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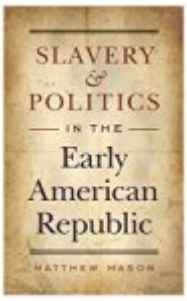
Matthew Mason. *Slavery and Politics in the Early American Republic.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. xii + 339 pp. $45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-3049-9.



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For Thomas Jefferson, the controversy over admitting Missouri into the union was a "fire bell in the night," a sudden irruption of the slavery issue into federal politics that threatened the survival of the union. As his language suggests, Jefferson must have been sleeping. Matthew Mason's superb new study shows that polarizing talk about slavery was ubiquitous in the 1810s: "antebellum strife over slavery took the shape it did in large part because of developments and lessons learned in that crucial decade" (p. 237). Americans talked about slavery because the institution was "central" to "American life," but these early controversies were *not* primarily about slavery (p. 5). Mason argues persuasively that successive crises of the federal union made antislavery rhetoric useful in a period when few Americans could imagine eliminating, or even limiting the expansion of, an institution that was so critical to the new nation's prosperity.

When Federalists ruled the roost in the 1790s they had little to say about slavery. But when Jefferson's ascendancy threw them on the defensive, alienated New England Federalists threatened to bolt the union and unleashed a barrage of antislavery assaults on iniquitous slaveholders. In other words, Mason argues, geopolitical considerations came first. Chafing at the dominion of Virginia Republicans and their misguided commercial policies, Federalists pandered to sectional prejudices, conjuring up an early version of the "slave power conspiracy" to mobilize constituents against sectional subjugation. Centrifugal tendencies in a fragile union encouraged moralizing rhetoric about sectional differences. Jefferson and his allies had set the pattern with their ideological assaults on Northern "aristocrats" and "monocrats" during the party battles of the 1790s: now Jeffersonian slaveholders--the party of pretended "democrats"--could be portrayed in turn as the most tyrannical "aristocrats" of all. After the War of 1812, when Federalists who flirted with disunion at the Hartford Convention were thoroughly disgraced, the antislavery, anti-slave power language they had deployed so effectively was embraced by dissident Northern Republicans. "The vague but latently powerful antislavery impulses of the Revolution thus gained concrete meaning and organized expression in states north

of the permeable border with slavery in the post-war years, just as they had in New England during the Embargo and War of 1812" (pp. 130-131). It would be more accurate to say "antislavery language" than "impulses," for, as Mason convincingly shows, impulses--the intentions that made the language meaningful--changed significantly over time. Immediatist William Lloyd Garrison's ideological debt to High Federalist Timothy Pickering is undeniable, but Garrison had rather different ends in view. As Mason puts it, "the 1810s were not the 1850s" (p. 237).

Slavery loomed large in the party struggles of the early republic, but slavery only became the central *problem* in American politics with the Missouri controversy of 1819-21. Mason shows how antislavery rhetoric developed in tandem with sectionalist politics in New England and the North generally in the preceding years. Though a few bold advocates anticipated future proslavery arguments, Southerners still felt secure in a union that protected and promoted their peculiar institution and saw no compelling need to respond in kind. Instead, they assured their allies in the North that "the South was doing all it could to ameliorate slavery and act against its abuses." Meanwhile, the preservation of the union was the highest moral imperative in a war-torn world menaced by counter-revolutionary monarchies (p. 82).

Northerners could find antislavery rhetoric resonant in inter-sectional conflicts over the future of the union *without* becoming thoroughgoing abolitionists. Mason does not discount the principled commitments of antislavery advocates such as the fiery Federalist preacher Elijah Parish, or of Quakers who sought to free themselves and their communities of slavery's contamination. But serious moral qualms about slavery were not widely shared and were, in any case, as likely to be held in the republic's early years by enlightened or evangelical Southern slaveholders as by their Northern counterparts. The leading concern for Northerners was to keep their distance from slavery--and slaves--not to end the institution. An antislavery "orthodoxy reigned," predicated on the notion that slavery's "proper sphere lay south of the Mason-Dixon Line and the Ohio River" and justifying gradual emancipationist initiatives in the North (pp. 6-7). Before Missouri, "even abolitionists subscribed to the principles underlying separate spheres," acquiescing in the southwestern spread of slavery (p. 148).

Southerners eventually rallied to the defense of slavery, but no proslavery orthodoxy was necessary in the early decades. When slaveholders acknowledged that slavery was a "necessary evil," they simply restated the logic of separate spheres. The most scrupulous masters might free their own slaves, and some might leave the South altogether. Yet no one believed that an immediate general emancipation was possible or desirable. Nothing could be done, so nothing should be said: "mainstream Southern Republicans clearly hoped that appeals to the Union would silence discussion of slavery" (p. 85). When Northerners broke the silence, Southerners could only conclude--with some justification--that partisan purposes were being served and that "their section was under siege" (p. 128). For most Southerners slavery was not yet avowedly a "positive good," but they began to recognize its "permanence" (p. 159). In any event, outsiders' interference would instigate servile insurrection and race war, destroying any possibility of progress toward freedom--or of the progressive amelioration of the institution.

