

Sex And The Civil War: Soldiers, Pornography, And The Making Of American Morality

Anya Jabour

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

Recommended Citation

Jabour, Anya (2017) "Sex And The Civil War: Soldiers, Pornography, And The Making Of American Morality," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 19 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.19.3.20

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol19/iss3/15>

Review

Jabour, Anya

Summer 2017

Giesberg, Judith *Sex and the Civil War: Soldiers, Pornography, and the Making of American Morality*. University of North Carolina Press, \$29.93 ISBN 9781469631271

Masculinity and Morality

Originally written for the Steven and Janice Brose Lectures in the Civil War Era at Pennsylvania State University, *Sex and the Civil War* explores “the Civil War origins of a federal conversation about sex and sexual regulation” (5). In four brief chapters, Judith Giesberg traces the increased production and distribution of erotica in mid-century America; “the triumph of pornography” in the Civil War era (3); the wartime misadventures of Anthony Comstock, who was the butt of practical jokes and “unpleasant words” during his brief stint in the U.S. Army (67-68); and the post-war anti-pornography campaign that culminated in the Comstock Law of 1873 (named for its most vigorous enforcer), which prohibited not only the circulation of salacious novels and cartes de visite but also the dissemination of information about birth control and abortion. The campaign to control “obscene” materials may have begun with a desire to protect the minds and morals of male “youth,” Giesberg points out, but it ultimately created an “enduring legal legacy” of restrictions on women’s sexuality and reproduction (98).

Giesberg set out to explore the lived experiences of a generation of men—those who came of age during the Civil War—and to support her contention that “war does more to sustain gender hierarchy than to upset it.” (7) She succeeds on both of these counts. But *Sex and the Civil War* does more than this. It also provides fresh insights into contested—but crystallizing—definitions of masculinity in Victorian America. By tracing the spread of sexually charged materials into the camps of northern soldiers—a development facilitated by special postal rates and routes for the U.S. Army—Giesberg is able to document the rise of a shared “sexual culture” (36) that both fostered an esprit de corps

among enlisted men and officers and sanctioned the commodification and consumption of female bodies. Both official records—such as the court martial of Colonel Ebenezer Peirce of the 29th Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteers for sharing *Fanny Hill* with the men in his command—and private accounts—such as the wartime diary of future anti-pornography crusader Anthony Comstock—demonstrate that conventional definitions of manliness revolving around self-control retained some currency in Civil War America. Nonetheless, the war marked a significant turning point in the rise of a male culture of sexual conquest—a cultural norm that is once again both on display and under scrutiny in the aftermath of a national election in which a presidential candidate boasted openly about sexual assault. The male sexual culture that emerged from the crucible of the Civil War has proven to be just as enduring—and as damaging—as the legal restrictions on women’s reproduction that were written into post-war anti-pornography legislation.

Sex and the Civil War is a slender but wide-ranging volume that offers intriguing glimpses not only into the much-maligned “yellow-backed” novels that were cataloged in anti-obscenity prosecutions (the illustrations are not typical fare for academic monographs) but also into attitudes about youth, concerns about a “marital crisis” (91), the role of the state in regulating morality, the pornographic tendencies of abolitionist literature, and much more.

A perhaps inescapable result of this broad remit is that some questions remain unanswered. While Giesberg calls attention to the irony that the Young Men’s Christian Association, once at the forefront of the anti-obscenity movement, also established social centers destined to become a mecca for men in search of homosexual encounters, she does not devote as much attention to the homosexual overtones of army men’s shared sexual culture as some readers might wish. What do we make of men reading erotic literature aloud to one another, taking turns to peer through a stereoscope at revealing photos, or gathering in groups to witness real-life (hetero)sexual encounters? By framing camp culture as a rejection of the culture of domesticity, Giesberg sidesteps such questions. Perhaps more importantly for the central concerns of this volume, the reasons for the linkages between the post-war campaigns against pornography and abortion remain unclear. The Young Men’s Christian Association—which advocated legal restrictions on obscene materials—and the American Medical Association—which added riders defining information about contraception and abortion as obscene—may have regarded their alliance as a holy one, but surely there is more to the story than “popular opinion sanctioning the moral authority

of the state.” (95)

These criticisms should not be taken as condemnation. Rather, the unanswered questions raised by *Sex and the Civil War* suggest that Giesberg has produced a genuinely provocative work, one that should establish new lines of inquiry for scholars of gender, sexuality, and the state—as well as the Civil War—for years to come.

Anya Jabour is Regents Professor of History and a past Co-Director of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Montana, Missoula. The author of numerous books and articles about women, families, and children in the nineteenth-century South, she served as a historical consultant to the PBS Civil War miniseries, Mercy Street, and is currently completing a biography of southern-born social reformer Sophonisba Preston Breckinridge (1866-1948).