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Amy Feely Morsman. *The Big House after Slavery: Virginia Plantation Families and Their Postbellum Domestic Experiment.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010. xii + 276 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-3003-9; ISBN 978-0-8139-3008-4.

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Manhood vs. Mutuality in Elite Virginia Households, 1860-1910s

The rural Virginia elite tried to hold on to their plantations in the aftermath of Confederate defeat. Many landowners succeeded despite challenges to their autonomy. Not only did the male heads of plantations lose much of their economic power during the Civil War, but they lost domestic authority in the postwar period. Those who persevered did so because they reassessed the labor resources they could draw on, particularly that of their wives.

As elite planters struggled to maintain their status as providers, women and their labor became "essential to the success of postwar agricultural business" (p. 5). Amy Feely Morsman indicates that "there is no question that separate gendered worlds still existed and shaped expectations about appropriate gender roles" in postwar Virginia (p. 231, note 3). Yet, women gained increased authority in private as well as public affairs. They did so not at the expense of their men but because of the synchronous adoption of mutuality by necessity. Morsman describes the changed spousal relations as a domestic experiment with no winners: "Planters wanted to solidify their class status, but they could not do it alone. To keep up appearances, husbands needed their wives to work, which undermined their elite class status as well as their standing as men" (p. 195).

Throughout *The Big House after Slavery*, Morsman draws on antebellum and war experiences to establish context for the postwar dilemma in which rural planter families found themselves. The first two of five chapters focus on the ways the men and women responded to their changed circumstances within their households and on their plantations. The third chapter addresses the ways that women and men participated in voluntary social and reform organizations, such as the Grange and various elite church groups. These organizations tended to accept traditional divisions of labor, with men assuming authority in the public realm and women tending to the household and domestic economy. The fourth chapter addresses the ways that "political parties used planters' uncertainty about their gender identity to manipulate them as voters" (p. 124). The fifth chapter moves the study beyond rural Virginia as Morsman considers the choices made by planter children who married and began their own families during the early 1900s. She concludes by describing the domestic experiment that plantation couples engaged in after the war as a point of transition between the antebellum "hierarchical household order" practiced by elites, and the entrance of women into work places and polling booths in the first quarter of the twentieth century.

For her study, Morsman selected sources that included correspondence and other personal exchanges between spouses who were members of Virginia's planter class and who survived and communicated throughout the postwar period. Most of her subjects were born into the elite during the early nineteenth century. The men were lawyers and planters, while the women were plantation mistresses who exhibited all the nuances of that status, from those who kept the keys and managed labor to those who believed they bore little responsibility within the household. Morsman selected archival collections that documented the exchange between husbands and wives so she could chart changes in gender norms within elite Virginia households, among planter families and their peers, and between elites and the rest of society. This concentration on families with living spouses ensures focus but excludes the large number of women unable to find spouses due to the casualties of war and those couples who found themselves outside of the normative experience of the plantation household, usually out of necessity rather than choice.

Postwar political debates about debt and fiscal man-

agement, according to Morsman, provide evidence of men seeking to preserve their sense of manhood and self-worth. Elite Virginia women, on the other hand, seem to have had little role in debates that ostensibly divided women and men, including those over married women's property acts and suffrage. The evidence indicates that women did not pursue change, that legal changes happened despite them, and that they realized little benefit from these changes. When Virginia men passed a married women's property law in 1877, they assured those opposed to the legislation that it would help male plantation owners manage debt; it would not threaten traditional relations among married couples. Women would not gain authority over the couple's property, marriages would not devolve into business arrangements, and women would not use the act as an opportunity to lobby for suffrage. Morsman does not increase our understanding of this debate by sharing elite women's views on these matters.

More could be done in the book with the analysis of law as it related to gender relations and mutuality. In Spanish law, which affected Texas and Louisiana law, married women retained control over any increase in property they brought to marriage.[1] Mississippi passed a married women's property act in 1839 to protect family property in a society in transition from frontier to cotton kingdom. In that state, property, including slaves that a wife might bring to a marriage, remained in her family's domain and did not fall under the sole authority of her husband upon her death. Furthermore, the wife retained control of any increase in her property throughout the marriage. This meant that plantation mistresses could own valuable property, and they had the authority to dispose of that property as they saw fit, including willing it to their daughters and other female kin. It could not be seized to settle husbands' or male relatives' debts. Morsman could have elaborated on the reasons legislators (often members of the planter class) gave for not extending property rights to plantation mistresses when Virginians first debated a married women's property bill in the 1848-49 term This antebellum debate might have been outside the temporal range of Morsman's postbellum study, but it seems integral to understanding the ways that Virginia planters' perceptions of their status changed concomitant to the changing roles women assumed during the postbellum period.

