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Chivalric Politics

Southern Ladies Take Their Stand

> Whilst our fathers, brothers, and friends contend on the gory fields for the rights of freemen, we would gladly assist in every way within the sphere of women's influence.... We claim a share in the lives of our brave countrymen; they are fighting for our common rights – we with willing hearts if feeble hands, are engaged in a soul-inspiring cause. We expect not, nor do we wish a voice in the councils of our nation.
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> —"A Rebel Daughter of Alabama" (1862)[1]

Southern women, more so than northern, accepted exclusion from voting and political office as natural and proper and scored those who tested the boundaries of good taste. A lady expressed political opinions, but of course she deferred to the opinions of father, brother, or husband. Despite extraordinary pretense and interminable blather, sensible men, northern and southern, acknowledged women's interest in politics within the bounds of accepted etiquette, which required a southern lady to deride "petticoat politicians," eschew public controversy, and indignantly deny that she would dream of "meddling" in civic affairs. A gentleman did not refuse to hear her opinions, much less presume to question her Christian principles and loyalty to the South.[2]

The Romans' literary image of aristocratic mothers, Susan Dixon comments, gave them standing as "disciplinarians, custodians of Roman culture and traditional morality" – a role akin to that of fathers. Roman mothers of the elite had a duty to train their sons for service to the state and their daughters to train sons of their own. Southern women learned of Roman mothers who compelled action

[1] "A Rebel Daughter" quoted in William Edward Wadsworth Yerby, *History of Greensboro, Alabama from Its Earliest Settlement*, ed. Mabel Yerby Lawson (Northport, AL, 1963 [1908]), 48.

[2] In 1808, Rosalie Eugenia Calvert, the Belgian-born member of a planter family in Maryland, condemned women who were "making themselves ridiculous discussing politics at random without understanding the subject." An ardent Federalist, she herself voiced a strong interest in politics: Ida Gertrude Everson, *George Henry Calvert: American Literary Pioneer* (New York, 1944), 31. Similarly, Mrs. Gabriel Manigault of South Carolina rejected women's direct participation in politics, but her letters bristled with partisan bitterness as Federalists faced Jeffersonians: George C. Rogers, *Charleston in the Age of the Pinckneys* (Columbia, SC, 1980), 135.