An Inadequate Ideology: Republican Motherhood and the Civil War

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What do women know about war? What do they not know? What drop in all the bitter cup have they not tasted? – what ball strikes home on the battle-field that strikes not the hearthstone as well?...[women know of war] who steadily crush back the blinding tears, and whisper through white, brave lips, "Go"…. who wait in vain for the letter that never comes – who search with sinking hearts, and eyes dark with anguish, the fearful battlelists…. Let the desolate homes, the broken hearts, and the low wail of agony that God hears on his throne, make answer![1]

The Civil War experience of most women was very different from that of the men. While the men fought, the women worked, prayed, waited. In many cases, women's roles were vastly expanded during the war years as they were called upon to assume tasks traditionally performed by the absent men. Women worked in the Sanitary Commission and other relief agencies, managed family farms and businesses, and saw battlefield duty as nurses. Perhaps women's most critical role during the Civil War was to send their husbands, brothers, and sons to the armies. The efforts of enterprising northern women, such as Mary Livermore and Jane Hoge, who worked tirelessly for agencies like the Sanitary Commission and the WCRA have been well documented by historians as part of the Women's Rights movement. The experiences of wartime mothers, however, have been relatively neglected. Going into the Civil War, motherhood was largely defined by the ideology of Republican motherhood and the doctrine of separate spheres. Although these two concepts remained intact throughout the conflict, the reality of Civil War motherhood, in reminiscences as well as in women's fiction, reveal an emerging challenge to the self-sacrificing Republican mother.

[1] Fleta, "Woman and War," *Flag of Our Union*, Jan. 28, 1865, 59, in Alice Fahs, "The Feminized Civil War: Gender, Northern Popular Literature, and the Memory of the War, 1861-1900, *The Journal of American History*, 85, no. 4 (Mar., 1999): 1461.

The historiography of Civil War mothers is largely encompassed by the debate over the role of women in general. The early accounts of women's participation in the conflict, many published in the 20 years after the war, glorified their sacrifices. In *Women of the War* (1866), Frank Moore gushed, "We may safely say that there is scarcely a loyal woman in the North who did not do something in aid of the cause." He continued, "They do not figure in official reports…yet there is no feature in our war more creditable to us as a nation, none from its positive newness so well worthy of record."[2]

Interest in the war experience of northern women waned during the first half of the twentieth century, but was revived in the 1950s. Agatha Young, in *Women and the Crisis* (1959), argued that the Civil War brought greater freedom for women. According to Young, this was because "during the Civil War the old restrictions and conventions relating to women's activities were lifted, as a matter of expediency, to meet the unusual demands of the war."[3] In her 1976 work, *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich contended that in the ideology of the mid-nineteenth century, "The mother serves the interests of the patriarchy."[4] She identifies this kind of motherhood as "institutional motherhood," the goal of which is to reinforce male control. Rich characterizes institutional motherhood as degrading to women and asserts, "If rape has been terrorism, motherhood has been penal servitude."[5]

Moving away from Rich's decidedly negative view of 19th century motherhood, Jeannie Attie instead focuses on the activities of women during the Civil War which challenged the prevailing assumptions about women's roles. In *Patriotic Toil*, Attie suggests that the proliferation of work immediately following the war that "flattered" the sacrifices of women represented an effort by the establishment to control and define the public perception of women's contributions to the war effort. To Attie, these works "hinted at the war's potential to upset customary assessments of women's unpaid labors." She further asserts, "Because the American Civil War…expanded the space for female economic and

[2] Frank Moore, *Women of the War; Their Heroism and Self-Sacrifice* (Hartford, Chicago, San Francisco, Cincinnati, 1867), iv-vi.

[3] Agatha Young, *The Women and the Crisis: Women of the North in the Civil War* (New York, 1959), 3.

[4] Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York, 1976), 45.