Northern and Southern whites were not acting in a vacuum. When Britain's "despotic" power threatened the new nation, differences over slavery were muted--at least among Republicans; when those threats subsided, "the interjection of British voices magnified the crescendo of sectional dissonance over slavery." Antislavery convictions deepened in the North while Southerners--unable to muzzle transatlantic critics--began to elaborate "the defense of slavery as a positive

good" (p. 87). But the most serious challenge to intersectional comity came from "assertive African Americans," rebelling, running away, and asserting their rights as nominally "free" blacks (p. 122). The growth of free black communities in the upper South and in neighboring free states called into question clear distinctions between slavery and freedom and their supposedly separate spheres. As slavery and slaves moved southwestwardly, Northerners could take comfort from their growing distance from the institution. But developments in the 1810s confounded such expectations: not only were freedpeople and fugitives moving north, but slavery advocates were seeking to overturn the Northwest Ordinance ban on slavery and extend the plantation complex across the Ohio--and into a region "naturally" destined for free labor. Southern sensitivity to outside interference was now matched by a "growing feeling of defensiveness" in the free states. Facing the prospect of encirclement by slave states while fending off Southerners' escalating demands for the rendition of fugitives, the southward sale of "term slaves" (promised freedom under Northern emancipation statutes), and the onslaught of kidnappers who preyed on vulnerable free blacks, Northerners realized that they could no longer keep their distance from slavery. Most ominously for the future of the union, the center of antislavery agitation shifted from New England to the middle states, defining the boundary between slavery and freedom along the Mason-Dixon line and the Ohio River.

Thanks to Mason's persuasive account of slavery and politics in the 1810s, the surprisingly violent and seemingly intractable controversy over the admission of Missouri as a slave state now makes much more sense to us than it did to Jefferson and his contemporaries. If slavery could expand into Missouri, it could expand anywhere and everywhere, thus shattering the assumption of separate spheres that had sustained the union. "Whites mobilized against slavery only when it affected them"--and now there was no escaping the institution's reach (p. 184). In the process of mobilizing against the slave power, significant numbers of Northern whites began to identify with slavery's real victims, particularly freedpeople subject to kidnapping. For their part, Southerners were astonished that Northern politicians would betray a union that was predicated on preserving and promoting slavery. That Northern Republican restrictionists would revive the antislavery rhetoric of discredited, disunionist Federalists demonstrated their brazen hypocrisy. Since when did anyone (beyond conscientious and caring slaveholders themselves) really care about the condition or fate of enslaved African Americans?

"The Missouri Crisis taught antebellum partisans that nationwide parties and the Union were safest when they could keep slavery off the table" (p. 214). The "compromise" may have preserved the union, but generated little enthusiasm, particularly in the South, where the very idea that Congress had any authority at all over slavery in the territories seemed to threaten future interference in slavery's heartland. The crises of the 1810s had demonstrated that the doctrine of separate spheres could not be sustained, yet "Southern and Northern moderates joined to codify it" in order to sustain the union, thus underscoring the artificiality of the boundary between slavery and freedom. An artificial boundary could be moved one way or the other, depending on the political will of the federal government. Not surprisingly, Southerners retreated behind new defensive bulwarks as they strictly construed the federal compact, extolled state rights, and proscribed nationalist heresies--even as they dominated national political parties dedicated to suppressing discussion of slavery and continued to control the federal government. What is more surprising is that in the 1850s a sectional party avowedly hostile to slavery's expansion should seek to *preserve* a union that had so long served to sustain and promote slavery. Abraham Lincoln and his allies reached back to the Founding to refashion the founders in their own image, reviving yet again

the moralizing rhetoric of antislavery Federalists who first challenged the despotic dominion of slaveholding Southern aristocrats.

Matthew Mason's provocative study belongs in the front rank of a new literature on slavery in the early federal republic.[1] By pursuing Mason's lead and exploring neglected connections between slavery and politics--and particularly the politics of the federal union--we will more accurately discern the contours of the early republic's history in its formative decades.

Note

[1]. See Peter Kastor, *The Nation's Crucible: The Louisiana Purchase and the Creation of America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); Adam Rothman, *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005); Eva Sheppard Wolf, *Race and Liberty in the New Nation: Emancipation in Virginia from the Revolution to Nat Turner's Rebellion* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006); and Craig Hammond, *Slavery and Freedom in the Early American West, 1790-1820* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, forthcoming).