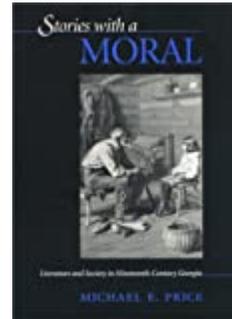




Michael E. Price. *Stories with a Moral: Literature and Society in Nineteenth-Century Georgia.* Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2000. xi + 394 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-2132-5.



Reviewed by Daniel Kilbride (Department of History, John Carroll University)

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Fightin' Words

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It seems that books and reading are all the rage among American historians these days. The study of the antebellum period has perhaps received more than its just due from this literature, as a significant number of studies, from David Reynolds's *Beneath the American Renaissance* to Isabelle Lehuu's recent *Carnival on the Page: Popular Print Media in Antebellum America*, demonstrate. [1] The topics run the gamut from canonical figures like Emerson and Fuller to the penny press, popular reading practices, gift books, and even handbills. And while students of the American South might complain that their region has failed to receive its due from this minor literary explosion, southern writers and readers have been the subjects of a number of important studies in recent years. Michael E. Price's *Stories with a Moral*, which investigates the interactions between literature and social development in nineteenth-century Georgia, is an interesting contribution to this growing literature.

Price's hundred-year time frame has many merits, although it is not without its problems. Its chief virtue is the evidentiary authority it brings to bear on the

book's main idea, which is that white Georgians' public and private writings during the nineteenth century – both before and after the Civil War – cohered around a single theme: the defense of plantation society and its fundamental component, chattel slavery. The notion that postwar southern society shared essential continuities with its antebellum manifestation is hardly new, of course. But, with a few exceptions, works that deal with the continuity-discontinuity question usually deal mainly with the postwar period, with relatively little or even token research on the slave South.

By contrast, over half of *Stories with a Moral* covers the Old South, with one chapter on Civil War literature and two on Reconstruction and the New South, with a brief epilogue that treats writings on the Lost Cause. Throughout, Price brings to his reading a theoretical perspective that sees literature less as a way of constructing experience than as a reflection of social developments and, more precisely, as a tool of the powerful. Literature, in Price's understanding, both reflects the visions and fears of ruling elites and legitimizes their authority. While his is not, to say the least, a terribly sophisticated

approach, at least we are spared the jargon and vacuity that many of us have come to expect from literary studies nowadays.

The book's first section, on the antebellum period, is dominated by its second chapter, on Georgia humorists. Price starts with an eight-page summary of William Gilmore Simms's *Guy Rivers* (1834), the point of which is not entirely clear. He then moves on to his main theme of interpreting writers as spokesmen for the state's slaveholding elite who fashioned a pastoral vision of southern slave society. Among his subjects are well-known figures like Augustin Baldwin Longstreet and lesser-known writers, such as John Basil Lamar and Ebenezer Jones. Explicitly proslavery and elitist, the humorists sought to perform serious ideological work by defending the region against what they perceived as a rising chorus of anti-slavery criticism from the North and Europe.

Even more, however, Price claims that Longstreet and other humorists couched their proslavery ideology within a tradition of frontier humor in order to pacify poor whites, whose affection for Jacksonian egalitarianism threatened planter leadership. In other words, Price interprets the Georgia humorists squarely within the paradigm of planter hegemony set forth by Eugene Genovese in *The Political Economy of Slavery*, an intellectual debt he takes pains to acknowledge. He does not indicate, however, that Genovese has modified his views significantly since that time. [2] Price argues that the humorists were provoked to defend southern society out of sensitivity to criticism of the region in the published accounts of European and northern travelers – the subject of his first chapter – though, oddly, he neglects to show that the humorists ever actually read any of them.

Price recognizes that the literary defense of plantation society was not exclusively a male enterprise. He accepts the contention of Elizabeth Fox-Genovese that the presence of slaves in southern households not only signified the ambivalent position of the South in a capitalist, free-labor world market, but necessitated that southern white women's roles would be fundamentally different from their northern sisters. Thus, he argues, southern domestic literature – women's writing – was dedicated to the defense of slavery and plantation society.

Though Price's treatment of this body of writing is intriguing, some readers may quarrel with his rather liberal definition of literature. After a fourteen-page summary of Caroline Lee Hentz's *Planters Northern Bride* (1854), Price turns exclusively to what he calls "the literature of intimacy" (129) – the private letters and diaries of Geor-

gia white women. Relying on widely available published material, such as Christine Jacobson Carter's impressive new edition of the diary of Dolly Lunt Burge, Price argues that planter women's central place in household production made them passionate, authoritative defenders of the plantation regime. At great length, Price suggests that the rhythms of the seasons, the weather, slave management, education, religion, and other mundane concerns illustrate the central role of paternalism in shaping the ideology of the planter class. It is, however, often difficult to discern the relationship of these matters to the construction of planter identity and paternalist attitudes among plantation mistresses. [3]

This literary defense of plantation society only intensified during and after the Civil War. Another foray into well-known, easily accessible diaries of southern women – and also a long sketch of Augusta Jane Evans's wartime novel *Macaria* (1864) – establishes that Georgia's plantation mistresses struggled with the physical and psychological dilemmas of the Confederate homefront. His analysis follows the familiar lines established by George Rable, James Roark, and Drew Gilpin Faust. [4] Price's treatment of postwar Georgia writers embraces both the "literature of intimacy" and published work, from familiar subjects like Joel Chandler Harris and Sidney Lanier to more obscure figures such as Louis Beauregard Pendleton.

