

Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household

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Review

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Glymph, Thavolia *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household*. Cambridge University Press, \$24.99 softcover ISBN 9780521703987

Understanding the Plantation Household

In *Out of the House of Bondage*, Thavolia Glymph persuasively demonstrates how the plantation house was a political space, where enslaved women and white women battled over the meanings of labor and autonomy during slavery and then over the definitions of freedom and citizenship after the Civil War. Glymph's study builds on the argument that plantation mistresses represented "the feminine face of paternalism," which Elizabeth Fox-Genovese made in *Within the Plantation Household* (1988). Taking her cue from Fox-Genovese, Glymph shatters the oft-assumed notion that the domestic sphere and the private world of the plantation household in the South was a much easier and less hostile space than the actual plantation itself, which was occupied by field hands hard at work in agricultural production. Glymph argues that the private sphere was, in fact, riddled with its own degrees of violence and politics, and it was often plantation mistresses—typically portrayed by historians as removed and not part of the slaveocracy—who, were, in fact, the major culprits of these violent acts and executed their power against enslaved women.

One of the most provocative aspects about Glymph's book is her courage in challenging the leading scholarship on gender and the Civil War. Throughout the book, Glymph both directly and indirectly disputes the claim that Drew Faust made in her brilliant and authoritative study, *Mothers of Invention* (1996). Glymph suggests that the problematic function of Faust's thesis, which is also part of an argument that Marli F. Weiner makes in *Mistresses and Slaves: Plantation Women in South Carolina, 1830-80* (1998), is that she assumes that the Civil War was, in fact, a defining moment in which slaveholding women emerged as principal actors in nineteenth-century southern history. By closely

examining the interactions between enslaved women and slaveholding women during the antebellum period, Glymph does not recognize the Civil War as a watershed moment in which white women gained an unprecedented degree of authority and became more involved in plantation management. Instead, she shows that in the decades leading up to the war many white women were actively involved in the lives of their slaves, so much so that they were violently coercing them into performing arduous labor or punishing them for insubordination. In the final analysis, both Glymph's and Faust's books can both be right, as the field of southern history defies a single interpretation. In the many plantation households that lined the southern landscape, it is likely that the Civil War did, in fact, mobilize slaveholding women as Faust argues, but that many women had already exerted their power and authority long before the Battle of Sumter, as Glymph maintains.

In keeping with a gender analysis, Glymph further contributes to the historiography on southern white women during the nineteenth-century by providing ample evidence of their authority, involvement, and participation in the maintenance of the slaveocracy, an idea that has been obscured by more popular historiographical representations that imagine Southern women as ancestors of Scarlett O'Hara—which is itself, as Glymph notes, a production of the "Lost Cause" mythology. Glymph explains, "the power of slaveholding women seemingly, then, is mistaken as powerlessness and taken less seriously, not because it was invisible or unrecognizable as such, but primarily because the prevailing ideology, then and now, presumes it not to exist" (26). Moreover, in making the claim that slaveholding women possessed the power to execute such violent acts, Glymph in a brilliant analytical turn makes an unexpected and ironic contribution to the historiography on Southern white women—which is often focused on uncovering moments of white women's independence and resistance toward societal norms—by identifying a moment in which white women gained power by violently abusing enslaved women.

Throughout the book, Glymph tracks the changing role of enslaved women from the antebellum period to the aftermath of the Civil War. Here, she brilliantly lays out how white women during slavery relied on both the image and the presence of enslaved women in their households in order to make themselves appear more "civilized," but then Glymph fascinatingly reveals how all of this changed dramatically after the Civil War when black women gained power and white women turned to them to work in their homes and to buy their goods.

Glymph's attention to how the relationship between slaveholding women and enslaved women changed during the postwar period makes an important contribution to the growing literature on gender during Reconstruction. Yet, what remains unclear is Glymph's decision to focus her analysis on the antebellum period. In light of the groundbreaking work on gender and slavery in the colonial period made by scholars such as Kathleen M. Brown in *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs* (1996) and Jennifer Morgan in *Laboring Women* (2004), among others, why did Glymph focus on the first half of the nineteenth-century? More to the point, it would have been beneficial for Glymph to have contextualized her research within the context of these significant historiographical interventions on the colonial era—or, at the very least, explain if there are any connections or ideas that connect these two epochs. For example, did slaveholding women's violence increase as the nature of slavery changed as a result of the domestic slave trade, the rise of slavery in the Mississippi Valley, and the decline of slavery in the Upper South, all of which transpired during the antebellum period?

Overall, *Out of the House of Bondage* is a provocative and very well-written analysis of gender in the South before and after the Civil War. Glymph's prose is incisively written and framed within a rich historiographical context. Her footnotes place her book in dialogue with not only southern history and gender, but also in a broader global context about the history of labor and gender relations—as she often cites scholars of European history and other theoreticians throughout her book. Her chapters are finely organized, and punctuated with an analytical punch that makes the book required reading for historians of the Civil War, the American South, and gender studies.

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