59.
CHAPTER 5

HEROS AND SYMBOLS:

JEFFERSON AND VARINA DAVIS, AND

"BUCK AND THE WOUNDED KNIGHT"

The years following the end of the Civil War and the collapse of the Confederacy were filled with bitter arguments about the wartime behavior of politicians and soldiers. Americans North and South were buried in a flurry of books, articles, editorials, and songs written for the purpose of defending one general’s actions while accusing another of incompetence, of acclaiming the wisdom of one statesman’s decisions while denouncing another as ineffectual. The accusations were most acrimonious in the South, however, because of the heavy burden of failure. The destruction of the Confederacy, as Michael Kreyling has noted, brought about a corresponding destruction of traditional Southern narrative. Writers who endeavored to make sense of the South’s part in the war had to take another look at old ideas of heroism. It was by re-imagining the process of defeat that Southerners invented new definitions of themselves and of their region; in doing so, they also had to invent new heroes to give meaning to their experience and new symbols to represent the terrible cataclysm they had survived. In his study, Kreyling argues that the Southern hero
serves to unify the Southern people by presenting them with a collective self-portrait. Inevitably male and necessarily singular in number, the hero’s purpose in a narrative is either to defeat a particular enemy or to be defeated by a dishonorable foe.¹ Such a definition, however, is not always applicable to narratives written by Southern women,² and Mary Chesnut is one Southern female whose writing subverts this specific outline. Instead of adhering to the male pattern, her narrative has a number of heroes, her heroes are both male and female, and their purpose is to prove that while the South failed to triumph over the “morally and culturally bankrupt” North, its defeat can be redefined as a spiritual victory. Moreover, in the process of creating her characters, Mary causes some of them to become symbols of the Confederacy and of the Confederate soldiers.

During the war itself, Mary was frustrated by her seeming irrelevance. She was a woman whose health was poor enough to preclude hospital work, whose family made clear that her assistance with the plantation was unnecessary and unwanted, and whose social position ruled out taking a job as a worker in “the Departments.” True, her drawing room was one of the premier salons of the Confederacy, but Mary wanted more. In the diary, Mary’s words expose her longing to rectify this situation by going off to war: “if I was a man I should be there too!” (PMC 70). Often, her statements echo nothing so much as Beatrice’s furious protestation in Much Ado about Nothing: “O that I were a man! . . . But manhood is melted into cursies, valor into compliment, and men are only turned into tongue, and trim ones too.”³ Beatrice’s words are directed toward the men who have slandered her cousin, the male system that has
made such slander possible, and the men (particularly Benedick) who speak of helping Hero but are unwilling to challenge the status quo. Mary makes a similar remonstrance in her diary against the masculinity of war:

> If I was a man I would not doze & drink & drivel here until the fight is over in Virginia. John Chesnut came down yesterday, to go to Virginia as a private next Saturday. Poor John . . . [my] advice last January was to take all the money (he has wasted since) & make a company of his own—he was counselled against it—& here it is now. These people make me weary of humanity. Never know their own minds ten minutes. Can have no desire—no plan—no enterprise strong enough not to act. Stopped by an obstacle that would not deter a chicken.

(PMC 74)

Mary is writing just before the First Battle of Bull Run, and the men in her family have been acting dishonorably—not only have they neglected to set themselves up as leaders of their fellow countrymen by organizing companies of their own, but they are ignominiously cooling their heels at home so long that they might miss the first major battle of the war. In many ways, then, Mary’s diary testifies to the emptiness of male posturing and to her belief that she could do better if only unenterprising men were not stopping her.

It is through the revision of this diary that Mary found a way to wrest control over the war from the hands of men not only by creating her own history of it, but also by privileging distinctly non-masculine characters in her interpretation. In creating the narrative, Mary makes her most important heroes a feminized man, Jefferson Davis, and his wife, Varina Davis, and the characters whom she makes most symbolic are a young woman, Sally Buchanan (“Buck”) Preston, and a failed warrior, General John Bell (“Sam”) Hood. By portraying the two Davises as heroes, Mary would certainly
have provoked controversy if she had succeeded in making her work public before her death. Davis' image as a man and as a leader of men had been destroyed by Northerners after the war, and Southerners blamed him for the Confederate defeat and for the hardships of Reconstruction. Because of this, they treated both him and his wife with hostility. Mary's valorization of Davis preceded the reclamation of his reputation by quite a few years; it was one of the things that made Robert M. T. Hunter, during the 1870s, say that her writing was, "a little too spicy," and that, "if published just now by a So Ca lady, such a work might make the world a little too hot to hold her." The fact that her work went unpublished for another two decades and thus seemed to post-date the South's re-acceptance of Davis as a hero does not negate her own far-earlier attempts to achieve this goal. Mary also risked controversy when she valorized Mrs. Davis, converting her into an heroic figure of the Southern mother whose primary interest is in the care of the Confederate soldiers. The decision Mary made to turn Buck Preston into a symbol of the South and General Hood into a symbol of the Confederate soldier would not have been so unusual in a Southern text had she not made them also represent the Confederacy's failure. That she did so was controversial enough to make the first editors of her work act as censors, and descriptions of Buck and Gen. Hood were removed from the 1905 text. Though she was silenced for many years, Mary Chesnut uses the Davises, Buck Preston, and Gen. Hood to offer Southerners images of themselves that are either redemptive or compassionately tragic.
Jefferson Davis was a hero to many Confederates during the war itself, but the number of these supporters was nearly matched by the number of his critics. Men such as Robert Barnwell Rhett (who had wanted the presidency for himself), Lawrence Keitt, William Boyce, Henry Hammond, and William Trescot disagreed with many of the choices Davis made during the war, and they led unofficial opposition to him. Thus, from Davis' determination at the beginning of the conflict to fill his cabinet with men of comparatively moderate views to his decision to replace General Joseph Johnston with General John Bell Hood as the commander of the Army of Tennessee in mid-1864, the President's detractors lined up to take potshots at him in the legislatures and in the press. The ranks of his detractors, though, swelled nigh unto bursting at the end of the war. His critics were angered when, in the final days of the conflict, Davis successfully urged the Confederate Congress to authorize the enlistment of African-Americans. This act was coupled with his own resolution that slaves who became soldiers would win their emancipation once they had helped to achieve victory. Many Southerners, those who did not own slaves as well as those who did, greeted this new strategy with cries of outrage and disapproval. Their president had betrayed them, they believed, by making them even more vulnerable to slave rebellion and by taking away the rights of "property" holders.

Davis' reputation plummeted even further when he escaped from Richmond a week before General Robert E. Lee surrendered to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Courthouse. Unlike Lee, Davis believed desperately that the fight for Southern independence could be continued effectively through guerrilla warfare. Few of the
soldiers joined him; as Lee had known, they wanted little more than to return to their families and farms. Davis, though, had caused damage to his own reputation. As one Virginian explained, “Nothing can justify a gentleman becoming an outlaw.” The former President of the Confederacy was now a fugitive, an “outlaw,” and thus no longer a perfect gentleman.

The greatest blow to Davis’ reputation came when a false rumor began to circulate which said that, when he was captured by Union forces, he was dressed in women’s clothing. The idea of the defeated President in hoop skirts caught the imagination of the American public, and cartoons were circulated lampooning the situation. One cartoon ran with the caption, “The Last Ditch of the Chivalry, or a President in Petticoats,” and it portrays Federal soldiers, one of whom is shouting, “It’s no use trying that shift Jeff, we see your boots!”, chasing a skirted Davis, who declares, “Let me alone you blood thirsty villains: I thought your government more magnanimous than to hunt down women and children!” Another, captioned “A ‘So Called’ President in Petticoats,” shows one officer lifting Davis’ skirts with his sword, saying to a Southern female bystander, “It strikes me your old Mother wears very big Boots,” and another ripping off his bonnet. While Davis protests, “If you hadn’t taken us Women & Children by surprise we wouldn’t have surrendered without a fight,” a Southern lady says to the Union officer, “Please let my old Mother go to the Spring for some Water to wash in.” The purpose of the cartoons is, obviously, to debase Davis by stripping him of every shred of his manhood, by re-clothing him in women’s apparel, and by causing him to classify himself with the
"Women & Children." No longer a gentleman, because the gentlemen had behaved honorably by surrendering, and certainly not a lady, Davis is now an unnatural creature, a feminized man and a political transvestite, beyond the pale of society and therefore unable to claim its respect.

The second of these cartoons is the most striking. Women of the defeated South had good reason to fear the behavior of Northern troops. Rape, although seldom officially sanctioned or approved, has traditionally been one of the spoils of victory that soldiers could claim, and it was a form of violence to which more than a few women had been forced to submit. Despite (or perhaps because) of this, one would have to look far to find a newspaper that would print even an admission that rape was occurring, let alone publish a sketch that depicted it. Even the most shocking of the newspaper accounts referred to rape in such heavily veiled terms as to be incomprehensible. In the second cartoon of Davis, however, the picture of a group of seasoned fighters surrounding a beskirted figure is made even more suggestive by the fact that one of the soldiers is lifting "her" skirts and nudging her leg with an unmistakably phallus-like sword while turning and speaking respectfully to two clearly female figures. Dismantling Davis' masculinity and re-clothing him in female garments has made the former President seem to be as vulnerable to rape as are his countrywomen, and such a rape has occurred metaphorically through the transmission of this cartoon's message: Davis is "raped" of his reputation. The Davis portrayed in the cartoon cannot protect himself, let alone the women who accompany him—in fact, in a toppling of the traditional hierarchy of gender, those women seek to protect him,
telling the Yankees that he is their mother. The cartoon also contends that Davis has polluted himself with dishonor when the ladies say, “Please let my old Mother go to the Spring for some Water to wash in.” Their statement implies that, at least in from the Northern press’ point of view, the former President needs to undergo some type of cleansing or purification ritual in order to wash away the contamination of cowardliness and disgrace. Davis is now less than a true man; he is a feminized man and therefore undeserving of the respect paid to a defeated, but worthy, foe.

This rumor was deadly to Davis’ public image because to defame a man’s reputation was to divest him of his honor as a gentleman. As stated in Chapter 3, honor was one of the guiding forces of the concept of the Southern Gentleman, and, though a man could define himself as being honorable, his neighbors had to agree with his self-assessment. Honor, as Bertram Wyatt-Brown says, is the “ethical mediator between the individual and the community by which he is assessed and in which he also must locate himself in relation to others. . . . One’s neighbors serve as mirrors that return the image of oneself.” The rumors thus became a type of charivari, a shaming ritual combining righteous humor with violence, the purpose of which was to preserve the honor of the society by punishing a person who had transgressed through dishonorable behavior.\(^{12}\) The effect of the rumors and the cartoons, as well as the public debate they inspired, was that the North returned a tarnished image to Davis; their verdict was that he had rendered himself dishonorable. Many Southerners, on the lookout for a scapegoat, accepted this image and treated Davis with hostility.\(^{13}\)
When Northerners emasculated Davis by stripping him of his honor, they also, by extension, emasculated all Southern men. Drew Gilpin Faust has analyzed the issue of cross-dressing during the Civil War. It was one thing for men to dress as women during private theatricals, as they had throughout the centuries, and delight audiences by showing them a "leading lady... with a perceptible mustache." It was an entirely different matter, though, to dress in women's clothing, as more than a few furloughed Southern soldiers were forced to do, in order to escape the unexpected appearance of Northern soldiers at one's front door. Such a practice seemed cowardly behavior, even though it was a practical means of ensuring that a soldier in such a predicament could safely escape to the battlefield, where he could cause the most damage to the hated Yankees. Furthermore, hoopskirts and petticoats carried a particularly important subtext during the Civil War: they were sent to any young Southern man thought to be a laggard or a shirker who was avoiding his duty by staying away from the field of action. The humiliation of Jefferson Davis, the "President in Petticoats," then, became a humiliation of all Southern men.

