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The Impact of Paternalism on the Interactions of Women in the Plantation South

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Women in the antebellum and Civil War South were on the bottom rung of the social ladder. White elite men held all of the power and often abused both white and black women in order to further their own social standing and assert their role as the paternal head of plantation. While interactions between different groups in the South initiated by white men have been examined countless times by historians, the interactions that occurred between women because of the paternalistic system have not been examined as thoroughly. This thesis examines how the interactions between white elite women and enslaved women were shaped by the paternalistic system in which they lived. Additionally, it examines when those interactions between elite white women and enslaved women were positive, when they were negative, and why.
The Impact of Paternalism on the Interactions of Women in the Plantation South

Numerous historical works have examined the lives of masters, mistresses, and slaves in the Old South. This thesis will explore interactions between women of different races in the plantation South between 1830 and 1856. I hope to answer a number of questions about interactions between enslaved women and white elite women. How did black and white women feel about their places in this paternalistic society? How did these perceptions shape their feelings about one another? Were black and white women united under a system controlled by white men or were they perpetually divided because of issues of race and enslavement?\(^1\) I have chosen to focus on Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia in order to narrow the study, while capturing differences between Upper and Lower South slavery, since many enslaved people considered Virginia and North Carolina in the Upper South to have had less harsh forms of enslavement than in South Carolina and Georgia.\(^2\)

In studying slavery, few sources can help us ascertain how enslaved or elite white women felt about their place in the slave system or their relations to one another. I have used WPA narratives, which are interviews with former enslaved people taken during the Great Depression by the Works Progress Administration, and plantation mistress diaries in order to assess this relationship. The WPA slave narratives...

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\(^1\) Many historians have attempted to answer these questions, often leading to accounts at one extreme or another. In her work *Within the Plantation Household*, for instance, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese argues that black and white women in the plantation South could never have a sisterhood, because issues of race were much too complicated and got in the way. Meanwhile in her work *The Plantation Mistress*, Catherine Clinton contends that gender overrode race, and that women could indeed have a sisterhood despite issues of slavery in the plantation South. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 35.

narratives have been used by historians from Eugene Genovese to Deborah Gray White to assess relationships between enslaved people and their masters. Despite their importance, these narratives have some problematic qualities. First, many interviewers were white, which presented several challenges to obtaining accurate information. Many white interviewers played to black stereotypes indicating their lack of respect for their black informants.\(^3\) One interviewer, for example, referred to enslaved children as “little darkies.”\(^4\) Approaching the interview in this manner was not exactly conducive to openness or honesty on the former enslaved person’s part. To add to those problems, interviewers often wanted “the right answer” to their questions, and refused to accept “the wrong answer.” For instance, the right answer to a question about how a master treated his slave was that the master was kind and compassionate, rather than cruel and cold.\(^5\) Again, this situation does not make for an open account.

Second, the Works Progress Administration interviewers collected narratives throughout the late 1920s and 1930s at the height of The Depression. Many formerly enslaved people depended on the descendants of their masters for old-age pensions, which some of those interviewed believed were forthcoming from the federal government; therefore, it was much more likely that some African Americans gave particular answers in hopes of receiving aid.\(^6\)

\(^5\) Ibid, 483.
\(^6\) Ibid, 482.
A third factor in determining the challenges inherent in using the WPA narratives is the age of the interviewee. Most interviewees were quite elderly at the time, because interviews were conducted nearly seventy years after Emancipation. Combined with the fact that many interviewees lived in poverty during the Depression and had experienced slavery while they were children, many former enslaved people might have perceived the past as much more idyllic than it really was. As John Blassingame suggests, “Since the average life expectancy of a slave born in 1850 was less than fifty years, those who lived until the 1930s might have survived because they received better treatment than most slaves.” While Blassingame’s caution might not be relevant in all cases, it is important to consider such issues when using slave narratives.

Plantation mistress diaries must also be examined closely and carefully interpreted much like the slave narratives. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese notes that, “Women’s traditions of public self-representation developed slowly and largely within the confines of dominant attitudes toward appropriate gender roles.” Southern women’s writings in particular reflected socially prescribed gender roles; in fact, many mothers supervised their adolescent daughters’ journal writing. Historians must keep in mind this careful observation of societal norms within diaries in our reading and use of journals as evidence. According to Drew Faust, elite white women’s diaries were not private domain, but actually written with the intent that

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8 Yetman, 187.
9 Blassingame, 486.
10 Fox-Genovese, 247.
11 Fox-Genovese, 247.
they would be seen by people other than the writers themselves. As Drew Faust notes, women perceived diaries as a way of chronicling the events of their lives rather than displaying their emotions.\textsuperscript{12} If elite white women’s diaries were designed for a public audience, then historians must be aware that the accounts may have certain biases, for instance a diarist will not portray herself as unkind or cruel, nor was she likely to insult her husband or father. Additionally, the diarists could leave out information that may be critical to a historian’s analysis. Thus, plantation mistress diaries, much like slave narratives, must not be accepted at face value.

Much of the behavior of the white interviewers in the WPA narratives was a holdover from the paternalistic system of antebellum southern society. Within that system, enslaved women fell under the control of white male plantation owners and overseers. Paternalism allowed white slave owners to justify the moral shortcomings and brutal reality of slavery; for example, if a plantation master could argue that he was simply “protecting” an “ignorant and lazy” African by giving him a place to sleep, clothes on his back, and food then slavery might not seem that morally repugnant by those outside of the system. According to Eugene Genovese, on the surface, paternalism ensured that in return for an owner’s generosity and protection, slaves gave up their freedom and worked for the master.\textsuperscript{13} As Genovese comments further, “paternalism, encouraged by the close living of masters and slaves was enormously reinforced by the closing of the African slave trade, which compelled

\textsuperscript{12} Drew Faust, Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 163-164.  
masters to pay a greater attention to the reproduction of the labor force.”

Thus, at the same time as it shielded the moral characters of plantation owners, paternalism also ensured the protection of slaves because white masters required a self-sustaining population once the overseas slave trade was abolished. Paternalism was a coercive system rife of dichotomies; a slaveholder could simultaneously be cruel and kind to his slaves or feel affection and hatred. The same went for a slave’s feelings for his/her master; therefore, the paternalistic system influences and complicates any discussion of the feelings white plantation mistresses and enslaved women had for each other.

Yet for some, paternalism was not a “hegemonic” system. Historian Walter Johnson theorizes that because historians used ideas of strategic warfare when examining slave resistance, they do have missed its aggressive and subversive qualities. If ideas of strategic warfare such as carefully planned out invasions are applied to passive slave resistance, the historian will realize that slaves were constantly fighting against the system, largely through non-violent rebellious acts. Additionally, the existence of coercive elements, such as whips and chains on every plantation suggests that planters also realized that they were fighting a continuous day-to-day battle to maintain their power in the system. The presence of a constant battle within the paternalistic system indicates that enslaved women might have consciously adopted paternalistic rhetoric such as praising their master’s fatherly

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14 Genovese, 5.
15 Genovese, 4.
16 Eugene Genovese uses the theorist Gramsci’s idea of hegemony to say that “masters and slaves had both ‘agreed’ on slavery.” Because of the complete dominance of paternalism, slaves lacked the ability to realize their own strength and value within the system. (Genovese, 148-149).
behavior while also discussing how they beat slaves brutally. The view of slavery offered by Walter Johnson focuses on the agency of the slaves much more than Genovese's characterization of slavery as a hegemonic system. For my purposes, Johnson's approach is much more useful for studying the actions of enslaved women. In many instances, plantation mistresses may have consciously chosen to use paternalistic rhetoric in their writings to support the system despite their understandings of its shortcomings.

Plantation mistresses also fell into the category of subordinate in the South; however, their positions in this paternalistic society were very different from those of enslaved women. White women were not enslaved or considered property, and they had a substantial amount of power over enslaved women; yet, they were still considered by southern elite white men to be legally subordinate to their husbands. As Catherine Clinton notes, in the context of matrimony, "Men commonly described women in terms of their property value."\(^{18}\) Thus, just as slaves were used by plantation masters to earn money, if a plantation master chose his wife wisely, she could also become a source of profit for him. As soon as she married, a southern woman's husbands took over her property, and when she became a widow, a male relative assumed control of her assets.\(^{19}\) Additionally, just as enslaved women were important to the reproduction of the workforce and were commonly seen as reproductive entities, so were plantation mistresses seen as "reproductive units, replaceable if necessary."\(^{20}\) Even if a husband mistreated his wife, divorce was

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\(^{19}\) Clinton, 34.
\(^{20}\) Clinton, 61.
virtually impossible and the wife was expected to remain with her husband.\textsuperscript{21} Thus, even though in a literal sense, white women were not enslaved, there were many aspects of the southern paternalistic system that subordinated white women to the point of financial helplessness.