Elite men chose to protect married women's property as a means to their own self-preservation and as insurance that they could perform their manly duties. All the while, the female helpmates and dependents took on increasing chores to diversify the fragile economic basis on which the elite plantations operated. Scholars disagree over the degree to which planters' wives participated in the plantation economy prior to the Civil War. Morsman acknowledges this debate, but the way she crafts her argument suggests that planter men did not acknowledge women's role as contributors to a plantation's economic success or see women's management as crucial to sustaining plantations as agricultural businesses before the war. According to Morsman, the men only came grudgingly to this realization after the war.

Morsman could strengthen this study of rural Virginia's elite by recognizing the ways that crop culture affected family labor expectations and thus the degree of mutuality required on different types of plantations. Geographically, planter families featured in *The Big House after Slavery* farmed in tobacco- and wheat-producing areas. These two staple crops had different seasonal demands and different labor needs. Morsman indicates that the crop cultures changed after the war to more diversified stock grazing because of decreased soil fertility, labor shortages, and market options. How did elite women affect these choices? What did they think about mechanization? To what degree did their authority, property, or work sustain postbellum diversity in crop, stock, and food production?[2] In other words, what factors other than a crisis in planter manhood affected women's roles on farms and plantations? Had plantation women's roles expanded because of war? Did women consider the changes as opportunities to become more involved in plantation operations after the war? Did they transform their influence to other areas of plantation operations, becoming more involved in breeding better cattle, for instance, a pastime that elite planters' wives could pursue in keeping with their status, if not their gender norms?

The Big House after Slavery focuses on an elite minority, but a minority entrenched in an environment that the majority of Virginians also inhabited: rural and farm life. Rural women and men of lower classes had more constant exposure to mutual dependency and understood how it translated into economic leverage, if not social and cultural influence. Freedpeople immediately practiced mutual dependency on their postbellum acreages, however small, as well.[3] Morsman incorporates evidence of freedwomen dictating working conditions after emancipation and being involved in church formation, but freedpeople and yeowomen contributed to the economic diversity of their homesteads through berry-picking, basket-making, laundry services, and stock- and crop-tending, much as their elite sisters did after the war. What does this say about the larger rural world in which

elites functioned, the elites' real influence on that world, and the disconnect that may have existed between their rural world and the changes occurring beyond it?

While Morsman attends predominately to rural gender relations, she wisely stops short of trying to compare rural to urban. Yet, she includes correspondence between a young attorney of rural origins with his urban bride-to-be as evidence of the ways that rural manhood had transformed by the early twentieth century. Ruth Whittle, the daughter of a Martinsville, Virginia, judge, had not learned the routines of a rural plantation mistress. She did not cook, did not feel comfortable around her fiancé's cow and probably could not milk, and did not raise poultry, all critical tasks on which rural mutual dependency and traditional gendered divisions of labor on plantations rested. Morsman argues that "Ruth as a young woman was less concerned with fitting any particular model for womanhood and more worried about falling short of her fiancé's personal estimation of her" (p. 182). Does the urban young lady's resistance to learning rural tasks relate to her interest in having her future husband, Robert T. Hubard III, do more of her work, and thus change his gendered routines, or does it relate more to maintaining her status as a woman served? Both Ruth and Robert agreed that they would need a cook when they established residency in Fayetteville, West Virginia. It is not clear how this example applies to couples who remained on Virginia's plantations after the war.

The elite planter class in postwar Virginia did not exist in a vacuum any more than did the freedpeople, yeomen, or middling farmers. The personal correspondence preserved by the elite might emphasize the couples' perspectives, but what of those from the outside who had long practiced what those within seemed just to be discovering? If most of the plantations survived, the household played a major role in that survival, but plantations were not unique in their dependence on mutuality or domestic economy. Families diversified income on farms across Virginia. The changes in plantation masters' and mistresses' roles after the Civil War may help explain the plantations' persistence, but more can be done to assess the uniqueness of the planter elite's domestic experiment.

Notes

[1]. For married women's property laws in the context of Spanish law, see Kathleen Elizabeth Lazarou, *Concealed under Petticoats: Married Women's Property and the Law of Texas, 1840-1913* (New York: Garland, 1986), and for the postbellum South, see Suzanne D. Lebsock, "Radical Reconstruction and the Property Rights of Southern Women," *Journal of Southern History* 43, no. 2 (May 1977): 195-216.

[2]. For an overview of agriculture as practiced on a Virginia plantation managed by widow Maria Massie and her sons and daughters between 1861 and 1889, see Lynn A. Nelson, *Pharsalia: An Environmental Biography of a Southern Plantation, 1780-1880* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), especially 190-222.

[3]. For more information on mutuality in the southern context see Joan E. Cashin, *A Family Venture: Men and Women on the Southern Frontier* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

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