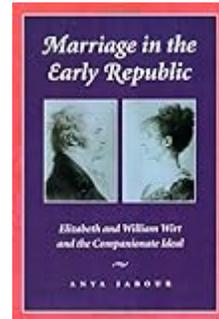




Anya Jabour. *Marriage in the Early Republic: Elizabeth and William Wirt and the Companionate Ideal.* Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998. ix + 217 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-5877-2.



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A Marriage in the Early Republic

In this slim volume, Anya Jabour offers a readable and provocative study of the intersection of two ideals which emerged in the first part of the nineteenth century: the companionate ideal of marriage and the separation of men's and women's spheres. In a close reading of the fascinating and voluminous letters of the Wirt family, and in particular William and his wife Elizabeth, she concludes that the fit was not a good one. Though William retained a few patriarchal prerogatives, the major obstacle the couple faced was that "increasingly demarcated gender roles" collided with higher expectations of mutual love and companionship, and together "undermined the Wirts' attempts to achieve a truly companionate marriage"(3-4). Jabour concludes that the gendered "prescriptions celebrated and naturalized the divergent experiences of love and marriage...and heightened the contradictions of companionate marriage in the early American Republic"(58). Though readers will debate the extent to which we can surmise this much from a single marriage between remarkable people, they will be indebted to Jabour for bringing so many timely questions to the fore, in prose both engaging and concise. In the text, notes, and a long "Essay on Sources," she links her

ideas to current literature on nineteenth-century families, gender, and southern society. Her subjects are captivating, and it is a tribute to the author to note that her analysis of them may have you reconsidering the key descriptive terms of the era.

After an introduction which sets the context of middle-class marriage in cities of the antebellum Upper South, Jabour divides her study into chapters representing different phases of the Wirts' marriage. With each major move to a new locale which included (most importantly) an intensification of the demands of William Wirt's career as a lawyer and politician, their experiences diverged and, according to Jabour, their (and, in particular, her) expectations went unmet. As William found fulfillment in an active practice helped along by a stint as Attorney General of the United States, Elizabeth became mired in the dailiness of raising the large family he wanted—including ten children, though not all survived to adulthood—in the bourgeois style they agreed upon.

In the beginning, however, there was the "beau ideal." This concept emerged in the postrevolutionary era, in which liberal ideals began to quash notions of patriar-

chal privilege and support beliefs in women's status as individuals.[1] It offered, in Jabour's words, "an ideal of companionship in marriage which promised a loving partnership of equals"(6). Though Jabour is careful to note that Elizabeth Wirt did not expect political or economic equality with her husband, she contends that Elizabeth expected "reciprocity and symmetry" in their relationship(6). Romantic love and affectionate companionship would be the cement that held partnership together. Marked by sentiments of "delicious tumult" and the "language of love," the relationship between the once-widowed, upwardly-mobile, and articulate lawyer, William Wirt, and the attractive, youthful, and educated merchant's daughter, Elizabeth Gamble, certainly began with the proper emotions. Though she turned down his offers of marriage twice—in the true manner of a woman who knew her decision on who to marry was the most important of her life and the only time she was "mistress of her own destiny"(19)—in 1802 she eventually succumbed to his intensive campaign, gained her father's reluctant approval, and married him.

After a brief sojourn in Williamsburg and the first of many separations, they went to housekeeping in Norfolk from 1803 to 1806. In her depiction of this stage of their marriage, as in the next two chapters which follow their moves to Richmond and then Washington, Jabour divides her analysis into three sections: domestic economy, home and family, and love and marriage. These three elements of their marriage overlap, which sometimes leads to repeated references to episodes such as his refusal to leave work in Norfolk to join the family retreat one summer, as Jabour revisits the implications of the ensuing tensions for both economy and family and marital relations. But the structure illustrates well the author's argument that inequality in terms of the economic partnership, and in William's insistence in not limiting family size, damaged the possibility of unperurbed love between the couple. Though the two initiated a domestic partnership in Norfolk, as William aided in household production and Elizabeth provided clerical help for his burgeoning legal practice, their contributions were never treated as equal, Jabour maintains. Instead, Jabour believes his part in providing the essential cash that made household production possible gave him priority in ultimate decision-making. She concludes that "At the same time that new ideals of marriage weakened the hold of patriarchy, the growing importance of cash gave men a new source of authority which threatened to upset the egalitarian relationships in the new nation"(27). This analysis begs the question of why Eliza-

