# Setting the Terms of the Debate

Stephen Berry

Historically Speaking, Volume 9, Number 6, July, August 2008, pp. 14-15 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
*DOI:* *https://doi.org/10.1353/hsp.2008.0010*

19th-century South (perhaps especially on its frontiers) honor actually mattered more than it ever had before. For perhaps the first time in history, honor could potentially allow all free men in a complex and wealthy society to claim its peculiar forms of status and approval.

Historians of gender, whether focused on women or men, have not taken a full account of the implications of *Southern Honor*'s major thesis for the history of masculinity. The history of masculinity has an awkward relationship with the history of gender in general. In a 2004 article in *Gender and History* Toby Ditz criticizes the historiography of masculinity for focusing too much on relations among men at the expense of men's gendered power over women. Yet while much of Ditz's argument is compelling, she does not cite or mention the two most powerful cases for concentrating on how men use gender against each other: Richard Trexler's *Sex and Power* and, you guessed it, *Southern Honor*.

A close reading of *Southern Honor* reveals that access to women was not the sole factor that shaped competitions for male power. The anthropological staple of distribution of women is indeed part of Wyatt-Brown's argument: planter men used relationships with each other to get wives. But they also made marriages to get closer to powerful men. And while white men sought to establish and demonstrate honor in their interactions with white women, as well as with African-American women and men, honor—and political power—was ultimately distributed only by their peers.

Indeed, the argument for starting with men v. men in order to understand how masculinity shapes a particular history begins with these questions: Where is the power in society? And where is the main contest over it? This is the argument for studying the decision making of dictators, the racial attitudes of whites, the business practices of Microsoft. It is not the whole of history, but it does drive a huge proportion of historical change. Wyatt-Brown's emphasis on the gendered ways that white southern men related to each other accounts for the fact that so much of southern political and cultural history before the Civil War—if you read the newspapers, for instance, of any southern community—seems not to be a story of southern white men fighting against women, African Americans, or even Northerners (until the last decade). Instead, they are fighting each other. More than that, they are denying each other's manhood, rhetorically feminizing and enslaving each other, blackening their respective names as it were, sometimes actually killing each other. They are battling before a community of their peers for honor, in short. And all of that relies on, and ultimately seeks to protect, slavery and male power.

A close reading of *Southern Honor* reveals that access to women was not the sole factor that shaped competitions for male power.

While some insist that histories of masculinity must always be a report on its foundation—the traffic in women, for instance—Wyatt-Brown's account of southern honor suggests something richer and more complex. It gives us a key to understanding the essential contest that structured the political and cultural histories of the South—not only the protection of slavery, but also the contest for manhood in a society structured by honor. Its implications are rich indeed, and we have only begun to scratch their surface. We need to think longer and harder about the arguments that *Southern Honor* makes and grapple with the ways in which it contradicts and undermines some of our existing paradigms of gender, political, and cultural history. After twenty-five years, we are only now able to sound the depths of this complex, suggestive, phenomenal book.

*Edward E. Baptist is associate professor of history at Cornell University and the author of* Creating an Old South: Middle Florida's Plantation Frontier before the Civil War *(University of North Carolina Press, 2002), which won the Florida Historical Society's Rembert Patrick Award for the Best Book in Florida History.*

# Setting the Terms of the Debate

Stephen Berry

Let's face it: twenty-five years is a long time. When *Southern Honor* was first published, I was in junior high school; my current students weren't even born; and disco, while moribund, was not actually dead. I find it amazing that for twenty-five years this one book has set the terms of debate over the nature of southern culture. It is still on every syllabus in every course on the Old South. And for good reason. The secret of its relevancy is, I think, two-fold. First, it really *predicted* so many of our own historiographical preoccupations—particularly gender. Second, it has actually *gained* in relevance as globalization has thrown us into contact with cultures that have, if you will, certain Wyatt-Brownian features. One of the core contentions of this book—that honor cultures tend to create in males an easily misdirected rage—is I think especially topical. There are clearly a lot of angry men out there, and their rage is 9/11 deadly.