After his capture, Davis was charged with treason, imprisoned for two years, and awaited trial for another two years until the charges against him were dropped; eventually, he settled down to life on his plantation in Mississippi. In 1881, Davis published his Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government, a work in which he poured out much of his bitterness about the treatment he received after the war. The people of the South were guardedly sympathetic; they were still nostalgic for the old days, but by that time many had left behind the worst of their unrelenting hatred of the
North. Though he had begun to agree intellectually with the spirit of reconciliation that was growing throughout the 1880s, he still felt emotionally unreconciled. He seemed somewhat of an anomaly, and few Southerners admitted him as a hero.¹⁵

It was not until 1886, the year that Mary Chesnut died, that Jefferson Davis was reinstated as a hero for the South. In that year, Davis made a whistle-stop tour of Alabama and Georgia with Henry Grady, a spokesperson for the rebuilding of the South, and John B. Gordon, a candidate for governor of Georgia. In Montgomery, Gordon laid out a new role for Davis by speaking to the crowd of “this man who has been made to suffer for us.” In Atlanta, Major J.C. Black continued the thought by celebrating the former Confederate president for “bearing majestically the sufferings of his people.” Finally, Grady completed the new image of Davis that the South came to embrace: “This moment, in this blessed Easter week, . . . witnessing the resurrection of these memories that for twenty years have been buried in our hearts, has given us the best Easter that we have seen since Christ was risen from the Dead.” No longer was Davis a man reviled. Now, he was a Christ-figure for the South, enduring punishment for speaking the truth, and the difficulties that he was forced to experience during the first years after the war metamorphosed into a Southern Passion Play. As a result of all of this praise, Davis’ reputation was restored. He became a hero whose popularity rivaled that of Robert E. Lee or Thomas J. (“Stonewall”) Jackson, and, at his death in 1889, he was hailed as “the representative of the ‘Lost Cause.’”¹⁶

Mary Chesnut anticipated this quasi-religious mood, this restoration of Jefferson Davis’ reputation as a hero to his cause; when she wrote her narrative, Davis
was still the degraded figure of a feminine man in the eyes of many Southerners. The impressions and thoughts about Davis that she records in her wartime diary reveal that she saw him as a man to be respected because of his position as President of the Confederacy, but also as a man with plenty of human frailties. In the revised narrative, though, she goes to great lengths to paint a portrait of Davis that transforms him into the perfect national hero, a faultless man who transcends the merely human; he is an example of what Michael Kreyling calls the “genius-hero” who “enjoys a remarkably full knowledge of his people.” As Kreyling has also observed, a hero needs to be united with “the woman ideally suited to become the mother of heroic culture,” so Mary’s narrative accompanies this picture of Jefferson Davis with that of Varina Davis, his wife in real life. While Varina Davis in the diary is a woman whom Mary respects because of her position as first lady of the Confederacy but also finds very trying and, occasionally, not quite comme il faut, her faults are smoothed over in the revised narrative, and Mary presents her not only as the perfect consort for Davis the hero, but also as a female hero in her own right.

When the war began, Mary was already on friendly terms with the Davises as a result of their acquaintance in Washington. In one of her very first diary entries, Mary reveals that she does not feel bound by friendship to refrain from complaining about Mr. Davis’ politics: “I cut out of the papers to day the inaugural of Jeff Davis—not altogether to my taste—too despondent—this thing “our necessity not choice,” as if the Union party <was to be propitiated still>“ (PMC 9). Politics, it seems, takes precedence over friendship with Mary. Since Mr. Davis is not quite the fire-eater on
the question of secession that Mary wishes he were, she is unwilling to grant him too much leeway. The issue is not that she dislikes Mr. Davis but that she believes he must first prove his case. Before she is willing to give him her devotion, Davis must demonstrate to her that he deserves the office of president by dedicating himself to the cause of Southern independence.

Mary's attitude toward Varina Davis is equally ambivalent at first. On March 2, 1861, she reports that when she went to pay her first call on Mrs. Davis, she was met “with open arms. What a chat that was, two hours. She told me all Washington news . . . We discussed the world & his wife & I could only get away by promising to come back every day” (PMC 18-19). Only a month later, though, Mary's friendship with Charlotte Wigfall, with whom she had also developed close ties in Washington, took precedence over that with Varina Davis, and the pair delighted in gossiping about Varina: “[had] a powerful talk with Mrs. Wigfall—her story of Mrs. Jeff Davis” (PMC 52). Trouble was brewing between Mrs. Wigfall and Mrs. Davis, most probably because the former thought that her husband, Louis Wigfall, was not receiving the proper amount of attention and patronage from Jefferson Davis.

Mary was caught between her two friends. At first, she tried to stay neutral in this private war by pursuing her friendship with both women. Though she spent more time with Mrs. Wigfall, Mary took pains to keep her relationship with Mrs. Davis amicable, sympathizing with her troubles and enjoying her intelligent wit (PMC 36, 66). Soon, however, Charlotte Wigfall, demanded more of Mary's time, and, though she protested—“Have mercy upon us, Oh Lord! Mrs. Wigfall wants me all the time”
she found herself spending more time with the dissatisfied Mrs. Wigfall and less time with Mrs. Davis. The rift between the Wigfalls and the Davises became a quarrel in late June and early July, and Mary sided against the presidential couple, writing on June 27, "Mrs. Davis & [Mr. Davis] are <coarse> talking people," a comment that was shortly followed by her indication of her solidarity with Mrs. Wigfall (PMC 85). The allegation that the Davises are "coarse" comes directly from Charlotte Wigfall, a secret that another lady reveals weeks later (PMC 120). Though Mary immediately crosses out the word "coarse," she has abdicated her independence of thought in favor of her partisanship with Mrs. Wigfall, at least temporarily, and has allowed another person to speak for her. Mary’s ability to let her enthusiasm for certain people or for a particular group is a type of "team spirit" that allows her to support her friends in the face of the worst detractors, even to the point that she refuses to listen to reason. It is this devotion that later helps her to redeem Jefferson Davis’ reputation earlier than most.

In the same diary entry that indicts Jefferson Davis for coarseness, Mary is also angered by his treatment of James Chesnut, Jr., her husband. James was sent by his commanding officer, General P.G.T. Beauregard, to request more ammunition from Mr. Davis, who replied that they had enough ammunition and followed his statement with what appeared to be an insult: "The President ridiculed Beauregard’s staff—& both Mr. C & I answered. The president said who ever they did not know how to fit out, they sent to Beauregard’s staff" (PMC 85-86). In all likelihood, Mr. Davis did not mean to direct his comment at James Chesnut personally. Throughout the war, Mr.
Davis had difficulties with Gen. Beauregard, and, on the following day, Mr. Davis indicated that he truly felt that James was too good to be on Beauregard's staff (PMC 86). Mary, though, had already taken the statement as a slur on the Chesnut reputation, and she added it to her list of grievances against the Davises.

The diary chronicles the increasing strain that was put on the relationship between Mary and the Davises, particularly Varina, over the next week:

Yesterday, for fear of giving offense, had to take tea a second time with Mrs. Davis. She was not civil enough, kept me bandied about for a seat. (June 28, 1861, PMC 86)

* * *

I think it provokes Mrs. <Davis> that such men praise me so. What a place this is; how every one hates each other. . . . Mrs. Davis & Jeff Davis proving themselves any thing but <well bred by their talk>. . . . These men call Mrs. Davis the Empress—Eugénie, &c, & do not like her.²⁰ (July 3, 1861, PMC 88-89)

The problem between the two women seems to be due largely to the fact that Mrs. Davis is no longer just the wife of another senator or cabinet member, she is now the first lady of the new country and as such she takes precedence over her former friends. Mary and Charlotte Wigfall appear to resent the new state of affairs. Mary's complaint that Mrs. Davis had not been "civil enough" and that she was kept "bandied about for a seat" indicates that she resents her new position of inequality. The charge that Mr. and Mrs. Davis are "any thing but well bred" is another echo of Mrs. Wigfall's accusation that the Davises are "coarse."

The crisis in Mary's relationship with Mrs. Davis came on July 4, when the pair finally confront one another:

Mrs. Davis was rude to me & I got Mrs. Preston to ask her what she meant. Ample apology made. . . . Mr. Lamar . . . Says the reason Mrs.
Davis don't like me that I take up with the Wigfalls—and besides that, wherever I sit I am some how in the way! The president was excessively complimentary. Mrs. Davis & I had a touching reconciliation. (PMC 90)

The reconciliation seemed to last for the rest of the war, despite efforts by L.Q.C. Lamar and, later, Stephen Mallory to the contrary. Mary began to use that unflattering nickname, "Eugénie," for Mrs. Davis as a private joke, and she felt that Mrs. Davis began to pay a more appropriate amount of attention to her—"had a merry time. . . Mrs. Davis cited me all the time" (PMC 97). It was not until later that Mary realized the power she and James had held as close friends of the Davises. When in Richmond, Mary was almost constantly with Mrs. Davis, and James was first an unofficial advisor and then an appointed presidential aide to Mr. Davis. Both Chesnuts had the opportunity to influence decisions made by the Davises, and both were often petitioned, by friends and by strangers, to urge some plan on Mr. Davis or to recommend some person for promotion. Mary and James were in an enviable position, and it is small wonder, then, that people such as Lamar, Mallory, and eventually Joseph and Lydia Johnston tried to poison their friendship with the Davises.

It took Mary longer to reach a similar reconciliation with Jefferson Davis. Her first loyalty was to her husband, and James, as long as he was an aide to General Beauregard, found himself caught in the crossfire between his commanding officer and his president. James' loyalty was with Beauregard immediately after the First Battle of Bull Run. Mrs. Davis held a reception following the Confederate success, and Mary reports that, during the ensuing speech-making,
The President took all the credit to himself for the victory. Said the wounded roused & shouted for Jeff Davis—and the men rallied at the sight of him & rushed on & routed the enemy. The truth is Jeff Davis was not two miles from the battlefield—but he is greedy for military fame. Mr. Chesnut was then called for & gave a capital speech. He gave the glory of the victory to Beauregard—and said if the President had not said so much for himself he would have praised him. (PMC 103)

Mary's displeasure was justified. Beauregard, although out-ranked by Joe Johnston, had been the general in command of the battlefield and thus was the most senior officer who deserved "the glory of the victory." The disgust that Mary and James feel for Mr. Davis and his unjust usurpation of Beauregard's glory comes from differing ideas of the proper behavior demanded of a politician. James is a man who refuses to promote himself, believing that honor and advancement come naturally to those who have earned them. On other occasions, Mary is greatly frustrated by this contempt that James feels for self-promotion and his reticence to request a specific posting even after his superiors have asked him to do so. Jefferson Davis has had greater experience in the political world and therefore understands realpolitik much better than James. Recognizing what a canny politician must do in order to remain in power, Davis is in many ways "greedy for military fame" because he knows that such fame is what will help him in his career as president. Smoothly, then, he inserts himself into the battle and, though the soldiers were probably cheering less even for Beauregard and more for Thomas J. Jackson, who earned his nickname of "Stonewall" at this battle, Davis takes "all" of the credit for himself.

Mary reacts to Jefferson Davis' actions in such an extreme fashion because the President's power and ability to promote himself were exactly what she felt James was
most lacking. These qualities were also what Mary wished her husband possessed. Because women were not allowed to become real politicians, Mary had projected her political ambitions onto James. Often, when she writes of James' poor management of his career, Mary will say things like, "I feel so depressed . . . for my political hopes" (PMC 165); when she hears the news that James will not be Minister to France, she quotes Shakespeare's Macduff, saying, "all my pretty chickens at one fell swoop'" (PMC 146). The allusion is, of course, to Macduff's reaction to the news that his family has been murdered by Macbeth, and it exposes just how betrayed Mary feels by what she perceives to be her husband's ineffectuality. In a sense, then, James' inaction has murdered Mary's ambitions, and she responds to the words and actions of Davis, an adept politician, with jealousy.

What made the situation between James and the President worse was that Davis and Beauregard were at loggerheads over the First Battle of Bull Run for many months. The source of their disagreement was a plan Beauregard had proposed for mounting an attack on Washington while the Union forces were scattered. While Davis argued that the General's plan had been a casual and unspecific one, Beauregard contended that it had been formal and detailed. James was, as usual, caught between the two men because he was the aide who had delivered Beauregard's plan to Davis. Mary, of course, sided with James, who vowed that what he had presented was an official proposal. Mary concludes her record of the incident with the comment that she had been writing "copies of [James'] letter to Davis—his report to Beauregard . . .
"How the Davis will [one illegible word] when they get that letter. That dream is shot." (PMC 192).

The attitude Mary takes toward Jefferson Davis is completely different at the end of the war. No longer do she and James see him as a "coarse" and grasping politician, and their respect for him is no longer reluctant. In fact, she now views him as a sacrificing hero—the image that she will promote twenty years later in her revised narrative. A great portion of the diary is missing, so the precise location of and reason for Mary's change of heart cannot be documented, but one can speculate that her devotion to Davis solidified either during the winter of 1862-1863 or later during the winter of 1863-1864 and the spring of 1864. During these months, Mary resided in Richmond and so spent much of her time in the company of the Davises. She and the first family grew to be even closer friends than they had been before, and Mary was also able to see at first hand how much of himself Davis put into his work for the Confederacy. On a more practical level, she had become very much aware of how dangerous divisiveness was to the war effort and how necessary it was to support one's leaders. Mary therefore cast her lot with the Davises and endorsed them wholeheartedly.

By the time Mary's diary picks up the threads of Davis' story, he has already been captured and imprisoned by the Union forces. No matter what might happen to Davis, the Chesnuts would always feel proud to have known and served the president, whom Mary now describes in heroic terms, and his family. Mary fervently echoes James' conviction that, even though branded a criminal, Davis, "spectacle as he was to
God & men, . . . would bear himself right nobly as a Christian, a gentleman, a patriot, a soldier, a statesman!” (PMC 251-252). In Mary’s mind, the imputation that Davis had been captured wearing women’s clothing was a ridiculous attempt to defame the former Confederate President while at the same time correct the scandalous memories of the late Abraham Lincoln’s arrival in Washington. Those hoopskirts and petticoats in which the Northern press dressed Jefferson Davis, Mary writes, “were the same old blanket shawl & water proof cloak I have seen him in & sat by him Sunday after Sunday at church in Richmond. That [lie] was an offering to Lincoln’s ghost & his Scotch cap” (PMC 257). Mary is one Southerner who is not cowed by her president’s humiliation.

