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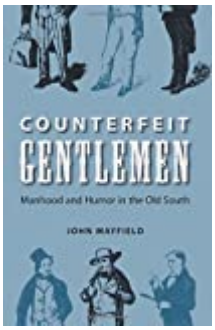

John Mayfield. *Counterfeit Gentlemen: Manhood and Humor in the Old South.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009. xxviii + 173 pp. $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-3337-2.

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Talk Like a Gentleman

In *Counterfeit Gentlemen*, John Mayfield attempts to explain the southern conception of manhood in the years leading up to the Civil War, an era in which the South was moving from a quasi-feudal agrarian economic structure to a market economy. To pursue this goal, Mayfield uses the humorists of the Old South, particularly John Pendleton Kennedy, Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, Johnson Jones Hooper, Joseph Glover Baldwin, Henry Clay Lewis, and George Washington Harris. These humorists provided subversive commentary from a marginalized perspective, most coming from impoverished families on the fringes of the southern economic system or from regions outside the South. Thus, they were able to observe southern manhood with the eye of an outsider.

One of the bookâs major goals is discerning how the southern man defined himself against other men in the same class. They distinguished themselves through theatricality, religion, physicality, and business, with each characteristic oftentimes contradicting another. Mayfield asserts, âIt is the tension between these ideals that furnished not only comic incongruity but [also] a deep personal ambivalence about manhood in the lives of Southern menâ (p. xxvii). In Mayfieldâs estimation, these writers used humor for two distinct purposes: to note the tragic irony of how America was perceived as opposed to how it actually operated; and to castigate and celebrate the flaws of frontier life and those who lived it, from the stuffy gentleman observer to the poor white yokel. His sources include the authorsâ primary texts along with an impressive array of secondary criticism from historians and literary critics. Mayfieldâs study offers significant insight into the antebellum southern manâs psyche while also contributing astute readings of the texts in question, not always an easy feat with the southwestern humorists. A weakness of the book lies in Mayfieldâs implication that the dialogue on southern manhood ended with the Civil War, while also hinting that it continues today in contemporary humor or southern literature. Nevertheless, any scholar interested in southern culture and literature will find this study valuable for the contributions that it makes to the study of southern manhood and southwestern humorists.

According to Mayfield, each humorist had something particular to say about the ever-shifting paradigm of manhood in the increasingly destabilized antebellum South. Mayfield constructs the book in chronological order as he traces the evolution of southern manhood from the Virginia gentleman to the backwoods yokel. In the first chapter, Mayfield provides the template from which he claims each reproduction of manhood was constructed: the Virginian gentleman. After describing the gentlemanâs qualities (powerful, confident, leisurely, and honorable), Mayfield then explains, using Kennedyâs *Swallow Barn* (1832), why this once reliable image of southern manliness lost its stability. The novel traces the day-to-day operations of planation life, exposing its master, protagonist Frank Meriwether, and its inheritor, Ned Hazard, as conceited, pompous, and ultimately useless. Ironically, the loss of power resulted from the gentlemanâs inability to expand past his plantation. While other men were adapting themselves to the new economic climate, the gentleman remained at home tending to his affairs because it was against his code to subject himself to the same work as his underlings. According to Mayfield, the failure to adapt resulted in the gentleman being confined to the more feminized domestic sphere. He asserts that Kennedy humorously captured the irony of the gentleman, who had to depend on his subordinates to maintain his lifestyle. Nowhere is this humor more present than the comic portrayal of the man-child Hazard, who is thirty-three years old, but has the life and work experience of a toddler. Ultimately, Mayfield surmises that âKennedy took the country gentleman–the manliest of men–tamed him, domesticated him, and feminized himâ (p. 7).

The second chapter is devoted to Longstreet and *Georgia Scenes* (1835) as well as his treatment of a multitude of southern characters. By the time of its publication, the country gentleman had lost much of his authority and manliness, so Mayfield suggests that one of the underlying purposes of *Georgia Scenes* was to determine who would replace him as the embodiment of manliness in the South. Mayfield calls Longstreetâs collection âmasculine humorâ because its story takes the reader away from the domestic sphere provided in *Swallow Barn* (p. 26). Instead, Longstreet recounted fights, ganderpullings, and mild swearing; the drive of the narrative moves from talking to performing. It is Longstreetâs emphasis on performance that draws Mayfieldâs interest. In Mayfieldâs reading, Longstreet offered a multitude of alternatives to the gentleman, such as the hard-working businessman, the evangelist, the fighter, and the ânoâcountâ redneck, embodied by Ransy Sniffle. Mayfield reasonably notes a sense of theatricality that played heavily on southern masquerade culture and that bound these diverse types of men together. Longstreetâs humor in describing these appears to be less ironic and more judgmental on the lower class of men who were establishing a new paradigm of manhood. While Longstreet seemed to have taken delight in ridiculing this culture with often humorous results, Mayfield argues that he also recognized the threat it posed to southern hierarchy. However, Longstreet appointed no official heir apparent to the gentleman and *Georgia Scenes* ends on a note of ambiguity.