And there are still aspects of southern honor that have yet to be adequately explored. What about women's honor and slaves' honor? What role did these have in social interactions in the Old South? Is it even useful to use such a term that has been so consistently applied to white males? Do we prefer the term mastery, and if so, why? Doesn't it have some of the same problems? For the little it's worth: I think Wyatt-Brown's thesis can and should be more fully adapted to the cotillion and the slave-quarter. If honor is a claim set before one's peers, then surely women, in their interactions with each other, and slaves, within their own communities, staked such claims and defended them, if not with their lives, then with their reputations. Did they stake and defend such claims in a distinctly southern way?

What about honor and the market? No aspect of the historiography has shifted more dramatically over these twenty-five years than the economic. We don't even see words like premodern or seigniorial any more. The engine of antebellum southern history (and to a substantial degree, antebellum American history) appears to me to be this: between 1820 and 1844, Southerners swept the remaining natives off of 25 million acres of the most valuable real estate in America and erected a Cotton Kingdom that would go on to produce 70% of the world's cotton supply and fuel the initial phase of the Industrial Revolution. This was an enterprise of enormous effort, enormous rewards, and enormous consequences, and it sent the South into its own peculiar version of a modernization crisis. How honor continued to function,

how it adapted itself to the market and adapted the market to itself, has been hinted at (by John Mayfield, Kenneth Greenberg, and others), but we still have no clear sense.

And what about honor as an internal, emotional experience? This may seem paradoxical, because Wyatt-Brown has stressed the essentially social nature of southern honor, the degree to which all claims to rank had to be ratified by community consensus. But he has also suggested that the honor ethic was a haunting, depressing, and enraging burden, and I think that needs to be explored from inside the male mind as well as from the outside.

Why has nothing remotely like *Southern Honor* been produced in twenty-five years? Why does it still stand so alone? I don't know, but I wondered while rereading the book if perhaps we discourage ourselves and our students from taking the kind of chances Wyatt-Brown took. Because let's face it: he did take chances, and he almost didn't get away with them. The reviewers used words like "brilliant," "sweeping," and "magisterial," but they also used words and leveled charges not as pleasant. I think Orlando Patterson hit closest to the mark when he said that "a good part of [the book's] intellectual excitement comes from the fact that it takes many chances, both methodologically and interpretively. Timidity is not one of Professor Wyatt-Brown's failings." Indeed, it isn't. But I worry sometimes about it becoming one of mine, one of ours, one that we may too easily pass on to our students. Wyatt-Brown wrote *Southern Honor* with an impressionistic, Cashian, Faulknerian fearlessness, and it's that literary fearlessness that I think we need more of.

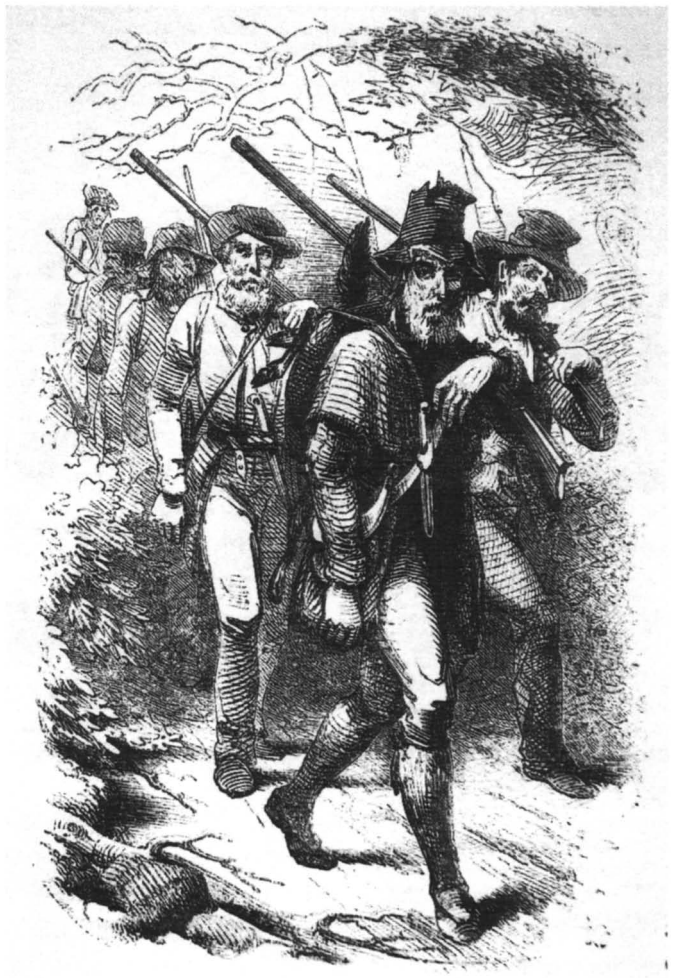
*Stephen Berry is assistant professor of history at the University of Georgia. His most recent book is* House of Abraham: Lincoln and the Todds, a Family Divided by War *(Houghton Mifflin, 2007).*