Mary’s fierce loyalty to the Davises is subdued only by her sad grief over the treatment that her friends receive at the hands of the North. When she remembers a minister’s prayer that Davis “might have strength to bear all the tyranny base men could put upon him, strength to be true to himself, true to us, to his own fame, to his god & his country . . . ,” she is so moved that she is unable to continue writing (PMC 257). She goes on to describe his plight in almost Biblical terms: “I see he is put into a dungeon without light. Two men watch him inside his den by day & by night. His parting with his wife & children sneered at—her bitter tearless agony chronicled” (PMC 257). In Mary’s mind, Davis has become a second Daniel thrown into the lions’ den, in this case a den overseen by Northern military police, because he has spent years fighting the heretical (to Southerners) notion that the South cannot leave the Union. Furthermore, Mary hopes that, like Daniel, Davis will walk safely out of his dark den
not only untouched by Northern hands, but also still the faithful representative of the South's rejection of such heresy. Finally, Mary predicts Davis' fate at the hands of post-war public opinion: "Alas Jeff Davis . . . The loser pays! It is he who has to pay all scores, run up by whomsoever; on him must all breakage & charges fall" (PMC 258). She realizes, then, that Davis will not be as successful as Daniel, and she believes that though he is blameless, Davis will be forced to pay for what the United States government views as the sins of the South.

When Mary revised her narrative, she made Jefferson and Varina Davis into heroic figures right from the very beginning. Gone is her belief that Mr. Davis is "too despondent" about the break with the Union and her fear that he is not enthusiastic enough about the fight for Southern independence. Now, any criticism of his behavior and his policies comes only from others, particularly those whom Mary has already found uncongenial to herself and her friends. Judge Thomas Jefferson Withers, Mary's uncle-in-law, is one critic who condemns Mr. Davis frequently and harshly, accusing him not only of helping the Provisional Congress to subvert the new Confederate Constitution, but also of incompetence, stupidity, and even drunkenness (MCCW 8, 609). Whenever a person denounces some action or personal attribute of Jefferson Davis, Mary immediately turns that attack back upon them. For example, when Mary discusses the "venomousness" of Judge Withers' attitude toward Davis, she then says, "What a pity to bring the spites of the old Union into this new one. It seems to me already men are willing to risk an injury to our cause if they may in so doing hurt Jeff Davis" (MCCW 12).
Attacks upon Davis, then, become occasions for a discussion of the dangers of dissent. Mary shows that criticism of Davis is not just ridiculous carping, but that it verges on the seditious, and its cumulative effect was, in fact, the failure of the Confederacy. Those people, like Judge Withers, who attacked the President and his decisions instead of presenting their ideas in a respectful fashion were the ones truly responsible for the South's loss because they created a climate of divisiveness which kept the South from acting as the unified nation it needed to be in order to win its independence. Thus, since the South's failure to gain its independence from the North is the fault of all those Southerners who refused to lend their support to their legally elected leader and to their officially sanctioned government, Davis is absolved from any blame for the Confederacy's defeat and Mary's crafting of Davis into the heroic embodiment of the Confederacy makes perfect sense.

Mary transforms her own criticism of Mr. Davis into unalloyed devotion; "Jeff Davis [will] save us," emerges as her habitual refrain in the narrative (MCCW 79). Just as her enthusiastic partisanship with Charlotte Wigfall had caused her to despise Mr. and Mrs. Davis in the early summer of 1861, the unswerving fidelity to Mr. Davis that she exhibits in her diary at the end of the war colors everything she writes about her "honored chief" in her revised text (MCCW 649). Carried away by the drama of her ardor, Mary and Caroline Preston, one of Varina Davis' ladies and Mary's close friend, pledge their support to Mr. Davis:

We may be flies on the wheel. We know our insignificance. But Mrs. Preston and myself have entered into an agreement—our oath is recorded on high. We mean to stand by our president and to stop all
faultfinding with the powers that be—if we can, where we can—be they
generals or cabinet ministers.

Above all, the head of our government—there!!
Magnanimous, if we are feeble! (MCCW 142)

It is noteworthy that Mary, who has long recognized the influence she had with the Davises, insists upon a pose of feminine “insignificance” and feebleness. While she might not have had the power to “stop all faultfinding with the powers that be,” she certainly made a point of refuting any criticisms leveled at Confederate leaders. Ever conscious of the way in which she, and those about whom she writes, would be perceived by her readers, Mary is well aware that to reveal that she, a mere woman without any function in the government, could have affected the decisions that the president made would damage her efforts to rewrite Jefferson Davis’ tarnished image. After all, only a “President in Petticoats” would listen to a mere woman’s advice. She therefore restricts her own role relative to Davis in the narrative to that of a supporting character—one who is “magnanimous” but “feeble.”

Mary Chesnut revises the portrait of Varina Davis in the narrative even more than she did that of Mr. Davis. She downplays the feud between Mrs. Davis and Mrs. Wigfall, now calling it merely “the little unpleasantness” (MCCW 113), and she makes no real mention in the narrative of her own quarrel with Varina. In its place, Mary takes great pains to demonstrate her great admiration for Mrs. Davis.

Once for all, let me say—Mrs. Davis has been so kind to me—I can never be grateful enough. . . . She is so clever, so brilliant indeed, so warmhearted, and considerate toward all who are around her. After becoming accustomed to the spice and spirit of her conversation, away from her things seem flat and tame for awhile. (MCCW 429)
As with her reworking of her interactions with Mr. Davis, Mary's overall goal of heroizing the president's reputation means that her picture of the first lady cannot contain the slightest indication of censure. All must be complimentary; Mrs. Davis must always be depicted as "so clever, so brilliant."

Mary's tribute to Mrs. Davis still has a ring of untruth, however. Her words—"Once for all"—sound as if she were declaring her admiration in the face of someone's protests to the contrary. The phrase "I can never be grateful enough" also hints at something more than a humble citizen's verbal prostration before her president's wife. For one thing, no one ever accused Mary of humility; if anything, she erred on the side of arrogance. It is unlikely that a person so "warmhearted" and "considerate toward all who are around her" would inspire feelings of eternal gratitude in a second, and distinctly un-humble, person unless that second person had some reason to feel apologetic. Though Mary has eliminated any incident that would uncover her jealousy of the Davises, a hint of her former feelings comes through in her apologetic tone.

Mary was, perhaps, aware of this problem, so she also provides abundant proof in the narrative that Mrs. Davis returned Mary's affection. For instance, Mary includes in the narrative a letter dated October 10, 1864, in which Varina writes to Mary of "my very sincere love for you" and her fear of the separation that defeat might bring: "I cannot bear to think we shall grow further apart until you forget me" (MCCW 664). In addition, Mary makes very clear her belief that any problem an intelligent person might have had with Mrs. Davis could only be the fault of those jealous of her position; Mary herself is, of course, no longer numbered as one of these jealous
people. When William Trescot reported that Mrs. Davis had spoken "rough truths" about Mary, she shrugged aside his words as being false and malicious with the comment, "I wonder why he hates Mrs. Davis so" (MCCW 325).

Once she has negated her former opinion of the Davises and has shown the couple to be amiable and admirable, Mary goes on to endow them with the qualities necessary to be good leaders. Jefferson Davis is no longer seen to be a politician greedy for adulation. In reference to the speech Davis made after the First Battle of Bull Run (the one in which he "took all the credit to himself for the victory"), Mary now says simply, "His enthusiasm was contagious." With deference to the vast amount of experience he had accumulated as a U.S. Senator and Secretary of War, she also tells her readers not that he was "two miles [away] from the battle field," but that "He is an old war-horse—and scents the battle fields from afar" (MCCW 109).

Jefferson Davis possesses, in the narrative, all of the qualities of a good president. He is respected, honored, and loved by the citizens; the only ones who dislike him are those people (certainly not the Chesnuts!) who are simply jealous of his position of power. He is wise, though the burden of knowledge that his wisdom places upon him is an unenviable one.

After his experience of the fighting qualities of Southerners in Mexico, he believes that we will do all that can be done by pluck and muscle, endurance, and dogged courage—dash and red-hot patriotism, &c. And yet his tone was not sanguine. There was a sad refrain running through it all. For one thing, either way, he thinks it will be a long war. . . . Then [he] said: before the end came, we would have many a bitter experience. He said only fools doubted the courage of the Yankees or their willingness to fight when they saw fit. And now we have stung their pride—we have roused them till they will fight like devils.

(MCCW 83)
In this passage, Mary presents Davis as a type of prophet who has predicted the South’s predicament during the course of the war. True, Southerners were plucky and dogged, courageous and “red-hot” patriots, but the Northerners were just as courageous and willing to fight for a worthy cause. Nor is Davis’ “sad refrain” apocryphal. He had accepted the position of president only with great reluctance, perhaps sensing, as Mary well knows from the vantage point of two decades of hindsight, that Southerners were facing a long war, that the Northerners would “fight like devils,” and that the South had more “bitter experiences” in store for it that most of its citizens could ever have imagined.

The strengths Mr. Davis exhibits as a politician are highlighted in the narrative by what Mary believes is his personal bravery. During a particular battle (most likely one of The Seven Days' battles) in July of 1862, Mary describes what she has heard from her husband about Mr. Davis’ actions:

Mr. Chesnut says he was riding with the president... General Lee rode up and, bowing politely, said, “Mr. President, am I in command here?”
“Yes.”
“Then I forbid you to stand here under the enemy’s guns. Any exposure of a life like yours is wrong. And this is useless exposure. You must go back.”
Mr. Davis answered, “Certainly I will set an example of obedience to orders—discipline must be maintained, &c—” but he did not go back. (MCCW 411)

That Jefferson Davis was risking not only his own life, but also the stability of the Confederate government by putting himself in range of the Federal guns is an undeniable truth. It is also true that General Lee’s orders had to be obeyed because he
was in command of the battlefield, a fact which gave him the right (and the duty) to order Davis off the field. Nevertheless, the leader of a people who believed so firmly in chivalry and the importance of courage had to demonstrate his own bravery at some point, and, as a writer trying to prove to posterity that Jefferson Davis was a hero, Mary Chesnut had to provide evidence of this. Davis' reluctance to leave the battlefield thus becomes a testimony of his personal courage.

Mary is wise in linking Mr. Davis' name with that of Robert E. Lee, the man whose reputation had always been spotless in the eyes of Southerners (and many Northerners, too). Shortly after she describes this incident, she connects their names again. In this instance, she addresses the issue of the jockeying for position, an issue she thought plagued the South's government and military, by saying, "both Jeff Davis and Robert E. Lee think it morbid ambition—that everlasting wish to rise. They think men should serve their country from motives of pure patriotism" (MCCW 440). Absent from this statement is any evidence of irony, despite the fact that both Davis and Lee occupied the highest positions in the government and in the military. One must ask, "to what other position does Mary Chesnut believe Mr. Davis could possibly rise?" The only answer is that she wishes him to be, as was Gen. Lee after the war, removed from the world of mere mortals and placed in a pantheon of Southern heroes. To that end, then, Mary describes both Mr. and Mrs. Davis, in her narrative, in super-human terms, choosing for her story events that will show the couple caring, suffering, and sacrificing for the people of the South.
Mary gives an account, in a passage of her narrative dated July 24, 1861, of a discussion she had with William Trescot, whose interpretation of political in-fighting held that the representatives from South Carolina were beginning a “disintegration” of the government (MCCW 121). Mary responds to Trescot’s news with an intriguing comparison:

Like Martin Luther, [Mr. Davis] had a right to protest and free himself from the thralldom of Roman Catholic Church, but when everybody began to protest against Luther—as it seemed good to them—freely exercising their right of private interpretation—!

Seceding can go on indefinitely with the dissatisfied seceders. (MCCW 121)

The simile links Jefferson Davis with Martin Luther at the time of the Reformation in Europe, a time when the Roman Catholic Church had held an almost monolithic power over the spiritual lives of Europeans. Mary (who is a Protestant) believes that Jefferson Davis, once a member of the United States Congress and of the Cabinet, had grown as tired of the autocratic power of the United States government as had Martin Luther, once a devout priest, of the abuses of the Catholic episcopacy. Like Luther with the Church, then, Davis had the right—even the duty—to “protest and free himself from the thralldom” of the United States and to establish his own reformed domain. Such a comparison launches Davis into a much more central role than was actually true. While Martin Luther was an instrumental force in triggering the Reformation in Europe, Davis had neither instigated nor led the South’s exodus from the Union. In Mary Chesnut’s narrative, however, Davis is the representative figure
and the guiding genius of the Southern cause. It is essential that she re-cast him as the central force behind it, as the Martin Luther of secession.

The comparison between Jefferson Davis and Martin Luther is sparked by Mary's frustration with the inability of many Southern leaders to cease what she views to be their petty and destructive grappling for power. Whereas she had complained in her diary about Davis' political maneuvering and the seeming ease with which he "took all the credit" for the happy outcome of events, Mary now deplores the lack of support that Davis receives from too many Confederates. Although Mary recognizes that all citizens possess the "right of private interpretation," the right to think as they please about political affairs, she frequently expresses her concern about the damage such disunity could cause to the Confederacy should "Seceding... go on indefinitely with the dissatisfied seceders."