Unlike enslaved women, however, plantation mistresses derived a certain degree of prestige and power within the system. Elite white southern ideals of the "lady" placed elite white women above all other races and classes, and the institution of slavery allowed them to maintain that image and status.\textsuperscript{22} The southern lady was supposed to be "virginal and pure," and expected to be a counterpoint to the plantation master's "rowdy debauchery."\textsuperscript{23} Within the antebellum South as well as the antebellum America as a whole, the more women who were spreading and living Christianity, the better and more morally prosperous their society was.\textsuperscript{24} In essence, women were the keepers of society's Christian evangelical morals, and as long as white elite women remained chaste, pure, and religious, men could continually submit to moral taboos in southern plantation society. This was not the only role that the southern lady was required to take on in order to maintain status. Clinton explains that, she was also "in charge of... the entire spectrum of domestic operations throughout the estate, from food and clothing to the physical and spiritual care of both her white family and her husband's slaves."\textsuperscript{25} Thus the plantation mistress performed several very important functions on the plantation and they were recognized for their work by being put on a moral pedestal.

\textsuperscript{21} Clinton, 80
\textsuperscript{23} Clinton, 87.
\textsuperscript{24} Clinton, 95.
\textsuperscript{25} Clinton, 18.
While elite white women were praised for their ability to be delicate and ladylike as well as managers of the plantation household, enslaved women were at the bottom of the social ladder, and faced abuse from both white mistresses and masters. They also had fewer opportunities than enslaved men to run away because of stronger familial obligations. For instance it was difficult to transport children while running away, so oftentimes enslaved women opted to not even attempt it. Additionally, racist stereotypes constructed enslaved women as either lusty Jezebels or servile Mammies. The image of the Jezebel came from the objectification of enslaved women. It was meant to be in direct opposition to the view of the chaste southern lady. Elite white women’s status was directly based on the lack of status of enslaved women. Because of the importance of the procreation of slaves on plantations, enslaved women’s bodies and sexuality were constantly visible. As Deborah Gray White writes, “People accustomed to speaking and writing about the bondwoman’s reproductive abilities could hardly help associating her with licentious behavior.”

The work conditions on the plantation also promoted the image of Jezebel, because often times enslaved women exposed much more of their bodies than white women because of the nature of the work they did; for instance, enslaved women who worked in fields often had to pull their skirts up around their knees in order to accomplish tasks. Because of the exposure of enslaved women’s bodies, the dominant group,

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27 The Mammy and Jezebel were both stereotypes that supported the belief that black women were either submissive or promiscuous. While the Jezebel image justified white men’s sexual exploitation of black women and the consequent mulatto population in the South, the Mammy’s image counteracted Jezebel by suggesting that black women could work in southern households and posed no threat to the dominance of whites in society nor the sexual norms of society. (White, 27-61).
28 White, 31.
29 White, 32.
white planters, could allege their promiscuity and justify the sexual exploitation of enslaved women by essentially blaming the women themselves.\textsuperscript{30} Thus, a highly sexualized Jezebel image of enslaved women allowed southern white men and women to justify the sexual double standard in which white men could sexually exploit enslaved women outside of their marriages while white women remained chaste and pure. It also allowed white women to differentiate their status from enslaved women by being able to claim moral superiority.

The Mammy was an asexual image of enslaved women as talented house servants. The Mammy was in charge of other house servants and could do any domestic chore that needed to be done. Additionally, she was recognized as the ultimate caretaker of the white children of the plantation household.\textsuperscript{31} The Mammy image was the “personification of the ideal slave” and, as a result, “Mammy was an ideal symbol of the patriarchal tradition... [and] the centerpiece in the antebellum Southerner’s perception of the perfectly organized society.”\textsuperscript{32} In essence, the Mammy epitomized the paternalistic image of slavery, because the stereotype included that she was well-treated and well-taught in the ways of domesticity. She was proof, in the eyes of the planter class, that slavery was a beneficial system to slaves, and that northern abolitionist fervor in the antebellum period had no basis in reality. During the Civil War and emancipation, the Mammy myth was shattered for many a plantation master and mistress because many perceived the Mammy as a maternal figure who cared for white elite children lovingly, and it came as a shock when the ever-loyal Mammies left their plantations as readily during emancipation as

\textsuperscript{30} White, 34.
\textsuperscript{31} White, 47.
\textsuperscript{32} White, 58.
any other enslaved people. Thus, the myths of Mammy and the Jezebel went a long way to supporting and justifying not only slavery but also paternalism.

Because of the pervasiveness of paternalistic ideas in the South, both black and white women adopted much of the language of paternalism in their own writings and interactions. This rhetoric especially appears when they discuss each other. Plantation mistresses were often condescending and belittling when describing enslaved women on their plantations. Many plantation mistresses described their slaves as incompetent and child-like, and in need of the constant supervision of their much more domestically adept plantation mistresses. Conversely, enslaved women often initially characterized their mistresses as equivalent to mothers who protected, cared for them, and at times disciplined them. Plantation mistresses most often adopted paternalistic rhetoric when referring to the womanhood of enslaved women. Much of this language appears in cases when the plantation mistress asserted her claim to ladyhood over the enslaved woman; in other words, when the plantation mistress felt the need to demonstrate her higher status in society. These instances include discussions of motherhood and female sexuality. When discussing pregnancy, plantation mistresses still adopted a paternalistic attitude, but were much more sympathetic to the plight of enslaved pregnant women. Additionally, discussions of mammy-like characters, though paternalistic in nature, still demonstrated a certain fondness for particular enslaved women in specific situations. That fondness, however, is somewhat tainted by the Mammy myth because although plantation mistresses may have seen their Mammies as maternal figures, they may still have been aware of the slavery apologist culture that brought the Mammy to life.

33 White, 168.
Although White states, “Genuine affection sometimes developed between the white children and house servants on southern plantations and farms." Consequently, this is an instance when historians must exercise caution while interpreting the words of plantation mistresses.

Enslaved women’s accounts often intertwined with plantation mistresses’ accounts in areas such as the discussion of the Mammy figure, but they diverged when it came to the discussion of domestic chores and status. As plantation mistresses evoked “fondness” for their mammies, enslaved women also evoked a particular fondness for their young mistresses. The fondness that mammies displayed was most likely directed towards plantation mistresses who were their charges and to whom they became mammies. Although plantation mistresses utilize paternalistic rhetoric to disguise the brutality of the system, when they do address such brutality it is often when distaste for enslaved women’s sexuality becomes violent. In most cases, this distaste emerged when the plantation mistress blamed an enslaved woman for the plantation master’s sexual coercions. In context, when enslaved women discussed brutality, the reasons they give for beatings from mistresses are often for matters involving an enslaved woman not accomplishing a domestic task satisfactorily, further indicating that when plantation mistresses lashed out at enslaved women, it was over things that threatened their place in the domestic order of southern society. After all, if a plantation mistress did not properly manage the household then she was not a true southern lady. Additionally, enslaved women often pointed out the instances where their masters obviously controlled the system. They sometimes expressed disrespect for their mistresses, because they knew that their

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34 White, 50.
mistresses did not have ultimate authority on the plantation. Overall, plantation
mistress’s accounts of enslaved women, and enslaved women’s accounts of plantation
mistresses tended to reflect the social order of the South through paternalistic
rhetoric.

Plantation mistresses were complicit with the system of slavery. They
understood that slavery made their way of life possible.\textsuperscript{35} Plantation mistresses held
managerial roles within the household,\textsuperscript{36} but ultimately they deferred to the power of
their husbands because of their inferior status in society.\textsuperscript{37} Plantation mistresses also
lived under a sexual double standard that shaped their views of enslaved women.
While white men expected white women to remain pure, white women’s husbands
had sexual control over them and enslaved women.\textsuperscript{38} Because society frowned upon
resistance to a husband’s authority, plantation mistresses endured the sexual double
standard often by excusing it as being “natural” for men and “natural” in a slave
society.\textsuperscript{39} White wives often made enslaved women the scapegoats because the
patriarchal system placed plantation mistresses in a position where they could punish
enslaved women but not their white elite husbands.\textsuperscript{40} All of these aspects of southern
society shaped the way plantation mistresses viewed and treated enslaved women.

The feelings that enslaved women had towards their mistresses could be
extremely complicated because they were in close quarters most of the time and had
to constantly deal with the system within southern society that made the master a

\textsuperscript{35} Fox-Genovese, 369.
\textsuperscript{36} Fox-Genovese, 116.
\textsuperscript{37} Clinton, 6.
\textsuperscript{38} Clinton, 204-205.
\textsuperscript{39} Fox-Genovese, 240.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid, 326.
father figure and the mistress a mother figure. If an enslaved woman was a house
servant, she came into very close daily contact with her mistress. Plantation
mistresses supervised house servants who did most or all of the manual household
labor. Enslaved female house servants had to do whatever their mistress told them
to do, and were often subjected to their tempers. In essence, plantation mistresses
were the managers and enslaved women were the workers of the household.
Naturally, however, being in such close contact allowed enslaved women in particular
to get to know their mistresses. Thus, they probably knew each other’s weaknesses
and strengths very well and could interact based on that knowledge.

