



**Anya Jabour.** *Scarlett's Sisters: Young Women in the Old South.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007. x + 374 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3101-4.

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## A Culture of Resistance

Teasing out an accurate description of young, elite southern women of the Old South has proved a challenge for scholars of women's history. Not the least problematic is how to label this part of society, for all of the usual titles carry considerable historical baggage. With *Scarlett's Sisters*, Anya Jabour has chosen a title that boldly replaces traditional terminology as part of her novel approach to southern women's history. Jabour examines elite white females between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five, and she chooses not to adopt the more traditional, stereotypical labels of "belle" and "lady." With the term "Scarlett's sisters," Jabour defines these women specifically as individuals engaged in the process of "coming-of-age" (p. 5).

As she sets forth in her introduction, Jabour divides these women's life experiences into seven stages: adolescence, school, single life, courtship, engagement, marriage, and motherhood. Her final chapter, "Rebel Ladies: War," deals with the Civil War and its effects on the issues outlined in earlier chapters. An epilogue, aptly entitled "Tomorrow Is Another Day: New Women in the New South," rounds out the book. Through each phase, Jabour builds her case toward a type of female resistance that is most obviously seen in the stages of courtship and engagement, when a young woman had more choices than at any other time in her life.

Each chapter begins with the story of a particular young woman, drawn from the numerous primary sources used by Jabour as the basis for her research. In chapter 1, she draws on the case of Lizzie Kimberly, a girl who at the age of thirteen left her home in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, in 1856 to attend St. Mary's School in Raleigh. This chapter, "Young Ladies: Adolescence," documents several instances in which girls acknowledged their own maturity, seeing themselves as "ladies." Jabour's exhaustive data bring to light explicit references to the end of childhood, which in turn inform our ideas about how these girls saw themselves. The photographs

of Violet Blair as examples of a "before-and-after" (girl to young woman) are representative of the captivating nature of the illustrations used throughout the text and assist readers in understanding the real meaning behind these life transitions.

Chapter 2, "College Girls: School," adds to Christie Anne Farnham's work in *The Education of the Southern Belle* (1994). Jabour's discussion provides a clear presentation of anecdotal references as well as considerable explanation of the effects of school life on these semicloistered young women. The description of "Commencement" at the conclusion of the chapter serves as a fitting transition into the next chapter, "Home Girls: Single Life." The time between finishing school and coming out in society is perhaps the least investigated aspect of young women's lives during this period, and Jabour certainly contributes to our knowledge of this life stage in chapter 3. She draws on her earlier work on the Wirt family (*Marriage in the Early Republic: Elizabeth and William Wirt and the Companionate Ideal* [1998]), beginning the chapter with the story of Laura Henrietta Wirt's assertion in 1826 that she wished to remain single forever.

This desire to remain single is at the heart of Jabour's argument for a cult of resistance among southern women. Moreover, many girls wished to replace the traditional bond between husband and wife with female relationships they had established while at school. Jabour presents several examples of young women who wished to maintain such female friendships, but the rules on social conventions and the sheer geographic distance between families made these desires difficult to fulfill. The subject matter of chapter 3 wanders somewhat into that of chapter 4, as some of the young women described in the earlier chapter are engaged, and the dangers of marriage are included here. Normally, however, a girl would have had her debut before becoming engaged.

The final pages of chapter 3 note the desire for young

women to be able to contribute to society, to somehow manage their own lives, and to choose their life's course. Nonetheless, most women eventually chose the path of marriage, even if many of them put off matrimony for as long as possible. Here is where Jabour makes a very strong case for resistance among young women in the antebellum period. Chapter 4, "Southern Belles: Courtship," introduces much valuable material on this most famous period of southern women's lives. Almost all of the girls whose stories fill these pages looked forward to the years of courtship and wished to extend them as long as possible, for they knew that this was the only time in their lives when they would experience any real personal freedom.

That many of these girls saw marriage as an end to their independence and their ability to have any say at all in their own destinies has been acknowledged in scholarly literature for some time. To interpret such thoughts as resistance, however, is how Jabour chooses to contextualize the wishes and actions of "Scarlett's sisters." A large percentage of girls took pride in numerous requests for marriage from a variety of suitors, often bragging about their conquests to their companions. Certainly, these young women deemed the thought of a protracted time of being "on the market" as positive, although they also assuredly knew it could not last forever.

The subject of chapter 5, "Blushing Brides: Engagement," is a topic that has not received as much attention as courtship, yet it provides an even stronger case for Jabour's argument for resistance among unmarried southern young women. Here, Jabour relates copious examples of women who, having agreed to marry someone, wished either to break the engagement or to prolong it as long as possible—to postpone marriage until it was absolutely necessary. Her reading of a lithograph is an excellent example of the new evidence of resistance to matrimony unearthed by Jabour (p. 164). In the illustration, entitled "Popping the Question," the young woman has control of the relationship, and the man is waiting for her to direct that relationship. The young woman knows all too well that she will completely reverse the situation by accepting his offer. Once she accepts the proposal, she simultaneously accepts an inferior status. Jabour suggests that the wedding day, then, became the "threshold between a culture of resistance and one of resignation," while it also served as a transition from the relative freedom of girlhood to that of adult responsibilities (p. 180).

As chapter 6, "Dutiful Wives: Marriage," demonstrates, most southern girls did get married. In doing so, they abandoned the culture of resistance and accepted traditional gender roles assigned to women. If they bore children, as most did, Jabour suggests that maternity became a major part of their identity. Motherhood, discussed in chapter 7, provided a pleasing alternative to the freedom women had experienced earlier, and, frequently, a substitute for the close adult relationships that they had never achieved with their husbands. The final chapter, on Confederate women, describes the many changes that women endured during the war years. Jabour notes that several diarists expressed the desire to "become men," although most did not actually do anything in that direction (p. 261). By becoming "rebel ladies," however, many southern women gained a measure of independence, if under the veil of doing so for "the cause" (p. 261). Here, women realized personal freedom in ways hitherto unavailable, and the culture of resistance flourished.

The continuity between life stages that are usually treated separately must be acknowledged to accept Jabour's thesis that a culture of resistance existed among this group of women. One could argue that if each stage were taken individually, the idea of resistance does not hold. For example, as the author notes, when women married, they gave up resistance by handing over their personal freedom to their husbands. Since most women married, it would seem that resistance hardly existed. Furthermore, were young southern women of the antebellum period more likely to resist entering matrimony than women from other periods or places? By considering the continuum of southern women's lives, however, Jabour demonstrates that there is more going on here than what might be a typical teenager's avoidance of responsibility in favor of fun and frivolity. The final chapter on "rebel ladies" clearly proves that resistance existed among this group of women.

*Scarlett's Sisters* provides a wealth of new information on southern women's history, and Jabour successfully provides a better understanding of the transitions that characterized these women's lives. Her term "Scarlett's sisters" adequately reflects her purpose. While it is unlikely that the more traditional "belle" will be dropped in favor of Jabour's approach, future historians will have to contend with the issues she raises and appreciate the subtleties of her argument against the continued use of the term.

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