As the war in the narrative draws to its close, and the Confederate government wastes more and more time in futile argument, Mary's text places more and more of the responsibility for the Southern defeat on those leaders who failed to support Jefferson Davis. In November of 1864, Davis called for the government to purchase a large number of slaves and put them to work in noncombatant jobs, thus freeing for combat duty the white men who had previously held those positions; if that were not enough, Davis said, the slaves should fight alongside the white men for the defense of the Confederacy. In both cases, any slave who had helped in the war effort would be freed after the war had been won. Mary agreed with Davis, as did James Chesnut, Jr., who wanted to arm and send selected slaves to the front at least as early as 1862.
(MCCW 313), but such an idea was horrifying to the majority of Southerners because they feared to arm and, after the war, to free the slaves. In response to Davis’ call, Mary says, “the temper of the [South Carolina] House roused, states rights rampant—we are about to secede again from the Confederacy. No doubt the Devil raved of ‘Devil’s rights’ in Paradise” (MCCW 679). Though the Confederacy during the final months of the war is far from being a Paradise, it was all that the Southerners had, and Mary, with the benefit of hindsight, is well aware that the hardships and the griefs that their own government asks them to endure are nothing compared to what life would (and will) be like after a Union victory. Thus, those South Carolinian representatives who argue that Davis, the President of the Confederacy, has no right to enforce an arming of the slaves are in Mary’s eyes nothing but Devils bent upon seceding from Paradise and establishing what would amount to a Miltonic Pandemonium in her home state.

As Mary’s condemnation of those who would break apart the Confederacy grows, she continues her hero-building, comparing Davis to Noah and the situation of the South to that of the earth at the time of the Biblical Flood. When, in late 1864, the South Carolina House of Representatives delayed taking action on a bill that proposed to draft men for home defense, Mary writes, “Through the deep waters we wade.... The enemy thundering at their gates—they can still fool themselves with words” (MCCW 680). Since both she and James support Davis and believe, as he does, that they are losing the war, Mary finds it strange that some people are unable to believe that calamity could strike the South. In her narrative, Davis is like Noah, almost
divinely knowledgeable about what must be done in order to survive (arming the slaves), but many of his fellow Southerners mock his words of warning. The South Carolinian legislators, Mary writes, are like “the men who would not join Noah in his Ark-building” (MCCW 680). A few weeks later, Mary returns to this reference to Noah: while the legislature debates “states rights and the encroachments of the Confederate government,” she writes that the “deep waters [are] closing over us. And we are . . . like the outsiders at the time of the Flood” (MCCW 694). The problem, here, is clear: unlike Noah, Davis cannot save anyone without the assistance of the Southern legislators.

In the eyes of Mary Chesnut, a Protestant Christian, both Noah and Martin Luther were men who were given a particular truth by God, experienced suffering at the hands of unbelievers, and were finally rewarded by God for their faith. Mary continues to write about Davis in terms of religious suffering: “They have made Jeff Davis their scapegoat. For their sins he is tied to the altar. We made the altar. We made the altar or burning bush—whatever that goat has to come out of” (MCCW 609-610). At first glance, this fairly incoherent image seems to portray Davis as another Isaac, whose almost-sacrifice prefigured that of Christ’s. Davis is thus an innocent sacrifice that intractable Southerners are willing to offer in exchange for their freedom from the United States just as Abraham was willing to kill his son as a sacrifice to God. In this sense, Mary seems to imply, Davis will ultimately be saved because his sacrifice is not necessary. She was, however, writing with full knowledge of Davis’ fate in the immediate post-war years, so she also makes Davis into the goat (in the
bible, it was a ram) that God gives to Abraham for a sacrifice instead of Isaac, thus making Davis a true “scapegoat” for the Southern rebellion. Finally, she links Davis with the burning bush from which God spoke to Moses about saving the Israelites from their enslavement by the Egyptians, thus making him into a type of mouthpiece or prophet of divine revelation whose decisions, though unpleasant or unpopular, speak of the true course by which the South can be delivered from the oppressive tyranny of the United States government.

Mary Chesnut develops her use of religious metaphor to describe Jefferson Davis in her narrative even further. As the final days of the war approach and Davis is besieged by citizens frantic to assign blame for the failure of the armies to withstand the onslaught of the Union forces, she begins to compare him to Jesus Christ:

Colonel Childs says the mob runs after Joe Johnston and curses Jeff Davis.
"We were never of the mob," was all I had to say.
"When you give the mob its choice, it selects Barabas and crucifies our Savior."
"Of course, a mob murders those who fail—or appear to do so. They do not wait to find out the truth." (MCCW 753)

The narrative goes on to cite the testimony of clergymen as witnesses to the appropriateness of Davis’ Christ-like perfection and his appropriateness as a sacrifice. One, a Northern-born Episcopal priest, calls Jefferson Davis “one of the purest and best of men” (MCCW 819). Immediately after this, Mary quotes another minister, who says of Davis, “He is a spectacle to gods and men. . . . He is the martyr of our cause” (MCCW 819).
The meaning of these metaphors is unmistakable. Mary makes Jefferson Davis the central figure within the Confederacy. Her transformation of Davis seeks to ensure that the reader will see that it is Davis who, like Martin Luther, has been responsible for envisioning the need for and precipitating the break with the United States government as well as overseeing the formation of a new country based upon a purer idea of democracy. It is he who, like Noah, is responsible for saving as much of the good part of the South from the destruction of the war. Finally, it is he who, like Christ, must sacrifice himself and become “a martyr to [the Confederate] cause” in the hopes that the truth of that cause will someday be widely acknowledged and accepted.

In short, Davis has seen the need for separation, has instigated the break with the United States, has conceived of and nurtured the new Confederate nation, and is willing to endure criticism and to sacrifice himself in the hope that it, and its citizens, may flourish instead. The fact that Davis’ own peers curse him is not surprising to Mary because such a rejection, such a denial of worth by his fellow Confederates, is an integral part of his martyrdom. Mary’s text relies upon her audience’s awareness of (and perhaps their feelings of guilt about) the humiliation and pain that Jefferson Davis had to endure after the war at the hands of Northerners—his imprisonment, his loss of fortune, and above all his feminized reputation—combined with their own post-war repudiation of him. In writing of Davis in terms that are decidedly religious and which refer to him as a type of national god, then, Mary Chesnut transforms Jefferson Davis into the martyr-hero of his country whose suffering has made his sacrifice real and not simply metaphoric.
At the same time that Mary Chesnut’s text heroizes Jefferson Davis, it also attends to the character of Varina Davis. Subject to the same restrictions as other women, Mrs. Davis was excluded from military affairs and political debates. According to her wartime diary, Mary Chesnut (hardly one who should have been pointing an accusing finger) seemed to believe that most of Mrs. Davis’ time was taken up with gossip, scandal, and posturing. That view of Mrs. Davis is missing entirely from the revised narrative, and Varina’s role in the narrative is similar to that of her husband’s. Her character represents all of the mothers who send their boys off to fight the war; she becomes the mother-hero who will spur the troops and civilians into action and who will succor them in their times of distress.

As Drew Gilpin Faust has noted, a mother’s role during the war was cheerfully to urge her sons on to battle in spite of the very real risk of losing them forever. Those who went willingly were valued accordingly; those who straggled or shirked without any good excuse were scorned. As one Virginian woman wrote to her son, “I am ready to offer you up in defense of your country’s rights and honor; and I now offer you, a beardless boy of 17 summers,—not with grief, but thanking God that I have a son to offer.” The estimation of a mother’s value thus became intertwined with her son’s willingness to go to war. Though one can safely surmise that the claim of sending a son to battle “not with grief” is a facade assumed by the mother in order to hide a deeply felt grief from her child, many believed that a good mother would “offer up” even a “beardless boy” as a possible sacrifice for the South’s “rights and honor”
while a bad mother, by contrast, would find excuses to keep her otherwise healthy son tied to her apron strings at home.

Varina Davis becomes, in Mary Chesnut’s narrative, an exemplar for other mothers. Because Mrs. Davis’ boys were far too young to go to war themselves, Mary shows her persuading other men to do their duty. For instance when one man explained how the hated Yankees had managed to make him do something by kicking and dragging him around, Mary has Mrs. Davis give a withering reply:

Mrs. Davis said in her sweetest tones,
“Why? Merely because you were kicked?”
“No—not exactly that. But I think I should have kicked and fought them, and then they would have killed me. One can die but once.” (MCCW 467-468)

The purpose of Mrs. Davis’ reply is obviously to depict her as shaming an all-too-accommodating Southerner into an attitude of brave defiance. While it is true that “One can die but once,” it would seem reasonable to most soldiers that their lives should be given up in battle as they were actively pursuing their cause. Forget the fact, though, that this soldier would probably have been shot or held prisoner longer had he defied his Northern captors, and forget the fact that any dead Southerner was one less soldier fighting for the Confederacy’s cause. The only good Confederate soldier, it seems, is one ready to defy Yankees even if it means his own senseless death.

Mrs. Davis offers herself, in contrast to this soldier, as an example of bravery. How doubly shaming for him to be rebuked by a helpless woman who appears to be braver than he. Mary Chesnut ends the vignette there, with Mrs. Davis’ stirring words
ringing in her readers' ears, not because she is unsympathetic to that shamed soldier but because her purpose is to depict Mrs. Davis in her role as mother to the nation. Like the lady from Virginia, Varina Davis is committed to the "defense of [the South's] rights and honor," and, unable to thank God that she has a son to offer at that time, Mrs. Davis acts as a substitute mother to the soldiers by urging them on to bravery.

Most of these soldiers found themselves very far from home for the first time in their lives, and Mary Chesnut highlights the kindness and consideration toward these men that she felt was typical of Varina Davis. Some of Mrs. Davis' acts of kindness were simple, such as when she would personally return the belongings of dead soldiers to their families (MCCW 504). At other times, she would take great risks in order to provide comfort for those military men with whom she came in contact, as she did on the night of May 3-4, 1863, during the battle of Chancellorsville, when the cavalry troops of General George Stoneman came within a few miles of Richmond.²⁶ That night, Mary Chesnut describes sitting on the "white marble steps" out in front of the presidential mansion, watching with quiet interest as the soldiers on picket duty come "spurring to and from the door as fast as they could ride," swiftly bringing messages to the president and then speeding back to the troops defending Richmond with his answers. When Mrs. Davis comes out with the news that the Union forces were only three miles away, Mary begins to pray in shock until the first lady calms and asks her to assist her in providing succor for the men:

We sat up—officers coming and going—and we gave them what hasty refreshment we could. . . . Finally, in the excitement of the scene and

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the constant state of activity and constant change of persons, we forgot the danger. The officers told us such jolly stories and seemed in such fine spirits—gradually we took heart, too. There was not a moment’s rest for anyone. Mrs. Davis said something more amusing than ever. “We look like frightened women and children, don’t we?”

(MCCW 478)

In this scene, Mary makes Mrs. Davis into a pillar of relief around whom the tired soldiers could rally for comfort and refreshment. Mrs. Davis treats the soldiers with the kindness of a mother, and the men respond with jokes and “jolly stories.” In the midst of great danger, Mrs. Davis and the soldiers give one another the gift of temporary forgetfulness.

The Varina Davis of Mary’s narrative is not only the friend of the soldiers, she is also an intercessor between them and the impersonal, often harsh, system of military justice. In what is perhaps one of the most wrenching scenes of the narrative, Mrs. Davis meets with a woman seeking a pardon for her husband who stood accused of desertion. “Shabbily dressed, chalk white and pinched in her face,” the woman has nevertheless attempted to dress up for the occasion, though the effect is more “forlorn” than formal, yet her “hands hung listlessly down by her side” (MCCW 610). She explains repeatedly that one of her daughters had died, that the family was ill (because of the dreadful weather) with one son more sick than the rest, that food was scarce, and that she had no help to run the farm.

When the Southern army traveled close to their home, this woman had written to her husband, “if you want to see the baby alive, come. If they won’t let you—come
anyhow" (MCCW 611). Unable to obtain furlough, her husband had snuck away to see his family:

He only intended to stay one day, but we coaxed and begged him, and then he stayed and stayed, and he was afraid afterward to go back. He did not mean to be a coward nor to desert. So he went on the gunboats on the river, to serve there. And then some of his old officers saw him. And they would not believe his story. I do not know if he told them anything. He does not talk much any time. They are going to shoot him. I would not let him alone. You see, I did it. Don’t you see?

(MCCW 611)

Varina Davis agrees that the husband had not meant “to be a coward nor to desert,” and she immediately goes to Mr. Davis and obtains a pardon for the doomed man. When she is given the pardon, the woman breaks down with relief and happiness. As Mary has presented Jefferson Davis in religious images, making him into a hero of Christ-like proportions, she also portrays Varina Davis in equally religious images, making her into a figure of the Virgin Mary who cares so deeply for the citizens of the South that she will do anything to help them. Mrs. Davis’ position in Mary Chesnut’s iconography of the Confederacy, then, is that of a woman ready and able to mediate between soldiers and their superiors, to intercede in military affairs for the sake of these poor sinners, and to secure their pardon from her husband, the nation’s highest voice of authority.