Although the planter class was in the minority of southern society, studying
the interactions of plantation mistresses and enslaved women is important to more
fully understand the pervasiveness of the paternalistic ideal within southern society.
Historian Stephanie McCurry writes that only 13% of families in the South Carolina
Low Country in 1850 were qualified as the planter elite while roughly 50% of farms
were owned by yeoman farmers. So why study the interactions of enslaved women
and plantation mistresses when they made up a relatively small part of southern
antebellum society? McCurry writes, “Planters extraordinary grip on land and slaves
meant that, despite their numbers, yeomen were only marginal contributors to the
region’s staple markets;” therefore, when planters and yeomen met in a public forum

42 Fox-Genovese, 165.
planters always had the social upper hand. Thus, even though yeomen made up the majority of society numerically, since the planter class created the dominant ideology of society, they must be particularly examined. Additionally, since white elite women and enslaved women were subject to that ideology, but not creators of it, they are two subordinate groups that must be analyzed.

Enslaved women did not accept the system of slavery or paternalism passively and many utilized different strategies to subvert both. They manipulated their mistresses and masters by feigning illness or disobeying orders. Some fended off their master’s advances, occasionally with violence. Enslaved women’s resistance and cleverness also helps scholars interpret slave narratives. For enslaved women, paternalistic rhetoric may have been another form of passive resistance. Just as breaking a dish or a hoe in their master’s house, discussing their master or mistress in a seemingly innocuous way while simultaneously exposing the brutality of slavery allowed enslaved people to protect themselves from the full retaliation of their master or mistress.

**Sex: The Great Divide in the Plantation House**

Plantation mistresses and enslaved women negotiated both gender and race in their interactions. On the one hand, they were in completely separate racial realms that vastly affected how they lived their lives. While white women were free, enslaved women were not. Because of paternalism however, most women were

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44 McCurry, 95.
46 White, 78.
subordinate to elite white men, although African American women’s status was much lower than white women’s. In order to avoid over-generalizing, it must be said that women’s dependence on men, particularly in the ability to secure a divorce from one’s husband, varied from state-to-state; therefore, it is cannot be said what the extent of control was within the different states represented within this study. The existence of the sexual double standard clearly demonstrates that women were further down the social ladder than white landholding men. This sexual double standard also created a rift between black and white women, since the enslaved woman was far less powerful than a white plantation master; plantation mistresses blamed black women for their husband’s extramarital sexual relationships and invoked the Jezebel stereotype. Generally, the major concern of plantation mistresses was self-preservation.

Many plantation mistresses used the Jezebel stereotype when describing enslaved women but were simultaneously distressed at the presence of a sexual double standard. Mary Boykin Chestnut’s account of a slave auction is one depiction of the “Jezebel” myth:

The woman on the block overtopped the crown. I felt faint, seasick. She was a bright mulatto, with a pleasant face. She was magnificent gotten up in silks and satins. She seemed delighted with it all, sometimes ogling the bidders, sometimes looking quite coy and modest; but her mouth never relaxed from its expanded grin of excitement. I dare say the poor thing knew who would buy her. My very soul sickened. It was too dreadful... Poor women, poor slaves.

Chestnut depicts the enslaved woman on the auction block as seductive and suggests that this woman perhaps knew that a plantation master would buy her for explicitly

47 Clinton, 81-83.
sexual purposes. Although Chestnut lamented that the system was sexually exploitive, she still seemed to put much of the blame on the enslaved woman for this exploitation; however, her final line “poor women, poor slaves,” seems to indicate that she does not really accept the sexual double standard and wishes the paternalistic system did not promote the infidelity of white husbands and the exploitation of enslaved women. The initial critique of the enslaved woman’s behavior on the auction block may have been part of Chestnut’s perceived obligation to uphold the plantation system in which she was complicit. The system of white male domination, of the South made the sexual double standard possible. It also made it possible to divert the blame for white male sexual exploitation of enslaved women, and many plantation mistresses accepted this diversion, at least on the surface. The Jezebel myth protected white womanhood, because it ideologically removed the possibility of enslaved women ever as chaste and pure. When plantation mistresses criticized enslaved women and called them Jezebels, it was a form of self-preservation in a society where white men disrespected both white and black women. If the blame for white men’s sexual exploitation of enslaved women was diverted onto enslaved women. Then white women maintained the moral high ground and consequently a higher place in society than black women.

The WPA interview with Julia Rush a formerly enslaved woman supports the view that mistresses blamed their husbands’ sexual “transgressions” on enslaved women who were in actuality the victims of assault. Rush discussed her mistress’s cruelty and hatred: “She was very mean and often punished her by beating her on her forearms for the slightest offense. At other times she made her husband whip her
(Mrs. Rush) on her bare back with a cowhide whip. Mrs. Rush says that her young mistress thought that her husband was being intimate with her and so she constantly beat and mistreated her. 

Rush's mistress took her anger at her husband out on the enslaved woman who he was sexually exploiting. Just as Chestnut depicted the enslaved girl for flaunting her sexuality on the auction block, Rush’s account makes clear another example of how the system of paternalism led to white women blaming African American women instead of blaming white men who were really responsible for the infidelities and sexual assaults carried out on plantations across the South.

Rush's account of sexual coercion was certainly not a rarity in the antebellum South. In a case of rape or sexual coercion enslaved women had very little recourse for pursuing the punishment of their masters. Additionally, the master “might use the power of his position to create opportunities for sexual coercion, backing women into a corner where capitulation seemed her best option.” The fact that the sexual contact between masters and enslaved women was not always violently induced but sometimes psychologically induced, made it harder for enslaved women to prove their innocence in the affair. Plantation mistresses may have believed that their husbands had coerced enslaved women to have sex, but her subordinate power position did not allow her to do anything to her husband; therefore, the victim was blamed. This made it even more unlikely that elite white women would support enslaved women over their husbands was the fact that “a wife’s economic well-being was greatly jeopardized if her husband were removed from the household through

50 Sharon Block, Rape and Sexual Power in Early America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 65.
51 Block, 74.
52 Block, 114.
incarceration or marital separation. Given the chance, a wife might strike out at the victim rather than her husband."\(^{53}\)

Rush’s account also demonstrates that enslaved women were aware that the cruel tactics of some white women were used to defend their own place as white ladies in the southern society. Not only did Rush’s mistress beat her for allegedly having sexual contact with the master, Rush also recalled, “On one occasion all of the hair on her head (which was long and straight) was cut from her head by the young mistress.”\(^{54}\) By cutting Rush’s long straight hair, a symbol of her womanhood, beauty and probably an indication of white ancestry, Rush’s mistress was sending the message that she was the only one who deserved the role of lady of the house. By associating the two events – the beating for supposed sexual transgressions with her master and her mistress cutting off her hair – Rush demonstrated that she fully understood the implications for those actions in the southern patriarchal society. Rush probably knew that she was the logical scapegoat for her master’s transgression, but she did not excuse her mistress’s behavior. Thus, the combination of Chestnut and Rush’s accounts indicates how hard it might be for plantation mistresses and enslaved women to sympathize with one another as women in the paternalistic system.

While some plantation mistresses accepted the idea of the Jezebel, others sympathized with the enslaved women caught in the middle of the double standard between the jealousy of their mistresses and the lust of their masters. Fanny Kemble expressed this sympathy for an enslaved woman raped by an overseer: “I have been

\(^{53}\) Block, 115.
\(^{54}\) Ibid.
interrupted by several visits... one from a poor creature called Judy, whose sad story and condition affected me terrible... It seems that Jem Valiant... was her first-born, the son of Mr. K[ing], who forced her, flogged her severely for having resisted him, and then sent her off as farther punishment, to... a horrible swamp in a remote corner of the estate.”

Instead of feeling anger at the enslaved woman for being too seductive, Kemble expressed horror at the overseer’s treatment of Judy, the slave who told Kemble the story. That said, Kemble may have felt differently if it had been her husband committing the abuses she relates or if it had been the master of the household; in fact, she probably would not have discussed the incident at all if it had involved her husband. The overseer was probably not in a high enough social class to warrant his actions a disgrace to the planter class; therefore, an elite white woman could criticize his actions and not risk the image of the planter class being tainted. In regards to the same incident Kemble wrote further, “Jealousy is not an uncommon quality in the feminine temperament; and just conceive the fate of these unfortunate women between the passions of their masters and mistresses, each alike armed with power to oppress and torture them.”

Kemble’s comment suggests that plantation mistresses sometimes felt sympathy for the position in which masters and overseers put enslaved women when they wanted to assert sexual power and dominance. Enslaved women were sometimes caught in the middle between the sexual coercion of their masters and the jealousy of the mistress. Since plantation mistresses occupied a lower status in society than their husbands, they lacked control over their husbands’ actions; consequently, they had to punish those of a lower social status, i.e. enslaved

55 Kemble, 156-157.
56 Kemble, 158.
women. Depending on the situation, plantation mistresses saw enslaved women either as innocent victims or as seductive whores; however, in Kemble’s case it is highly probable that the reason why she sympathized with the enslaved woman was because it was not her husband who was sexually exploiting enslaved women.

