

# Love & Duty: Confederate Widows and the Emotional Politics of Lost

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## Review

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**Elder, Angela Esco.** *Love & Duty: Confederate Widows and the Emotional Politics of Loss*. The University North Carolina Press, 2022. HARDCOVER. \$95.00. ISBN 9781469667737 pp. 208

By focusing on Confederate widows, Angela Elder's important book adds to the growing history of emotions during the Civil War. While Confederate war widows virtually disappeared from the public eye during the post-Civil War era, Elder argues that during the Civil War widows played an important role in the Confederacy in terms of their ability to influence and shape political mobilization. She highlights the ways in which these widows experienced emotional grief differently, yet at the same time demonstrates the ways in which their personal emotions of grief were politicized by the Confederacy.

Elder begins by contextualizing the culture of widowhood in the antebellum South. Love and loss, she explains, was "ritualized" for women, especially among the elite (17). Prescriptive literature provided southern women with "guidance" in terms of how to express their love, how to be a good wife, and how to mourn a husband. But Elder does not solely rely on antebellum literature for her sources. She examines the letters and diaries of real women. What she discovers is that not all women followed the advice provided by popular culture, though many did.

This context is important for Elder's argument. She examines closely how during the Civil War women used their letters to husbands and lovers in ways thick with emotion that betrayed the antebellum culture. The war, Elder contends, changed the emotional expressions of women. This understanding informs her examination of how southern women experienced mourning for their husbands who died in the war. As part of their grief, mourning wives experienced a change in identity, from wife to widow. In so doing, they had to navigate through their emotions and behaviors with cultural expectations in mind. The grief experienced upon learning of the death of a husband could be traumatic. But as Elder explains, "wives came to terms with their new identity as widows in different ways and at different speeds" (78). In this way, Elder makes an important contribution to the growing historiography of emotions history,

clearly demonstrating a cultural shift among southern women in terms of how they experienced and expressed their grief.

Despite the variety of authentic emotional responses captured in letters and diaries, Elder highlights the ways in which Confederate leaders portrayed the grieving Confederate widow to serve specific political purposes. Politicians and newspapers alike praised widows for their devotion. Instead of critiquing the emotions expressed by widows, they linked the devotion of Confederate wives to their husbands to the Confederacy itself. Moreover, Confederate widows, Elder maintains, did wield political power themselves. Widows had a special status in the Confederacy because their husbands had given their lives for the nation. This enabled widows to make claims upon the Confederacy. Specifically, Confederate widows received a degree of political currency that other women in the South did not have.

Elder is at her best when she dives into case studies of Confederate widows. For example, she examines closely the story of Octavia “Tivia” Stephens. Tivia, Elder explains, experienced the death of her husband, daughter, and mother all around the same period of time in 1864. The unbearable grief she experienced is made authentic to readers through the words of Tivia herself. But readers also learn about the ways in which Tivia’s family and community sought to provide support for her. Despite their support for her, Tivia’s inability to move on emotionally from her grief disappointed her family (95-98).

While Elder does discuss lower-class Confederate women, the focus of the book is on “elite” Confederate women. While I appreciate the challenges of finding the voices of poor women, many of whom lacked the literacy skills needed for letter and diary writing, Elder tended to conflate upper-class women and middle-class women into the category of “elite” women. This made me wonder if there were class distinctions among these women that she focused on. In addition, while she does give some attention to the challenges Confederate widows from West Virginia faced, overall, there is little distinction made among the Confederate widows based on their region or state. Perhaps there were few distinctions when it came to the culture of widowhood, but some exploration into this would have been helpful.

These critiques notwithstanding, *Love & Duty* is a very readable book, deplete of jargon, and filled with fascinating stories of Confederate widows. As such, it is very appropriate for undergraduate and graduate courses on the Civil War and the nineteenth-century American South, emotions history, and American women’s history. It is also essential reading for scholars

whose research focuses on the history of Southern emotions or Southern women's history during the nineteenth century.

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