It is curious to note that Mary Chesnut’s response to the woman’s plight and Mrs. Davis’ intercession is reminiscent of her response to seeing Colonel Chesnut weeping beside his dead wife’s bed:27 she writes that she “fled—rather than blind myself” (MCCW 611). Nor does it seem to be an accident that her story about Varina
Davis helping the wife of the accused deserter directly follows the scene of Colonel Chesnut’s grief. Of the first incident, Mary writes that it was something “never meant for me to hear”; of the second, she implies that it was an encounter that she was not meant to see and that her participation could “blind” her. Both incidents are very dramatic, and the strongest emotions they convey are grief, remorse, and sorrow. Unlike Colonel Chesnut mourning for his wife, however, the woman whom Mrs. Davis has helped now has hope for the future. One must ask why Mary includes her emotional response to this scene of suffering, a scene that she implies is too private even for her own ears, in her very public text.

The two passages are found in the final quarter of the narrative, well after the South’s fortunes had peaked and started to decline rapidly. Writing many years after the end of the war, Mary cannot escape her knowledge of what will happen to her family and friends in the succeeding months. Mary’s character in the narrative recoils from her weeping father-in-law because his grief about his wife’s death has become a symbol of the destruction of the pleasant way of life embodied by the Southern Gentleman and Lady. Her flight from the presence of his grief is thus an echo of her desire to escape the horrors of life during Reconstruction, the difficulties and pains that she experiences as she revises her narrative. Similarly, then, the goodness that Mrs. Davis has shown and the hope that her actions have inspired in the poor wife of the accused deserter are unbearable to Mary because she can take no joy in the man’s pardon, she can find no hope for the future of a country led by the kind, but doomed,
Davises. She knows only too well what will shortly be the fate of the South, of its people, and of its leaders, so she must flee from the presence of hope and joy.

Mary Chesnut’s narrative was not published in any form until well after her death. Although she was thus unable to use her voice to lead those who called for a renewed respect for Jefferson and Varina Davis until after that process had already begun, her work, even in the truncated form of the two editions of A Diary from Dixie, has been received as “a masterpiece” within the field of Civil War literature. Mary presents both Jefferson and Varina Davis as larger-than-life characters in her narrative whose concern is always for the well-being of Southerners and the Confederacy. Any contradiction between the needs of the individuals and the demands of the nation—any connection between, for instance, the men whom Varina Davis comforted during the battle of Chancellorsville and the men whom Jefferson Davis had sent to die there—are glossed over by the narrative. Nor does Mary allow a hint of her own difficulties with the Davises to creep into what is otherwise a celebration of their super-human goodness and wisdom. Throughout her narrative, Mary shows the Davises as giving everything they had, even their fortune and their freedom, for the betterment of the Confederacy and its people. She makes clear that, because of their great sacrifices, they are heroes to whom post-war Southerners owe respect and deference.

These images of Jefferson and Varina Davis also present Southerners with a flattering image of themselves. Mary Chesnut’s view of the couple, especially her picture of Mr. Davis, reverses the image that the North presented to the South at the end of the war. No longer do Southerners have to feel ashamed of a “President in
Petticoats,” a leader alleged to have run away from surrender dressed as a woman, or of themselves for being represented by such a leader. Instead, they see a man of whom they can be proud; now they can hold their heads up and say to the world, “This is the man we chose to lead us, and, though we were unable to win our freedom, he bore himself nobly and well.” In choosing to redirect her readers’ attention away from popular heroes like Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson, Mary argues that heroism is not just for those who were involved in the military side of the war. Though they are given a primary role in the narrative, Jefferson and Varina Davis can also be seen as being the most visible examples of non-military people whose actions were heroic. If such widely disparate characters as political leaders and mothers can be seen as heroes, then the actions of anyone who honestly tried to promote the Confederate war effort and who sacrificed their own happiness or well-being for the cause of the war could be called heroic, too. Thus, what is perhaps most important about Mary Chesnut’s heroizing of the Davises is that their reinstatement as people worthy of respect reflects back upon all Southerners, allowing them to partake of Jefferson and Varina’s reputation for strength, honor, courage, kindness, and wisdom. In redeeming the Davises, Mary’s narrative offers redemption to all Southerners, too.

The view of the Confederacy that Mary gives in her narrative is that of a wonderful society that is as beautiful as it is doomed. This is not a particularly startling perspective to adopt about the war; indeed, one of the major explanations by proponents of the Lost Cause theory held that the Confederacy was doomed because it was too beautiful to survive. Mary’s text is unique among other examples of Lost
Cause literature because, while other writers would end their work on a note of hope for the future of the South—either within the Union or through another, and more successful, attempt at independence—she refuses to mitigate the sense of tragedy and sadness that she creates in her narrative through the relationship of Sally Buchanan ("Buck") Preston and General John Bell ("Sam") Hood. In the text, Sam Hood is the symbol of the honorable Confederate officer: a man who fights valiantly and honestly for his cause, but who is overwhelmed by misfortune at the end of the war and who rides with dignity into obscurity. Brave, patriotic, chivalric, determined to achieve noble ambitions in spite of terrible wounds, and eventually gracious in defeat—this is the portrait of Hood, and through him of the Southern soldier, that Mary gives her readers. In her narrative, Mary characterizes Buck Preston, a well-born South Carolinian who is a particular friend of hers, not as a simple girl or even as an archtypical young lady, but as a symbol of the Southern Confederate nation as a whole. Buck is thus not only the woman whom Sam Hood loves, she is also the symbolic cause for which he fights. In the narrative, Hood’s love for and courtship of Buck becomes a metaphor for the Southern soldier’s devotion to and willingness to fight for the Confederacy, and his ardent pursuit of her represents the faithfulness with which that soldier sought to make the Confederate cause successful.30

To recreate Buck Preston as a symbol of the South was not an unusual strategy for an American author to take. Much, if not most, of the fiction written about the American Civil War, particularly those works that concentrate on the effect that the war had on Southern society, contains a female character who embodies the author’s
view of the South. The heroines of Augusta Evans Wilson’s *Macaria: Or Altars of Sacrifice* (1864) represent the sensitive and intelligent South that Wilson thought was the mysterious inheritor of the world’s culture. The heroine of John William De Forest’s *Miss Ravenel’s Conversion from Secession to Loyalty* (1867) depicts the selfish, barbaric, and hedonistic South that De Forest believed needed to be civilized and brought into line by the North. Ellen Glasgow’s heroine in *The Battle-Ground* (1902) symbolizes the old-world gentility mixed with a new work ethic that made up post-war Southern society. Margaret Mitchell’s famous Scarlett O’Hara in *Gone with the Wind* (1936) is an emblem of the brash, materialistic, and inward-looking New South. Even Allan Gurganus’s heroine in *The Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All* (1989) is a symbol of the tough and long-lived endurance of the South.

In her own narrative, Mary Chesnut makes Buck Preston into a figure representing the South for which General Hood (and, in this metaphor, all of the Southern soldiers whom he represents) is fighting. Like other women, Mary was not allowed on the battlefield, so she concentrates her study of the Confederacy on the actions of its high society where her metaphor of Sam and Buck plays itself out. As a “faithful watcher” of “men and manners,” she declares that the social realm is predominantly “an enlarged field for character study,” and that it operates according to the same dynamics affecting armies and politicians (*MCCW* 690). Within this “enlarged field,” she says, “Flirtation” and “flattery . . . dashed back and forward” are the main methods of conducting any type of “business” transactions (*MCCW* 690). Although she claims to deal only with the affairs of general society, she makes sure
that the social interactions of her characters mimic the attack and retreat, the feint and
dodge, of the Southern and Northern armies on the even larger "field" of battle as they
entice their enemy into traps and flirt with danger and death.

Within this realm, the most successful campaigner and "business" woman is
Buck Preston. In the narrative, she is a heroine beloved and desired by male characters
as much as real-life soldiers loved their idea of the South. As Anne Firor Scott has
observed, the image of the ideal upper class young woman had changed little in the
South between the publication of Baldesar Castiglione's The Book of the Courtier (in
1528; the first English version, translated by Sir Thomas Hoby, was published in
1561) and the time of the American Civil War. The attributes required of her—beauty,
purity, sweetness, modesty, obedience to her parents, kindness to those less fortunate
than herself, etc.—are similar to those of earlier times with a few obvious exceptions.
Almost every heroine of Civil War fiction is expected to flirt and to have spunk,
gumption, or feistiness. Silence is not always demanded of her, and she is often
admired for her ability to stand up for her beliefs, even if those beliefs are less than
admirable themselves and even if it is a man whom she defies. Above all, a Civil War
heroine is distinguished by her "capacity to 'create a magic spell' over any man in her
vicinity."  

Accordingly, Mary characterizes Buck as a classic Southern Civil War heroine
who has all of the requisite qualities. Not only is Buck beautiful, flirtatious, obedient,
and, as Mary says, "the very sweetest woman I ever knew," but her charm also gives
her an oddly potent power over men: "Buck . . . had a knack of being 'fallen in love

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with' at sight and of never being 'fallen out of love' with" (MCCW 430). Mary believes that such "a knack" of charming men is one of the commendable virtues a woman can have because, in her formula, a womanly prowess within the "enlarged field" of society mimics male military and political artistry in the fields of battle and government. The fact that Buck is also a good friend of and well liked by many other young women gives her character stability and defends her from unkind charges of capriciousness that might otherwise have been leveled at her.

The process of casting Buck as a symbol of the South involves removing her from the mundane world of ordinary male-female relationships and giving her an eerie type of power, one that takes Anne Firor Scott’s "magic spell" and turns it into something entirely different. This uncanny power seems appropriate for a representative of a society that is marked at once by a quest for greatness and by the constant tragedy of death. Immediately after describing Buck's ability to attract men, Mary reveals that this power of attraction has a dreadful result:

there seemed a spell upon her lovers—so many were killed or died of the effects of wounds. Ransom Calhoun, Braddy Warwick, Claude Gibson, the Notts.

In Columbia she came, in her girlish way: "Shall I answer him? See here."

Annie, on hearing the name: "Answer! Did you see the paper today? He is killed." Annie the practical.

Once she came in and sat on the edge of my bed. In those Columbia days, a cloud had come over her bright face. "Buck, what makes you so pale, dear—and why have that black mantle around you this warm day?"

"Why not? I feel so sad—black suits me. Alfred Rhett has killed Cousin Ransom in a duel." Here she drew the mantle close around her face. . . . She wore the black mantle several days. (MCCW 430-431)
By referring to Buck's problem as some type of "spell" whose origin is mysterious, threatening, and alarming Chesnut manages to give the young woman a sense of otherworldliness. Whether fighting because of the South's code of the duel, like Col. William Ransom Calhoun, or fighting for the Confederacy in battle, like Bradfute Warwick, who became a lieutenant colonel under Sam Hood in 1862, and James Deas and Henry Junius Nott, men connected with Buck die at a remarkably high rate.\textsuperscript{32}

No other woman in Mary Chesnut's narrative is so closely associated with dying men: not Louisa McCord, who runs a hospital for wounded and dying soldiers in Columbia; not females directly active in the war effort, like Rose O'Neal Greenhow, who was arrested by the United States government for espionage; not even Varina Davis, whose contact with and succoring of soldiers of all ranks is repeatedly emphasized throughout the narrative. When Mary Chesnut's nephew, Johnny Chesnut, is asked he if ever found himself "succumbing, too, to Buck's fascinations," his reply is informative:

"No, never." He looked alarmed at the bare suggestion. "I dare not. I would prefer to face a Yankee battery. They say So-and-So is awfully in love with Miss S.P. Then I say, look out! You will see his name next in the list of killed and wounded."

This was very hard on Buck, but our brave young soldiers faced the music gallantly. Let who would die or be killed, there was always a new crop of flourishing dimensions growing vigorously around her. Lovers were never wanting. I think she was loyal to the dead and missing. (MCCW 431)

While Johnny is able to keep his emotions under control, his words indicate how extensive Buck's list of doomed suitors is and how legendary she has become in Southern high society. It is almost as if she were a sun that, while shining brightly on
the "new crop of flourishing dimensions growing vigorously around her," also
transmitted a deadly cancer along with its nourishing rays. Indeed, her list of suitors is
almost like a private "killed and wounded" list.

Nor does Mary Chesnut have to strain the facts to make Buck appear to have
such a tragic impact on the lives of the men who flocked to her. On the contrary, Mary
often refrains from pointing out that the latest young man to die or to be wounded had
lately been seen in Buck's circle of admirers or was a Preston relative. An important
factor in Mary's characterization of Buck is that she is always an ambivalent
participant in the young men's courtship of her, enjoying their attentions but unhappily
aware of the risk they were running by pursuing her. The black mantle that she draws
"close around her face," and which she keeps on for days, is far different than the
usual beautiful and bright clothes she prefers to wear, and this sad badge of mourning
clothes her in a sense of melancholy responsibility. Additionally, Mary stresses the
fact that the properly reared Buck does not consciously chase her suitors, merely that
she has a "knack" of attracting them. As Mary observes, "Lovers were never
wanting."

