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Visual Culture Analysis of "The Last Ditch of the Chivalry, or a President in Petticoats"

Abstract

This lithograph is a Northern depiction of the capture of former Confederate President Jefferson Davis. Titled "The Last Ditch of the Chivalry, or a President in Petticoats", and picturing Davis in a woman's dress and bonnet, the Northern press painted Davis as a coward. Rather than being a man and standing up to the Union troops, Davis disguised himself as a woman and attempted to cowardly escape. Although in actuality Davis was wearing a rain jacket and shawl rather than a full dress and bonnet, the Northern press mocked him. This piece demonstrates the prominence of male Southern honor, and how the ideals of being a man contradicted with the expectations for women. Davis' flee also symbolizes the fall of the Confederacy.

Keywords

Civil War, Jefferson Davis, Visual Culture

Disciplines

History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology | Military History | United States History | Women's History

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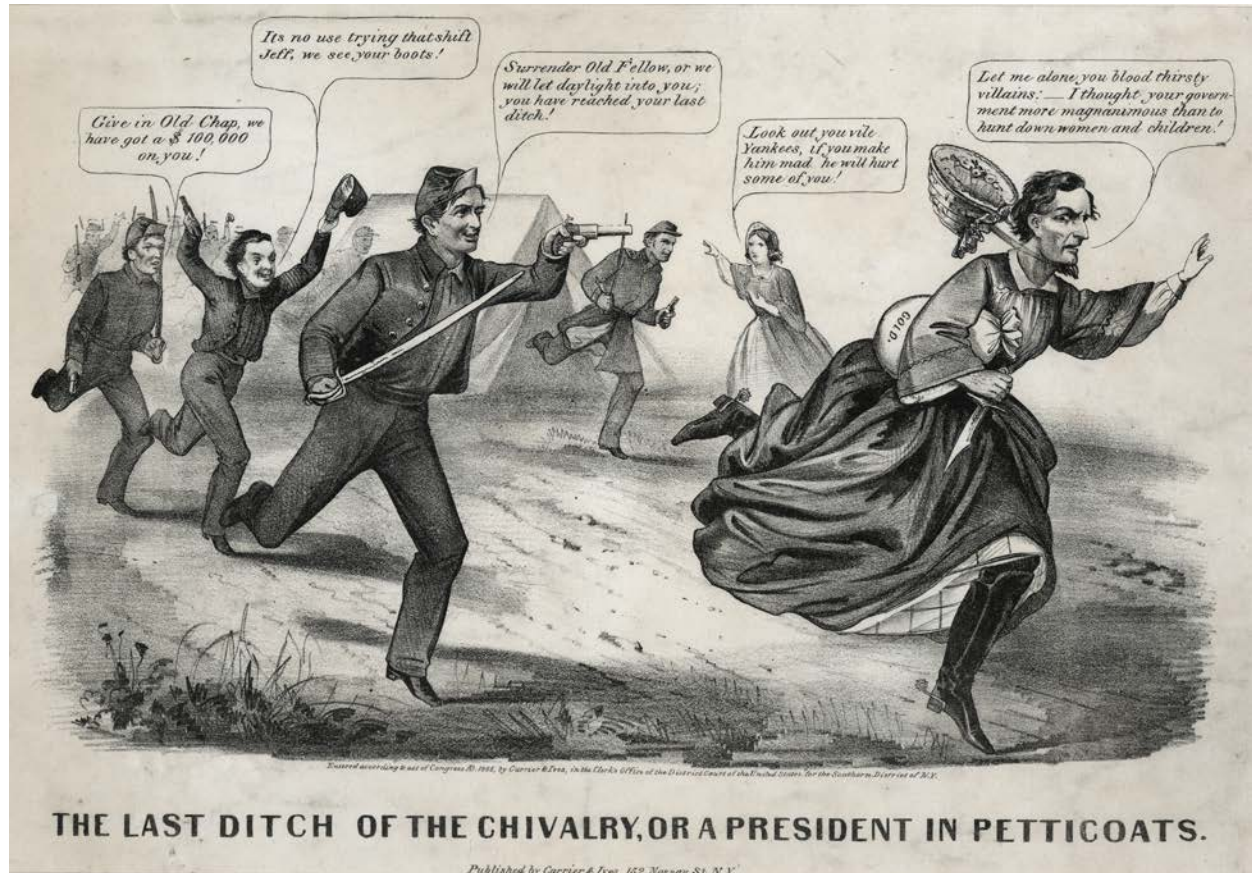Written for History 245: Gender and the American Civil War.

