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Acting Proper: Lucy Buck's Ambivalence towards Southern Gender Standards

On September 25th, 1862, Lucy Rebecca Buck wrote “My Birthday! Twenty years old! [...] And I’m a woman, repel the unwelcome thought as I will [...] Nevertheless by this very feeling of care that is clinging about my heart is the truth made apparent [...] A woman by this sensitive apprehension of my own unworthiness, of my deficiencies in every respect.”¹ Lucy’s introspective diary entry revealed the pressures she felt to conform to the southern female gender standards of obedience, piety, chastity, purity, and maternity.² Moreover, Lucy’s diary offered an important window into how the often-unstudied Confederate belles ambivalently viewed but ultimately upheld gender standards during the Civil War. Although Lucy’s daily activities demonstrated her physical investment in standards set forth by the cult of domesticity, her intimate writing revealed her awareness of the discrepancies between social ideals and reality. Her writing also showed her rejection of aspects of the definition of southern womanhood through her belief in higher education for women, her reluctance to marry, and her enjoyment of labor after the family slaves escaped. However, Lucy’s conformity to the social performances deemed appropriate for Confederate belles during the war like fundraising, as well as her demonization of other young women who she felt violated social norms, showed how she publically strove to uphold the very Confederate gender standards she privately resisted. Lucy

¹ Lucy Rebecca Buck, *Shadows on My Heart: The Civil War of Lucy Rebecca Buck of Virginia*, ed. Elizabeth R. Baer (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 152.

² Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 202.

explored becoming a southern woman through her dialectical private diary writing and public behaviors.

Lucy Rebecca Buck wrote the diaries later published as *Shadows on My Heart* during the Civil War. Born September 25, 1842, Lucy was the third of thirteen children born to William Mason Buck and Elizabeth A. Ashby and was a member of the small planter class in Front Royal, Virginia. According to Lucy's brother, William Richardson Buck, their father owned eight slaves and employed freedmen.³ As appropriate to her economic status, Lucy attended a girl's school and later the Front Royal Academy where she learned social skills valued by the upper class.⁴ Lucy and her family lived on their plantation, Bel Air, for the duration of the war, and witnessed the numerous military actions around Front Royal. She was eighteen at the start of the war and had recently become a belle.⁵



Figure 1 This image of Bel Air taken shortly after the Civil War reflects the socioeconomic status of the Buck family. The settlement period wing (ca. 1795) and the larger nineteenth century addition show the family's rapid rise to social prominence. (Courtesy of the Warren Heritage Society, Front Royal, Virginia)

³ Buck, *Shadows on My Heart*, xxxviii.

⁴ Buck, *Shadows on My Heart*, xvii.

⁵ Most young southern women came out as belles in their mid- to late teens. For more information, see Laura F. Edwards, *Scarlett Doesn't Live Here Any More: Southern Women in the Civil War Era* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 20-21.

Despite her overall investment in southern society, Lucy's writing revealed her awareness of the inequities created by gender standards for southern women. She strongly felt that higher education was important for women. One evening she hosted two neighboring men who began to debate female education.⁶ Lucy and Mr. Brerwood "thought that the continuation of the mind to a high degree refined and elevated her character and tastes and softened and beautified her disposition."⁷ Conversely, Mr. H. thought that "a female philosopher [...] was necessarily masculine, bold and ambitious, a perfect monstrosity."⁸ Lucy, however, was markedly similar to the female philosopher Mr. H. abhorred as she enjoyed reading and found legal dissertations interesting.⁹ Nonetheless, the debate was so intense that she "as a prudent hostess [had] to change the subject without either party having departed from his original positions."¹⁰ This scenario exemplified the tensions created by gender standards in Lucy's life. Lucy was aware that if she acquired a reputation as a freethinking young woman, many suitors as well as society would find her unfeminine and shun her. As an educated and articulate woman, she could capably debate the benefits of educating women. However, she chose to obey social conventions by submissively withdrawing from the debate and initiating a new subject.

⁶ For a discussion of the controversial female education in the South, see George C. Rable, *Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 17-22.

⁷ Buck, *Shadows on My Heart*, 18.

⁸ Buck, *Shadows on My Heart*, 18.

⁹ Buck, *Shadows on My Heart*, 18-19.

¹⁰ Buck, *Shadows on My Heart*, 18.



