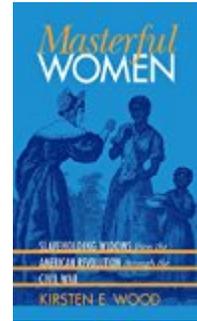


Kirsten E. Wood. *Masterful Women: Slaveholding Widows from the American Revolution through the Civil War.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. xiii + 281 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2859-5; \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5528-7.

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Reconsidering Mastery in the Old South

At the heart of Kirsten E. Wood's study of slaveholding widows lies more than a compelling examination of a group of women often relegated to the margins of history. *Masterful Women* is an analysis of mastery and identity in the Old South. Focusing on widowhood in the slaveholding societies of Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia from the American Revolution to the Civil War, Wood demonstrates that a flexible relationship between gender, class, and power enabled slaveholding widows to don the guise of master and thereby protect and enhance their families' social, political, and economic hegemony between generations. Using their ladyhood to assert their command and compel the assistance and deference of others, widowed mistresses challenged the ideological link between mastery and white manhood. Their experience with slaveholding reveals that wealthy white women were wholly invested in the institution of slavery and that their mastery, just like that of white men, "could never be fully secure" (p. 13).

Wood's study is based on a thorough examination of slaveholding widows' personal and business papers, as well as those of their families and associates. While the Cocke widows of Virginia, Martha Jackson of Georgia, and Natalie Sumter and Ada Bacot of South Carolina figure prominently in *Masterful Women*, Wood also investigates more than one hundred other slaveholding widows whose collective experiences tell a story of contested mastery over self, property, and society in the Old South.

In her seven thematic chapters, Wood highlights the

most important and conspicuous aspects of slaveholding widows' attempts to establish their mastery. The difficulties of managing slaves, obtaining familial assistance, conducting commercial transactions, and defending their prerogatives in an increasingly volatile society left slaveholding widows uncomfortable, stressed, and fatigued, especially by the end of the Civil War. This, however, was less a consequence of women assuming men's roles than it was a function of the "contingent nature of all mastery" (p. 13). Indeed, the fact that slaveholding widows could claim to be masters, despite their gender, underscores the fiction of the concept. Wood's analysis of the relationship between gender and mastery is the focus and greatest strength of her book.

Wood explains that, for most white Americans, mastery "meant slaveholding, but it also became a virtual synonym for 'household head'" (p. 2). Not only did masters preside over their dependents and property, but they also represented publicly the interests of the household (both a physical space and a set of domestic relationships). The concept of mastery was usually associated with white men who presumably had the economic and, therefore, political independence deemed necessary to fulfill the public and private responsibilities of householding. The ideological link between mastery and suffrage suggested that all non-voters, including elite slaveholding women, could not be masters. Wood provides persuasive evidence to the contrary.

While southern laws and customs placed most white

women in numerous states of dependency, Wood finds that the material resources, legal independence, and privileged social position of wealthy slaveholding widows gave them the power to challenge their dependent status, albeit reluctantly. By assuming the responsibilities of household head upon their husbands' deaths, many female slaveholders undermined the popular belief that only white men could be masters. According to Wood, "slaveholding widows developed a distinctive version of mastery, which harnessed ladyhood to householding and privileged both over mere white manhood" (p. 6). For widows, ladyhood served as a "social armor; it bolstered slaveholding women's authority within and beyond their households" (p. 10).

While this critical argument puts Wood in conversation with the growing literature on female slaveholders before and during the Civil War, it also enters her into larger debates about class and democracy in the South. In concurrence with Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Stephanie McCurry, she finds that wealthy white women were dedicated to protecting their class privilege.^[1] Wood sees this as the purpose of their mastery. Slaveholding widows helped keep democracy at bay by encouraging male planters to align with them on the basis of shared class interests, rather than side with non-slaveholding white men on the basis of patriarchal prerogatives. "Legally independent widows who acted like masters and demanded to be treated like ladies confounded this quasi-egalitarian masculinity" (p. 102). By emphasizing the gentility and fragility of their ladyhood, slaveholding widows not only prevented white men from challenging their mastery, but they compelled such men to help them secure it.

Wood finds that "in ideological terms, southern ladyhood and mastery were essentially antithetical. In daily life, they enjoyed a more complex relationship: sometimes contradictory, sometimes supportive" (p. 101). Slaveholding widows' deliberate use of ladyhood as a tool of control demonstrates that they were skilled at determining when and how to use their gender to their advantage. "While the iconic southern lady of antebellum print culture was profoundly confined, slaveholding women had some choice about which threads in the tapestry of gender to pull" (p. 82). Wood does an excellent job of demonstrating that slaveholding widows were not passive victims of a repressive gender system. They rarely if ever translated their mastery into a feminist initiative. Instead, "they endorsed not only the South's racial and class hierarchies but also its fundamental gender inequality. Indeed, they relied upon it" (p. 157). Dependent ladyhood was a powerful identity for slaveholding widows

who wanted to protect their social and economic privilege but needed the assistance of others to do so.

While Wood's book is a success and deserves a prominent place on the bookshelves of all southern, gender, and nineteenth-century historians, there are a handful of unresolved issues in it. For example, the impact of slaveholding widows' mastery on popular gender ideologies and practices is unclear. Wood argues persuasively that slaveholding widows did not challenge the gender order, but she also contends, "by doing work normatively assigned to both genders, they confounded the contemporary presumption that women and men were fundamentally different sorts of beings, intellectually, morally, and physically" (p. 194). In what ways did this discovery resonate beyond the individual experiences of slaveholding widows? Did it cause white southerners to reevaluate their notions of womanhood or the kind of economic and social opportunities available to women? Similarly, was there a discernible difference in the gender systems of communities with high numbers of slaveholding widows versus those with few female "masters"? For example, did the visible exercise of power by women have any ramifications for the socialization or education of planter-class daughters?

Finally, while the title of Wood's book states that it is a study of slaveholding widows from the American Revolution to the Civil War, it is primarily an examination of early national and antebellum era widows. A greater focus on the Revolutionary War and the late eighteenth century would provide readers with a better understanding of the ways in which popular concepts of mastery, slaveholding, womanhood, and widowhood changed over time. For example, Wood locates the rise of domestic ideology in the early nineteenth century. What were the social, political, and personal implications of slaveholding widows' mastery before they operated within this gender framework?

Rather than reflecting weaknesses in Wood's study, these questions point us in the direction of new areas for research. *Masterful Women* is a straightforward and insightful book that will not only appeal to scholars and students in a variety of historical fields, but will undoubtedly inspire creative and important studies as well.

Note

[1]. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman*

Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

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