Sarah Hansen

April 21st, 2017

Visual Culture Assignment

THE LAST DITCH OF THE CHIVALRY, OR A PRESIDENT IN PETTICOATS.

1. **Write thorough description of the piece in your own words. How would you describe this to someone who couldn't see it?**

The focus of the piece is former Confederate President Jefferson Davis, who is running from Union troops. Davis' character is rather unique; he is wearing a full-length dress and a bonnet is tied around his neck. The bonnet is rather extravagant; there is a ribbon on the outside and layers of material as well as flowers. His dress is adorned by a stitched pattern on the sleeves, making his attire perhaps fancier than the woman's in the background. A bag of gold is tucked under his right shoulder, and his right hand is clasping a knife. Contradicting his dress and bonnet, Davis is wearing black, knee-high boots with spurs. With one arm outstretched, he is running a few paces ahead of the first Union soldier. Davis is

yelling to the Union troops behind him: "Let me alone you blood thirsty villains: - I thought your government more magnanimous than to hunt down women and children!"

There are four distinct Union soldiers running behind Davis, and a blur of many more Union troops can be seen behind them (they appear to be cheering and have their hands and some hats raised). All four express excited facial expressions, and one soldier even has both hands in the air, as if cheering. The three soldiers who are not raising their hands have pistols and swords in each hand. Three soldiers are talking to Davis. They appear to be enlisted, as their uniforms have no badges. The first one is yelling: "Surrender Old Fellow, or we will let daylight into you; you have reached your last ditch." The second: "It is no use trying that shift Jeff, we see your boots!" And the third: "Give in Old Chap, we have got a $100,000 on you!" The Union officer who is not talking to Davis is most likely an officer, as he has badges on his shoulders.

A woman is seen next to a tent in the background of the piece. She is yelling to the Union troops: "Look out you vile Yankees, if you make him mad he will hurt some of you." She is wearing a traditional, full-length dress and a bonnet, and is waving one hand sternly in the air.

The scenery is outside in the country. Behind the four Union soldiers there is a tent. All men are running on uneven ground, and weeds, grass, and plants can be seen in the foreground. It does not appear to be raining.

2. **What's the subject of the painting/illustrations? How is the subject framed?**

The subject of the piece is the capture of former Confederate President Jefferson Davis. Davis was captured by Union forces on May 10th, 1865 outside Irwinville, Georgia. He had retreated south after the threat of Richmond falling. As per the description on the back of the cartoon, in a hurry to evade Union troops Davis had worn his wife's raincoat and shawl (not a dress, as is depicted in the cartoon). When he was captured, the North labeled him a coward and ridiculed him for trying to escape under the guise of a woman. This cowardly perception is enforced by Davis' quote in the piece ("I thought your

government more magnanimous than to hunt down woman and children!"), as well as his attire in a woman's dress and bonnet. Rather than wearing his wife's shawl and jacket as an act of haste and prevention against the poor weather, the North chastised this event as an act of foolery. The typed description on the back of the piece explains that the "Northern press had a field day" after Davis' capture, and this print was supposedly published right after his capture. The title of the piece is: *The Last Ditch of the Chivalry, or a President in Petticoats*, mocking Davis' cowardice and the fall of the South.