[5] Ibid., 13-14.

political participation, the disjuncture between the realities of women's lives and the myths embedded in the antebellum compromise threatened to become visible."[6]

In other recent scholarship, Lyde Cullen Sizer focuses on the northern women writers of the Civil War. She points out the inherent conflict in the two major ideologies in the North: republicanism and individualism. Sizer discusses the shift from sentimental offerings to work containing more realism in the writings of northern women and contends, "These writings demonstrated an ongoing and consistent effort to redefine in an outward motion the limits of women's sphere."[7] Sizer further asserts that the Civil War brought a transformation in women's definition of themselves, but not a transformation in the social reality.[8]

Sizer's identification of the incongruence between women's conception of themselves and their social reality is illustrated by the persistence of the ideology of Republican motherhood. The tradition of Republican motherhood, developed shortly after the Revolutionary War, was a powerful influence on the women who had children at home during the Civil War or who had sent their sons to battle. According to Linda Kerber, the idea of Republican motherhood came out of the discussion of women's rights during the Revolutionary era. While unwilling to give women equal rights with men, the founding fathers did acknowledge the importance of education for women. Alfred F. Young explains, "Mothers were endowed with the patriotic responsibility of raising their sons an daughters as virtuous citizens for the new Republic and therefore required a better education."[9] Thus, women's primary role in the new country would be confined to the home, and yet out of this negotiation over rights she gained greater access to education.

In addition to its status as a privilege granted to women after the Revolution, the ideal of Republican motherhood was also based on the belief that a mother had significant control over her child's development. Marilyn Blackwell asserts, "[According to Mary

[6] Jeannie Attie, *Patriotic Toil: Northern Women and the American Civil War* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1998), 18.

[7] Lyde Cullen Sizer, *The Political Work of Northern Women Writers and the Civil War, 1850-1872*, (Chapel Hill & London, 2000), 13-15.

[8] Ibid., 4, 11.

[9] Alfred F. Young, "The Revolution was Radical in Some Ways, Not in Others," in Richard D. Brown, ed., *Major Problems in the Era of the American Revolution, 1760-1791* (Boston & New York, 2000), 507.

Palmer Tyler's early writings] a mother's influence was more important than a father's not because a woman was more moral . . . but because her natural relationship to children, her tender feelings, and her reason would act in a child's and the family's best interest."[10] This authority still came with the serious responsibility to raise the child to be a productive member of society. Thus, the future prosperity of a community rested on the quality of its mothers' moral guidance. Blackwell explains, "Focusing attention on their sons and encouraging industry, frugality, temperance, and self-control, republican mothers would nurture virtuous citizens who served their communities; by educating their daughters, mothers would ensure the virtue of future generations."[11]

The importance of a mother's role in shaping her child's character was preached by the authors of the popular "self-help" books in the years before the war. Mary Palmer Tyler's 1811 tract *The Maternal Physician* exhorted mothers, "To say nothing of our duty, as *citizens*, while forming the future guardians of our beloved country, it is undoubtedly our duty, as *mothers*, to bring up our sons in such a manner as shall render them most useful and happy."[12] ."[13] Lydia Maria Child's 1831 manual *The Mother's Book* and John J. C. Abbott's *The Mother at Home* (1834) reemphasize this civic responsibility. Abbott places upon mothers the additional responsibility of their children's salvation.[14]

These ideas continued to be prevalent into the 1850s. In 1851 the editor of Godey's Lady's Book instructed women, "Use your privilege of motherhood so to train your son that he may be worthy of this reverence and obedience from his wife. Thus through your sufferings the world may be made better; every faithful performance of private duty adds to the stock of public virtues."[15] The same article further asserts, "She [woman] has a higher and holier vocation. She works in the elements of human nature; her orders of architecture are formed in the soul. Obedience, temperance, truth, love, piety, these she must build up in the character of her

[10] Marilyn S. Blackwell, "The Republican Vision of Mary Palmer Tyler," in Rima D. Apple and Janet Golden (eds.), *Mothers and Motherhood: Readings in American History* (Columbus 1997), 37.