Figure 2 This ca. 1860 image of Lucy (right) and her sister Nellie (left) shows Lucy’s intelligent and moody persona. The girls’ clothing and hair styles reflect their status as belles. (Courtesy of the Warren Heritage Society, Front Royal, Virginia)

Similarly, Lucy’s skepticism of marriage showed her reluctant conformity to southern gender standards. When Lucy’s friend Kattie Boone got married, Lucy wrote that Kattie “is evidently of the opinion that all the virtues pertaining to manhood are concentrated in [...] Mr. Samuels [...] I hope she may ever think thus but I feel sad to hear young brides indulging in such bright anticipations as these.”¹¹ Lucy revealed her awareness of the discrepancies between reality and ideals when she wrote “I think of the contrast between married life as they imagine it to be and married life as they will find it to be ten years hence.”¹² Like other many young southern women, Lucy recognized that upholding gender ideals through marriage meant the burdens of household management and raising a family.¹³ However, during the Civil War,

¹¹ Buck, *Shadows on My Heart*, 33.

¹² Buck, *Shadows on My Heart*, 33.

¹³ Victoria E. Ott, *Confederate Daughters: Coming of Age during the Civil War* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 116-117.

finding a husband became an even more anxious endeavor for southern women as the male population declined. Many young women intensely competed for suitors because they feared remaining single.¹⁴ While other young women of Front Royal pursued marriages like Kattie, Lucy remained silent about her own courtships. Her diary never mentioned serious beaux or the possibility of her own marriage, suggesting that she did not share the apprehensions of her friends. Lucy's lack of anxiety over finding a husband combined with her skepticism of marriage revealed her quiet resistance to the unrealistic marital ideals for southern women.

Similarly, Lucy's ambivalence to the impact on her lifestyle of losing the family slaves revealed her inner conflict on southern gender roles. Like most Confederate belles, Lucy supported the institution of slavery because the patriarchal system granted her privilege based on her race, class, and gender.¹⁵ She did little housework since most of the burdens fell on her family's female slaves. Unlike many young Confederate women, Lucy was not overtly disturbed by her family's loss of social power when their slaves escaped.¹⁶ Instead, on the first day without slaves Lucy confided to her diary "I made some biscuits and curd –my first curd for the occasion. I really enjoyed the day –hard as the work was."¹⁷ Similarly, a week later she noted "we were all cooks, Ma made bread and fried meat, Grandma prepared onions and lettuce, I dressed the latter, brought water and arranged table, Nellie and Belle brought milk, cream and butter and Laura warmed the pies. We did enjoy it so too –it seemed so sweet after working so hard for it."¹⁸ Instead of feeling helpless by the loss of the family slaves, Lucy felt empowered because she directly helped provide for her family. She was comfortable taking on a social role as a laborer

¹⁴ Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 140-141.

¹⁵ Ott, *Confederate Daughters*, 10.

¹⁶ Giselle Roberts, *The Confederate Belle* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 151.

¹⁷ Buck, *Shadows on My Heart*, 210.

¹⁸ Buck, *Shadows on My Heart*, 215.

for the family because society saw her behaviors as an acceptable form of domesticity since the family no longer had slaves. Lucy revealed her security in her role as cook when a Confederate soldier from Alabama called on her while she was baking. She reported “after having enquired for me once or twice I sent an invitation for him to come in and *see* my excuse for not being visible.”¹⁹ After she finished baking, she then visited with him in the parlor, as was socially acceptable. Lucy’s flexibility between her roles as a Confederate belle and as a provider for her family exemplified how she maintained her socially accepted, gendered performances while also showing how she enjoyed stepping outside the boundaries previously consigned to her by the cult of domesticity.

Similarly, Lucy sought socially condoned ways of supporting the Confederacy. She did not become a nurse since she “turned faint and sick while merely holding the basin” for her sister as she tended a wounded soldier.²⁰ Instead, Lucy performed other socially accepted gendered roles like knitting socks and collecting money from townspeople to provide a relief fund to the citizens of Fredericksburg.²¹ Unlike knitting, fundraising extended women’s roles into the public sphere. However, fundraising was still considered a socially acceptable wartime activity for Confederate belles because it inspired patriotism on the home front.²² Lucy was acutely aware of her new public position as a fundraiser. After participating for the first time in a benefit concert she remarked, “After all our dread the affair passed off quite creditably.”²³ Lucy was nervous about giving a public performance because she was conscious of how her society perceived her. She wanted to retain her image as a pure, submissive, domestic southern belle and worried that the audience would see her as being too assertive. However, she realized that Front Royal society

¹⁹ Buck, *Shadows on My Heart*, 220.