That Mary Chesnut sees her young friend as a figure of the South is quite clear.
She believes that, like Buck, the South is beautiful, charming, and beguiling. So
wonderful is it that people derive immense enjoyment merely from being within its
environs and from living under the bright rays of its sun. Nor did Mary's South, again
like Buck, have difficulties in attracting men to its side. She points out that all of the
truly brave and honorable men eagerly jumped at the first call to action, and, from

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generals down the ranks to "gentlemen privates" (MCCW 65), they proved their worth through their enthusiasm for joining the Confederate military. Recruiters were said to be overwhelmed by the numbers of volunteers, and rumors circulated that, in some places, surplus men were sent home. The rest of the men—those who bought substitutes, sought safe office jobs, dodged conscription, or pulled political strings in order to protect their lucrative plantation and industrial jobs—were like those men whom Mary considers not quite comme il faut socially: they are dishonorable and beneath the notice of women like Buck. Mary thus equates Buck, with her talent for acquiring, retaining, and juggling the affections of legions of men, with the South, whose aptitude for obtaining enough good and honorable men has enabled it to engage in a war with the United States. Throughout her narrative, she continually intertwines Buck's desirability with the South's worthiness, so that the young lady and all her social business come to represent the Confederacy and its struggles for independence.

Whereas the South's actual recruitment of soldiers was often couched in appeals to mothers and to wives, asking them to sacrifice their sons and husband for the glory of the Confederacy, Mary's metaphor creates a South that is more like a young lady who is being asked to sacrifice her future happiness as a wife and mother. It is this young lady who observes the men ride away, and it is she who will welcome some them back home again. The Mary who writes this narrative is well aware of what condition the men will be in when they return, and she gives her young ladies a type of resigned prescience too. Buck begins a conversation about Southern men as possible husbands:
“Sally H is going to marry a man who has lost an arm—also a maimed soldier, you see—and she is proud of it. The cause glorifies such wounds.”

Annie said meekly, “I fear it will be my fate to marry one who has lost his head.”

“Tudy has her eye on one who has lost an eye. What a glorious assortment of noble martyrs and wrecks—heroes, I mean.”

(MCCW 588-589)

Noticeably absent from the list of marriage prospects is any man who has avoided the war; such men as these are beyond the pale. One lady, presumably older and already married, overhears the conversation and comments, “The bitterness of this kind of talk is appalling” (MCCW 589); she is, perhaps, also shocked by the pleasure the girls take in such gallows-humor. Such joking is appalling, but Mary knows that it is also altogether true, and she insists that the Buck who appears in the narrative is appreciative of what these “heroes,” the “glorious assortment of noble martyrs and wrecks,” have done for her and, by extension, for the South. As Mary says earlier of Buck, “she was loyal to the dead.” The black mantle that Buck wears, then, is not simply a badge of mourning that she dons for the sake of “Cousin Ransom,” it is also an emblem of the South mourning for the lost and wounded men who have fought for its cause. Consequently, even before General Hood enters the narrative as an active character, Mary inculcates within her readers an understanding of Buck’s symbolic presence in the narrative.

By equating the risk that men assume by becoming suitors of Buck with the risks they assumed by becoming soldiers, Mary Chesnut has set the stage for the Southern army’s defeat as embodied in General John Bell ("Sam") Hood. Hailing
from Kentucky, Hood was a twenty-nine year old graduate of West Point when the war began. Commissioned a First Lieutenant of Cavalry in April, 1861, he was promoted to major a month later and in October to colonel in charge of the Fourth Texas Infantry regiment, a unit with which he was ever after associated and where he won commendation as a leader of the wild Texans and the affection of his men.

In March of 1862, Hood was inexplicably promoted to brigadier general over the heads of two senior colonels and began to emerge as a major figure in the Southern army. After protecting the rear of General Johnston’s army (not to mention its supply train) at Eltham’s Landing during the Peninsular Campaign in the Spring of 1862, Hood was showered with compliments for his “conspicuous gallantry” and began to be referred to as “The Gallant Hood of Texas.” Not only his superiors, but also the men under his command cheered his performances. As one soldier wrote of that battle,

I got mighty nervous and shaky while we were forming in the apple orchard to make that last desperate charge on the batteries. But when I looked behind me and saw old Hood resting on one foot, his arm raised above his head, his hand grasping the limb of a tree, looking as unconcerned as if we were on dress parade, I just determined that if he could stand it, I would.

After the Second Battle of Bull Run in Virginia and Antietam in Maryland, “old Hood,” now thirty-one years old (the “old” of his nickname was, of course, a sign of affection), was made a Major General. As his most recent biographer has noted, Sam Hood seemed to be locked into a valuation where “personal combat leadership” was everything, and he was unable to make the transition between “personal leadership
Hood was able to keep his problem with the many duties of leadership under control for the next few years, and admiration for his military abilities grew after his brave conduct at Fredericksburg; Gettysburg, where he was seriously wounded in the left arm and won a promotion to Lieutenant General; and Chickamauga, where his right leg was so critically damaged that the doctors had to amputate it quickly.\textsuperscript{36}

Sam Hood’s troubles began in earnest when he was returned to duty with the Army of Tennessee, which was under the command of General Joseph Johnston, in February of 1864. Joe Johnston had long been a thorn in the side of President Davis, and the two had argued about many aspects of the war over the past few years. In the spring and early summer of 1864, Johnston’s army was the only thing standing between General William Tecumseh Sherman and the civilian population of Georgia. Johnston’s refusal to risk his men by engaging in battle and his continual retreating before the inexorable advance of Sherman’s army convinced Davis to replace him with Sam Hood, newly commissioned as a full general, the highest rank in the Confederate army, at the age of thirty-three. Davis really had little choice: Johnston had to be removed, and the only other possible candidate, General William Hardee, supported Johnston’s policies and was on poor terms with army headquarters. Hood’s bravery, aggressiveness, intuitiveness, and ability to inspire the same qualities in his men made him the ideal combat leader, but he was also impatient, inattentive to detail, and apt to ignore obstacles in his path, all of which made him an unlikely bet as the commander of an entire army. It is not surprising, then, that Hood’s campaigns that summer and
fall led to the loss of Atlanta, Franklin (Tennessee), and Nashville, to the virtual
destruction of the Army of Tennessee (all of which hastened the final defeat of the
Confederacy) and finally to his own removal as commander in January of 1865.37

When Mary introduces Hood to her narrative, which she does only a few pages
after the first real description of Buck, she takes pains to describe him in language that
alludes to the Romances of old:

he came, with his sad Quixote face, the face of an old crusader who
believed in his cause, his cross, his crown. . . . Someone said that great
reserve of manner he carried only into ladies’ society. Mr. Venable
added he had often heard of the “light of battle” shining in a man’s
eyes. He had seen it once. He carried him orders from General Lee and
found [him] in the hottest of the fight. “The man was transfigured. The
fierce light of his eyes—I can never forget.” (MCCW 441)

The transfiguration of which Mr. Venable speaks is the essence of the chivalric
soldier. Sam Hood behaves with modesty, courtesy, and graciousness when he is in
“ladies’ society,” and his “great reserve of manner” is a mark not only of shyness but
also of the respect he feels for women. Yet, when called upon to defend his country,
that “great reserve of manner” disappears, and he becomes General Hood, a man liable
to be found only on the front lines, “in the hottest of the fight,” and with the fierce
“light of battle’ shining” in his eyes. One can argue that sections of Bertram Wyatt-
Brown’s parody of the Sermon on the Mount can be applied to this “transfigured” Sam
Hood: “Blessed are the strong, for they can conquer kingdoms,” and “Blessed are they
who wreak vengeance, for . . . they shall have honor and glory all the days of their life
and eternal fame in ages to come.”38 When he fights, Hood becomes the great and
honorable warrior who represents the hope of the South.
At the same time, by describing Hood as sadly quixotic, Chesnut signals her readers that, like Don Quixote, whose ideals are romantic and impossible, Hood has, in the figure of the Southern soldier, created military ideals for himself that are ultimately unattainable. Similarly, her description of his face as that of “an old crusader who believed in his cause, his cross, his crown” reiterates the fact that, like the original crusaders, who fought valiantly (and, to a Eurocentric Christian like Chesnut, rightfully) for their cause, he will never truly gain what he seeks: marriage to Buck and the triumph of the Confederacy. Thus, Hood, like Buck, is designated a tragic figure from his first appearance in the narrative.

This description of Sam Hood is at once followed by the information that he has received orders to join General Lee in the north of Virginia with his troops. As his men march out of Richmond, Hood is introduced to Buck for the first time. The introduction is uneventful, and the two do not speak to one another in the narrative, but Hood does say something about her to his friend (and Buck’s future brother-in-law), John Darby. When asked what the general had said about Buck, Darby replies, “Only a horse compliment—he is a Kentuckian, you know. He says, ‘You stand on your feet like a thoroughbred’” (MCCW 443). Sam’s compliment is blunt, belonging more to the rough world of the army than to the genteel drawing room and proving its speaker to be more of a soldier than a courtier, but Buck seems to appreciate its depth. Only later will Sam admit to Buck that, when he saw her that day, he “surrendered at first sight” and that ever since his “battle cry has been ‘God, my country, and you!’” (MCCW 565, 559).
Given Buck’s history with men, even readers unfamiliar with the general’s life must become alarmed at his complete “surrender” to her “magic spell.” In fact, the battle that Hood rides off to fight is that of Brandy Station, the first stop on General Lee’s attempt to bring the war to the North in the summer of 1863. While Hood does manage to survive the conflicts of that summer, notably Gettysburg and Chickamauga, he also suffers his two great injuries, the laming of an arm and the loss of a leg. Again, Mary Chesnut is able to use historical fact to strengthen her metaphor and equate the physical sacrifices Southern soldiers made in the service of the Confederacy with those Buck’s suitors always seemed to make. In the narrative, Hood now becomes “Sam, the wounded knight” (MCCW 509), who suffers from the emotional pain of his difficult courtship of Buck as much as he does from the physical pain of his injuries.

The course of Hood’s courtship of Buck in the narrative parallels the successes and failures that both he and the Confederate army experience during the latter part of the war. As his star rises, their love affair flourishes; when his career begins to plummet, their relationship withers; finally, when his failures in Georgia and Tennessee culminate in his removal as commander of the Army of Tennessee, the engagement is called off and the two part forever. As Mary Chesnut says to Buck, “It was odd . . . that Hood was always lucky till he fell in love with you” (MCCW 555). Furthermore, their relationship within Mary’s metaphor plainly parallels the fortunes and ultimate failure of the Confederacy. In some ways, the couple’s story fell, fully formed, into Mary Chesnut’s lap, and fate seemed to have singled them out as
representatives of both the South and the Southern army. They met in early June of 1863, when fortune’s wheel was still on an up-swing for the Confederate forces.

Hood’s wounding at Gettysburg, the battle that resulted in a terrible number of casualties and which most historians consider to be the “high-water mark” or the summit of fortune’s wheel for the Confederacy, highlights not just his own energetic bravery, but also identifies him again with the Confederate army and its soldiers. The amputation of his leg after his heroic actions at the Battle of Chickamauga is a symbol of the beginning of the fortune’s downturn. Most Southerners did not (indeed, could not) realize that the South and its armies were now in decline, that the Federal forces were slowly but inevitably closing in. For Buck and Sam as well as for most Southerners, the winter of 1863-1864 was thus still a time of hope. The couple’s friendship blossomed into a publicly recognized courtship that culminated in their engagement in early February, 1864 (MCCW 562), just before Hood was sent to join the Army of Tennessee. The engagement died out around the same time that Hood was removed from his command and their final meeting was on April 15, 1865 (MCCW 785), less than a week after Lee’s surrender to Grant and only three days before the Confederate Secretary of War agreed to a general surrender. Even without Mary’s metaphor, their courtship is still curiously analogous to the circumstance of the Confederacy.

Sam begins to pursue Buck in earnest when he is convalescing in Richmond from the amputation of his leg. His wooing of her is, like his earlier compliment, not distinguished by drawing-room glibness, and at times his blunt ardor alarms his
friends. One day, when out for a ride with Buck, Mary Chesnut, and Henry Brewster, a South Carolinian turned Texan, Sam begins a discussion of Richmond gossips that almost turns into a proposal:

"they say I am engaged to four young ladies—liberal allowance, you will admit, for a man who cannot walk without help."
"To whom do they say you are engaged?" asked Buck, staring at the horses' heads.
"Miss Wigfall is one."
"Who else?"
"Miss Sally Preston." Buck did not move an eyelid. She watched the horses' heads.
"Are you annoyed at such a preposterous report?"
"No."
Brewster aside to me: "God help us! He is going to say everything right out here before our faces."
Buck continued coolly: "Richmond people are liberal, as you say. I never heed their reports. They say I am in engaged to Shirley Carter and to Phil Robb."
. . . Sam said viciously: "I think I will set a mantrap near your door and break some of those young fellows' legs, too.