3. **From whose point of view is it pained/drawn/photographed?**

The piece is drawn from an onlooker's point of view of the Union troops capturing Jefferson Davis. As a Confederate woman is seen in the background, the view could be that of another Confederate citizen. The capture of Davis was a highly publicized event, and this piece (from the Currier and Ives, a northern newspaper) is a perhaps exaggerated depiction of his capture. Even the title (*The Last Ditch of the Chivalry, or a President in Petticoats*) suggests a mocking tone. Davis wore his wife's raincoat and shawl in his hurry to evade the Union soldiers, which allowed the North an opportunity ridicule him as a woman and a coward.

4. **Does it contain symbols?**

The primary symbol in the piece is Davis' feminine attire. With a lacy bonnet and adorned dress, the Northern press is mocking Davis' flee from the Union army. Davis is portrayed as a coward; rather than facing the Union army as a man, he disguised himself as a woman and fled. He appears malicious, yet comical. Still wearing spur boots, grasping a knife, and holding a bag of money, Davis is portrayed as the enemy. In regards to physical appearance, Davis is still a male, yet, with a dress and bonnet, the Northern press is degrading Davis' supposed "Southern Chivalry." Davis can also be understood as a symbol of the Northern victory over the South. In his flee, Davis represented the "last ditch of the chivalry," and the fall of the Confederacy.

5. **Make a list of what you know about the piece? (artist, patron or person who commissioned the piece, date, medium, visible marks on the back, provenance/ownership)**

This lithograph was published in 1865 in Currier and Ives, a northern newspaper (centered out of New York). According to the description on the back of the piece, it was published immediately after hearing word of Davis' capture (sometime after May 10th, 1865). The political cartoon was titled: *The Last Ditch of the Chivalry, or a President in Petticoats*. On the bottom of the piece, an address for Currier and Ives is provided: 152 Nassau St, NY. Below the scene there is also the following text: "Entered according to act of Congress AD 1865, by Currier & Ives, in the Clerk's Office of the District Court of the United States for the Southern District of N.Y.." Special Collections acquired the lithograph from The Philadelphia Print Shop, Ltd., in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. No visible marks are available on the back save a typed description, which was added much later to the piece (added by the Philadelphia Print Shop).

6. **Make a list of what you don't know but would need to know if you were writing a history of the illustration work/source? What other sources might you use to answer your questions? Where would you find the answers?**

It is not known who specifically crafted the lithograph. Although presumably a Northern artist, it would be interesting to understand the cartoon from the artist's viewpoint. It is also not known how much information about Davis' capture was available in Northern newspapers. It would be helpful to look at newspapers from the same timeframe, and find Northern articles about Davis' capture. It would be interesting to see if the articles contained the same mockery, or if the public knew Davis was not actually wearing a dress. To write a history of the lithograph, it would be important to know more of the context surrounding the cartoon, and whether it was drawn in isolation or supplemented by various articles about Davis' capture. It would also be interesting to compare the Southern perspective of the capture (perhaps also by cartoons or newspaper articles) with the Northern perspective.

7. **Please make an argument for its significance as it relates to gender during the Civil War.**

This lithograph is a Northern depiction of the capture of former Confederate President Jefferson Davis. Titled *The Last Ditch of the Chivalry, or a President in Petticoats*, and picturing Davis in a woman's dress and bonnet, the Northern press painted Davis as a coward. Rather than being a man and standing up to the Union troops, Davis disguised himself as a woman and attempted to cowardly escape.

Although in actuality Davis was wearing a rain jacket and shawl rather than a full dress and bonnet, the Northern press mocked him. This piece demonstrates the prominence of male Southern honor, and how the ideals of being a man contradicted with the expectations for women. Davis' flee also symbolizes the fall of the Confederacy.

