

Masterful Women: Slaveholding Widows From the American Revolution Through the Civil War

Joshua D. Rothman

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Rothman, Joshua D. (2005) "Masterful Women: Slaveholding Widows From the American Revolution Through the Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 7 : Iss. 2 .
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol7/iss2/21>

Review

Rothman, Joshua D.

Spring 2005

Wood, Kirsten E. *Masterful Women: Slaveholding Widows from the American Revolution through the Civil War*. University of North Carolina Press, \$49.95
ISBN 807838599

Prim and property Widows in control of land and slaves

In the slave South, white masculinity entailed mastery, with its attendant privileges of patriarchal household dominance of dependent and submissive women and slaves, and its rights of democratic participation in the political system. Practicing mastery was hardly as easy as claiming it, of course, but as Kirsten Wood argues in **Masterful Women**, by failing to account for slaveholding widows, historians have neglected an entire group of people who could indeed claim much of the authority inherent to mastery while lacking the maleness often presumed necessary to do so.

Widows who owned slaves were still women, and could thus never have some of the power that accrued automatically to white men. No matter how wealthy a widow might be, she could not vote or hold political office, and she could not participate in the field of honor so central to southern masculine identity and the southern public sphere. Still, if slaveholding widows could never exercise the full panoply of prerogatives available to men and thus could never truly be masters, they nonetheless possessed significant autonomy and used real power far beyond what was supposed to be available to women, making them undeniably, per Wood's apt title, masterful. They owned their own property and had total authority over their own households and its dependents. They hired and fired overseers. They bought, sold, managed, and punished slaves. Their homes were less the idealized private domestic spheres of sentimental literature than the public commercial spaces that settling estates and dealing with merchants, factors, and debtors required. They stood for themselves in court and sometimes traveled far from their farms unattended, which no married woman who considered herself respectable would ever do.

Yet the widows on whom Wood focuses most centrally considered themselves not merely respectable women but genteel and refined ladies. Obviously, one could be a slaveholding widow while owning one slave or owning 20, and Wood is sensitive to the different social and economic options available to slaveholding widows of the yeoman and planter classes. But the circumstances of widows who could lay the strongest claims to being both masters and ladies create the central tension in Wood's work and its most revealing insights. Ideologically, being a master and being a lady were antithetical. It was precisely this peculiar contradiction of categories embodied and manipulated by slaveholding widows, however, that could make for substantial formidability. When challenged financially by a disgruntled male relative or an aggressive neighbor wanting to take advantage of widows' assumed and expected female weakness, for example, slaveholding widows who presented themselves as ladies could counterattack both legally and informally by drawing on the authority that came through their control of a household *and* on the dependency that supposedly attached to their status as women. Certain that they were entitled to the gendered class privileges derived from both property and chivalry, slaveholding widows could create strength through the very status that limited and restricted them.

Slaveholding widows were hardly always comfortable or happy with their roles and circumstances. While widows and their kin might mutually support one another in trying times, settling and managing an estate could also provoke conflict that held the potential to tear families apart. Moreover, assuming the legal and commercial responsibilities of running a household was physically and psychologically demanding, and it is clear that most widows would have preferred to have had living husbands who could carry those burdens. Wood demonstrates that having power rarely made slaveholding widows feel powerful, and that many felt unsure of themselves and overwhelmed by feelings of uselessness and, somewhat ironically, fears of becoming overly dependent on others for assistance.

These were resilient women, however, and ambivalence about their social status and economic authority never stopped them from being fully invested in both their mastery and their ladyhood, or from capitalizing on those positions to perpetuate their own socioeconomic advantages and those of their families. Whether promoting the political careers of their male relatives, turning to white men to help them brutalize their slaves, or relying on elite male proxies to help them defend their property rights, slaveholding widows were fundamentally

conservative forces who helped bolster rather than undermine traditional hierarchies of race, class, and even gender. Their power belied the notion that the South was truly a white male democracy, and dramatically demonstrated that it was not just skin color and sex but property that ultimately ruled.

Wood musters no statistical evidence and makes no claims about the number of slaveholding widows in the South. Such figures might have made the argument more potent but not necessarily more convincing, and they are likely difficult to obtain. Moreover, Wood notes that southern women stood about an even chance of being widowed at some point in their lives, and that most--particularly those with money and those who had already had children--chose not to remarry. Even accounting for the fact that most widows, like most white southerners, were not slaveholders, Wood is likely dealing with a fairly sizeable population. And numbers aside, Wood has undoubtedly provided a valuable new way of looking at and understanding the intersection of gender and class in the slave South. Slaveholding widows may have been exceptions to many of the rules by which the South usually functioned, but in the end, Wood's study throws many of those rules into stark relief and proves them.

Joshua D. Rothman is an assistant professor of history at the University of Alabama and the author of Notorious in the Neighborhood: Sex and Families across the Color Line in Virginia, 1787-1861. He is currently working on a study of slavery and speculation in the Old Southwest.