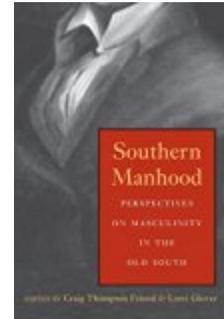


Craig Thompson Friend, Lorri Glover, eds. *Southern Manhood: Perspectives on Masculinity in the Old South*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004. xvii + 234 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-2423-4; \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8203-2616-0.

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## The Unsteady Quest for Manhood

This is an important and impressive collection that more than meets its objective of broadening the study of Southern manhood. It brings together studies of a range of contexts in which white and black Southerners tried—and sometimes failed—to become “masculine” and to exemplify manliness. Without exception, the editors and authors have struck a commendable balance between conceptualizing larger historical questions and narrating the intimacies and complexities of real lives. They examine manhood’s symbolic codes and behaviors, and the particular—even peculiar—relationships between mastery, honor and self-control within a society dedicated to the practice of enslavement. They study men without ignoring women, and they study Southerners without ignoring broader shifts among Americans. They understand that masculinity is not so much defined against femininity as against effeminacy, or failed manliness. They draw deep from the wells first sunk by Bertram Wyatt Brown in *Southern Honor*, and contribute in their own ways to an increasingly sophisticated American literature on the history of masculinity.[1]

These are signal achievements, but this collection goes even further. These essays often move outside the confines and confidences of elites and focus on the quest for independence, self-governance and mastery among “those who fell outside the hegemonic ideals” (p. xi). The writers explore how values were co-opted, transformed and even rejected by more marginalized men, complicating any simple equation between honor, mastery and manliness and opening up new ways of thinking

about the pleasures and perils of masculinity in past societies. The essays travel across racial and cultural barriers, into Indian country as well as slave and free African-American culture. They tackle issues of social origins, generation, age, class and wealth with a refreshing seriousness. Perhaps most important of all, they focus on manhood as a goal, the object of a quest that can fail or falter or be complicated by the circumstances of individual lives. By looking at men who are in some way out of place, on the edge, or not yet fully and securely masculine to themselves or others, they find the best ways of examining manhood as a larger social, cultural and historical performance. Masculinity, like other forms of power and identity, is often best studied in those places where it is most under question. This shared intellectual task is what makes *Southern Manhood* so successful and so significant.

Friend and Glover’s masterful introduction to key themes and questions is followed by a series of excellent essays. Harry S. Laver examines militias as a refuge from the ambiguities of mid-nineteenth-century manhood, showing how uniforms, weapons and pageantry could authenticate white manliness in a way that few of the tools of trade and commerce could. Greg O’Brien’s lucid study of Choctaw elites shows the links between new economic possibilities and changed gender roles, and how instabilities in gender identities often heralded fundamental transformations on the Indian side of the frontier. In an essay that unflinchingly keeps track of race, gender, class and respectability, L. Diane Barnes

uses fraternal orders in antebellum Petersburg to show how crucial were the bonds of race—and the “special wage” (p. 87) of whiteness—in subduing artisan Southerners’ antagonisms towards employers and economic change. John Mayfield’s essay on humor and the inversion of manly ideals is a wonderful piece of cultural history that uses jokes and stories to probe the fault lines in Southern men’s ideas about mastery. Jennifer R. Green takes us inside the Southern military academies for a precise and compelling analysis of how Southern boys experienced the tension between subordination and independence and learned the difficult art of mastering and disciplining the self. In her finely crafted piece, Heather Andrea Williams explores the importance of literacy for African-American soldiers, as a means of achieving both individual manliness and the arguments for collective emancipation.

There are, to my mind, three even more outstanding chapters in this collection. Lorri Glover’s study of elite young Southerners in Northern colleges before the Civil War is a particularly compelling study of what made Southern male identity distinctive. In Southern minds, she argues, self-control was linked to the enhancing of reputation and the preservation of social connections; in Northern minds, it was a crucial component of career and personal aspiration. Glover also shows the historical importance of how Southern men made themselves on Northern turf, becoming increasingly self-conscious as a regional elite, taking pride in “self-reliance backed up by violence” and becoming “nearly obsessed with self-mastery and social reputation” (p. 42). Craig Thompson Friend’s account of Cyrus Stuart’s unsteady and ulti-

mately unsuccessful aspirations to upper-class masculinity is a beautifully wrought study of one life through which many other lives are illuminated. What Friend reveals most tellingly of all is that nineteenth-century manhood was confirmed in rituals and mimics of masculinity that were very hard to master, especially when the would-be gentleman lacked the means and the social graces to achieve true initiation.

For last I have saved Edward E. Baptist’s powerful story of African-American masculinity on the southwestern plantation frontier. Baptist makes the by now relatively uncontroversial point that the denial of black manhood was central to the sense of mastery that rendered white men masculine. He also acknowledges the significance of resistance in African-American male identity. But he moves beyond the expectation that men must resist, to show how enslaved men could prevail in other ways, through dignity, for instance, or through emphasizing the work of care and especially fathering as the best possible response to the assaults of slavery. He also shows how other kinds of men, rootless men, men who put themselves on the margins, tricksters, hobos and outsiders, were exploring other responses to the slave system’s ultimate and terrible incapacity to preserve their relationships with families and communities. It is moving and powerful stuff, and it is wonderful social history.

#### Notes

[1]. Bertram Wyatt Brown. *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

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