Mayfield explores the works of Hooper and Baldwin and the evolution of the frontier confidence man in the third chapter. He pairs these authors because of their ties to Alabama. On the southwestern frontier, a new ideal of manhood emerged, one that combined masquerade culture, confidence schemes, and cutthroat market culture. Hooper and Baldwin observed this emergence in the rough environs of Alabama as outsiders who were competing for a piece of the booming cotton industry and all the business it would provide. In essence, Mayfield suggests that the works of both authors served as a humorous speculation on which group would define manliness for the frontier, using the southern gentleman as a reference point. Hooper satirized the southern ideals of honor and manhood with his creation of Simon Suggs. Concerning Suggs, Mayfield posits, âWhat Suggs does, ever brilliantly, is use the rules of gentlemanly behavior as instruments of the conâ (p. 55). Thus, hooperâs humorously ironic portrayal of the frontier exposed the southern code of honor, an important measurement of manhood, as a sham that allowed confidence men to prey on those who thought the code infallible. Baldwin, Mayfield argues, provided a more optimistic view of the frontier mainly because of men's varying degrees of success in adapting themselves to market culture. Hooperâs sensibilities laid in the past with the Virginia gentleman who had been besmirched by the likes of Suggs, which led to his bleak outlook. Conversely, Baldwin looked to adapt the old conception of manhood with something more progressive, as evidenced by his comic portrayal of the gentleman in *Flush Times* (1853). Ultimately, Mayfield notes that Baldwin was able to accept in his comic essays on manhood what Hooper was not: manhood was a commodity to be sold, and patrician ideals like honor would only result in failure.

In the fourth chapter, Mayfield analyzes the work of Thomas Bangs Thorpe, suggesting that Thorpe sought

to find the definition of manhood by fashioning an alloy of the country gentleman and the frontier wild man. In his extensive collection of hunting stories, including âThe Big Bear of Arkansasâ (1841), and his only novel, *The Masterâs House* (1854), Thorpe observed the southern hunting culture as an outsider from New England. Mayfieldâs analysis of the ever popular âThe Big Bear of Arkansasâ is of particular interest, in which he reasonably surmises that Thorpeâs work was informed by his desire to combine the transcendental view of the hunt with the primal, with protagonist Jim Doggett being both master of and one with nature. The humor in the story arises from the inherent conflict of Doggettâs perception of the hunt, not to mention his uncouth social manners. Mayfield suggests that Thorpeâs characterization of Doggett reflects his disillusionment with the South, noting that this particular hunting narrative remains transcendent today because it illustrates that âthe violence lends a sense of tragic loss to the very men who kill, as if they destroy themselves in the actâ (p. 14). Though Thorpe was somewhat obsessed with becoming a gentleman, he also could not ignore the inherent depravity and wastefulness of hunting in the South. Thus, like the works of other authors in Mayfieldâs book, Thorpeâs endeavors are rife with ambivalence and uncertainty.

Lewis is the subject of Mayfieldâs penultimate chapter, in which he examines a peculiar, more introspective concept of manhood. Mayfield accurately notes that Lewis was perhaps the most self conscious and confessional of the southern humorists. While other humorists voiced their jokes and criticisms through fictional characters, Lewisâs most famous work, *Odd Leaves from the Life of a Louisiana Swamp Doctor* (1850), is largely autobiographical. Regarding manhood, Mayfield notes that âLewisâs frank depictions of exposure and humiliation were simply not consistent with the demands of Southern manhoodâ (p. 87); nevertheless, Lewisâs stories were a source of tremendously self-deprecating humor. The sources of Lewisâs humiliation manifested in his insecurity about his unmanly profession (doctor), the decay of the gentlemanly patriarchy on the frontier, and his preoccupation with death. According to Mayfield, all three of these deficiencies limited Lewisâs prospects for upward mobility because they simply did not follow the ever present codes of manhood in the South. The result is a collection of dark but humorous gothic tales that detail Lewisâs anguish.