Other plantation mistresses did not sympathize with enslaved women, but did comment on the “sins” of plantation masters and expressed anger at the system of slavery. Mary Boykin Chestnut said it best when she wrote, “…Our men live in one house with their wives and their concubines; and the mulattoes one sees in every family partly resemble the white children. Any lady is ready to tell you who is the father of all the mulatto children in everybody’s household but her own.”

Rebecca Latimer Felton expressed similar sentiments: “The crime that made slavery a curse, lies in the fact that unbridled lust placed the children of bad white men… on auction blocks, and no regard was shown to… parental responsibility in such matters… There were other men… who… defied the marriage law… by keeping up two households… one white and the other colored, and both women were afraid to make public outcry.”

Neither enslaved women nor plantation mistresses controlled the sexual exploitation of enslaved women. It only made sense then that when plantation mistresses expressed sympathy for an enslaved woman who had been sexually assaulted or coerced by white men- and the paternalistic system that allowed it - she expressed sorrow for white women as well. This type of account indicates that there was some potential for common understanding between black and white women.

Plantation mistresses and enslaved women came in all personalities, some, like

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57 Chestnut, 21.
58 Rebecca Latimer Felton, *Country Life in Georgia in the Days of My Youth*, (Atlanta: Index Printing, 1919), 98.
Chestnut, struggled to sympathize with enslaved women, while others, like Kemble and Felton, realized the true abusers within the system were the masters. An alternate idea to this could be that women like Chestnut were more concerned with preserving the paternalistic system than women like Felton and Kemble.

**Motherhood: Common Bond or Competition?**

Although living in the same place physically, white and enslaved women had very different views of motherhood. Within the southern patriarchy, elite white mothers were responsible for “their children’s education, morality, and physical well-being;” therefore, they punished their children for inappropriate behavior, and ensured that their children grew up within the guidelines of the southern patriarchy. Although elite white women disciplined and cared for their children, the plantation master was the ultimate authority within the household.\(^59\) In the slave community, motherhood was important for different reasons. Once the international slave trade was banned in 1807, having an enslaved woman with strong reproductive capabilities on a plantation made financial sense to plantation owners. Without an abundant supply of slaves coming from overseas, enslaved communities had to naturally reproduce themselves in order for a plantation master to have a viable workforce.\(^60\) As White discusses, this worked with the already existing African culture that put a premium on motherhood and high reproductive rates, because children equaled wealth simply because the more children a family had the more work a family could accomplish, and the more work a family could accomplish the more successful the family would be. A woman in the slave community gained a higher status if she was

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\(^59\) Clinton, 47.

\(^60\) White, 69.
able to bear many children.\textsuperscript{61} Having many children served a second purpose for enslaved women: stability. Because reproduction of the enslaved community was important to plantation owners, an enslaved woman who was very fertile was too important to give up; therefore, those fertile women enjoyed a much better chance of remaining on one plantation for an extended period of time, if not for their entire lives.\textsuperscript{62} These ideals are important because they often manifested themselves in the descriptions that elite white women and enslaved women gave of each other; thereby being another integral part of the answer to the question of how elite white women and enslaved women perceived each other.

Looking at the ideals of the enslaved people themselves rather than the ideals that were forced upon them by the plantation class, one finds that pregnancy and motherhood provided several important advantages not only to the enslaved mother but also to the enslaved community on plantations, particularly the community of women. First, White writes, “Giving birth was a life-affirming action. It was... an act of defiance, a signal to the slave owner that no matter how cruel and inhumane his actions, African Americans would not be utterly subjugated and destroyed.”\textsuperscript{63} From this perspective, the more children an enslaved woman bore, the more she demonstrated to her master that she, and her race, would not be held down by the system of slavery; however, the other side of this was that those children were born into slavery and would be forced to work for the master. Second, childbirth and pregnancy created a stronger and more tight-knit community of enslaved women. It provided a much-needed opportunity for companionship and bonding among

\textsuperscript{61} White, 112.
\textsuperscript{62} White, 108.
\textsuperscript{63} White, 110.
enslaved women, both the pregnant and those who assisted the pregnant enslaved women. Enslaved mothers also performed a vital function in maintaining a close slave community. Women and children were separated much less often than men and children; consequently, because of enslaved mothers, children could have knowledge of their fathers, even if those fathers were sold away when the children were young. Mothers, in essence, were responsible for maintaining a kinship connection within the slave community and across the boundaries of plantations. Thus, as much as elite whites had their own motivations for giving enslaved mothers a high status in enslaved society, enslaved people themselves had some agency and made the experience of motherhood and having many children their own.

When it came to motherhood, some plantation mistresses doubted the ability of enslaved women to adequately care for their black children. Elizabeth Waties Pringle described her constant intervention when an enslaved woman did not properly hold her black baby’s head. Fanny Kemble described the enslaved women on her plantation who, she believed, did not know how to properly bathe their infants. She wrote, “Anything, however, much more helpless and inefficient than these poor creatures you cannot conceive; they actually seemed incapable of drying and dressing their own babies, and I have to finish their toilet myself.” This focus on enslaved women as bad mothers may relate to the importance of the role of motherhood in a plantation mistresses’ life. Plantation mistresses derived much of their prestige in

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64 White, 108-109.
southern society from motherhood. Their comments on an enslaved woman’s lack of skill in motherhood might have come from their need to preserve their prestige in society. After all, if an enslaved woman who was supposed to be inferior to a plantation mistress was just as good at mothering, it was detrimental to the plantation mistress’s higher position in society. If without a mistress, enslaved women were unable to take care of their children properly, the mistress could present herself as the protector of the black race and consequently defend the entire institution of slavery.

While plantation mistresses believed that they were the keepers of the slaves that they owned, in other words that they were responsible for all aspects of an enslaved person’s life, many enslaved women believed themselves to be the keepers of their mistresses. In WPA narratives, formerly enslaved women sometimes expressed very affectionate feelings toward their former mistresses, but these feelings may not be exactly as they appear. Granny Cain said of her mistress, “Mrs. Lucy Kenner, who was the best white woman I know of - just like a mother to me, wish I was with her now. I stayed there 'till my mistress died, was right by her bed.” The feelings that Cain had for her former mistress may have indeed been genuine, but there are several reasons to suspect that Cain may have been masking the brutality of the slave system.

By reading even deeper into the text, it can be seen that Cain’s portrayal of her mistress was not quite as positive as it initially seemed. When Cain said her mistress was the best white woman she knew, she may not have perceived white women to be very nice in general; therefore, she may have been indicating that her mistress was

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67 Clinton, 48.
nicer than other white women, but still not very nice. Also, Cain’s assertion that she was at her mistress’ deathbed may have been a way in which Cain demonstrated how important she was to her mistress. On closer examination, the assertions that Cain makes express not only a much more negative view of her mistress – and indeed white women in general – but the narrative also becomes much more geared toward making Cain look like a loyal and dedicated and most of all needed servant; therefore, Cain bolsters her own image.

Other enslaved women superficially endorsed what many plantation mistresses said about being mothers to their slaves, but on further reading of their stories their idyllic depiction of the plantation evaporates and in its place is a picture of brutality and cruelty. Some formerly enslaved women described their mistresses as kind to them and blamed slaves who received punishment for unruliness. As Mariah Calloway recalled, “My mistress was very fond of me, too, and gave me some of everything that she gave her own children, tea cakes, apples, etc. She often told me that she was my mother and was supposed to look after me.”69 In this account, Calloway presented the image of a happy plantation home with a kind, generous and, most importantly, motherly mistress.

Later in the account, however, Calloway’s pastoral imagery fades into a less than idyllic plantation scene. In describing how her master and mistress treated other slaves on the plantation, she recalled: “In spite of the kindness of the Willis family there were some slaves who were unruly; so the master built a house off to itself and called it the Willis jail. Here he would keep those whom he had to punish. I have known some slaves to run away to other plantations and the hounds would bite plugs

out of their legs.”

Essentially, the image she invokes is one of the slaves as unruly children and the master and mistress as the parents who must teach them a lesson. She may have believed, to a certain extent, in the merits of disciplining a slave who was unruly, much like a parent who disciplines a child; however, she also may have been playing to a white interviewer’s sense of southern social order. Her graphic description of the Willis’ jail and runaway slaves mangled by hounds portrayed the cruelty of the system without directly challenging it. It also subtly undermined the image of the doting and loving plantation mistress that many white women portrayed in their own writings.

Some enslaved women explicitly put a less than maternal spin on white women like Kemble and Pringle’s behavior towards enslaved infants. Mariah Calloway described her experience with over-protective mistresses: “Older women on the plantation acted as nurses for all the small children and babies while their parents worked in the fields. The mistress could keep a sharp eye on the children also to see that they were all cared for. A slave’s life was very valuable to their owners.”

Enslaved women did not perceive themselves to be incapable of taking care of their own children, and some portrayed their mistresses as greedy and as excessively supervising enslaved women who cared for enslaved children for fear that they would lose valuable property. This is definitely a view that contradicts that held by some plantation mistresses. Even when roles were reversed and an enslaved woman played a motherly role in the plantation mistress’s life, some elite white mistresses still characterized themselves as the most important figure in the enslaved woman’s life.

