

### Sex, Sickness, and Slavery: Illness in the Antebellum South

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## Review

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**Weiner, Marli F. and Hough Mazie.** *Sex, Sickness, and Slavery: Illness in the Antebellum South*. University of Illinois Press, \$60.00 ISBN 978-0-252-03699-6

### Exploring Antebellum Medicine

*Sex, Sickness, and Slavery* is more about physicians than patients. It is an intellectual history of how doctors thought about illness, race, and gender. Doctors in the era were struggling to identify themselves as men of science, modernity, and standing, but the limits of medical knowledge left room for considerable speculation about how health, race, and sex intersect. White male doctors took advantage of the void to promote theories and practices intended to validate southern slave society and their place within it. Theirs was a tricky endeavor. Time and again physicians had to confront contradictions inherent in judging men superior to women and whites superior to blacks. They walked a fine line lest they imply the superiority of black men to white women or fail to account for incongruities. (Where did people of ambiguous race or gender fit into the scheme?)

The task of categorizing bodies was made difficult by their biological sameness and the expectation that race and gender mattered. Women, thought to be defined by their reproductive organs, had to be sorted out in such a way as to ensure that the perceived weakness of white female bodies did not render them somehow inferior to the bodies of their black sisters whose supposed strength suited them for hard labor. In this case, doctors attributed the physical weaknesses of white women to the effects of "civilization," which had the advantage (for the ruling class) of turning inferior physicality into cultural superiority.

Somehow, doctors managed to uphold (to their own satisfaction if not that of others) the correctness of the southern social order. Marli F. Weiner shows how they did this by carefully analyzing their writing in published medical

journals. Scholars familiar with the history of medicine will more than likely already be familiar with much of this argument, made previously by Seven M. Stowe, Todd L. Savitt, and other historians. Yet there is more to this book than this one thread of analysis.

Weiner moves beyond physician-created sources at times to explore the ways in which lay men and women, black and white, thought of medicine, gender, and slavery. Although other historians have explored the topic of southern health and healing, most have not addressed all of the players (white and black, slave and free) in one book. The inclusion of this cast of characters makes Weiner's book an imaginative and valuable addition to the literature on medicine, gender, and slavery. The focus is on what lay people thought about illness rather than on how they experienced illness or medical practice.

*Sex, Sickness, and Slavery* has been published posthumously with the help of Mazie Hough. It represents a culmination of Weiner's lifelong research into an antebellum world shaped by the power of white men. It will appeal to historians of the South, medicine and science, race, gender and women. The book offers a well-written explanation of how partisan ideas of race and gender can intrude into "scientific" thinking.

*Marie Jenkins Schwartz, professor of history at the University of Rhode Island, Kingston, writes about the history of slavery and its legacy. Her books include Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South. Readers may contact her at [schwartz@uri.edu](mailto:schwartz@uri.edu).*