[11] Ibid., 31.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

[14] John S. C. Abbott, *The Mother at Home* (London, 1834, later edition, 1972), 116-119.

[15] "Editor's Table," *Godey's Lady's Book*, XLII (January, 1851): 65.

children."[16] L.A. Hines echoes this sentiment in the 1851 article "The Mothers of Greatness," "It has been inferred that nearly all of goodness and greatness in human character is due to maternal influence."[17] Hine goes on to catalog the accomplishments of men such as Lord Bacon, John Wesley, and King Henry IV of France and attribute their many successes to the influence of their mothers.

During the war newspapers perpetuated the idea that mother's influenced their children's character with touching stories from the front. *Harper's Weekly* told of a wounded soldier who meekly asked, "What do the women say about us boys at home?" In order to make this character more sympathetic the authors described him as a boy who had been through the trials of war and yet remained faithful to his mother's teachings. The author writes, "He had walked through rough, stony places; temptation , sin, folly had beset him on the right-hand and the left; but he felt still a mother's influence on his soul, leading him into the June paths of old."[18]

The war also brought a new emphasis to the ideology of motherhood: sacrifice. Women were increasingly called upon to send their brothers, fathers, husbands, and sons to the front. Newspapers commended these women as patriots and published accounts drawing attention to and praising their sacrifices. An article in the New York Times extolled, "Who can tell of that silent patriotism all over this country, which has, without a struggle or a sigh, offered up what the heart most valued for the country's sake. Widows have sent their only and long-cherished sons, sisters their brothers, wives their husbands, and maidens their betrothed."[19]

Mothers were singled out for special praise when they gave their sons to their country. *Harper's Weekly* related the story of a German woman who traveled from Wisconsin to visit her wounded son and bring him a quilt. The author describes her patriotic sacrifice:

> The old woman was intensely patriotic. She had three sons, she said, in the army; one had been killed, and this boy wounded; but she counted her sacrifices as nothing; "she'd be a soldier herself if she could." How the sublime devotion and unselfish patriotism of this

[16] Ibid.

[17] L.A. Hine, "The Mothers of Greatness," *The North Star*, 3 April 1851.

[18] "Hospital and Camp Incidents," *Harper's Weekly*, 14 February 1864, 107.

[19] "The Women and the War," *New York Times*, 3 August 1862.

> noble woman—and of thousands like her all through the land—[should shame those turning against the war.][20]

This German mother was happy to give her sons to her country and was praised for her fulfillment of the Republican mother ideal. Alice Fahs points out, "Such emblematic portrayals revealed that at the outset of the war the ideology of republican motherhood shaped images of women's participation in the war. In early wartime feminized literature, women's appropriate role was to sacrifice their sons for the sake of country."[21]

The ideal of the Republican mother and the reality of motherhood during America's bloodiest conflict did not always coincide. Two books published immediately following the war endeavor to glorify the sacrifices made by northern women and to emphasize their important roles as army nurses and aid agency representatives. Both books are compilations of little vignettes describing the war experience of different women. Interspersed throughout these romanticized accounts of heroism are poignant glimpses of the anguish of mothers at the sacrifice they have been called to make. Mrs. Mary W. Lee served as a nurse in the Union Army and received a letter from a bereaved mother begging for details about her son's last moments. Mrs. Mary D. Ripley wrote, "My heart is filled with sorrow; my grief I cannot express. . . . O, I shall never, never again see my darling boy in this world! Never again hear his joyous laugh! . . . I am much afflicted, and can hardly write. This is terrible!"[22] This mother's heartache illustrates the reality of war motherhood which no ideology of sacrifice can assuage.