70 Mariah Calloway.
71 Mariah Calloway.
The converse to the stereotype of Jezebel to which plantation mistresses subscribed was the stereotype of the Mammy. Mary Norcott Bryan gave a perfectly stereotypical description of the Mammy: “What a jolly time was hog killing... The great pots of boiling lard with a bay leaf thrown in for perfume, several huge blocks of wood in the yard and fat smiling mammies with red bandannas on their heads singing sweet old negro melodies, and chopping up sausage meat.”72 This view of the Mammy as a sweet old asexual slave contented with her position was a view that many plantation mistresses accepted.

Grace Elmore Brown reinforced the myth of Mammy when she said, “On me hung all the happiness of Mauma’s life. I was as she said ‘the apple of my eye’ and how little did I give her in comparison, t’is this that often makes me weep, and cry out for Mauma to come back that I may do all for her.”73 After Mauma’s death, Elmore lamented “each feeling of coldness, every unkind thought or cold tone” directed at Mauma.74 It seems very sweet to lament an enslaved woman’s death and any unkindness directed at her. Brown may have criticized Mauma in life, but in death she found a common humanity with her; however, Brown’s statement also made clear that she perceived herself to be in charge of the enslaved woman’s happiness and that the enslaved woman was so “ignorant” that she depended fully on her mistress’ “kindness.” Brown’s was not a flattering view of enslaved women and demonstrates the condescension that plantation mistresses felt toward enslaved women. In many plantation mistresses’ accounts, enslaved women were not smart.

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73 Grace Elmore Brown, 24.
enough to know any better and their ignorance proved the need for slavery in the first place. Seemingly, the only time plantation mistresses felt it was important to express sympathy for their Mammies was when the Mammies died; in other words, when mistresses perhaps had to find a way to assuage their guilt for mistreating enslaved women.

On the other hand, many enslaved women perceived that they played a vital role in shaping their young mistress’s lives as their mammies. While describing her mistress, Elisabeth Sparks said “She died 'bout four years ago. Bless her. She 'us a good woman. Course I mean she'd slap an' beat yer once in a while but she warn't a woman fur fighting fussin' an' boatin' yer all day lak some I know. She was too young when da war ended fur that. Course no white folks perfect.” Sparks suggests that her mistress was too young to be as mean to her slaves as other mistresses. Since many enslaved women cared for white children, including those who later became their mistresses, children sometimes developed affection for the enslaved women who cared for them.75 Young mistresses, therefore, might have been more likely to be kind to slaves than older mistresses, because their childhood memories were fresher. Sparks also noted that white people were not perfect. White people could not help their behavior because, after all, they were “only human.” The matter-of-fact statement that white people were not perfect could also be a suggestion by Sparks that black people were closer to perfection. Additionally, her mention of her mistress’s death and the enslaved woman’s sympathy for her mistress might indicate her understanding of a common humanity she shared with her mistress.

75 White, 50.
Ironically, despite their seeming incredulity at the ability of enslaved women to take care of their own children, many plantation mistresses entrusted the care of their white children to enslaved women. Since being a true southern lady required a mistress to be a good mother as well, it is no wonder that some of the worst beatings documented by formerly enslaved women involved the white children for whom they cared daily. Dinah Cunningham stated: "De onliest whippin' I got was 'bout dat child. I had de baby on de floor on a pallet and rolled over on it. Her make a squeal like she was much hurt and mistress come in a hurry. After de baby git quiet and go to sleep, she said: 'Dinah, I hates to whip you but de Good Book say, spare de rod and spoil de child.'"\(^7\)\(^6\) Cunningham's mistress claimed she had no choice but to beat Cunningham for not properly taking care of her charge, the mistress's baby. Not only did she beat Cunningham, but the beating was very severe as Cunningham described it: "Wid dat, she goes out and git a little switch off de crepe myrtle bush and come back and took my left hand in her left hand, dat had all de rings on de fingers, and us had it 'round dat room. I make a big holler as she 'plied dat switch on dese very legs dat you sees here today."\(^7\)\(^7\) The beating affected Cunningham so much that she remembered the type of tree from which the switch came as well as the hand that the mistress used to hold Cunningham still. The severity of the beating suggests that Cunningham's mistress was perhaps sensitive about an enslaved woman caring for her child. Whereas the ideal southern mother would have cared for her child herself, Cunningham's mistress had to prove her good motherhood by defending her child from the "incompetent" enslaved caretaker.

\(^7\)\(^7\) Dinah Cunningham.
The issue of motherhood was a very contentious one in the antebellum South. Just as plantation mistresses often either blamed enslaved women for the sexual coercion of the plantation master or sympathized with the enslaved woman's plight, plantation mistresses had similar mixed feelings about the status of enslaved women as mothers. Similarly, many enslaved women saw their mistresses as mother figures but also hinted at the darker side of their mistresses' behavior. Again, the issue at hand often came down to competition for status in the antebellum South. Since elite white women gained status from motherhood, they may have felt threatened by the motherhood of enslaved women. Enslaved women, on the other hand, could never be accepted as good mothers by elite white women, so they fully embraced the ideals of the enslaved community about motherhood and status, and demonstrated to their masters and mistresses their abilities as mothers.

**Pregnancy: "A Dismal Story"**

In their diaries many plantation mistresses discussed their sympathy for pregnant enslaved women. Elizabeth Waties Pringle addressed the plight of enslaved women who had babies one after another: "Estelle had been our maid for five years and only left us to be married - a good match according to their ideas. She had a new baby every year and worked very hard. She grew blacker and thinner, until early this spring she took to bed. Though scarcely thirty I think, she leaves five living children and three lie in the graveyard beside her." The experience of the enslaved woman that Pringle relays is reminiscent of the experiences of many plantation mistresses because for plantation mistresses as well as enslaved women pregnancy and childbirth were daunting experiences that drained the energy of the women and

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78 Pringle, 158.
possibly led to infection and death. The statement also indicates that elite whites had different ideas about marriage than slaves. A large factor in courtship of enslaved people was love and affection. Conversely, many elite whites married for status and financial gain; however, so as not to over-generalize, many spouses did share a great deal of affection. Thus, enslaved women and white elite women shared in the potential agony of pregnancy and childbirth, but whereas plantation mistresses more often chose spouses based on protection and social status, enslaved women, or formerly enslaved women were more likely to choose partners based on love and affection.

Many plantation mistresses saw pregnancy and childbirth as dangerous and with a shortage of birth control methods there was not much that they could do to prevent unwanted pregnancy. The pregnancy and delivery were uncomfortable and painful, and sometimes resulted in infection and death. Additionally, according to Clinton, because of the lack of accepted birth control methods, most white women were unable to prevent unwanted pregnancy. That is not to say that various birth control methods such as abortion and induced miscarriage did not exist, but within the southern patriarchy children meant status; consequently, using birth control was frowned upon. Within the southern slavery system there is some evidence that plantation mistresses and other women in antebellum America did employ methods of birth control. Historian Linda Gordon points to a number of factors that indicate that some forms of birth control were in use. First, the decline in population from the

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79 Clinton, 151.
80 White, 147.
81 Clinton, 60-69.
82 Clinton, 151-154.
83 Clinton, 206.
eighteenth and nineteenth centuries demonstrates that people had some success in limiting births. Second, a market for substances that could induce abortions found in doctor’s offices and drug stores of the 19th century points to a trend of birth control use. Third, she argues that all classes of women were able to practice the most commonly suggested birth control methods of douching and withdrawal, and that they took advantage of that ability. The presence and use of birth control methods by women in 19th century America indicates that white southern women may have been constrained by their society’s negative attitude toward birth control. Much like their resistance to slavery, plantation mistresses did not always follow the conventional norms of elite white southern society.

Plantation masters often set out to ensure that the enslaved population reproduced rapidly; however, much like in the plantation household, enslaved women found ways to limit their births. There is evidence that some enslaved women may have utilized infanticide and induced miscarriages so as to spare their children from the plight of slavery. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese describes infanticide and abortion as forms of resistance in enslaved communities. Though extreme, infanticide and abortion were ways in which enslaved women “by killing an infant they loved, would be in some way reclaiming it as their own.” In essence, infanticide was the ultimate form of resistance because it undermined the southern goal of “naturally” increasing the enslaved population. Despite the ability to do so, the chances of utilizing effective birth control were low for both black and white women in the South, so just

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85 White, 87-88.
86 Fox-Genovese, 324.
as Pringle’s slave became unhealthier after each birth, white women suffered as well; therefore, some white women sympathized with enslaved women when discussing pregnancy.