Mayfield saves the last chapter for perhaps the most well-known character in southwestern humor, Harrisâs Sut Lovingood, who completely subverts the idea of manhood through his unabashed cowardice and ungentlemanly behavior. Mayfield sees Harrisâs creation as a last humorous attempt to express the contradictions of being a southern man. Not only did Harris lampoon the traditional country gentleman through Sut, but he also satirized those respectable forms meant to take his place, such as the confidence man, the evangelical, and the business man, and Sut outwits them all. Harris accomplished this satire by making Sut the fool who is able to criticize proper society because he is not complicit with it. In one of Mayfieldâs sharpest points, he compares Sut with Fyodor Dostoevskyâs Underground Man; both attacked âthe nostrums and petty sins of their respective societiesâ from the dregs of their respective cultures (p. 110). Sut cannot attain the southern conception of manhood, nor does he want to, which makes him the perfect character to hold its conventions in contempt.

Mayfieldâs epilogue revisits the topic of southern manhood shortly before, during, and after the Civil War. He asserts that the southern man had not quite learned to incorporate the market ideals of the northern man, primarily because southern notions of honor and masquerade culture as established in the image of the country gentleman were still so pervasive. The book ends on something of a somber note, as Mayfield concedes that despite these humoristsâ attempts to deflate and expose the ideals of southern manhood, such ideals are still among the most prominent in our nationâs collective memory.

Mayfieldâs analysis and conclusions are very astute and worthy of further contemplation, but his assertion that the southern gentleman faded into collective memory by the Civil War ignores subsequent literature with similar struggles, much of it laced with humor. While the Civil War is a useful deadline for Mayfield to use considering his subject matter, the vitality of southern manhood influenced by the southern gentleman did not close with the warâs end, and plenty of writers, such as Mark Twain, William Faulkner, and Cormac McCarthy, continued to wrestle with questions of honor and masculinity. Often, these writers used tragedy to depict this struggle, as Faulkner did with Quentin Compsonâs story in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929); nevertheless, they also used humor, as Faulkner did with Jason Compsonâs narrative in the same novel. Certainly, the conception of manhood in the South changed after the war as Mayfield correctly surmises, but presenting the war as a clear line of demarcation where the construction of southern male gentility and honor ends and the Southâs full immersion into market culture begins, as Mayfield implies through-

out his study, negates a multitude of variations on the themes that he delineates after the war.

Nevertheless, Mayfieldâs study provokes plenty of thought on the construction of southern manhood and the use of humor to destabilize that construction. In a lean 128 pages, Mayfield accomplishes the goals he establishes in the bookâs introduction. By beginning with the country gentleman, Mayfield demonstrates a clear starting point from which he begins his discussion of southern manhood, and his examination of the subsequent humorists are tethered to this image. Indeed, one can see the evolution (or devolution if you will) of the conception of southern manhood in Mayfieldâs analysis, beginning with the noble but impotent Meriwether and ending with gleefully lascivious Sut Lovingood and the scoundrels he exposes in his misadventures. Thus, Mayfield remains consistent and steadfast in exploring his stated topic.

Among Mayfieldâs greatest strengths as he argues his point is his ability to combine biographical information with a close reading of the texts. There is no stretching to make meaning in *Counterfeit Gentlemen*, and Mayfield does an excellent job in guiding his readers through the contours of the authors and their works. The content of the analysis is original in the sense that Mayfield looks at these authors as real people and tries to move beyond stereotypes of antebellum southern gentlemen. His sources for the biographical information on the authors is nothing short of impeccable, but he also breathes life and nuance into the biographies. For example, he writes of Harris, âIf there was any consistency to his career ... it seemed to be his capacity for hard work and constant debt in the pursuit of the image of prosperity. Actual prosperity eluded himâ (p. 112). In these two biographical statements, Mayfield expresses the tension evident in Harrisâs work.

Mayfield combines his deft use of biography with a keen eye for interpreting the primary texts. Judging from the preface, it appears that he is not going to delve into the works in any significant detail because he downplays the significance of the texts to his study; however, he does a fantastic job of explaining how the text supports the assertions that he makes about southern manhood. The pinnacle of his analysis is his comparison of Sut Lovingood to Dostoevskyâs Underground Man. On the surface, one could argue that this comparison is a bit forced. After all, how could some mere underground frontier humorist possibly be compared to a giant of Russian literature? Nevertheless, Mayfield makes the point work with his meticulous analysis. He does not belabor the point, either, succinctly making it in three paragraphs.

A good academic book should certainly be nuanced and open to complexity, but it should also be accessible. Mayfield does an excellent job of striking this balance. His points are direct and his style very amiable, but the content also evokes thought and acknowledges the complexity of the topic. Anyone with an interest in southern honor, shame, manhood, and humor will find Mayfieldâs study enlightening. I also extend that recommendation to anyone interested in contemporary southern studies, because, as Mayfield so accurately expresses, the conception of the southern gentleman has yet to leave the southern imagination. In sum, *Counterfeit Gentlemen* provides provocative analysis and furthers the conversation of a topic that has received some critical treatment, but Mayfield gives the topic the extra attention it deserves.