



Sex in the Civil War: Soldiers, Pornography, and the Making of American Morality by Judith Giesberg.

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Review by Donald R. Shaffer, Upper Iowa University (shafferd@faculty.uiu.edu).

In *Sex in the Civil War*, historian Judith Giesberg (Villanova Univ.) brings the evidence of contemporary pornography to a trenchant scholarly analysis of gender identity among (mostly Union Army) soldiers and the larger civilian community in the North during and following the war. Much of her often explicit source material remains controversial even today, when the internet has made pornography ubiquitous in a way that would have horrified postbellum moral campaigners like Anthony Comstock. Giesberg argues that pornography and its intersection with other sexual controversies in Victorian America precipitated a crisis of gender during the Civil War and prompted an aggressive postwar campaign against what many Americans saw as an insidious moral threat to the nation.

The book comprises an introduction laying out its subject matter and analytic method, four chapters, and an epilogue. Chapter 1, “Lewd, Wicked, and Scandalous: American Pornography Comes of Age,” begins with the tentative antebellum efforts of the US government to outlaw pornographic materials, which before the 1850s entered the country mostly from abroad. Giesberg notes that banning imported pornography merely encouraged enterprising Americans, mainly in New York City, to produce it domestically to meet demand. Innovations in the US Mail made it cheap to ship obscene materials across the nation and new technology allowed consumers to view them discreetly. Furthermore, wartime postal regulations discounting and prioritizing parcel shipments to soldiers as a morale building measure facilitated the spread of homegrown pornography into Union army camps, to the point that it “came to be associated with the experience of soldiering” (31).

In Chapter 2, “Storming the Enemy’s Breastworks: Civil War Courts-Martial and the Sexual Culture of the U.S. Army Camp,” Giesberg explores pornography’s influence on the sexual culture of Union soldiers. She draws heavily on court-martial records, where evidence of pornography in military camps was most likely to be registered and preserved. Interestingly, she finds that both officers and enlisted men were tried for possessing pornography. Some officers tried to use pornography as one method among others to bond with their men and encourage enlisted men to bond with each other: “Sharing of erotic images between men served to negotiate lines of authority and trust.... [P]ornography served as a form of transaction among men who needed to know they could trust one another” (52).

Of course, not all Union soldiers welcomed pornographic materials in their camps. Giesberg discusses a noted postbellum moral crusader in chapter 3, “True Courage: Anthony Comstock and the Crisis of the War.” She locates the roots of Comstock’s postwar campaign against pornography and other forms of indecency in his experience of Civil War military camps. Comstock’s older brother had been killed while serving in a Connecticut regiment that was decimated early on in the war. But, by the time the younger Comstock enlisted in the same unit, it was engaged in safe and rather boring garrison duty in St. Augustine, Florida. Here the priggish Comstock, appalled by the ribald camp culture, did not get along with his comrades and deeply regretted not being tested in combat like his brother. That disappointment, the author suggests, motivated him to join postwar moral crusades and prove

his manhood by bravely and zealously campaigning against the evildoers he believed were corrupting the nation's youth with licentious materials.

Chapter 4, "Outraged Manhood of Our Age: The Postwar Antipornography Campaign," portrays Comstock's career as a champion of morality as part of a larger "postwar surge of interest in and legislation regularizing and regulating marriage and, in doing so, stabilizing a gender order that war had upset" (84). The US Congress and increasing numbers of state legislatures passed laws empowering both government officials and activists like Comstock (who eventually became a federal postal inspector) to target pornographers, abortionists, and purveyors of birth control devices and sex education information. Although the activists had their detractors, Giesberg finds that they garnered much popular support in part because influential lobbies such as medical professionals found the anti-smut crusaders useful in their efforts to professionalize medicine by eliminating untrained practitioners, especially abortionists.

My only quibbles with the book are its brevity, likely a result of its origin in a set of lectures delivered at Penn State University, and (through no fault of the author) the paucity of its primary sources. Giesberg notes that extant specimens of Civil War-era pornography are mostly in private hands rather than institutional collections. And, too, the zeal of activists like Anthony Comstock likely removed much evidence that might have been useful to scholars and historians today. I hope that Judith Giesberg and other researchers will continue to uncover and analyze relevant materials. In the meantime, *Sex in the Civil War* has demonstrated that pornography can provide insights into both the changing moral universe and the inner worlds of its past consumers.