

Reviews

Julia Nitz. *Belles and Poets: Intertextuality in the Civil War Diaries of White Southern Women*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2020. 296 pages. ISBN: 9780807173725

The southern belle writes back! Though the eight diarists who wrote themselves into history and into the pages of Julia Nitz's monograph did not label themselves "belles," they incorporated this idealized figure into their definitions of southern womanhood, which they resisted, revised, or rejected. They signaled alternative modes of thought and action through literary references, primarily drawn from English writers, which these elite southern women sprinkled across their diary pages. This intertextuality enabled them to negotiate their own identities in relation to southern patriarchal hegemony. As Nitz writes about her comprehensive study, it "highlights the degree to which literary texts influenced psychological processes that triggered resistance to or compliance with social, cultural, and ideological prescriptions" (213). *Belles and Poets* also situates the diarists within transatlantic literary and cultural conversations that they participated in with quotations, allusions, themes, plots, and characters in order to navigate through war and upheaval.

Two southern matrons stand out among the eight: Mary Chesnut and Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas. The irrepressible Mary Chesnut consolidated her status as a Confederate drawing room politician and the ambitious wife of James Chesnut, Jr, the son of a wealthy South Carolina planter, with publications by C. Van Woodward and Elisabeth Muhlenfeld in the 1980s. Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas's published diary, edited by Virginia Ingraham Burr and with an introduction by Nell Irwin Painter, introduced her to a wider public in 1990. She had received from her father, an affluent Georgia planter, a house, a plantation, and slaves worth thirty thousand dollars upon marrying Jefferson Thomas, himself of planter background, but also capable of squandering the couple's combined assets. Other diarists were

younger and less prosperous, such as Sarah Morgan, who began her diary entries in Baton Rouge at the age of twenty, or Kate Stone, who lived on the Brokenburn plantation in northeast Louisiana with her widowed, enterprising mother, five brothers, a younger sister, and roughly 150 slaves. Despite differences in age and economic circumstance, all women diarists belonged to the southern elite, a status that did not guarantee their unreserved conformity to traditional feminine roles or the “peculiar institution.” In her first chapter, “Women Diarists, Civil War Experience, and the Literary Influence,” Nitz speedily introduces all eight in a thematic structure that may cause readers unfamiliar with Civil War diaries to read and read again.

The diarists wrote about Confederate victories and defeats, gender arrangements, slavery as an institution and as a lived experience, and about their personal existences as wives, mothers, daughters, travelers, and refugees in a society at war. They included fictional and non-fictional texts and references that helped them make sense of a world turned upside down, what with the loss of cherished family members and friends, new areas of influence, usurped or damaged property, flight, and social and racial structures unbalanced. While Nitz competently takes on biographical and thematic issues relating to southern women diarists, her focus on the literary allusions in their journals makes for new, significant understandings of Confederate women’s psychological and political response to the war, its causes, and consequences. Their intertextual strategies allowed them to vent emotions they could not express openly, given the fact that the diaries were not, as for later generations, for their eyes only. The hand-written journals had to be shared with husbands, visitors, and other interested parties and thus had to be coded—with quotations from favorite novels, poems, or magazines that helped leisured elite women get through their days.

The women rarely expressed their feelings directly in their pages, though so-called “leakage entries” did appear. Always taught to retain their composure, the diarists revealed their emotions with literary references, which served important functions in their texts. Faced with new or chaotic situations, they sought out literary quotations or poems that might help them make sense of public and private affairs. They also evaluated events with allusions that enabled them to criticize those in power, such as white southern men. Mary Chesnut, for example, finds that male southerners rushed to war out of boredom. With a Tennyson poem, she criticizes their thoughtless bravery that would end in disfigurement or death on the battlefield (Nitz 66-68). The diarists also went to literature to construct their own identities,

since a fictional persona might serve as identification or support in trying moments and times. Nitz sums up: “Literary worlds are these diarists’ second home, and they continuously draw on them to make sense of the real world” (73).

Literary references provide extra layers to the understanding of the world—social and ideological—the diarists inhabited. In the much-analyzed passage in Chesnut’s diary where she sees a light-skinned enslaved woman on the auction block ogling her bidders, her direct address to implied readers, “See Sterne,” sends Nitz to *Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1793) and allows her to conclude that Chesnut’s “discontent with slavery and arranged marriages alike, especially the license it gives to white men for extramarital relations, is not impetus enough to disrupt the system from which she ultimately benefits” (135). In her chapter “Literary Explorations of Slavery Ideology,” Nitz demonstrates how literary allusions divulge the complicated efforts of the diarists to reconcile their belief in white superiority with their occasional unease with slavery as an institution and their criticism of double moral standards. Intertextual conversations in their journals also helped the women come to terms with Confederate defeat as a possible indication that God was not on their side. To this end, they constructed their own narrative of victimhood. Nitz agrees with other scholars that “mastery” and “paternalism” originated in established notions of masculinity, but she argues convincingly that religious attitudes played an equally important part. Chesnut, for example, felt underestimated in her role as childless wife in the South of her time, but she also felt violated as a Christian woman expecting marital loyalty (150). Like the other diarists, she sought comfort and strength in literary role models. Nitz highlights in her final chapter especially two such types: the antiheroine and the woman warrior. These “misfit heroines” (215) helped elite southern women find the necessary responses to their unusual circumstances in the Civil War South.

Belles and Poets constitutes a new approach to Civil War diaries written by southern women. These documents from what Catherine Clinton called “The Other Civil War” have been examined in terms of their subversive feminism, their conflicted response to slavery, their experience of war, defeat, and death, and much more. But in her impressive chasing down and interpretations of all the literary references that have previously existed at the margins of existing scholarship on the journals, Nitz adds new understanding of these elite women’s frame of mind, and the mind of the South overall. She also demonstrates that transatlantic exchanges inspired the dia-

rists, who were often isolated from other sources of encouragement and motivation and thus relied on a variety of printed sources from across the Atlantic to navigate their own world. They helped create, in short, a global South. Nitz's extremely well-researched and well-documented monograph participates in similar transatlantic conversations about the American South in the world, and about the importance of literature to help us live in it.

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Edward B. Foley. *Presidential Elections And Majority Rule: The Rise, Demise, and Potential Restoration of the Jeffersonian Electoral College*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. 238 pages. ISBN 978-0-19-006015-2.

Fears of a minoritarian trend have permeated the past two decades in American presidential politics. From the popular vote inversion of the 2000 election to Trump's allegations of postal ballot fraud in 2020, the early 21st Century has brought into question the viability of America's political system. *Presidential Elections and Majority Rule's* focus, however, is not on the striking discrepancy in the national popular vote total evident between losing candidate Al Gore and winning candidate George W. Bush in 2000, nor the yawning hypothetical one which commentators were anticipating as a possibility before the 2020 election. Author Edward Foley, an Ohio State University law professor and former Ohio Solicitor General, instead accentuates the importance of popular vote majorities at the state level, or what can succinctly be defined as a "compound form of majoritarianism" (8). Because the Founding Fathers wanted the winning presidential aspirant to have "support from the majority of the electorate in the states that formed the candidate's Electoral College victory" (6), Foley implies that plurality victories (when a winning candidate wins with less than 50% of votes cast) should be highlighted for their dubiousness. Although Thomas Jefferson successfully furthered majoritarian principles through the passage of the Twelfth Amendment, a plurality-based winner-take-all system was quietly adopted by states under Andrew Jackson with stark consequences for fu-