In another instance of the breakdown of the noble ideology at the reality of death Jane Hoge records her meeting with a mother sitting at her dying son's bedside. Hoge described her interaction with the woman, "'He is the last of seven sons—six have died in the army, and the doctor says he must die to-night.' The flash of life passed from her face as suddenly as it came, her arms folded over her breast, she sank in her chair, and became as before, a rigid impersonation of agony."[23] A southern woman, Margaret

[20] "The German Mother and her Quilt," *Harper's Weekly* (30 January 1864): 71.

[21] Fahs, "The Feminized Civil War," 1466.

[22] Moore, *Women of the War*," 166-167.

[23] L.P. Brockett and Mary C. Vaughan, *Woman's Work in the Civil War: A Record of Heroism, Patriotism and Patience* (Boston, 1867), 565.

Easterling, eloquently relates the weariness of mothers who are asked by their governments to sacrifice again and again. Easterling, who already had two sons in the army, wrote to Jefferson Davis, "I know my country needs all her children and I had thought I could submit to her requisitions. I have given her cause my prayers, my time, my means and my children but now the last lamb of the fold is to be taken, the mother and helpless woman triumph over the patriot."[24] The ideology of the bravely sacrificing mother began to breakdown under the stress and reality of war and loss.

Even mothers who did not send their sons to war were relieved, rather than disappointed, that they were not called to make this sacrifice. Maria D. Brown remembered the day her husband and son went to enlist and were turned down, "I couldn't eat that day. I felt that it was no worse for my men than for thousands of others all over the land, but, oh, how glad I was when they came home again after only a day's absence!"[25] In later years when a neighbor boy said goodbye to her before marching off to World War I Brown remarked, "Isn't it terrible that he was there to be shot at?"[26] Maria Brown did not seem to be enamored of the noble idea of laying her sons "on the altar of her country."[27]

The ideology of Republican motherhood was also challenged by new opportunities for the expansion of women's roles. In *Patriotic Toil*, Jeannie Attie contends that the ideology of separate spheres, of which the idea of Republican motherhood was a part, was already breaking down before the war. In these years, the separate spheres ideology was fervently promoted in an effort to delineate specific gender roles during a period in which these roles were increasingly blurred by the rise of industrialization. Attie writes that these efforts were only partially successful. She asserts, "Such ideological formulations did not so much reflect the realities of women's lives as distort them. They hid the degree to which women of all classes engaged in market relations."[28]

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[24] Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill & London, 1996), 241.

[25] Harriet Connor Brown, *Grandmother Brown's Hundred Years 1827-1927* (Boston, 1929), 144.

[26] Ibid., 148.

[27] "The Great Uprising of the Women of the North," *The New York Herald*, 12 May 1863, http://www.accessible.com/accessible/text/civilwar /00000073/ 00007362.htm, accessed 2/27/04.

[28] Attie, *Patriotic Toil*," 9.

Some of the tension over gender roles in the pre-war era was relieved by what Attie terms the "antebellum compromise." According to Attie, in the 1854 work *A Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School* Catharine Beecher "offered a political bargain to men in Jacksonian America: women would relinquish claims to political equality if in return they acquired recognition for their separate but equally important sphere of influence."[29] Attie contends that during this time in American history when many new groups were gaining rights it was critical to confront the issue of women's rights. The compromise offered by Beecher's treatise legitimized the effort to expand rights for other groups while leaving women behind. According to Attie, the compromise was of a reciprocal nature and this crucial fact was missed by many people at the time. She writes, "If the compromise broke down, if the female sphere of influence were not inviolate, women would be entitled to abandon their end of the bargain and demand the rights accorded to men."[30]

The demands on all citizens during the Civil War began to break down this compromise. Women increasingly needed to move out of their traditional domestic sphere in order to support the war effort. Some women embraced this opportunity to expand their sphere. Jeannie Attie asserts, "Although the antebellum gender divisions of labor and power meant that women would not be able to dictate either the extent of their political contributions or the measure of their sacrifices, many women nonetheless perceived that the military crisis might erase some of the boundaries that separated them from male preserves of power."[31]

One of the most conspicuous new roles the war created for women was that of an army nurse. Though these women could be perceived as performing duties within the domestic sphere, their experiences of the gory carnage of battle and their rapidly growing store of practical medical knowledge inched them closer to professionalization in a traditionally male field. Lori Ginzberg explains, "The Civil War truly elevated nurses' status in the form of pay and government authorization, nurses came to epitomize the tension between the traditional emphasis on sentiment and womanly

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[29] Ibid., 11.