The nostalgia for a rural past evident in this literature, particularly in the country-city juxtaposition Price finds particularly telling, represented the ambivalence with which Georgia writers faced the New South. Wishing to preserve planter dominance and black subjugation, pro-planter writers allied with New South elites to oppose both small-farmer radicalism, the freedmen's aspirations, and capitalist excess. Most writers, Price suggests, established a romanticized vision of the master-slave relationship as a fictional antidote to the social unrest and impersonality that, they believed, characterized the new order of the postwar South. In a brief epilogue, Price admonishes us not to dismiss the apologetic writing of postwar Georgians as mere nostalgia or escapism. Rather, the pastoral tradition exemplified by Harris and Charles Henry Smith should be seen within the romantic tradition of cultural criticism, in which contemporary defects are exposed by contrasting them against an idealized past.

Given that Price's subject matter, evidence, and even his conclusions will be familiar to nearly all students of nineteenth-century southern history, his reluctance to

engage some issues may appear puzzling. For example, Price interprets literature by Georgians rather strictly in terms of the proslavery argument and the defense of southern culture. There is certainly much to be said about the development of sectional self-consciousness in this period. But surely one of the most important contributions of southern intellectual history over the past fifteen years or so has been to refute the notion that the southern mind was, in Michael O'Brien's words, "superficial, unintellectual, obsessed with race and slavery, [and] enfeebled by polemic." [5] Price does not engage this new literature on the southern intellect, and indeed his study rather reinforces those sentiments by reducing Georgia literature to the proslavery argument and the defense of plantation society.

Stories with a Moral reinforces old historiographical verities in other areas. Historians like Mark Smith and Jeffrey R. Young have begun to move beyond the capitalist-anticapitalist paradigm to which Price remains wedded, a once-fruitful debate that, Young correctly observes, has "grown increasingly stale." [6] Throughout *Stories with a Moral*, Price engages relevant historical literature, but he does so selectively. His chapters on the Civil War and Reconstruction, for example, rely heavily on James Roark's *Masters without Slaves*, and his treatment of women depends rather exclusively on Fox-Genovese's *Within the Plantation Household*—highly esteemed works, to be sure, but the starting points, not the finishing lines, for studies of planters and white women. [7]

In other areas important interpretations also go unaddressed. Since Price argues that planters dominated Georgia culturally as well as politically, one might expect him to find Michael Johnson's *Toward a Patriarchal Republic: The Secession of Georgia* a promising source, but it is neither cited nor engaged. The same goes for J. William Harris's well-regarded *Plain Folk and Georgia in a Slave Society*, a book that is on point to Price's treatment of planter-yeoman relations if there ever was one. [8] No historian can reasonably be expected to address all the relevant literature in his or her field, of course. But the omission of important and directly relevant works probably saps *Stories with a Moral* of much of the interpretive sophistication it might otherwise have possessed.

One interesting and relevant line of inquiry that goes largely dry is the role of readers – not merely writers – in nineteenth century Georgia. Price does suggest that Georgia humorists were provoked into defending plantation society by the criticisms contained in the writ-

ings of northern and European travelers, but this as far as he goes. That's too bad, because much recent work has investigated the reading habits of nineteenth-century Americans, and studies are beginning to be done on the American South. [9] Even if one accepts, for example, that Georgia humorists wrote not as chroniclers of frontier life but as moral defenders of slave society, we do not know how Georgians – and other Americans – read them. That important and relevant question awaits its own study.

Despite these minor defects, however, *Stories with a Moral* is an interesting study that will appeal to historians interested in the relationship between literature and society in the nineteenth-century South. Price offers readings of familiar, commonly available literary works – and a few that are not-so familiar – and adds his voice to a number of ongoing debates, from planter-yeoman relations to women's roles during Reconstruction.

Notes:

[1]. David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (Cambridge: Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988); Isabelle Lehuu, *Carnival on the Page: Popular Print Media in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

[2]. Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South* (New York: Vintage, 1967). See his *The Slaveholder's Dilemma: Freedom and Progress in Southern Conservative Thought, 1820-1860* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992), on the evolution of this interpretation.

[3]. Christine Jacobson Carter, ed., *The Diary of Dolly Lunt Burge, 1848-1879* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1997).

[4]. George C. Rable, *Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Identity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984); James L. Roark, *Masters without Slaves: Southern Planters in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977); Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the Civil War South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

[5]. Michael O'Brien, "On the Mind of the South and its Accessibility," in O'Brien, ed., *Rethinking the South: Essays in Intellectual History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 19.

- [6]. Jeffrey Robert Young, *Domesticating Slavery: The Master Class in Georgia and South Carolina, 1670-1837* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 4; Mark Smith, *Mastered by the Clock: Time, Slavery, and Freedom in the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).
- [7]. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).
- [8]. Michael P. Johnson, *Toward a Patriarchal Republic: The Secession of Georgia* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977); J. William Harris, *Plain Folk and Gentry in a Slave Society: White Freedom and Black Slavery in Augusta's Hinterlands* (Middletown, Ct.: Wesleyan University Press, 1985).
- [9]. Ronald J. Zboray, *A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Mary Kelley, "Reading Women/Women Reading: The Making of Learned Women in Antebellum America," *Journal of American History* 83:2 (1996), 401-424; on the South, see the essays in Michael O'Brien and David Moltke-Hansen, eds., *Intellectual Life in Antebellum Charleston* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1986); and Jonathan Daniel Wells, "The Origins of the Southern Middle Class: Literature, Politics, and Economy," (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1998).

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