According to male honor and Southern chivalry, men were supposed to be strong and brave. Admirable, Victorian men were considered "manly." Manly was defined as being independent, strong, brave, large-minded, honorable, and highminded.[1] Manliness was a code of conduct; a standard to live up to and an ideal of male perfectness.[2] To be manly was to be honorable, and honor was one of the most important facets in Southern society. To act dishonorably would be to cut a lasting scar on the family name, and would deprive a family of their privileged status. It is important to note that Southern chivalry and male honor were most valued by the elite, slaveholding class. Although some less privileged families also aspired to these notions (as well as some privileged families did not aspire to these notions at all), poor white families were more concerned with surviving the war than acting with honor.

Regardless, to act dishonorably was heavily shunned in the South. When ten Confederate soldiers deserted the Confederate Army and were captured, their execution was published in Southern newspapers, and the soldiers' desertion was deemed an act of cowardice. The newspaper labeled the deserters as "deluded men," and used their execution to prevent other soldiers from acting dishonorably.[3] According to the newspaper, the men's "names are disgraced forever, and around their memories will forever linger a dark stain that can never be blotted out."[4] The newspaper also warned family members on the home front from causing the soldiers to act dishonorably: "Let their fate also be a warning to wives, mothers, sisters, fathers, and others, against writing letters to their loved ones calculated to make them

[1] Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880 – 1917,* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 18.
[2] Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880 – 1917,* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 27.
[3] "John Futch Papers." (Raleigh: North Carolina Department of History and Archives.)
[4] "John Futch Papers." (Raleigh: North Carolina Department of History and Archives.)

unhappy and dissatisfied in the army and cause them to desert."[5] Although just one example, this language demonstrates the importance of male honor in the South. Evident from the execution of the deserters and the charged language describing the execution, honor and bravery were extremely valued for southern white men. Chivalry, which encompassed honor, bravery, and manliness, was a pinnacle achievement in this gendered discourse, and men without chivalry were shunned.

Confederate women were merciless to men they perceived as cowards. Especially elite women would convince their husbands to fight in the war in the name of honor and manliness. Confederate men were encouraged to enlist to "prove their masculine fitness."[6] If a man refused to fight in the war, he was a coward. One Confederate woman told her fiancé that "If he had not promptly volunteered for the defense of our state, he could never have entered this house; and, indeed, he could not have had access to any parlor in the city again. No woman of Carolina would for a moment tolerate a coward."[7] This example of an elite, Confederate woman using honor to convince her fiancé to be brave corresponded with the current societal perception of Southern honor. Many Confederate women used the same discourse to persuade men to fight. There was an expectation for men to be brave and chivalrous, and a deviation from this expectation was considered cowardice.

Even in the North, bravery in war was revered. Sentimentalism was woven through both Northern and Southern societies, and can be identified in letters and diaries from the Civil War era. Sentimentalism is the belief in the individual soldier; the soldier who will fight bravely, act honorably, and die heroically, if necessary. Louisa Alcott, a Northern nurse, admired the Union soldiers under her care. In a sentimental tone, she noted how a scar was "the best decoration a brave soldier could wear,"[8] and that the ideal soldier

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[5] "John Futch Papers." (Raleigh: North Carolina Department of History and Archives.)
[6] Nina Silber, *Gender & the Sectional Conflict* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 16.
[7] Eugene D. Genovese, "Toward a Kinder and Gentler America: The Southern Lady in the Greening of the Politics of the Old South," in *In Joy and Sorrow: Women, Family, and Marriage in the Victorian South, 1830-1900*, ed. Carol Bleser, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 133.
[8] Louisa May Alcott, *Civil War Hospital Sketches* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2006), 23.

was "earnest, brave, and faithful."[9] Although the North did not abide by Southern honor, Alcott's language portrays the sentimental emotions conveyed by both sides during the war.