[30] Ibid., 12.

[31] Ibid., 23.

feeling on the one hand and the new values of scientific care on the other."[32]

Mothers with wounded sons made up a portion of the Civil War nurses. One such example is that of the German mother who brought the quilt to her son. Another woman who entered nursing on account of an injured son was Mrs. Mary Morris Husband. Initially Husband was involved in making sure the soldiers had good food while they recovered from injuries, but her participation intensified when she received news of her son. Brockett and Vaughan relate, "The time had come for other and more engrossing labors for the sick and wounded, and she was to be inducted into them by the avenue of personal anxiety for one of her sons."[33] While caring for her son, Husband began taking care of other soldiers as well. Brockett and Vaughan write, "As her son began to recover, she resolved, in her thankfulness for this mercy, to devote herself to the care of the sick and wounded of the army."[34]

More radical than mothers leaving home to nurse their sons in hospitals near the battlefields were the mothers who left their children at home to nurse other women's soldier sons. This behavior is entirely incompatible with the ideology of Republican motherhood that insists it is a mother's greatest duty to stay at home and shape her children into upstanding citizens. Despite its inconsistency with the prevailing ideology, it was not a rare occurrence.

Some mothers who left home to become nurses felt the pressure of their domestic duties and waited until an appropriate time came for their departure. One such woman was Mrs. Isabella Fogg. According to Frank Moore, Mrs. Fogg felt the call to leave her home to support the war effort, but "in the spring of 1861 the family duties by which she was bound seemed to make it impracticable for her to leave at once."[35] After the Battle of Bull Run in July of 1861, "changes occurred in the family of Mrs. Fogg, which seemed to release her from her pressing obligations to remain at home."[36] These changes included the enlistment of her son. Mrs.

[32] Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence* (New Haven, 1990), 143.

[33] Brockett and Vaughan, *Woman's Work in the Civil War*, 288.

[34] Ibid., 289.

[35] Moore, *Women of the War*," 113.

[36] Ibid.

Fogg served as a nurse throughout the entire war until she was crippled by a fall while working on a hospital boat in 1865.[37]

Frank Moore also records the story of Mrs. Mary A. Brady, an Irish immigrant who devoted herself to personally delivering relief packages to wounded soldiers. Though not a nurse, Brady spent countless hours traveling to the battlefield hospitals and visiting the soldiers. Moore reports, "Up to the summer of 1862 the life of Mrs. Brady was unmarked by other than the domestic virtues and the charities of the home. Her life was that of an industrious, kind-hearted woman, finding her chosen and happy sphere in the duties of wife and mother."[38] After seeing the wounded in a Philadelphia hospital, however, Mrs. Brady chose to give up her traditional duties, including leaving her five small children for extended periods, in favor of war service. According to Moore, Brady's devotion to the Union cause cost her her life as she died of over exertion in the summer of 1864 "while planning fresh sacrifices and new fields of exertion."[39]

Another woman who left her traditional child rearing role behind was Mrs. Sarah A. Palmer, known to the soldiers as Aunt Becky. She records her feelings as she left Ithaca, NY on September 3rd, 1862 to nurse the soldiers of the One Hundred and Ninth regiment, "As I thought of the two little girls whom I was leaving motherless, I felt a wild desire to return."[40] Her decision to leave her children in order to care for the wounded in battlefield hospitals was met with criticism. She reported:

> Standing firm against the tide of popular opinion; hearing myself pronounced demented—bereft of usual common sense; doomed to the horrors of an untended death-bed—suffering torture, hunger, and all the untold miseries of a soldier's fate; above the loud echoed cry, "It is no place for woman," I think it was well [that she remained firm in her decision to go.][41]

Throughout her service, which only ended with the war, Aunt Becky was homesick for her children, and yet felt it was her duty to be with the soldiers. While on a brief furlough her thoughts were with the soldiers. She writes, "My heart was with its work, and the

[37] Ibid., 129-130.