²⁰ Buck, *Shadows on My Heart*, 152.

²¹ Buck, *Shadows on My Heart*, 176.

²² Giselle Roberts, *The Confederate Belle*, 51.

²³ Buck, *Shadows on My Heart*, 264.

accepted her behavior as a form of patriotism.

While Lucy gently pushed the boundaries of acceptable social behavior, her critical opinions of the famous Confederate spy Marie Isabella “Belle” Boyd highlighted Lucy’s views on proper patriotic behavior for Confederate belles. Both young women were members of the same social class although Belle was from Martinsburg (West) Virginia. She frequently visited her aunt who lived in Front Royal and joined the same local social circles as Lucy. Similarly, Belle was a year younger than Lucy. However, Belle became a Confederate spy in 1861 after she shot and killed an offending drunken Union soldier.²⁴ Lucy disliked Belle and found her “rude and evasive.”²⁵ Furthermore, Lucy felt like associating with Belle had “compromised my dignity in mingling upon terms of equality and apparent friendship with persons whom in my heart I despise –persons whom I felt to be false and heartless.”²⁶ She noted “I never am brought in contact with such persons without feeling a conviction that if forced to confine myself to their society I shall become as frivolous apparently as they.”²⁷ Despite their shared socioeconomic status, Lucy realized that Belle did not follow the prescribed set of social behaviors. Lucy felt young women such as Belle tainted the purity of southern womanhood and she sought to distance herself. Although Lucy was herself conflicted over southern gender standards, she still strove to uphold those very standards from what she saw as encroachment by false Confederate belles.

²⁴ Mary Lou Groh, “Maria “Belle” Boyd,” The Civil War Trust, <http://www.civilwar.org/education/history/biographies/maria-belle-boyd.html> (accessed April 16, 2014).

²⁵ Buck, *Shadows on My Heart*, 12.

²⁶ Buck, *Shadows on My Heart*, 12.

²⁷ Buck, *Shadows on My Heart*, 12.



Figure 3 This ca. 1855-1865 image of Belle Boyd shows her strong personality despite her status as evidenced by her dress. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress)

Because Lucy viewed Belle’s forms of patriotic activities as being too far outside the social norms, she deeply mistrusted Belle. Lucy was going to send letters to her brothers behind Confederate lines through Belle, but upon finding “the young lady with a Yankee officer – concluded not to intrust [sic] my letter with one who appeared upon such familiar terms with those whom we most dreaded.”²⁸ While Belle was likely flirting with the officer to gain information as part of her spying activities, Lucy viewed the activity as traitorous. Even though spying through flirtation was a means for Confederate belles to help the southern cause, many young women saw engaging in coquetry with villainous men as compromising to their honor.²⁹

²⁸ Buck, *Shadows on My Heart*, 80.

²⁹ Catherine Clinton, *Tara Revisited: Women, War, and the Plantation Legend* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1995), 97.

Lucy's entry reveals the stigmatization of female spies by their peers. When Belle ran through enemy fire to greet General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson during the Battle of Front Royal, Lucy dismissively recorded the incident. She wrote "'tis said she [Belle] wished some information conveyed to the army about the time of the keenest firing and not being able to get anyone to go for her, she went herself to a most exposed point, where the bullets fell like hail stones about her riddling her dress."³⁰ Lucy characterized Belle as a demanding and foolish woman, highlighting her belief that Belle's actions transgressed the standards set forth for women by the cult of domesticity.

Lucy's diary revealed her ambivalence towards southern gender standards. Her writing showed her awareness of the discrepancies between gender ideals and reality through her entries on female education and marriage. Similarly, her accounts of cooking and fundraising exemplified the ways she engaged in socially acceptable behaviors while expanding her role beyond the norms for bellehood. However, her descriptions of Belle Boyd also showed how Lucy felt morally obligated to uphold southern gender standards rather than accept young women who transgressed the socially acceptable behavior norms. Lucy's writing provides a unique window into the ways in which Confederate belles negotiated the wartime gap between gender ideals and reality. The ambiguity of Lucy's private writings and public behaviors reveals the need for further scholarship on the complexities of young Confederate women's reactions to the social upheaval during the Civil War.

³⁰ Buck, *Shadows on My Heart*, 84-85.

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