# THE SCOPE OF *SOUTHERN HONOR*

Orville Vernon Burton

Because *Southern Honor* is written with the literary grace characteristic of Bertram Wyatt-Brown, many have missed the interdisciplinary and theoretical sophistication that has truly made this book a classic, not a word I often use. This book has inspired a generation of cultural historians, rejuvenated the field of American Studies, and pointed the way to the scholarly microhistory and community history that has so "honored" our profession.

Some have not paid attention to the subtitle, *Ethics and Behavior in the Old South,* which alerts us to the anthropological insights incorporated into what has become a major interpretation of the South. To appreciate the genius and the influence of *Southern Honor*, one must go back to our previous understanding of the literature on the American South. Before *Southern Honor*, there was W. J. Cash's *The Mind of the South*, and basically three, or perhaps three-and-a-half, interpretations of the Old South, none of which by itself satisfactorily explained the American South. Although with a very different interpretation, Wyatt-Brown explicitly drew upon Cash for a model, and he wrote eloquently about Cash and the savage ideal and sense of honor before the publication of his own monumental *Southern Honor*.[1] For all who want to understand what Wyatt-Brown was trying to do in *Southern Honor*, I recommend they read his insightful and exciting 1975 essay entitled "The Ideal Typology and Antebellum Southern History: A Testing of a New Approach." Wyatt-Brown, like Cash, sought to show "how all parts of southern society functioned to form a social whole." Like Cash, he emphasized continuity, arguing that "the main thrust of southern life was the preservation of its traditions."[2] Wyatt-Brown has correctly pointed out that "Cash is simply part of a southern scholar's intellectual frame of reference, and it is impossible to not deal with him."[3] One can expand Wyatt-Brown's claim and add that for us historians of the American South it is impossible to not deal with Wyatt-Brown.



Upcountry white hunters in the Old South. From David Hunter Strother, *Virginia Illustrated* (Harper and Brothers, 1857), 173.

When I attended graduate school in 1969, the reigning interpretation of the Old South posited planters as rational economic men who responded, above all, to economic forces (Lewis C. Gray, Kenneth Stampp, and Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman). Eugene Genovese was emerging as the foremost critic of "planter capitalism." Writing from a Marxist perspective, Genovese emphasized the sources of irrationality internal to any slave system, including the one that developed in the American South. Like U.B. Phillips, Genovese put the relations between master and slave at center stage. Out of vogue at the time was a third interpretation that deemphasized planters, slaves, and the market, and instead argued that the yeoman's democratic frontier experience shaped southern society and culture (Frank and Harriet Owsley). Finally, many of us in graduate school at the time were fascinated by David Potter's idea of the South as a "folk society." Exactly what Potter meant was unclear, but his claim that the South "retained a personalism in the relationships between man and man which industrial culture lacks" seemed to ring true.[4]

*Southern Honor* complicates and addresses each of these schools of interpretation in important and insightful ways, and has now added the fourth interpretive school of southern history. In addition, *Southern Honor* set a new standard for how history was to be done. *Southern Honor* is not only about men or masculinity, but also about community, and it therefore added immeasurably at an early stage of the literature to our understanding of women in the South. *Southern Honor* is truly gender history.

Three questions raised by *Southern Honor* still intrigue me. Could slaves or free blacks have honor?