[38] Moore, *Women of the War*," 38.

[39] Ibid.

[40] S.A. Palmer, *The Story of Aunt Becky's Army Life* (New York, 1871), 4.

[41] Ibid., 1.

visit which I thought would be so pleasant, was crowded with anxious thoughts of the boys, who might any day be ordered to the front, or might sicken and die, and I away."[42] Even toward the end of the war, when she had been apart from her children for two and a half years, Aunt Becky remained determined to stay with the men. On March 16, 1865 she confides to her journal, "The old homesickness creeps over me again—the old longing for children.... I shall some time go—when, only the Good Lord knows—not while they need me here."[43]

Mothers were affected by the war not only by the children the lost or left behind, but also by the children they gained. Women nurses often became surrogate mother figures to the soldiers they cared for. Charles M. Kendall, a Wisconsin soldier, recalls Mrs. Sturgis, "About this time I also became acquainted with 'Mother.' Every one called her by that name; and for me, it was easy to follow their example, for she seemed to have the feelings of a mother for all of us."[44] Aunt Becky became similarly attached to the soldiers of her regiment. She remembers hearing one of them was killed, "Over none did my heart yearn as a mother over her son, more than when I learned that Willie Lewis was killed.... I had taken the homesick child into my affections as a son, and now mourned him as such."[45]

As experience of the Civil War exposed tensions within the ideology of motherhood, these strains were subtly reflected in women's fiction. In *The Political Work of northern Women Writers*, Lyde Cullen Sizer identifies several key characteristics of women's writings during the Civil War era. First, women were almost always the main characters of their stories and the war was defined as it was experienced by these heroines. Sizer suggests, "Women gained new social power in telling such stories."[46]

Second, women writers engaged in a pattern of "consent and resistance" within a society that placed them in a constricting separate sphere. Female authors developed a strategy to negotiate the difficult terrain between outright challenge and subtle suggestion. Sizer writes, "Rather than opposing the dominant culture and its ideologies of womanhood, writers manipulated those ideologies, first one way and then another, along a spectrum of cultural politics

[42] Ibid., 33.
[43] Ibid., 172.
[44] Moore, *Women of the War*," 479.
[45] Palmer, *The Story of Aunt Becky's Army Life,* 62.
[46] Sizer, *The Political Work of Northern Women Writers and the Civil War,* 6.

contained within accepted bounds."[47] In addition to the ideologies of womanhood, female writers also had difficulties with the ideology of republicanism. Sizer explains, "Women's relationship to republicanism was uneasy, given their subordinate status within it: as dependents, at least ideologically, their voices were not meant to be heard in a national public context."[48]

Within this environment of ideological tension, the work of women writers contributed to the gradual disintegration of the Republican mother ideal. Louisa May Alcott and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps each published novels in 1868 that would challenge the old ideologies while remaining familiar enough to attract a wide readership. Sizer writes, "These novels used the war to talk about the future rather than assess the past; these novelists created moral women but gave them new power."[49]

Louisa May Alcott's novel, *Little Women*, follows the story of the March family through the war years and afterward. The family consists of four daughters: Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy. The girls are at home with their mother, whom they affectionately call Marmee, while their father serves in the Union army. Alcott's book both reflects the old ideology of motherhood and hints at a new independence for women.