In their accounts, formerly enslaved women often discussed the large number of children to whom they and other enslaved women gave birth. Many with seeming pride discussed the large number of children that they gave birth to and reared. Miemy Johnson discussed her own experiences with pregnancy and childbirth, "Our children was Roxanna, Malinda, Ben, Mary, Waddell, Queen Kilseboth, Russell, Peerty, Thomasin, Mary Jese, Willie, Sam and Roy. Had de easiest birth pains when, to my big emprise, de twins, Sam and Roy come."87 Another formerly enslaved woman Analiza Foster discussed the value of an enslaved woman with many children, "Ter show yo' de value of slaves 'bout my gran'ma. She was sold on de block four times. an' eber time she brung a thousand dollars. She was valuable case she was strong an' could plow day by day, den too she could have twenty chilluns an' wuck right on."88 Although Foster may not like the fact that her grandmother was sold four times, she seems proud that her grandmother was strong enough to have multiple children and keep working. Foster’s positive description of her grandmother might go back to the view within the enslaved community that women who bore numerous children maintained a higher status than women who did not; however, the pride that Foster felt may have been more an adoption of white elite ideals of enslaved mothers rather than the ideals of the enslaved community itself because in this case Foster’s grandmother’s ability to have many children did not make her life

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more stable as demonstrated by the fact that she was still sold multiple times, nor
does it fit with ideals of enslaved people because Foster’s grandmother was not able
to preserve kinship connections by remaining on one plantation as many enslaved
mothers were apt to do. Millie Barber also shared a similar view when she said, ““De
fact is I can't 'member us ever had a doctor on de place; just a granny was enough at
child birth. Slave women have a baby one day, up and gwine 'round de next day,
singin' at her work lak nothin' unusual had happened.” Again, Barber seems to
assert the fact that enslaved women were strong enough to keep going directly after
giving birth to a child.

The picture that Johnson and Foster paint is vastly different from the picture
that Pringle paints of an enslaved woman who had too many children in too short of a
time. This difference in perspective may indicate that despite its seemingly
sympathetic portrayal of pregnant enslaved women, Pringle’s account may have been
more condescending than compassionate. Enslaved women’s accounts of childbirth
and pregnancy indicate that they mixed a measure of paternalistic ideals with the
ideals of the enslaved community in order to assert that enslaved women did have
some power in a seemingly hopeless situation. They seem to directly counter
Pringle’s assessment by demonstrating that enslaved women were strong and capable
even with the burden of pregnancy.

Plantation master’s harsh treatment of enslaved women during their
pregnancies also invoked sympathy from plantation mistresses. Fanny Kemble
expressed her horror when masters and overseers beat pregnant enslaved women:

“Another of my visitors had a still more dismal story to tell; her name was Die; she

had had sixteen children, fourteen of whom were dead; she had had four miscarriages:
one had been caused with falling down with a very heavy burden on her head, and
one from having her arms strained up to be lashed."\textsuperscript{90} Some plantation mistresses
were sympathetic to enslaved women who had to go through such an ordeal,
especially when masters and mistresses relegated enslaved women to a role of
backbreaking labor and harsh punishments.

Formerly enslaved women told similar tales of distress during pregnancy.
Enslaved women confirmed the stories that mistresses told of how pregnancy
oftentimes did not deter the wrath of an angry overseer, master, or mistress. Analiza
Foster, a formerly enslaved woman, related the story of a pregnant woman who died
as a result of a beating she received because she fainted while plowing. She
described how the pregnant woman was buried in the dirt with her arms tied above
her head. Then the overseer "takes de long bull whup an' he cuts long gashes all over
her shoulders an' raised arms, den he walks off an' leabes her dar fer a hour in de hot
sun... Den de driver comes out wid a vinegar, salt an' red pepper an' he washes de
gashes. De 'oman faints an' he digs her up, but in a few minutes she am stone dead."\textsuperscript{91}
These instances demonstrate the complete disregard that many masters, overseers,
and mistresses for that matter, had for the lives of their slaves. Although as property
slaves were valuable, their masters often did not treat them humanely. Just as
plantation mistresses recognized that fact, enslaved women did as well. Neither
enslaved women nor plantation mistresses attempted to hide this reality because they
sympathized with the plight of other pregnant women. One common bond that most

\textsuperscript{90} Kemble, 157.
\textsuperscript{91} Analiza Foster.
women shared was pregnancy, and perhaps they could be indifferent about other abusive aspects of slavery, but abuse toward a pregnant woman seemed inexcusable to many white and black women.

In addition to beatings, enslaved women also faced the threat of being sold away from their infants while plantation mistresses did not. Formerly enslaved woman Fordon Bluford said, “I saw many slaves sold on the block - saw mammy with little infant taken away from her baby and sent away. I saw families separated from each other, some going to one white master and some to another.”92 Once enslaved women gave birth, they had to worry about being sold away from their children or their children being sold away from them. Anne Rice, a formerly enslaved woman from South Carolina, presented an even worse scenario, “My ma said her step-mother sold her. Sometimes they would take crowds of slaves to Mississippi, taking away mothers from their infant babies, leaving the babies on the floor.”93 In this scene, mothers are sold away from their babies, and their babies are left abandoned on the sale floor. These cases indicate that no matter how harsh the realities of pregnancy were for plantation mistresses, the realities for enslaved women were much harsher. Enslaved women not only had to fear for their own lives and the lives of their children, but also they had the constant fear of being sold away from their children.

The severe challenges of slavery for enslaved women indicated by the experience of pregnancy and childbirth is evidenced by former enslaved woman Della Briscoe: “Sickness was negligible --- childbirth being practically the only form of a

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Negro woman's 'coming down.' Briscoe is saying that, as an enslaved woman, illness was not recognized as a reason not to work. The only reason that an enslaved woman could have in order to rest and avoid work was pregnancy. When pregnancy became the only means for relaxation, then the system is obviously inhumane. Plantation mistresses faced challenges in their lives as well, but still had infinitely more leisure time than enslaved women. The harsh accounts of enslaved women's experience in pregnancy offered by both plantation mistresses and formerly enslaved women demonstrates that it was a part of the system too inhumane to even try to cover up with paternalistic rhetoric.

**Household Duties and Religious Purveyances**

The primary duties of a plantation mistress were to supervise the running of the plantation household and ensure the morality of its occupants; therefore, if the everyday activities of the household did not run smoothly the mistress had to be the one to rectify the situation, conversely, when activities went well the mistress took credit for it. Since enslaved women did the bulk of the household chores in the plantation household, they were the ones that plantation mistresses often held accountable for mistakes. Thus, the accounts of everyday domestic life on plantations between plantation mistresses and enslaved women tend to have very different tones and points-of-view.

Plantation mistresses sometimes praised particular enslaved women for their good work; however, this praise seemed to occur when the enslaved women went about their work with no resistance whatsoever. As Mary Norcott Bryan wrote of her

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95 Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, 112.
slave, Hollen, and Hollen’s experience relaying her account of slavery to a northern couple: “They were... interested in asking how the negroes were treated by their owners in slavery times. So on long winter nights Hollen would regale them with tales of our plantation life, and their surprise was great when they found how kind we were to the slaves.”\textsuperscript{96} Hollen was a good servant and deserved praise for her work because she was so faithful that when she went north after emancipation she told people how happy and good slave times were. Who knows what Bryan would have felt about her if Hollen had gone north and criticized slavery profusely?

Judging by Bryan’s praise of a “faithful” slave who “knew her place,” it was probably in an enslaved woman’s best interest to play to the idea that plantation mistresses were the main authority in the plantation household, and many enslaved women did just that. This perspective may be seen in many letters from enslaved women to plantation mistresses. One enslaved woman, Valentine, wrote to her sick mistress: “We were all very uneasy about you when we heard you were confined to your bed, for we know that you must be very sick if that was the case... I long for the time when I shall see you & my dear master & miss Virginia at home once more...”\textsuperscript{97} In the same letter, Valentine wrote, “When I was writing to Richard I thought you would like to hear particularly about every thing at home and as it gave you pleasure I am very glad that I did mention something about it.”\textsuperscript{98} The rest of the letter went on to describe daily life on the plantation during her mistress’ absence; therefore, the letter could be taken as an exercise in appeasement. Valentine seems to be playing to

\textsuperscript{96} Mary Norcott Bryan.
\textsuperscript{98} Ibid, 65.
her mistress’ sense of importance by claiming to miss her and expressing her sorrow for her mistress’ illness. The point of the letter was most likely to show that things were running smoothly on the plantation, and that punishments need not occur when Valentine’s mistress arrived home; however, Valentine artfully stated that although things were going well on the plantation, her mistress was still needed.

A letter from Lethe Jackson, an enslaved woman from the same plantation as Valentine, also took on a tone of appeasement: “Tell Mistress... that we long for the time when she will be again here to give her directions and have every thing as... she wants it – We have all done the best we could since she went away but still there is nothing like having a person of sense to dictate – and if we are all obedient everything goes smoothly and happy...”\(^9\) Jackson obviously wanted to indicate to her mistress that everything was running smoothly. Enslaved women knew who they had to please and how to do it, especially since many female house servants lived in close proximity to their mistresses, and knew their mistresses’ temperament and tendencies to react to flattery. Consequently, these letters do not necessarily indicate that the enslaved women were badly treated by their mistresses, or even that they did not have a level of affection for them, but they indicate that some of that affection may have been pretense and that enslaved women clearly understood who was boss or at least who thought she was boss.