beth's ability to manage household finances and provide "vital"(31) economies when her husband's practice was just beginning did not give her the upper hand. Cash was the bottom line perhaps, but that was because it was what men contributed, not because it was more important than women's contributions. Indeed, Jabour offers a wonderful description of the extent of the domestic production Elizabeth and her servants (both free and enslaved) engaged in, highlighting the "vast amount of labor necessary to run an urban household in the early nineteenth-century South"(31). Yet even as Elizabeth's ambitions (and family) grew and she set up gardening, meat preserving and other productive enterprises so extensive that her household and outbuildings occupied an entire city block after their move to Richmond, her ability to govern her husband's decisions declined, if anything.

Jabour argues that their life in Richmond, covered in the third chapter entitled "Betwixt Duty and Love," crystallized the contradictions that faced attempts to sustain a companionate marriage between a husband who was committed to a public life and earning a wage and a wife who hoped that her husband would derive happiness chiefly from the life they shared together. Initially William professed to find "happiness...nowhere but in private life" (73) and both devoted much of their correspondence between 1807 and 1817 to discussions of their children's health and education. But at the same time William pursued both his law practice and public acclaim (for example, as a prosecutor of Aaron Burr in 1807, and as the leader of a military company during the War of 1812). The latter concerns gradually took more of his time, but he believed that his public life aided him in his duty to his family. In contrast, to Elizabeth's mind, responsibilities that took him away from home threatened his commitment to their partnership. As early as 1807 she begged him "not to take any more business, in those distant courts" and to "settle yourself at home"(88).

Yet Elizabeth's unwillingness to adjust to a wage-earning (and glory-seeking) husband may represent more than just her frustration in William's lack of commitment to the modern companionate ideal, an analysis Jabour could have drawn out further. Indeed, the Wirts' travails in Richmond provide a fascinating glimpse at how old and new ideals, and northern/urban and southern/rural ideals, persisted and even intertwined in this place and time. Elizabeth's acquisition of the large lot in Richmond was meant to hold her husband's offices as well as expanded household production. This was a significant step toward getting them on the equitable ground a companionate marriage required, as Jabour sees

it, because “Elizabeth created a space in which the boundaries between work geared toward producing goods and services and work oriented to the cash economy were flexible” (67). Yet here, as elsewhere, one wonders just how modern Elizabeth was. When William proposed moving his offices away from the home and closer to the capital, he rationalized that it would keep his “dirty clients” from “jostling” her “visiting ladies” (67)—a modern bifurcation between public dirt and private purity if ever there was one. Elizabeth vetoed the plan. More to the point, she contextualized her requests for him to “settle...at home” as a need for him “to superintend in person all your affairs—and assist by your council” (114). In particular, she wanted his authority over recalcitrant servants and slaves, and characterized herself as “defenceless” (105-6).

In considering these remarks, we might wonder whether the trouble in their marriage was due to William’s failure to live up to the modern companionate ideal because he was committed to an equally modern notion of separate spheres (as Jabour argues)—or whether it was because Elizabeth had her (southern) head in the past. She seemed to want an old-fashioned marriage in terms of meshed home and work and masculine authority, and she apparently misunderstood or rejected the implications of the urban bourgeois order her husband was embracing. When Elizabeth requested that William give up profitable work that kept him from home, it is not clear whether she naively believed that they could do without the money he made, or whether she had an anti-materialist outlook which meant that she was willing to live within restricted means. The third option, that she understood the demands of his occupation better than he did and knew they could do without his circuit-riding, seems unlikely given her youth and background as a merchant’s daughter.

