

“Here, the mistress was 'trapped within a system over which she has no control, one from which she has no means of escape. Mistresses become passively submissive rather than active participants and initiators who 'directly participated in and benefited from a labor system far more degrading than patriarchy at its worst'” (Glymph 29)

One thing that struck me while reading this was that in scholars' attempts to remedy the prevailing notion of the dainty and headstrong white southern woman and plantation mistress, they simultaneously reinforced misogynistic ideals concerning white womanhood. While scholars such as Anne Firor Scott and Catherine Clinton are correct in their analysis that white women on plantations did suffer under patriarchal norms, as Glymph writes, these scholars' negligence and lack of oversight in analyzing the ways in which white women's race and gender overlapped severely minimizes the real power that white women plantation mistresses had. By grouping them in with enslaved Black men and women, the plantation mistress becomes not an actor playing a key role in the maintaining of the plantation dynamic and institution of slavery, but a passive bystander. This is not to say that enslaved people passively faced their oppression, but rather that categorizing the white mistress—the oppressor—alongside the people that she was enslaving obfuscates the power and authority that she wielded over them. Not analyzing the white mistress's intersection between race and gender reinforces the patriarchal and misogynistic notion of white women's “inherent” submissiveness and helplessness. This imagining of the white mistress's identity and role is akin to Eliza from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Eliza's passivity regarding enslavement and the institution of slavery is similar to that of how scholars like Clinton and Scott contextualize white womanhood within the plantation. Davis, in “The Legacy of Slavery: Standards for a New Womanhood”, argues that through her characterization, Eliza is “white motherhood (and femininity) incarnate, but in blackface” (Davis 27), and while I don't disagree with this, I feel that Eliza's characterization is damaging to Black women but also white women as well. The model of picture-perfect, “civilized”, pious white femininity that Harriet Beecher-Stowe builds throughout *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is just that—a model. It is an ideal, but as Glymph notes, one that was rarely obtained and experienced by white women in the Antebellum South. Like the mid-20th-century scholarship surrounding the plantation mistress, Harriet's depiction of Eliza and white femininity gives credence to the idea that white women are inherently passive and cannot be active in their own bodies, narratives, and institutions that they help contribute to. Both are affirming unattainable ideals that were used to harm and disempower white women and minimize their close proximity to white supremacist standards. This is problematic because it frames the very real and horrific physical and psychological violence plantation mistresses inflicted on the enslaved as being somehow “to a lesser degree” or not as potent as that of white men. It fails to recognize how someone can simultaneously be oppressed by a given system and also use their privileges over others to inflict harm. And also weaponize said oppression (on in this case the enslaved) to affirm themselves closer to the dominating ideals of whiteness. In all, despite scholars' attempts to add nuance to and complicate societal understandings of the white plantation mistress, when these analyses don't highlight the dynamics between race, gender, and power, they only serve to reify the patriarchal constructions of race and gender that they were attempting to dismantle.