Plantation mistresses sometimes took credit for the skills that enslaved women had. Elizabeth Waties Pringle described how when one of her former slaves married, she was forced to work for her husband and gained no respect for it: “And so all

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Estelle's little accomplishments and skill were wasted, except the sewing which I had taught her and that showed in the neat, trim looking clothes of her little army of children.\textsuperscript{100} The one skill the Estelle was able to use successfully after leaving the plantation also happened to be the skill that her mistress had taught her. Some plantation mistresses might have believed that what they taught enslaved women had a lot of importance to the enslaved women's lives during and after slavery.

Despite their point-of-view that they helped enslaved women gain valuable skills, and that because of their teachings the household ran smoothly and everyone was happy, some plantation mistresses' writings indicate that there was another side to the happy home in which they lived. "I never am cross to my servants without cause and they give me impudence, if I find the least fault, this is of the women the men are not half as impudent as the women are."\textsuperscript{101} This mistress, Brevard, claimed that she was never mean to her servants, but there is a rather prominent "unless" in that statement. It seems that if enslaved women and men did not follow orders properly there would be consequences. Although Brevard did not go into detail about what those consequences were, it may be assumed that they were more than giving enslaved women a good stern talking to. While, according to Clinton, plantation mistresses rarely administered corporal punishment, mistresses, like Brevard, may have administered corporal punishment themselves or passed the punishment off on their husbands.\textsuperscript{102}

\textsuperscript{100} Elizabeth Waties Pringle.
\textsuperscript{101} Keziah Goodwyn Hopkins Brevard, South Carolinian Library, University of South Carolina, In Our Common Affairs, ed. Joan E. Cashin (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 263.
\textsuperscript{102} Clinton 188-189.
While Brevard and other plantation mistresses remain silent about what kind of methods they used to punish enslaved women for improper conduct, enslaved women were not so silent on the subject. Many indicated that punishment for minor household offenses involved physical punishment. When describing when she was corporally punished, Millie Barber said, "Did I ever git a whippin'? Dat I did… More than I can count on fingers and toes. What I git a whippin' for? Oh, just one thing, then another. One time I break a plate while washin' dishes and another time I spilt de milk on de dinin' room floor. It was always for somethin', sir. I needed de whippin'." It is interesting that the instances in which Barber was whipped involved some sort of household mess-up. She does not mention being whipped for talking back or sneaking off in the middle of the night, she mentions being whipped for spilling milk and breaking a dish. Plantation mistresses most likely administered these beatings. Since mistresses were in charge of taking care of the household, they had to be the ones to ensure that if something unacceptable, in their minds, occurred they remedied the problem. This tendency to punish quickly probably came from a pervasive fear of slave revolts in the Antebellum South. Anything that might have been construed as resistance, even passive resistance, had to be addressed immediately and harshly. Being “ladies,” however, plantation mistresses would not have admitted in their own writings that their method of remediation was beating a slave; therefore, Barber’s account is important because it gets at a different side of plantation mistresses behavior and interaction with enslaved women.

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104 Clinton, 192-193.
Other WPA interviewees were even more explicit than Barber about the reasons for beatings and the methods of the beatings. Describing her mistress’s behavior towards her cook, Emaline Heard recalled, “Just before dinner, the mistress would come in to inspect the cooking. If the food in any of the pots was not cooked to her satisfaction, she would sometimes lose her temper, remove her slipper and strike the cook.”\(^{105}\) Heard’s recollection demonstrates much about how mistresses ran the plantation household. Even if she did not cook, the mistress was there to ensure that the cooking was completed “correctly.” Since the cooking reflected her own skills as a household manager, the mistress had a lot to lose if it was not done according to her specifications; therefore, beating an enslaved woman for not cooking food “properly” was probably, in her mind, the only recourse for the foul-up.

Enslaved women also described beatings by their mistresses for moral slip-ups like telling lies. Morality in southern antebellum society was a concept rife with hypocrisy. The slaveholding South was a society that relied on utilizing human chattel for labor but was also deeply Christian. Plantation mistresses perceived slaves as contaminants in their moral worlds and many feared that their children’s morals would be negatively affected by the moral shortcomings of slaves.\(^{106}\) This may explain why plantation mistresses punished slaves, sometimes severely, for seemingly minor moral offenses. For example, Easter Reed described the reasons her mistress would beat her: “No mam, my marster never did whip me,” said Reed. "But the mistress would if she caught us tellin' a lie. She'd whip her chillun as well as us. My sisters were whipped for leavin' the cows out in the pasture when they were s'posed to

\(^{106}\) Clinton, 91-92.
be shut up." In this case, the mistress whipped enslaved women for telling lies. This is consistent with the mistress’ role as moral purveyor on the plantation. To be a “true lady,” plantation mistresses were in charge of teaching their children and slaves morals and educating them about religion. Reed’s mistress may have seen it as her moral duty on the plantation to punish slaves and children for lying.

Overall, to maintain their status as ladies, plantation mistresses were in charge of work done within the house as well as the religious education within the household. Even though they did not always do the work themselves, the state of their home reflected on them; therefore, when an enslaved woman did not complete a task to their liking, mistresses punished them for it. On the other hand, when an enslaved woman did something well, the plantation mistress often took credit for it. Enslaved women realized the feelings that plantation mistresses had and played up to them by appeasing their mistresses and making them feel important and capable; however, when mistresses mistreated enslaved women, enslaved women were much less likely to hide it when asked about it. As ladies, plantation mistresses were not supposed to be violent, therefore, they would not have written about any corporal punishment that they administered. According to Drew Faust, “No gendered code of honor celebrated women’s physical power or dominance. A contrasting yet parallel ideology extolled female sensitivity, weakness, and vulnerability.” In contrast, enslaved women readily described the violent punishments that they received at the hands of their mistresses. Thus, looking at both the plantation mistresses’ accounts

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108 Clinton, 50.
109 Faust, 63.
and enslaved women’s accounts, the historian gets a much fuller picture of interactions between enslaved women and their mistresses.

**Wanting Independence: The Greatest Sin an Enslaved Woman Could Commit**

During the antebellum period, mistresses expected enslaved women to be completely malleable to the mistress’s will. For an enslaved woman to want independence was unacceptable; therefore, an intelligent and clever slave was seen as a challenge to the mistress’s authority. As Mary Boykin Chestnut remarked, “Betsy, a recalcitrant maid of the W’s, is sold to a telegraph man. She is... clever in every kind of work; but... she was a dangerous inmate. But she will be a good cook, a good chambermaid, a good dairymaid, a beautiful clearstarcher, and the most thoroughly good-for-nothing woman I know to her new owners if she chooses.” Despite Betsy’s ability to fill every role expected of a house servant, Chestnut believed she would be “good-for-nothing” in her new master’s home. This may be because of the cleverness that Chestnut points out. In Chestnut’s view, a slave’s cleverness undermined her servility; thus, a slave who was clever but good at every other job was still “good-for-nothing.” The concern with cleverness may go back to the fear of slave revolts. The more clever, or educated, an enslaved person, the more they may question their status as a slave and, in turn, they may participate in or incite a rebellion by slaves. Thus, many plantation mistresses preferred enslaved women with unquestionably servile natures, or at least ones that appeared to be servile, and they negatively portrayed enslaved women who were intelligent, which threatened the perceived harmony within the plantation household.

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110 Chestnut, 228.
Once the Civil War began, it became even more important to the plantation mistress and master that enslaved people remain loyal. The desire for independence was a very negative quality for slaves to have. Even if some white elite women objected morally to slavery, once the Civil War began, they gave themselves fully to ‘The Cause’ and they more readily supported the slave system.\textsuperscript{111} It was not as simple as supporting the Cause, however, as Faust writes, “Much of the complexity of wartime relationships between white women and slaves arose because women increasingly relied on slaves’ labor, competence, and even companionship at a time when slaves saw diminishing motivation for work or obedience.”\textsuperscript{112} Elite white women seemingly embraced the Cause because they needed to maintain the obedience of enslaved people at a time when they were aware of emancipation and the threat of losing the southern paternalistic system. This increased need for enslaved people to maintain the plantation with the absence of the patriarch made loyalty an even more vital quality for enslaved people to have. Independence could be manifested in the form of free thinking as well. Even if the enslaved woman claimed to be, and was loyal, mistresses perceived the will of a slave to do what she thought was best to be a negative quality. As Brown noted, “I asked Cynthia today how she liked the idea of going to the plantation... her wish is to stay here, but I think her will is too strong, and she loves her own way too much to be left here... This doubt in our servants is very disagreeable... indeed we do not know in whom we can trust but God.”\textsuperscript{113} Despite the fact that Brown’s servant did not indicate in any way that she was disloyal, Brown still felt that she had reason for suspicion. She

\textsuperscript{111} Clinton, 196-197.
\textsuperscript{112} Faust, 64.
\textsuperscript{113} Brown, 112.
attempted to justify her suspicion by stating that the enslaved woman in question was too invested in her own way of doing things.

