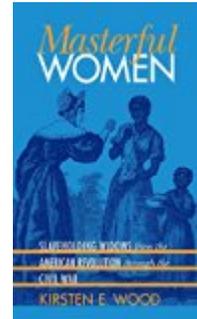


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Kirsten E. Wood.** *Masterful Women: Slaveholding Widows from the American Revolution through the Civil War.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. xiii + 281 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2859-5; \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5528-7.

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## Mastering Widow Masters

Anyone who has ever researched the history of American widowhood knows that the topic of Kirsten E. Wood's book is a difficult one. There simply is no single source that inventories all widows in the nation, a region, a state, or a community, let alone those who owned slaves. Therefore, Wood should be credited for investigating this challenging topic and tracing it over a fairly long span of time. While the title does not indicate that her study focuses just on Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia, this geographic limit does not impede the significance of her findings.

Wood begins by pointing to the example of Martha Washington, the nation's "first" First Lady, who also became a slaveholding widow. Wood asks what happened to the many Southern women like Martha, who, though less prominent, became widows with slaves between the American Revolution and the end of the Civil War. Were they able to preserve their husband's economic, social, and political status? After their husbands died did they truly become masters not just of their slaves but, as well, their personal fate?

One factor which makes it possible for Wood to disclose information about these widows is that, while most were not large slaveowners, as members of slave-owning families they were likely to be literate and thereby produce manuscripts that many years later would make their way into an archive. Hence, Wood has carefully researched diaries and correspondence of these widows, particularly those housed in the Southern Histori-

cal Collection, the Duke University Archives, the South Caroliniana Library, and the Virginia Historical Society. Further, Wood relies on a number of published studies, most notably Suzanne Lebsack's *The Free Women of Petersburg: A Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (1984), to fill in critical gaps.

Wood's most critical finding is that slaveholding widows "developed a distinctive version of mastery, which harnessed ladyhood to householding and privileged both over mere white manhood" (p. 6). She concludes that these women "provided a conservative counterpoint to the patriarchal and potentially democratic mastery espoused by yeoman and male planters" (p. 11).

While Wood begins her study with the late-eighteenth century, tracing some of the changes brought about by the Revolution, and concludes with a chapter on the Civil War, most of the chapters are topical rather than chronological. Chapter 2, which examines how widows managed slaves, provides particularly interesting analysis of the differences between small and large slaveholding widows. Woods points out that a widow with few slaves experienced a far greater loss with her husband's death since he likely would have been providing a substantial amount of his labor to that of the slaves. She also explains how slave widows differed from male slaveholders as the former "often measured their personal success or failure more in terms of house slaves' performance" (p. 36). Further, slave widows (whether large or small owners) were less likely than men to "as-

sert their power over slaves in raw physical terms” and “sexual domination or its threat did not commonly figure in their mastery.” Significantly, while these factors might suggest a more “moderate form of slavery” under the management of these widows, she finds that “slaves often fared no better or even worse than before” the death of the husband-master since his death often necessitated the selling of slaves. Further, financial retrenchment frequently forced these widows to diminish the physical conditions under which their slaves labored. On the whole, Wood concludes, that as slave managers, widows “were not fully successful masters, but neither were they benevolent ladies or hapless incompetents” (p. 59).

Chapter 3 describes the interaction of these widows with their relatives. Wood notes that widows received such aid as co-residence, but also emphasizes that many “tried to help families as much as they were helped” (p. 67). She observes that one significant advantage widows had over wives was with regards to the law, as they were now entitled to testify in court—an invaluable right which could assist their relatives.

Chapter 4 outlines how these slaveholding widows navigated the public realm, particularly the economy. Again, it not only underscores the role of kin assistance, but delineates how these women both used agents in commercial exchanges and sometimes even served as agents. Further, because most of these women had access to good means of travel and accommodations, the risks they might encounter while traveling were diminished.

In chapter 5 Wood traces the public influence of slaveholding widows in formal and informal politics. Wood discovers that over this era a shift occurred as there was a growing tendency among the planter class to “uphold elite privilege across lines of gender, contrary to the democratic implications of universal white manhood suffrage” (p. 116).

Wood investigates the many choices the slaveholding women made from whether to remarry to how to disperse their estates, in chapter 6. She finds that only a minority of these women remarried and that the older and more wealthy ones were most likely to remain single. Her most significant finding, based on her careful use of the wills of Rowan County, North Carolina, is that slaveholding women privileged their female heirs and in doing so “acknowledged both their emotional investment in other women and the peculiar hazards of widowhood” (p. 135). She concludes that widows “found special value

in their female networks even though as widows they relied heavily on men for financial, legal, and managerial help” (p. 135). Still, she stresses that these women were “fundamentally conservative” as they “endorsed not only the South’s racial and class hierarchies but also its fundamental gender inequality. Indeed, they relied upon it” (p. 157).

Taking her story into the war years in chapter 7, Wood explains that slaveholding widows experienced the difficulties faced by all white women and civilians during this period. Still, it was the loss of their slaves which especially hurt them since it had been their slave management “that secured their respect and authority in the eyes of friends, families, and subordinates” (p. 190).

As previously noted, examining the history of American widows is a difficult task. Even though these slaveholding widows were more likely than most women to leave the types of sources that reveal their thoughts and actions, there is reason to think that most of those who did were the larger slaveowners rather than the vast majority who owned few slaves. This is not intended as a criticism of Wood who shows sensitivity to the issue of representativeness as well as the need to provide statistical evidence whenever possible. Indeed, there simply is no consistent source indicating how many slaves these women owned either at the time of their husband’s death or at the moment they wrote a diary entry or a letter. Further, it is impossible for Wood to examine larger demographic patterns as well, such as the number of children these women had at the time of their husband’s death, since before 1850 the manuscript census does not give the type of family-oriented information which would make this possible.<sup>[1]</sup> Again, Wood deserves credit for pushing her analysis back into a period when the records are too thin to answer many of these questions. We can only hope that Wood’s excellent study will stimulate more examinations of nineteenth-century American widows that will permit additional regional, urban/rural, and class comparisons.

#### Note

[1]. For an examination of Virginia widows during a period when the records allow for more statistical analysis, see Robert C. Kenzer, “‘Knowing the Uncertainty of Life and the Certainty of Death’: A Profile of Virginia’s Civil War Widows,” in *The War Was You and Me: Civilians in the American Civil War*, ed. Joan E. Cashin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

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