Emma LeConte, a teenager from the elite slaveholding in the South, perpetuates the ideals of sentimentalism and male honor in her diary. As her home, Colombia, was being burned by Sherman's army, Emma commented on how the Union soldiers were not acting with honor. She explains, furious, "This is civilized warfare. This is the way in which the 'cultured' Yankee nation wars upon women and children! Failing with our men in the field, *this* is the way they must conquer!"[10] Emma is identifying the difference between civilized and uncivilized warfare; fighting against other men with honor or targeting women and children. Although not labeling Sherman's troops directly as cowards, Emma's sarcastic use of "civilized" is stripping male honor from the Union troops. She has a clear sense of what honor encompasses, a feeling that was universal throughout the South.

Men in war were expected to join the army and fight bravely. Women in war were supposed to provide emotional and subsistence support from the home front. Whereas male patriotism was exerted through chivalrous battles, female patriotism "could only be reflected in a woman's support for male kin and not as a manifestation of her independent civil allegiance."[11] As per Victorian standards, a true woman was defined as pious, pure, domestic, submissive, and maternal.[12,13] Women were considered inherently more moral and spiritual, perfecting the qualities of the heart: sensibility, grace, tenderness, imagination, and compliance.[14] Whereas men aspired to "manliness," propelling them into war, women aspired to "true womanhood" and supported their men from the home front. An honorable war was to be fought by men.

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[9] Louisa May Alcott, *Civil War Hospital Sketches* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2006), 39.

[10] Earl Schenck Miers, *When the World Ended: The Diary of Emma LeConte* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 49.

[11] Nina Silber, *Gender & the Sectional Conflict* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 39.

[12] Nancy A. Hewitt, "Beyond the Search for Sisterhood: American Women's History in the 1980s," *Social History* 10 (Oct 1985): 300.

[13] Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880 – 1917,* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 11.

[14] Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1977), 161.

As for all discourses, there were many contradictions to these gendered models. Especially for poor Confederate women, the absence of men from the subsistence farms was enormously detrimental to the family's vitality. John Futch, one of the ten executed Confederate soldiers, was a poor Southern farmer. His decision to desert the army was partially a result of his wife begging him to come home. Regardless of exceptions to the discourse of male honor as is seen through Futch, many Southerners (especially the elite) led their lives according to chivalry.

Understanding the underpinnings of Southern chivalry and man honor, it is easily understood how Davis is being mocked in the lithograph from Currier and Ives. Northerners called Davis a coward. Instead of being a brave, sentimental leader, he attempted to flee the Union army disguised as a woman. Whereas it was acceptable for women to flee, it was dishonorable of men. Davis, drawn in female garb, discredits his name as the "last ditch of the chivalry." Because chivalry is so valued in the South, the North is demonstrating how fragile Southern manliness is in the face of war. This cartoon not only demoralizes Davis and the South, but boosts the sentimental morale of the North.

Yet, it is also interesting to see the bitterness in the Confederate woman behind Davis. Although it was acceptable for women to act less bravely, elite Confederate women especially tended to be fierce. When Colombia was being occupied, Emma LeConte was furious at the Yankees: "I thought I hated them as much as possible – now I know there are no limits to the feeling of hatred."[15] Even after the city is burned, Emma is not ready to give up the war: "The South will not give up…but I look forward to years of suffering and grief, years of desolation and bloodshed."[16] Emma's tone is very similar to the Confederate woman's in the lithograph. Bitter and fierce, both woman act with "pluck and dignity."[17]

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[15] Earl Schenck Miers, *When the World Ended: The Diary of Emma LeConte* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 60.

[16] Earl Schenck Miers, *When the World Ended: The Diary of Emma LeConte* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 85.

[17] Earl Schenck Miers, *When the World Ended: The Diary of Emma LeConte* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 82.

In conclusion, this piece demonstrates a mockery of Southern chivalry and male honor. The Northern press exaggerated the story of his capture and ridiculed former Confederate President Jefferson Davis as a womanly coward. Not fulfilling the traditional discourse of male honor by fleeing the Union army in a dress and bonnet, Davis is a symbol for the Northern defeat of the South. Although the Confederate woman in the background still remains resilient, Davis represents the "last ditch" of the South and the end of the chivalrous Confederate era.

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