

Southern Sons: Becoming Men in the New Nation

Giselle Roberts

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Roberts, Giselle (2007) "Southern Sons: Becoming Men in the New Nation," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 4 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol9/iss4/20>

Review

Roberts, Giselle

Fall 2007

Glover, Lorri *Southern Sons: Becoming Men in the New Nation*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, \$50.00 hardcover ISBN 9780801884986

Manliness and Femininity in the Old South

Lorri Glover, *Southern Sons: Becoming Men in the New Nation*

Anya Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters: Young Women in the Old South*

While historians have routinely used race, class, and gender to uncover the life experiences of different groups within the South, they have until recently failed to draw upon age as a category of analysis. Lorri Glover's *Southern Sons: Becoming Men in the New Nation* and Anya Jabour's *Scarlett's Sisters: Young Women in the Old South* contributes to this new wave of scholarship by examining the elite coming of age experience in the antebellum South. Mining the personal papers of young elite men and women, Glover and Jabour chart the evolution of a distinctly southern adolescent culture of resistance—where young men resisted their identity as American citizens in favour of sectional allegiances, and young women resisted the burden of womanhood that defined them as helpmeets to husband, home, and family.

While Glover and Jabour argue that a culture of resistance underscored the coming of age experiences of men and women in the antebellum South, the common ground, it appears, largely ended there. Lorri Glover's compelling examination of young, elite southern gentlemen between the 1790s and the 1820s cites citizenship and service to the new Republic as defining characteristics of the male coming of age story. Southern boys were regarded as key to the persistence of the new nation, and reared to become civic-minded leaders whose independence of economic circumstance, conscience, and action was founded on their domination of slaves (23). Southern parents indoctrinated their sons into a culture of mastery by granting them free reign over their education, finances, choice of friends, and personal conduct, all the while

encouraging an admiration for and allegiance to the Republic. Educated increasingly within a southern college system—which emphasised racial values, elite solidarity and regional identification—young men created a raucous peer culture that turned their parents' emphasis on masculine autonomy into a justification for mayhem (64). Physically separated from their kin, young southern gentlemen refused to obey university officials and instead looked to their peers to set the boundaries of acceptable comportment. And while the academy setting may have fostered bad behavior and rebellion amongst its students, it became the training ground to socialize boys to judge and be judged by others. Individual assertion of masculinity and self worth, and its recognition by the community, were, as Glover notes, essential prerequisites for manhood in the Old South.

While formal education may have nurtured a young man's independence and regional identification, its conclusion ushered in the second test of a boy's manhood—his ability to command social respect by acting the part of a gentleman. By socializing gracefully, dressing appropriately and developing a repertoire of finely tuned behaviors and socially acceptable hobbies, young southern gentlemen practiced self-mastery by personifying the antithesis of their slaves (2). They also became marriageable men. Glover argues that marriage, together with the establishment of an independent household, provided the fullest expression of manhood. As masters of households, wives, children, and slaves, southern gentlemen demonstrated their preparedness for civic participation. Coupled with a well-chosen career, southern gentlemen used their public and family lives to reinforce their social respectability and garner political power. Glover persuasively contends that the centrality of slavery to the southern masculine ideal nurtured and reinforced the southern commitment to sectionalism. Regarding the defense of slavery as both an obligation and a sign of manhood, southern men set their region on a course apart from the Republic and toward a violent confrontation over the values and institutions that made them southern men (179).

While southern men's coming of age story was marked by their resistance to the nation building ideals of their forebears in favour of slavery and sectionalism, young southern women participated in a culture of resistance of a different kind. In an attempt to free elite white girls from the popular mystique of the southern belle, Anya Jabour's *Scarlett's Sisters* contends that young women critiqued prevailing models of femininity and waged an ideological—if safely invisible—warfare against marriage, housekeeping and motherhood by prolonging

each life stage and thereby postponing adult female responsibilities (13).

While girls enjoyed a childhood of relative freedom, the onset of adolescence signified a time of increasing restraint on young women, both in terms of conduct and appearance. Letting down skirts and pulling up one's hair represented a coming of age moment that coincided with socialization in a southern feminine ideal that assumed male dominance, denied female agency, and defined womanhood in terms of self-denial and service to others (36). While the southern school system was designed to reinforce the culture of femininity, Jabour argues that it actually provided young girls with an alternate vision of womanhood centred on self improvement and female community. Unlike their male counterparts, who rebelled against the authority of college officials, young women regarded their teachers as attractive exponents of the culture of single blessedness, and embraced academic achievement and friendship as the core tenets of the schoolgirl identity. According to Jabour, a collegian counterculture of resistance that placed self improvement and sisterhood above self sacrifice and patriarchy, inspired young women to resist their assigned roles and offered them a context in which to do so (45, 51).

This pattern of resistance, Jabour argues, was present in every subsequent life stage in a young woman's coming of age. Upon graduation, young women resisted marriage by either retreating into the domestic world as dutiful daughters-at-home, or basking in the social limelight as accomplished southern belles. An engagement, in either instance, signified an end to the pleasures associated with single blessedness and marked the onset of domestic responsibility and the perilous obligations of childbirth. In an attempt to ameliorate their subordinate status in marriage, young women prolonged their engagements and wielded their power as belles in order to secure a companionate match based on romantic ideals and mutual affection. Marriage, however, symbolized a gateway between a female youth culture of resistance and a southern women's culture of resignation (162). As young women devoted themselves to the domestic responsibilities of mistress and wife, they prepared themselves for the inevitable task of motherhood, and what Jabour describes as an effective end to female resistance (217). Unable to assert control over their reproductive systems, young women nevertheless chose to resist the involvement of the male dominated medical profession in the birthing process in favor of accustomed female support. As mothers, young women adopted yet another identity that embraced their role as caregivers to their children.

While the inextricable link between slavery and masculinity may have led young southern men on a path to Civil War, the conflict provided young women with the opportunity to explore their culture of resistance and translate it into what Jabour describes as outright rebellion (280). Living in female dominated households, often without the presence of slave labor, young women learned the art of housekeeping or entered the paid workforce. As refugees, they traveled long distances without male kin to escort them, and cast aside the previous limitations of southern femininity to express their resistance to invading Union troops. The relocation of eligible suitors to the battlefield also gave young women greater power to postpone marriage or avoid it entirely. Jabour concludes that the war was indeed a watershed for young women, allowing them to become the makers of change (283) in the postbellum world.

Lorri Glover's *Southern Sons* is a compelling examination of the ways in which the evolution of southern masculinity culminated in secession and war. Anya Jabour's *Scarlett's Sisters* represents an important attempt to highlight agency in the coming of age experience of young women in the Old South. While her culture of resistance argument is interesting, young women's desire to prolong particular life stages can also be attributed to their engagement with and enjoyment of school life or home life or bellehooùand should not necessarily be read as an effort to resist what came next. Nevertheless, both books contribute to our understanding of the ways in which the coming of age experiences of men and women in the Old South both culminated in, and were transformed by, secession, war and defeat.

Giselle Roberts is a Research Associate in American History at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia. She is the author of The Confederate Belle (University of Missouri Press, 2003) and the editor of The Correspondence of Sarah Morgan and Francis Warrington Dawson (University of Georgia Press and the Southern Texts Society, 2004).