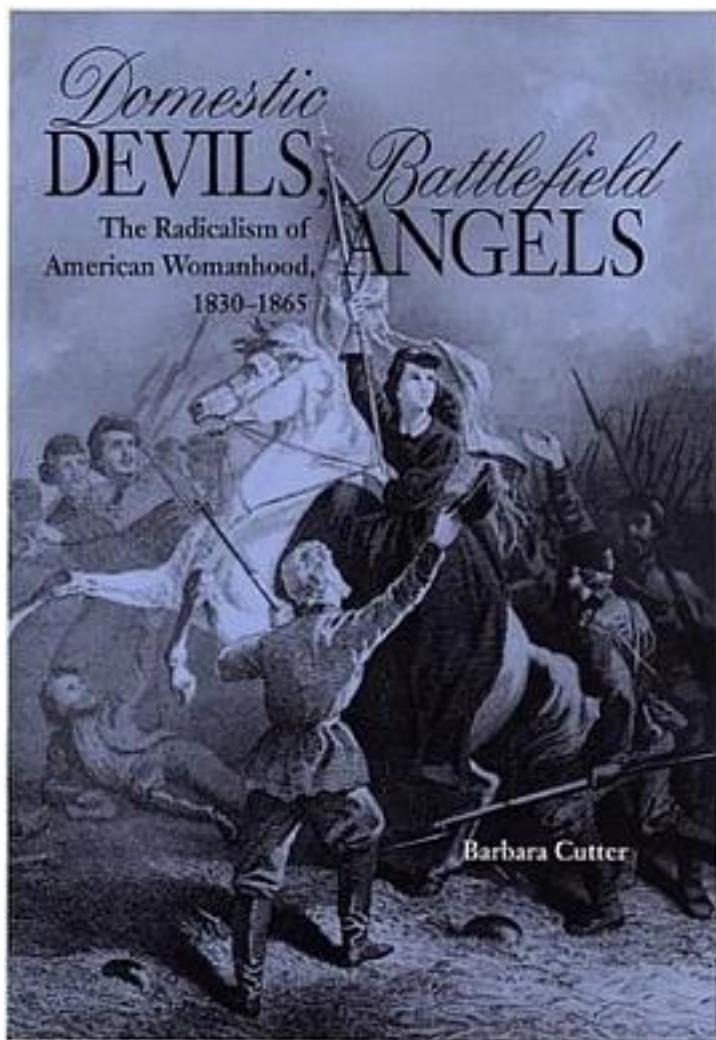


Domestic Devils, Battlefield Angels



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Women accused of murder fascinated nineteenth-century Americans, and spectators crowded into courtrooms to witness their trials. Female lecturers and Civil War workers striving to improve society also attracted enormous attention. The era's most controversial women seemed to either publicly maintain American morality--or publicly betray it. Why did such women--both criminals and caretakers--simultaneously captivate and trouble America?

Antebellum Americans believed that proper women should be virtuous, but the meaning of feminine virtue was highly contested. One minister condemned abolitionist Abby Kelley as a "servant of Satan" for giving public lectures against slavery, but others asserted that Kelley did her duty as a moral woman by protesting an unjust system. In a different arena, even prostitutes could serve as examples of virtue if they were perceived as working to feed their families.

Cutter argues that "redemptive womanhood"--the idea that women hold active responsibility for the nation's moral and religious health--is the key element of gender ideology in antebellum and Civil War America. In this era, society for the first time allowed and encouraged women's involvement in the public sphere, as long as women worked for the good of the country. The ideal of redemptive womanhood prepared them to go to any lengths to defend the virtue of their nation. During the Civil War, this ideology encouraged women, particularly those from the North, to organize relief efforts, nurse soldiers, and even enlist in the army disguised as men.

Exploring the ways in which nineteenth-century women transformed American society, "Domestic Devils, Battlefield Angels" sheds new light on a gender ideology that fostered public participation and action--even violence--in the name of women's redemptive moral power.

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