Brackett Fialka on Nitz, 'Belles and Poets: Intertextuality in the Civil War Diaries of White Southern Women'

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In Belles and Poets, Julia Nitz argues that editors and publishers of nineteenth-century women’s diaries have often dismissed “literary allusions as embellishments fit for erasure rather than as purposeful commentary” (p. 2). Rather than being extraneous or idle scribblings, Nitz writes, such allusions point to powerful relationships women had with the written word. Taking seriously and analyzing these relationships can help us to comprehend how white, southern, well-to-do women “made sense of the world around them”—especially in terms of “region, race, and gender” (pp. 3-4). More specifically, these diarists tended to think, write, and self-reflect in intertextual terms, drawing on a text or multiple texts to create “new meaning” (p. 4).[1]

Organized thematically into five chapters, Belles and Poets first introduces the eight diarists, their backgrounds, and the experiences they had during the Civil War. Nitz uses the women’s reading and writing habits to frame her analysis, which proves valuable given many Civil War scholars’ familiarity with such diarists as Mary Boykin Miller Chesnut or Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas. These women understood that their diaries were semi-private spaces subject to the cultural restraints of southern patriarchy. Still, Nitz argues, they also “found means to circumvent these restrictions and to use their journals for introspection ... using the voices of poets, novelists, historians, and philosophers to utter the irrepressible inexpressible” (p. 36). All told, however, chapter 1 focuses more on detailing what the diarists read rather than how they read and interpreted their lives through reading—something taken up in the second chapter.

Chapter 2 describes how women turned to literary allusion to express the inexpressible, to justify a viewpoint or position, and to consider questions that challenged social and cultural convention. Further, white southern women copied familiar texts into journals and scrapbooks not merely to collect them but also precisely because their intended “readers” (family, friends, etc.) would recognize the quoted material. Nitz’s analysis and exhaustive knowledge of literature shine in this chapter, particularly in her explanations of why certain texts and literary characters held significant meaning for diarists, a topic she revisits in chapter 5.

Identity studies inform the analysis in chapter 3, which focuses on how women defined themselves in relation—and in opposition—to others, as well as how they used literary allusion to explore questions or concerns that would otherwise remain unwritten. In the case of southern diarists, Nitz argues, the
“main opposition drawn between ‘them’ and ‘us’ is between the North and the South” (p. 79). Further, these female diarists conceived of the South as an idea and ideal as much as a region, particularly when it came to support for the Confederate cause. As scholars have shown, however, women did not always accept the Confederacy or the war effort without question, particularly as their sacrifices and difficulties grew considerably.[2] As Nitz shows, though, most well-to-do white southern diarists avoided criticizing the Confederacy or the war outright and instead relied on literary allusions to be “vehicles for exploring feelings of doubt and shame and for inquiring into questions of responsibility” (p. 103).[3] In a manner similar to that in chapter 2, Nitz demonstrates extensive knowledge of literature and poetry while taking seriously the writings of these diarists; she considers the passages as a whole rather than in pieces that justify her claims.

Just as white southern women defined themselves in opposition to the North, they also saw enslaved African Americans, and African American women in particular, as foils to their white womanhood—a fact that is evident given their reading choices and their diary entries. This chapter offers interesting interpretations of well-to-do white women’s views on slavery, and directly challenges the notion that the Civil War was a primary motivation for changing attitudes toward slavery.[4] Instead, Nitz offers evidence that some women began questioning slavery, its morality, and its impact on their region before the devastation of war was fully realized or enslaved people began taking their freedom for themselves. Diarists such as Clanton Thomas and Chesnut expressed their dismay at what they saw as the moral failings of planter men, and sometimes even used anti-slavery literature to justify their positions. That said, Nitz concludes that their criticism of slavery reveals frustration with patriarchy rather than any true qualms about the enslavement of other humans. Indeed, many diarists defended the institution against abolitionist literature and altered narratives to support slavery—particularly at the end of the war. Overall, these diarists “view[ed] slavery through the lens of personal experiences filtered by cultural narratives that were in turn created by a web of intertextual discussions about slavery and other hierarchical relationships and institutions” (p. 151). As Nitz demonstrates, a critical piece of those cultural narratives was literature and reading habits.

Belles and Poets’s final chapter explores white southern women’s use of “literary frameworks to explore potential role models,” also discussed briefly in chapter 2 (p. 168). Using numerous examples from the diaries at hand, Nitz demonstrates that “allusions to female role models and fictional heroines play[ed] a substantial role in the diarists’ self-exploration” (pp. 168-69). Often, women readers and diarists compared themselves to the female characters and authors they found in books, using these figures to better understand their own identity and lives. These diarists had different understandings of their roles as women, but they all employed literature and literary figures to help express their personal thoughts and to explore who they were. Nitz frames her analysis using the tropes of heroine and anti-heroine—both of which appealed and challenged southern women’s understandings of themselves. Invoking these figures allowed southern women to “vicariously challenge paternal structures” without moving beyond “the confines of the acceptable” (p. 210).

Belles and Poets is certainly not the first book to explore the planter aristocracy’s obsession with transatlantic literature or even to describe how reading material affected rhetorical possibilities and emotional frameworks.[5] That said, the book takes white southern women’s diaries and reading on their terms and demonstrates that literature provided women a means for considering “facets of Confederate identity and their role as women in a patriarchal society” (p. 11). Nitz relies on eight well-known and oft-quoted southern women’s diaries to make her case—Eliza Frances “Fanny”
Andrews, Mary Boykin Miller Chesnut, Malvina Sarah Black Gist, Cornelia Peake McDonald, Judith White Brockenbrough McGuire, Sarah Ida Fowler Morgan, Sarah Katherine “Kate” Stone, and Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas. While some historians may question such a limited source base, one of Nitz’s motivations was to “correct some of the observations made and conclusions drawn from these [diaries] by historians, literary scholars, and cultural theorists” (p. 7). In other words, Nitz (rightly) criticizes historians for cherry-picking from these rich, lengthy diaries, and insists on understanding them as intertextual spaces better examined in their full context.

Overall, Nitz demonstrates a clear and compelling grasp of multiple scholarship and historiographies. This group of southern women, Nitz contends, tell us about how readers shaped the meaning of texts just as the text altered mindsets and provided new vocabularies for self-expression. Nitz aptly explains the complex logic and emotion of women’s literary lives, particularly in terms of gender, race, and hierarchy.

Still, the book’s thematic organization sometimes leaves the reader without a sense of time, which interferes with its historical analysis. Further, some of the chapters need additional threads to connect them more obviously and consistently to the broader argument and to previous and/or later chapters. Finally, more heavy-handed editing would have benefited the readability of the prose tremendously, as there are sections too reliant on passive voice or complex phrasing, both of which make an already complex topic seem dense and confusing. These minor criticisms aside, Belles and Poets makes valuable contributions to our understanding of these well-known diarists and is a must-read for any scholar using them for their own research.

Notes


[2]. See, for example, Drew Gilpin Faust, Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); and Stephanie McCurry, Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

[3]. Previous scholars have argued that wealthy southern women were not as critical of the Confederacy given the enormous privilege they gleaned from patriarchy and the slave system, but Nitz’s focus on allusion as a means of criticism is novel. See, for example, Gilpin Faust, Mothers of Invention; Laura Edwards, Scarlett Doesn’t Live Here Anymore: Southern Women in the Civil War Era (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000); and McCurry, Confederate Reckoning.

[4]. This line of reasoning is most prevalent in Gilpin Faust’s Mothers of Invention.


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