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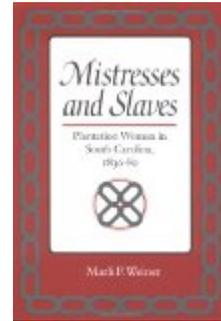
In *Mistresses and Slaves: Plantation Women in South Carolina, 1830-1880*, Marli Weiner examines the interplay of race and gender within the daily lives of white mistresses and black slave women on South Carolina's large rice and cotton plantations. Drawing from diaries, correspondence, and reminiscences of white women who lived in the large plantations of South Carolina, WPA interviews of former slaves, and the prescriptive literature from southern ladies magazines, Weiner reconstructs the day-to-day interactions between mistresses and their female slaves, and the cultural prescriptions about southern white womanhood which shaped their responses to each other. She argues persuasively that although racism and slavery sharply divided them, women's work and a uniquely southern ideology of domestic womanhood brought female slaveholder and slave together in a relationship which differed markedly from that between a white man and slave. Often, the results of this interplay between the ideologies of female domesticity and racism were intimate but profoundly ambivalent relationships between mistresses and slaves, which were as likely to be characterized by cooperation, mutual protection, and even genuine affection, as neglect, hostility, or brutal violence. After the disruptions of the Civil War, however, the familiarity and opportunities for common ground between white and black women were gradually supplanted by more uniformly hostile relations.

Most studies of the ideology of domesticity have examined northern, white communities troubled by the pressures and social dislocation of nineteenth-century industrialization and urbanization, where middle-class white women engaged in moral "uplift" and social reform. Guided by the ideology of domesticity and its central principle of women's moral superiority over men, northern white women created a meaningful public role for themselves outside of their homes, asserting their social and cultural authority over the working-class men, women, and children they sought to aid. Historians of the ideology of domesticity have generally focused their attention on the northeast, assuming that this was predominately a northern phenomenon. Weiner demonstrates, however, that slaveholding men and women of the south eagerly embraced the ideology of white female domesticity. For instance, one woman, Lucilla McCorkle, filled a diary and commonplace book with eleven years' worth of newspaper clippings, recorded prescriptive advice detailing the principles and guidelines of domestic womanhood, and measured her own efforts and shortcomings against those ideals.

Although Lucilla McCorkle and many southern women read the writings of Catherine Maria Sedgwick, Catherine Beecher, and other prominent northern advocates of domesticity, Weiner shows that southern men and women put their own spin on the ideology of domesticity and white womanhood, fashioning it into an explicit defense of gender and racial hierarchies in the south, and then employing it to defend southern society and its institutions, both of which were increasingly under attack by northerners during the mid-nineteenth century. Equally importantly, however, the southern ideology of domesticity shaped relations between slaveholding women and slaves.

According to Weiner, the shared work experiences of women lay at the core of relations between mistresses and slaves. Southern concepts of racial difference and white superiority meant that white women customarily superintended their slaves' labor rather than laboring alongside black women. But nineteenth-century conventions about women's roles mandated that together, mistresses and female slaves prepared food, cleaned, made clothing, nursed the ill, and raised the children of the plantation. Although many slave women did hard labor in the fields, the varied and often sex-segregated work lives of slave women periodically brought them into intimate contact with white mistresses. Weiner records numerous instances of mistresses mistreating and abusing their slaves, but she argues that the ideology of domestic womanhood encouraged white women to behave benevolently toward their slaves, often mediating the harshest elements of slavery. She describes mistresses intervening on behalf of slaves to prevent beatings, negotiating with their husbands to keep slave families from being separated through sales, caring for motherless slave children, and sympathizing with individual slaves.

Weiner carefully points out that even the most charitable mistresses who were devoted to the ideology of domesticity never subscribed to radical notions of shared sisterhood or equality with black women, and indeed, for most mistresses, benevolence was a difficult and often unattainable ideal. Still, slave women were sometimes able to use their mistresses' goodwill to their own benefit and that of their families, and Weiner argues that the Southern ideology of domesticity, which brought slaves and mistresses together at work, and encouraged mistresses to engage in benevolent relations with their slaves, also promoted the growth of fragile bonds between mistresses and slaves, ameliorating the worst excesses of slavery. But as Weiner points out, by alleviating some of the harshest elements of slavery, the ideology of female domesticity and the benevolence of white mistresses served as a conservative force in Southern society, by helping to promote the survival of slavery. However, the Civil War and the emancipation of the slaves gradually altered the daily working lives of black and white women as former slaves eschewed working in the homes of white women in favor of working alongside black men and in their own homes. The changed fortunes of the South left few white women the "luxury of benevolence," eroding and finally destroying the conditions which created even the fragile and fleeting bonds between white women and black slaves, leaving much more acrimonious relations in its place.

One of the greatest strengths of *Mistresses and Slaves* is Weiner skillfully uses the mistresses' own words to illustrate how white women struggled to reconcile their own convictions of racial superiority and their frustration with the daily trials of presiding over a huge plantation, with cultural prescriptions for their domestic, maternal benevolence, and the intimacy of their shared lives and common experiences with slave women. As she carefully examines the powerful meanings of mistresses' and slave women's daily work lives as they resonated–and collided–with equally powerful racial and domestic ideologies, Weiner vividly recreates many of the complexities and possibilities for relations between mistress and slave. She points out that black women selectively incorporated elements of the ideology of domestic womanhood into their lives when they had the opportunity, but notes that they had their own ideas about gender and womanhood, created within the African-American community. The author argues that, for slave women, the common ground of shared work experiences and gender was submerged by the overwhelming differences of slavery and racial prejudice.

However, the limited nature of historical evidence from the slaves themselves means that Weiner's recreation of slaves' understanding of domesticity and gender relations is ultimately less persuasive and satisfying than her sensitive and nuanced analysis of the inner conflicts of mistresses. Likewise, Weiner readily acknowledges that her discussions of white women's attitudes toward slavery and domesticity are limited by her sources, most of which are from upper-class women who lived on the large plantations worked by twenty or, often, many more slaves. She argues that because these women were from the most prominent families of South Carolina and enjoyed extensive social and cultural influence, their behavior and beliefs influenced those of their social inferiors who presided over fewer slaves. But if benevolence was a luxury which few could afford after devastation of the Civil War, this raises tantalizing questions about the pre-war relations between the more numerous and less-wealthy white women and the one or two slaves owned by her family or perhaps only hired out from neighboring planters before the war. Despite their interest in imitating their betters or maintaining gender and racial hierarchies, these mistresses could afford scant luxuries and–if they were literate–surely had little time for reading prescriptive literature aimed at southern ladies.

But Weiner should not be faulted for the shortcomings of an uneven historical record, which of course, cannot always answer the questions historians ask of it.

Weiner's thoughtful study of the relations between mistresses and slaves, her skillful use of their own words, and her careful explication of their behavior and beliefs about work, womanhood, and slavery before and after the Civil War, bring us much closer to understanding the historical complexities of race and gender in the nineteenth-century South.

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