Marmee represents the ideology of Repubican motherhood at its best. Though she had no sons to offer her country, she willingly gave her husband. When she talked with Jo about how much she cared for and missed Mr. March, Jo wondered at the sacrifice, "Yet you told him to go, Mother, and didn't cry when he went, and never complain now, or seem as if you needed any help." Marmee replied, "I gave my best to the country I love, and kept my tears till he was gone. Why should I complain, when we both have merely done our duty and will surely be the happier for it in the end?"[50]

Marmee also embodies the Republican mother in her effort to guide her children to lead spiritual lives. When the girls are sad after reading a letter from Father, Marmee reminds them of a game they used to play called Pilgrim's Progress. In the game, the girls had to travel from the "City of Destruction" to the "Celestial City" all the while carrying their individual burdens. When Amy counters that they have grown too old for such games, Marmee replies, "We are

[47] Ibid., 7.
[48] Ibid., 12.
[49] Ibid., 244.
[50] Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (New York, 1868), 82.

never too old for this, my dear, because it is a play we are playing all the time in one way or another." She further encourages, "Now, my little pilgrims, suppose you begin again, not in play, but in earnest, and see how far on you can get before Father comes home."[51]

In addition to providing an example of self-sacrifice and religious piety, Marmee also instructs her children in proper feminine behavior. After losing her temper with Amy, Jo feels repentant and implores Marmee to help her control her outbursts. Marmee advises, "Watch and pray, dear, never get tired of trying...to conquer your fault." She goes on to explain how she, too, struggled with her temper and only was able to gain control of it when Father reminded her that she set the example for her children. Marmee asserts, "The love, respect, and confidence of my children was the sweetest reward I could receive for my efforts to be the woman I would have them copy."[52]

Alcott's Marmee character epitomizes the ideal Republican mother, and yet the protagonist of the novel is Jo, a decidedly unique and independent female character. Jo, Alcott's semi-autobiographical character,[53] prefers writing to visiting and romps with the boys to tea with the young ladies. Her goal in life is to write a great novel and she has no plans to get married. Despite her independence, Jo is intensely loyal to her parents and sisters and gives up writing sensational popular stories because they "desecrate some of the womanliest attributes of a woman's character."[54] Sizer writes, "While Jo is not the 'coming woman' of Alcott's later imagination, she rides on the cusp of a new world while retaining much of the old."[55]

Alcott's *Little Women* is a novel bridging the gap between the receding ideology of Republican motherhood and the gradually emerging independent woman. The experience of the war rendered the old ideology increasingly untenable, and yet a majority of the population was not ready to let it go. Sizer writes, "Many have concluded that *Little Women* is a conservative compromise, particularly because all the little women, including the independent Jo, marry in the end."[56] Though Jo does marry, against the original

[51] Ibid., 12.
[52] Ibid., 80, 81.
[53] Sizer, *The Political Work of Northern Women Writers and the Civil War,* 45.
[54] Alcott, *Little Women,* 354.
[55] Sizer, *The Political Work of Northern Women Writers and the Civil War,* 255.
[56] Ibid., 258.

intentions of the author who acquiesced to her readers' desire, she does not wed without qualifications. Sizer points out that Jo responds to Professor Bhaer's marriage proposal with "I'm to carry my share, Friedrich, and help to earn the home. Make up your mind to that, or I'll never go." Sizer asserts, "For a mid-nineteenth-century novel, written to instruct young America, this is a strong message indeed."[57]

Like Louisa May Alcott, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps wrote a novel about an independent young woman within a context that was recognizable to the prevailing ideologies about women. In *The Gates Ajar* Phelps tells the story of a young girl, Mary Cabot, who has just lost her older brother, Royal, in the war. Roy and Mary were extremely close, and he was her only close relative. His death leaves Mary devastated and angry with everyone and everything, including God.