But William had premodern elements as well, as Jabour points out. He craved public honor, even challenging a rival to a duel, and he maintained a decidedly premodern interest in his refusal to limit fertility, philosophizing that “whatever is, is right” (74). At one point, the timing of a third baby’s arrival eight months after her brother’s birth, indicates that she was conceived virtually as Elizabeth recovered from a difficult—nearly fatal—labor. (40). Elizabeth undoubtedly regretted the frequency of her pregnancies, but tellingly characterized her part as “cheerful submission” (75). Certainly both partners illustrate the slow pace of ideological change, but William had more invested in the new order.

Whether on the periphery all along, or forced by circumstances to join William there, Elizabeth and her large brood found themselves very much a part of a consumer society in 1817 when William accepted the position of Attorney General, and moved the family to Washington, a transformation that Jabour covers in her fourth chapter, entitled “An Almost Complete Divorce.” The social climate demanded, and William’s earnings permitted, their entrance into a world of fine furnishings and clothing, daughters’ debuts, and frequent entertaining. Jabour finds that the departure from a productive world ended what remained of a “domestic partnership” and replaced it with “a relationship between a male provider and a dependent woman”(101). At the same time, William’s work kept him away from home as many as ten months a year, and the couple necessarily demarcated their tasks more, as she took on the once-shared task of child-rearing, and he justified his continued interest in the family by the money he brought in to maintain them. This was, in Jabour’s analysis, the near collapse of a companionate marriage. Elizabeth eventually reconciled herself to this new life and separate spheres, even embraced a role as the arbiter of religious matters in the family, but by the late 1820s, the couple was clearly estranged. Jabour infers a larger point from their troubles: “[M]en’s and women’s desire and need for each other existed within very different contexts in nineteenth-century America”(139). In an “uneven” apportionment of responsibility and rewards, wives found most of their happiness within marriages, but husbands “set the terms of the relationship” (139). This assessment does provoke a methodological consideration about the dangers of generalizing from a single case, however well-documented.[2] But it also upends traditional interpretations, and invites new questions. Why did a separation of spheres not accommodate a companionate marriage for the Wirts? At least on one level, it seems it should have: A recognition of women’s moral superiority theoretically gave women the means by which to claim equality in marriage—albeit an equality based on complementary differences rather than similar and shared duties. The Wirts’ case suggests that educated women in the Early Republic could deny the efficacy of such a “complementary differences” partnership, and thereby forces us to consider both more cases and the terms themselves.

Jabour concludes her study with a chapter on the Wirts’ move to Baltimore where they attempted to “rebuild castles in the air” after William lost his office with the election of Andrew Jackson. William’s political disappointments (including a failed bid for the presidency

in 1832) and family tragedy (especially the death of a favorite child, Agnes) served to bring the couple closer together. In a partnership closer to Elizabeth's expectations, they worked in the early 1830s to establish themselves as planters in Florida, but his untimely death denied this final attempt at achieving the ideal of a companionate marriage. After his death, Elizabeth took an active role in preserving his legacy. She not only finessed the language of his public eulogies, but she administered the Florida lands profitably and served as the leader of the large family until her own death in 1857.

The Wirts' marriage and historical assessments of it provide plenty of fodder for discussions about the meaning of companionate, of the implications of separate spheres ideology, and the extent of the social distance between the antebellum North and South. *Marriage in the Early Republic* makes a good start toward forcing new discussions of all of these issues.

Notes

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[1]. In this analysis, Jabour is closer to Jan Lewis, "Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic" *WMQ* 44(oct. 1987): 689-721, than Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680-1800* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), as she notes (173, n. 5).

[2]. One obstacle to inferring their reactions as typical or indicative of larger social problems is their individual characteristics. Elizabeth was young (18 to his 30) when they married, and full of high expectations and an unwillingness to compromise, as most youths are. It is difficult to determine what part of her unhappiness was her adjustment to an adult world that expected compromise, and what part was created by his resistance to sharing their lives more completely.

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