(MCCW 509-510)

In this, one of the lighter moments of their association, Sam's attempt to make Buck reveal her feelings has backfired: it seems that he feinted when he should have dodged. Certainly, he is no match for Buck's expertise in the business of flirtation and flattery. Shortly thereafter, however, he regains his balance, and Buck is found in willing possession of his diamond hat pin, which he has convinced her to keep until such time as he can buy a new hat. This gesture of holding onto a piece of diamond jewelry, as Mary Chesnut makes her readers aware, is highly suggestive of a new level in of their love affair. Even more suggestive is the picture Buck paints of the ceremonial
replacement of that diamond pin in Hood’s new hat, a rite that would suggest that Buck is knighting him as her own warrior.

Mary Chesnut’s own retrospective point of view, coupled with her focus on the extraordinary parallel between national events and these two actual lives, colors the Buck/Hood metaphor with the sense of doom and sadness that she felt about the results of the war. Almost every encounter between Buck and Sam is informed by this underlying feeling of inescapable tragedy. For example, one night when they were attending private theatricals, Hood leaned against a wall while Buck stood guard over him: “The crowd surged that way, and she held out her arm to protect him from the rush. After they had all passed she handed him his crutches, and they too moved slowly away” (MCCW 570). In this scene, Mary shows Buck protecting her “wounded knight” from the difficulties of making his way in the social world, but she also uses the wound itself as a constant reminder of the serious struggle that is taking place just outside of Richmond. Mary’s narrative includes a number of accounts of parties, plays, and dinners. Many people, however, criticized the members of Richmond society for their frivolity; James Chesnut was one Southerner who was repulsed by his wife’s pursuit of pleasure. Mary replies to such criticism by quoting a friend: “we . . . understand the French prisoners in the Reign of Terror now. They danced and flirted until the tumbril came for them, too” (MCCW 670). Even in the midst of pleasure, then, Mary consistently refers to the courtship of Buck and Sam in the latter part of the narrative to remind her readers that the Southern soldiers are suffering and dying in spite of all the Confederacy does to help them. Always, the
unnerving sound of the tumbrel’s approach can be heard beneath the merry noise of these parties.

Mary also follows her descriptions of various encounters between Sam and Buck with bad news. When she causes Sam to reveal that he had already proposed and been turned down by Buck at least once before they had their uncomfortable conversation about engagements in the carriage, she curtly ends the scene with news about the wife of William Henry Fitzhugh (“Rooney”) Lee, the son of Robert E. Lee and a friend of Mary’s: “Mrs. Rooney Lee died yesterday. One of her babies died, too. She was not twenty-three. He is a prisoner still” (MCCW 516). By coupling the death of a mother and child with a discussion about someone else’s complicated and unsuccessful love affair, Mary suggests that the war is interrupting and destroying the normal patterns of life, replacing courtship, birth, and childhood with premature death. This pattern, pleasure or fun concluded with sorrow and tragedy, is one which Mary puts to good use in creating a mood of incipient tragedy in the relationship between Sam and Buck.

While Hood is definitely head-over-heels in love with Buck and she truly seems to care about him more than she has for any other man, their relationship is characterized by her equivocation: one moment, she seems to rebuff him, while the next she seems to accept him. In fact, their relationship does not really appear to progress from one point to another over the course of their acquaintance. While they do agree to marry, their engagement, which Buck describes to Mary, is founded on the temporary triumph of Hood’s will over that of Buck’s:
"As we rode, he held out his hand. I said, 'Ah! Don't do that. Let it all rest as it is. You know I like you. You want to spoil all.'"

"'Say yes or say no. I will not be satisfied with less. Yes—or no, is it?'"

"Well, he would keep holding out his hand. What could I do? . . . So I put mine in his. Heavens, what a change came over his face. I pulled my hand away by main strength."

"The practical wretch, he said at once: 'Now I will speak to your father. I want his consent to marry you at once.'" (MCCW 561-562)

Part of the couple’s trouble comes from the fact that the Prestons were not overjoyed at the match; they considered Hood not to be educated and cultured enough for their daughter. The real difficulty, however, is that Buck’s skill at the “business” of society, that the feint and dodge or the social attack and retreat that echoes Hood’s skill at military maneuvering, has precluded any possibility of them forging a lasting union and she is ultimately unwinnable. Directly after their engagement, Mary Chesnut observes, "So the tragedy has been played out, for I do not think even now that she is in earnest" (MCCW 562). In pursuing Buck, Sam, the “wounded knight,” has doomed himself to failure in this courtship as much as his military career seems to have been cursed after the battle of Chickamauga. As his fortunes in the military and domestic spheres decline, so too do the fortunes of the Confederate army, and, as the number of Sam’s unsatisfactory meetings with Buck accumulates, so too does the impression of the inevitability of the defeat of the Confederacy.

In the actual course of the War, observant and rational Southerners knew that defeat was inevitable long before the formal surrender. The downhill slide into ruin in the narrative picks up speed when Hood replaces Joe Johnston at the head of the Army of Tennessee. Buck is very unhappy about his appointment, saying, "Things are so
bad out there. They cannot be worse, you know. And so they have saved Johnston from the responsibility of his own blunders—and put Sam in. Poor Sam!” (MCCW 622). Mary Chesnut, who knows exactly how and when the war will end, has allowed Buck to prophesy the future through her fears for Hood, and the she drives home her point with the death of Buck’s brother.

William Campbell Preston, a favorite of his sisters, is a major of artillery serving in the Army of Tennessee, and he therefore falls under the command of his future brother-in-law, with whom he has a very friendly relationship (MCCW 574). As Buck sits with Mary in their Columbia house in late July of 1864, she seems to have a premonition of the bad news; she suddenly jumps up and runs home where she is greeted with the news that Willie had been killed, “his heart literally shot away—as he was getting his battery in position,” during one of the many battles around Atlanta (MCCW 623). The fact that Willie has died while serving under Hood—that her fiancée is the general who is finally responsible for her brother’s death—is unbearable to Buck. To General Hood, Willie’s death comes to represent all the men who have died under his command. Even after he is relieved of that command, his grief overpowers him. When one of his friends begins to tell a funny story, Hood does not hear her, and Jack Preston, Willie’s brother, pulls Mary aside to discuss their friend:

“He did not hear a word she was saying. He had forgotten us all. Did you notice how he stared in the fire...? "Yes, he is going over some bitter hour. He sees Willie Preston with his heart shot away, feels the panic at Nashville and its shame." "And the dead on the battlefield at Franklin... that agony in his face comes again and again. I can’t keep him out of those absent fits
The horror of the last few months and the knowledge that he is responsible for all of these death have made Sam Hood into a walking dead man. No longer one of the living, but not truly one of the dead, he resides in his own personal hell, staring into the fire for hours, not heeding the assistance his friends try to give to him, and reliving the bitterness and the agony of his failures. Hood’s grief forces him to experience “the torture of the damned,” and, like the inhabitants of hell, his grief is never-ending.

The symbolism of Willie’s death, Buck’s grief, and Sam’s despair is quite clear. While Mary believes that Hood’s failure was unavoidable after the damage that Joe Johnston had already dealt to his army through his constant retreating, he was nevertheless the commander in charge of the army, and, in terms of the narrative, he is also the symbol of all the men who have died. Though Buck does not really blame her lover for the death of her brother, she cannot help but connect the two in her mind. Even worse than that, however, is her knowledge of the fact that one more young man about whom she cared has died and that once again she must draw the black mantle closely around her in mourning. This time, however, there is no “new crop of flourishing dimensions” to replace the men who have given their lives for the Confederacy. The South had only two short months left before surrender. Just as Buck and Hood are now devoid of any hope for the future for their relationship, so too have Southerners given up their hopes of victory and resigned themselves to defeat.
Mary is silent about the actual breaking of Hood's engagement to Buck; the decision to part is reached silently, outside of the narrative. Though she has denied any glimpse of this sad scene to her readers, she provides a tableau of their final meeting. Hood has conveyed Buck safely through the ruined countryside to Mary's doorstep in Chester, South Carolina, where she has taken refuge from the destructive force of General Sherman's army. After Sam has left them, Mary writes, "Hood has gone. He held his hat off while he was in sight of the house." When someone asks, "Why did he remain uncovered so long?" she is answered, "In honor of my being here," said B quietly (MCCW 785). Hood's attitude toward Buck has always been characterized by an ideal form of chivalry and honor, and his farewell gesture to her is no exception. This gesture, of courteously doffing one's hat in order to show honor to another person, is something that Mary's husband has already declared to be "my idea of behavior . . . worthy of the chivalry" (MCCW 191). Although James had been speaking of the proper way to treat one's foe, such as in a fencing match, Mary appropriates the gesture and makes it the honorable and gracious way to salute one's lost love. This last image Mary gives of Hood's relationship with Buck and, symbolically, of the South's relationship with its Confederate soldiers, is that of a defeated man respectfully saluting that which he loves and for which he has fought. The ending of their love affair, then, signifies the death of the military's hope of winning independence for the South just as their separation mimics the break-up of the Confederate armies.
Mary Chesnut's elegy to the men of the South, inspired by the sound of one last squad of cavalry "dashing by" her door as she watches, a refugee in Chester, South Carolina, seems to be a fitting farewell to both Buck and Sam:

There they go, the gay and gallant few—doomed, the last gathering of the flower of Southern youth, to be killed—to death or worse. Prison. They continue to prance by—lightly and jauntily the caracole. Maybe there are younger eyes than mine looking out, and they know it. They march with as airy a tread as if they still believed the world was all on their side. (MCCW 768)

Although Sam has marched away from Buck with chivalry and gallantry, his bearing conceals the knowledge that everything is over for him and for the Confederacy; the world is no longer on the side of the South. Through the symbolism of the relationship of Buck and Hood, Mary's narrative ends with a view of the Confederate soldier and the Confederate South that is at once compassionate and tragic. When that view is coupled with the redemptive heroism of Jefferson and Varina Davis, however, Mary argues that, while the Confederacy was defeated by the morally corrupt North, the sacrifices that Southerners made during the war and the suffering and hardships of Reconstruction were justified. Her final message to her readers, then, is that even though the Union won the war, Northerners cannot deprive Southerners of the knowledge that the chance they took was worthwhile and that the cause for which they had fought was honorable.

2 Kreyling does admit that Scarlett O'Hara is most certainly the female hero of Margaret Mitchell’s Gone with the Wind, but in his analysis of Ellen Glasgow’s novel about the Civil War, The Battle-Ground (Kreyling concentrates more on her fiction about post-war Virginia), he overlooks the role of Betty Ambler, who is unquestionably a female hero.


4 See Chapter 1.


6 William Taylor, Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character (New York: George Braziller, 1961) 338. See also Chapter 3 above.


8 Foster 11-12.

9 Foster 12.

10 Foster 26-27. The cartoons appeared in unnamed Northern papers and are located in the Library of Congress.

11 Foster 28.

12 Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982) 14-15, 445-453. For more on the charivari, shaming rituals and degradation rituals, see Wyatt-Brown, Chapters 14, 16, and 17.

13 Foster 95.

15 Foster 72-74.

16 Foster 95-98.

17 Kreyling 50.

18 Kreyling 18.

19 In C. Vann Woodward and Elisabeth Muhlenfeld’s edition of Mary Chesnut’s diary, words that appear in single angle brackets—“<was to be propitiated still>”—indicate words that have been crossed out in the manuscript; words that appear in double angle brackets—“<<I got up nearly frantic . . . >>” (PMC 40)—indicate words that were erased but have been recovered. In Woodward’s edition of the narrative, the single angle brackets are used for effaced or erased words while the double brackets are used for excerpts from the diary and previous versions of the narrative. Appended to this entry is a sentence added after the war: “what a fool I was 1866” (PMC 9n3).

20 Woodward notes that the nickname alludes to Eugénie de Montijo, the wife of Napoleon III (PMC 89n6).

21 PMC 192n1.

22 Woodward identifies this general, unnamed in the narrative, as Robert E. Lee from the rough draft of the 1880s version.

23 Foster 23. See also Wilson 102-103.

24 Faust 13-14.

25 Mary does imply, however, that Mrs. Davis is forced to sacrifice one of her sons. The accidental death of Joseph Evans Davis (“little Joe” to his family) inspires Mary to write, “Who will they kill next, of that devoted household?” She does not indicate whom she blames for Joe’s death, only that she believe that his death was a type of sacrifice.


27 See Chapter 3.

30 Edmund Wilson also points to the Buck/Hood relationship as a symbol of the doomed Confederacy; he suggests that Mary Chesnut's handling of their affair is reminiscent of Anton Chekhov's writings about the ruin of Russian society. See Wilson 286. Wilson's analysis is necessarily incomplete, however, because he was writing with two handicaps—he did not have the full text of the narrative, nor did he have the knowledge that the narrative is not a diary—yet his examination of Mary Chesnut's work leads him to compare the text to a novel (Wilson 279). No real comparison of the Buck/Hood story can be made between the diary and the narrative because the corresponding sections of the diary are missing.