When Deacon Quirk visits Mary soon after Roy's death he tries to convince her that she should do her best to get over his loss. He asserts, "It's very natural; poor human nature sets a great deal by earthly props and affections. But it's your duty, as a Christian and a church-member, to be resigned." Mary does not respond initially, but as he persists in preaching resignation Mary fires back, "Deacon Quirk, I am not resigned. I pray to the dear Lord with all my heart to make me so, but I will not say that I am, until I am, - if ever that time comes."[58] Before he leaves, Deacon Quirk suggests that perhaps Roy is not among those elect who will gain entrance into heaven. He does hold out hope, however, because "Royal's mother was a pious woman."[59] These statements set Mary to thinking bitterly about heaven and she concludes her journal entry, "God forgive the words! But Heaven will never be Heaven to me without [him.]"[60]

Deacon Quirk's complete failure in his effort to comfort Mary illustrates what Sizer identifies as a key concept in the book. She wrote, "It offered a direct challenge to religious patriarchs by bypassing their inadequate forms of comfort, assuming that only women knew best how to speak to women." Sizer continued, "She [Phelps] later claimed...that the war and the experience of writing the novel transformed her, leading her away from the 'old ideas of

[57] Ibid.
[58] Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *The Gates Ajar* (Cambridge, MA, 1964), 14.
[59] Ibid., 15.
[60] Ibid., 18.

womanhood' toward an understanding and sympathy for 'the peculiar needs of women as a class.'"[61]

Despite her challenges to patriarchal control over women, Phelps retains some of the old ideology in her description of the relationship between Mary and her Aunt Winifred who comes to stay with her. Aunt Winifred, like the Republican mother, leads Mary and other young people of the town toward God. When Mary finally reconciles herself to God and finds that she believes in him she exclaims to her Aunt, "You, His interpreter, have done it."[62] While Winifred plays the familiar role of spiritual guide, she also challenges the ideology with her radical conception of an inclusive and joyful heaven. Sizer sees this assertion as a challenge to the role of men in teaching women religion. She writes, "Phelps offers another vision of heaven to her anguished readers, a heaven glimpsed through the friendship of women rather than the ministry of men."[63] According to Sizer, Phelps' novel is unique in that it makes little attempt to romanticize or glorify the war. She contends, "Indirectly commenting on the war's purposes, Phelps makes Mary one of the 'unconsulted' that the war has left and demonstrates her suffering to be of central importance. This legacy of grief, and not the need to defend or further the war's objectives, is the focus of the book."[64] In Phelps' book, part of the ideology of motherhood remains while the author attacks the usefulness of ideologies in assuaging the anguish left by the war.

The ideology of Republican motherhood played a significant role in influencing the shape of the women's sphere in the antebellum North. The experiences of women during the Civil War, however, dealt serious blows to this once mighty creed. When confronted with the cold reality of the death of their sons so nobly sacrificed for the good of the country, mothers cried out in anguish rather than stoically accept their sacrifice as part of their "role." Women like Maria Brown were thrilled when they did not have to send their sons to war rather than disappointed that they had failed their country. Many women, like Aunt Becky, defied their traditional responsibility to raise good Republican citizens when then left their own children at home in order to nurse soldiers on the battlefield. The tension between the old ideologies and the growing realization

[61] Sizer, *The Political Work of Northern Women Writers and the Civil War,* 264.
[62] Phelps, *The Gates Ajar,* 130.
[63] Sizer, *The Political Work of Northern Women Writers and the Civil War,* 265.
[64] Ibid.

of their inadequacies was eloquently illustrated by women writers. Authors like Alcott and Phelps tried to maintain some remnant of the familiarity of the old ideologies while pushing the boundaries for the future. In 1863, Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote, "We have heard many complaints of the lack of enthusiasm among northern women; but, when a mother lays her son on the altar of her country, she asks an object equal to the sacrifice."[65] While most women were not willing to go as far as Stanton in demanding women's rights, after the Civil War it became increasingly clear that the ideology of Republican motherhood would no longer justify the sacrifices made by the women of the North.

[65] "The Great Uprising of the Women of the North," *The New York Herald*, 12 May 1863, http://www.accessible.com/accessible/text/civilwar/00000073/00007362.htm, accessed 2/27/04.