32 Richard M. McMurry, John Bell Hood and the War for Southern Independence (Lexington, KY: The University of Kentucky Press, 1982) 35. This is the best and most recent of the biographies of Hood and the most reliable source of information on his personal life. See also Richard O'Connor, Hood: Cavalier General (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1949); and John P. Dyer, The Gallant Hood (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1950). Though Mary Chesnut only mentions how Henry Nott was killed, both of the Nott boys presumably died at Shiloh (MCCW 371). For more on dueling in the South, see Wyatt-Brown's Southern Honor and Taylor's Cavalier and Yankee.

33 For a study of patriotic appeals and recruitment, see Faust's Mothers of Invention, Chapter One: "What Shall We Do?: Women Confront the Crisis."

34 McMurry 24-28.

35 McMurry 39-40, 49-50, 64.

36 McMurry 65, 74, 77.
37 McMurry 121-123.

38 See Chapter 3.

39 Symonds 51.
CONCLUSION

Of all of the aspects of Mary Chesnut's narrative that make it so unique within the field of Civil War writings, the one that is the most readily apparent is the text's sense of immediacy. Few other American authors, male or female, have succeeded in recreating the patterns of life in a nation at war with itself as well as Mary Chesnut. Although it is risky to discuss an author's intentions, it seems clear that what Mary wanted to do was to write a book that would simulate the experience of war from the perspective of a female non-combatant. She wanted her readers to feel as if they were living through the events of the war for themselves, and the use of a diary format is a logical way to help the narrative to accomplish this. That Mary has achieved this goal is an indisputable fact: as we readers pass through her pages, we become absorbed into the life of the Confederacy.

This is not a simple process. Unlike other historians of the war, Mary Chesnut does not give either explanations of what is happening and why it is significant or detailed backgrounds of those people who are involved. Making sense of the text can be difficult for the modern reader because the text reflects the chaos of wartime life. People of the late twentieth century who might pick up the book include not only those unfamiliar with the experience of civil war in America but also those who have never
before been part of a society wrapped up in the single-minded pursuit of defeating an enemy. None of us has the first-hand knowledge of the Civil War that brings coherence to what is otherwise a very confusing text, and some have heard about war only through network news reports. Even those who are well-acquainted with the history of mid-nineteenth century America have to interrupt their reading to check the editor’s footnotes, and readers are always stopping to ask questions like, “what was so important about Robert Barnwell Rhett?” or “why was it so bad that Joe Johnston kept retreating toward Atlanta?” Furthermore, many readers are surprised at how unreliable news reports can be, and almost everyone who reaches the end must wonder how the Confederates, who were so outnumbered and outgunned by the Union forces, ever thought they could possibly be victorious.

Such confusion, however, was part of Mary’s plan. Many Southerners asked themselves the same questions during the Civil War; after all, real life has no footnotes. They too were confused about the meaning of events and had no alternative to the often-faulty reporting of news. Many of them had never heard of Joe Johnston or Robert E. Lee before the war and had to depend upon rumor and hearsay for background information. Even more important was the fact that the most ardent of the Confederates felt the occasional twinge of doubt about the end of the war. Disorganization, bewilderment, and doubt are all part of what it is like to live in a world at war, so Mary makes them part of her narrative.

On the other hand, Mary Chesnut did assume that her readers were familiar with the general history and culture of the South. The audience she imagined for
herself needed no explanations about states' rights, nor did they require to be told that Southern women were, by and large, against the practice of slavery. Her imagined readers were also well-educated, familiar not only with Southern culture, but also conversant enough with the history and literature of the major European countries to understand her wide-ranging allusions. Finally, Mary assumed that her readers would share her pride of caste and country, and she expected them to share her aversion to the loose morals that war (and, she thought, proximity to Northerners) brought to the South.

Above all, Mary Chesnut tries to ensure that her readers will share in the shifting moods of wartime. On one page, Mary will write mournfully about the Confederate dead,

When I remember all the true-hearted, the lighthearted, the gay and gallant boys who have come laughing, singing, dancing in my way in the three years past, I have looked into their brave young eyes and helped them as I could every way and then seen them no more forever. They lie stark and cold, dead upon the battlefield or moldering away in hospitals or prisons—which is worse. I think, if I consider the long array of those bright youths and loyal men who have gone to their deaths almost before my very eyes, my heart might break, too.

Is anything worth it? This fearful sacrifice—this awful penalty we pay for war? (MCCW 625).

Yet, only a few pages after she has questioned the worth of the "fearful sacrifice," her mood shifts. Now, she discusses how reading the "warlike" poetry of Sir Walter Scott and Thomas Campbell has "exalted" her spirit and has allowed her to forget about the war and the "Confederate heroes fallen in the fight." She writes about the calm and matter-of-fact way that she and her friends discuss the men who have died:
“Remember, now, was he not a nice fellow? He was killed at Shiloh.” Day after day we read the death roll. Someone holds up her hands. ‘Oh, here is another of our friends killed. He was such a good fellow’” (MCCW 628). By this point in the text, the reader has come to understand the paradox of how war can make people resigned to death on a large scale at one moment and wild with grief the next. Consequently, at the end of 836 pages, the reader agrees with Mary that wartime serves to intensify normal, everyday life: the good times are wonderful, the bad times are terrible beyond belief, everything happens at a much quicker pace, and a person must adapt or go mad. Mary’s style of writing helps to achieve this. In many ways, her text embodies different “Southern” ways of writing. Sometimes, she seems to be chatting with a friend, while at other times, she writes with the oratorical formality for which Southern politicians became famous; occasionally, her prose is peppered with the humorous stories and strange aphorisms that are still so popular in the South; most of all, though, Mary Chesnut is a storyteller.

Perhaps it is the uniqueness of Mary’s narrative that has kept critics from examining it as a literary creation. Her re-enactment of wartime has made for a very confusing text, one that is difficult to read let alone analyze. Almost everyone who writes about the narrative has called for a critical reading of it, yet no one seems to have wanted to tackle such an enormous book. Obviously, this dissertation is only a very modest beginning, but at least it addresses some of the major issues that Mary’s work raises. I have tried to examine the narrative not as an historical document and not as an autobiography; I do not believe that it should be defined in terms of either of
those textual forms. By reading both her diary and her narrative, one can see that the latter text is very different than the former. Such a comparison also proves beyond a doubt that what Mary was trying to create in the narrative was, in G. Thomas Couser’s words, “a novelized chronicle in diary format.” Couser’s phrase may be unwieldy as the name for a literary genre, but it is the only one that truly fits the nature of the text. In my study, I have been careful to distinguish between the diary and the narrative, treating the first as an example of lifewriting and the other as a consciously created literary narrative.

In deciding to write a critical analysis of Mary Chesnut’s narrative, a few issues immediately jumped out at me. The character of Colonel Chesnut looked over my shoulder and haunted me as I reflected on his daughter-in-law’s work. He represented so much of what was good and bad about the Old South, that world that ended with the Civil War. The Southern Gentleman’s attributes—honor, chivalry, courtesy, independence—can be good qualities (no one, for instance, likes to be treated rudely or with contempt) as long as one uses them wisely; they can be attributes that “grease the wheels of society.” They are also qualities that apply (or should apply) to the behavior and reputation of women. Yet they are tricky notions when applied to the nineteenth-century South. For example, the excuse that many Southerners gave for Preston Brooks’ assault on Charles Sumner in the Senate before the Civil War was that Sumner had treated the South with dishonor by discussing the evils of slavery. The idea that Sumner had treated Southerners dishonorably by raising the issue, and thus deserved to be crippled, is a horrifying one. Furthermore, it was the South’s distorted
valuation of independence that allowed them to rob other human beings—especially slaves and women—of their liberty. In analyzing the narrative, I was particularly interested in how Mary Chesnut admired the good aspects of Colonel Chesnut, whom she made into the ideal Southern Gentleman, while trying to contain her anger about his abuses of power. This tension between admiration and rage is an undercurrent throughout the narrative that cannot be ignored.

The second topic that seemed obvious to me was slavery: how could one write about the Civil War without discussing slavery? That would be as impossible as discussing modern American society without examining civil rights or racial relations. To do either would be to play Mary's "ostrich game." I am one of the many critics who are frustrated and disappointed by Mary's decision to tone down her statements about slavery in the narrative. Though I realize that she needed to conform more to the mood of the South in order to get her book published, I am unhappy that she accommodated her readers' tastes. After reading countless pages of Abolitionist and pro-slavery arguments, though, and even more discussions about Southerners and slavery, I must agree with those who argue that the Mary Chesnut who wrote the wartime diary and who hides behind ambivalent statements in the narrative was firmly opposed to slavery. Indeed, her private critiques of the practice often surpass those of Northern Abolitionists in terms of anger, honesty, and compassion. Yet her racism is an issue that other critics seem to want to ignore. Like the family who refused to admit that there was elephant in the living room, though, the critics who refrain from discussing Mary Chesnut's racism while labeling her a Southern abolitionist have only
done part of their job. When I wrote about her racism, I felt as if I were betraying a
dirty family secret, but I think that it is an issue that demands even more examination.
Indeed, though my chapter on slavery is the longest in my dissertation, it is still too
brief, and I regret that I was able only to touch lightly on the issue. A whole book (or
dissertation) about Mary, the text, and the issue of slavery would be a welcome
addition to criticism of her work.

Lastly, I thought that since Mary Chesnut saw herself as such a born politician,
an examination of her interpretation of the political side of the Civil War would
naturally need to be included in a study of the narrative. Mary takes a great interest in
the post-war reputations of Jefferson and Varina Davis not because she thinks she
must accept the South’s political patriarch and his wife but because, as her diary
makes clear, her loyalty to them was honest and deep by the end of the war. Mary’s
use of Buck Preston and Sam Hood as metaphors for the Confederate South and the
Confederate Soldier is, perhaps, one of the best examples of such symbolism in
Southern post-war writing, but it is not strictly an allegory. She still saw them as being
real people about whom she cared intensely. It is interesting to note that her diary and
narrative are the only Civil War and post-war texts that give the details of the
Preston/Hood courtship—indeed, Mary’s texts are virtually the only source of
information on Buck Preston that have been published—perhaps a look at any family
papers relating to the Hood or Preston families could shed more light on their
relationship. In general, though, Mary was fortunate in finding herself always at the
center of events in spite of being on the losing side. She was on friendly terms with
most of the political leaders in Richmond and in South Carolina, and her drawing room was often filled to bursting with generals. As she writes in the narrative, “It was a way I had, always to stumble in upon the real show” (MCCW 535), and it was her great achievement in life to recreate that “real show” in her narrative.

Contextualizing Mary Chesnut’s narrative was one of the most difficult parts of this project because she does not “fit” any of the images of the Southern lady that modern critics have described. She was not a plantation mistress. Though she may have been a “belle” in earlier years, no record of her youth exists and she definitely does not consider herself to be an older “belle” at the time of the war. She was not a rebel who fled the South and worked as an advocate to correct its injustices as did the Grimké sisters. She was neither a bourgeois wife nor an overworked drone of the lower classes. In short, Mary Chesnut was an exception to the categories that critics have defined for her society. Since she was not bound to the plantation by a woman’s traditional duties, she was a woman who enjoyed an extraordinary amount of free time. She partook of the luxuries of a wealth that neither she nor her husband possessed. Her husband’s career and fondness for her company ensured that she was at the center of the action during the most important political event of nineteenth-century America. Perhaps there were other women like her in the antebellum and post-war South, but, if so, no one has yet brought them to scholarly attention.

A great deal more work needs to be done with this new field of writings by Mary Chesnut. The diary should be studied as a text in its own right. It has long been hidden in the shadow of the narrative, but it is a wealth of information for the historian
and a fascinating text for those who study autobiographies and lifewritings. Surely, then, it should take its place among other diaries from the nineteenth century. Mary Chesnut’s novels, unpublished for over a century, are to be brought out by Elisabeth Muhlenfeld sometime in the next year and will demand critical attention of their own. More information is needed about Mary’s girlhood, education, and early married life. Only one biography has been written about her, and it is somewhat less than reliable because of the amount of speculation that its author presents as fact. A second biography, one that is more objective in its interpretation of Mary’s life, would thus be greatly welcomed by critics of Mary’s work.

Critics have only begun their task of understanding Mary Chesnut’s narrative. Those, such as C. Vann Woodward, who have called her an early feminist of the most radical sort need to provide proof for that assertion; certainly, the narrative and diary alone do not supply such proof. It would seem logical, then, that a study of images of and attitudes toward women in the narrative is urgently needed. As mentioned above, much more can be said about Mary’s writings on the issue of slavery. In addition to these areas, social class is another problem that should be explored in detail. Mary is overtly snobbish toward some people and in some situations, but she shows a great deal of compassion toward other people who are less well-off, financially and socially. Thus, a study of the narrative and social class in the nineteenth-century South would be a productive addition to the field. Finally, since the Chesnuts were a family in crisis—quite a few of them were barely on speaking terms with each other—an investigation of Mary’s portrait of the family as waging a private type of civil war
would be yet another interesting angle to take. Perhaps the soon-to-be-published editions of her novels or another biography would assist critics in discovering more about Mary’s attitudes toward the virtues and vices of her society. I believe that Mary Chesnut’s narrative deserves and warrants this further study because it remains one of the richest and most masterful accounts of Civil War life by any author, male or female, North or South.
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