If enslaved women did not fulfill their mistress’ expectations of loyalty and expressed a desire to be free, their mistresses became extremely bad-tempered. When the Civil War ended and the Emancipation Proclamation freed her family’s slaves, Grace Elmore Brown expressed anger at one slave who dared to be happy about her freedom: “Old Mary is the only black sheep… Saturday evening she was told of her freedom and expressed quiet satisfaction, but said none could be happy without prayer… and Monday by daylight she took herself off, leaving the poor baby without a nurse… Old Mary is off my books for any kindness or consideration I may be able to show her in after years.”114 As long as enslaved women conformed to the image of a happy, ignorant slave, plantation mistresses “loved” them, but as soon as an enslaved woman expressed her dislike of the system or did not adequately acknowledge her mistress’ “kindness,” the plantation mistress felt angry and betrayed. Plantation mistresses only “loved” enslaved women when they stayed within and did not question their inferior place in society.

Many enslaved women felt similarly to Old Mary and expressed a great desire to be free, mostly through celebration at the advent of Emancipation. Annie Huff described the elation of some slaves after emancipation: “A few days later Mrs. Huff returned from a trip to Macon and called all the children together to tell them that even though they were free, they would have to remain with her until they were

114 Ibid, 122.
twenty-one. Little Mary exclaimed loudly — 'I'm free! I won't stay here at all!'”

Although the mistress and master of the plantation tried to convince their slaves to stay after emancipation, the enslaved girl who Huff describes could not hide her joy, or her recognition of the fact that emancipation meant that she did not have to listen to her master or mistress anymore. Despite being constantly encouraged by their white owners to remain loyal, slaves had a strong sense that they deserved freedom.

The desire for independence of an enslaved woman was not always met with disdain by the plantation mistress; instead, it could be met with pity. Grace Elmore Brown discusses the desire of Phyllis, an enslaved woman, to be free: “She had heard a woman who bought her freedom from kind indulgent owners, say it was a very sweet thing to be able to do as she chose, to sit and do nothing, to work if she desired, or to go out as she liked, and ask nobody’s permission…” While all of this seems like the desirable effect of freedom, Brown continues, “They cannot and will not connect suffering with freedom, but believe all will be reached with freedom…. What can the poor, uneducated, stupid negro expect in the competition with white labor… Who would worry with the lazy, self indulgent race, unless held as property.” The view of freedom that Brown presents seems less than ideal for the enslaved woman. According to Brown, those who wanted freedom should be pitied because all they would find was pain and suffering. The only way for enslaved women to successfully compete with white labor was allegedly through slavery. Free labor simply was not an option as far as the plantation mistress was concerned.

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116 Brown, 121.
117 Brown, 121.
Many enslaved women submitted to the same sentiments as Grace Elmore Brown; however those sentiments may have been superficial at best. In many WPA interviews, formerly enslaved women expressed their feelings of sadness and fear at the thought of freedom, as well as the idea that they could not take care of themselves as well as their mistresses and masters could care for them. For example, Carrie, a former enslaved woman from Georgia asserted that she was well-fed and taken care of during slavery and said, "I'd be a heap better off if it was dem times now," she said. "My folks didn't mistreat de slaves. When freedom come, de niggers come 'long wid dere babies on dey backs and say I was free. I tell 'em I already free! Didn't mek no diffrence to me, freedom!"\(^{118}\) She was not the only formerly enslaved woman who expressed such ideas. Fannie Jones expressed extreme sadness at the thought of freedom: "Atter freedom come, Marster said to me and Ma, 'you all is free now to go wharever you wants to.' Ma, she wanted to go, but I jus' cried and cried 'cause I didn't want to leave Marster and Mistiss; dey was too good to me."\(^{119}\) Even when her husband, who lived on another plantation, tried to persuade her to move to his plantation after emancipation, Adeline Willis refused to move with him with the sentiment: "I knowed my white folks and they was good to me, but I didn't know his white folks. So we kept living like we did in slavery, but he come to see me every day."\(^{120}\) She continued on to say, "After a while, tho' we all went back and lived with my white folks and I worked on for them as long as I was able to work and always


felt like I belonged to 'em, and you know, after all this long time, I feel like I am their's."\textsuperscript{121}

The view that slavery protected slaves and that freedom frightened them must be examined carefully. The problems with WPA narratives manifest themselves particularly clearly in the discussion of emancipation. First of all, many of these women were quite young at the time of emancipation, and therefore had not long experienced the negative aspects of slavery. An enslaved child could have grown quite genuinely attached to their masters and mistresses. The other issue, which is manifested in Carrie’s statements about how slavery was better than freedom could have been because of the formerly enslaved woman’s experiences during the Great Depression. Formerly enslaved women may have thought that interviewers were aid workers, and if they spoke kindly of their mistresses and expressed gratitude for all that was done for them in slavery then perhaps they could receive government aid. Adeline Willis’ discussion of her emancipation presents another issue. She never asserted that she wanted to stay with her mistress and master after slavery, but she did say that she would rather be with them because she knew what to expect from them, as opposed to the owners of her husband with whom she did not have much experience. Thus, her former owners may have simply been the lesser of two evils. As far as white people were concerned, she believed that they were the kindest that she could get. Additionally, Willis said that as long as she lived with her former owner she felt like she was still owned by them. This may mean that they still treated her as a slave despite her freedom. Thus, even the most nostalgic musings about slavery by enslaved women may not have been as positive as they seem.

\textsuperscript{121} Adeline Willis.
Overall, the differences of opinion between plantation mistresses and enslaved women about independence and freedom are not surprising. While plantation mistresses maintained their own status in society by owning slaves, enslaved women had nothing to gain from it. Even when it seems that enslaved women were sad to be emancipated, that sadness may have been due to the fact that many enslaved women were emancipated at a young age, that they felt that if they positively described their mistresses that they would receive aid, and if they left their plantations they would face white people even harsher than their own owners masters and mistresses.

The Plantation Master: Ultimate Authority

The sentiments expressed in the preceding sections are very important to assessing what emotions and thoughts shaped the interactions of plantation mistresses and enslaved women, but in a paternalistic system the plantation master was the ultimate authority and cannot be ignored. The actions of the master strongly influenced how plantation mistresses and enslaved women interacted as well as how enslaved women felt about their mistresses and vice versa. Plantation mistresses seem to be torn about the authority that their husbands maintained. On the one hand, there were some aspects of that authority and the abuse of it that were reprehensible, and on the other hand, elite white women were trained so thoroughly to accept the authority of their husbands and fathers that they defended the system despite its major shortcomings, in part because they gained much of their status from the system. The writings of Mary Boykin Chestnut demonstrate this trend. She expressed disgust when she wrote about the practice of plantation masters “taking” enslaved mistresses
as “concubines.” Despite her disgust, later in her diary Chestnut writes, “Are Southern men worse because of the slave system?” Not a bit! They see too much of them… Our men are sick of the black site of them!”

Despite her disgust at the fact that southern men took advantage of their female slaves, Chestnut still did not believe that the system of slavery made southern men behave worse. This seems contradictory. These sentiments, however, indicate the classic plight of the plantation mistress. As much as she may have disliked, even hated, her husband’s assaults, which the slave system supported, she was very much tied to her husband and the patriarchal system financially and socially; therefore, ultimately the plantation mistress had to accept the shortcomings of slavery for her own general welfare.

Enslaved women often knew that their mistresses were not the ultimate arbiters of punishment on the plantation. Enslaved women knew and acknowledged that despite a mistress’s cruelty, she was not the one who needed to be obeyed the most. Caroline Malloy discussed how kind her mistress was for throwing parties for the “darkies.” When asked about whether or not her mistress beat her, “Caroline chuckled, Mrs. Brown always promised her a ‘paddling’ but this threat was never carried out. When the other slaves were disobedient, the master whipped them. That was the only law that she seemed conscious of --- the law of her master.” She described her mistress in a loving, familial way, but also acknowledged that her mistress did not have the real power in the household. That belonged to the master, who, in Caroline’s eyes, was not as hesitant as his wife to give Caroline a “paddling”

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122 Mary Boykin Chestnut, 21.
123 Mary Boykin Chestnut, 123.
125 Caroline Malloy.
if she misbehaved. The patriarch had the ultimate power, and even enslaved women were conscious of this, as evidenced by their depictions of the master as the ultimate purveyor of punishment. The nonchalance in which Malloy discusses her mistress’s attempts at discipline perhaps indicate that Malloy did not take her mistress’s authority seriously, and perhaps that made her mistress more likeable; however, she did seem to fully understand that for her own well-being she should never upset her master.

Many enslaved women described their masters as more violent than their mistresses. Mary Moriah Anna Susanna James discussed her master and mistress: “Old Silas Randolph was a mean man to his slaves, especially when drunk. He and the overseer would always be together, each of whom carried a whip and upon the least provocation would whip his slaves. My mistress was not as mean as my master, but she was mean” 126 Although Mary admits that her mistress was mean, she was still not as mean, or perhaps as violent, as Silas Randolph, the master of the plantation. In Mary’s account the master was the one who would give out the majority of and probably the most severe punishments. While the plantation mistress may not have been a particularly pleasant person to interact with, it was probably better to invoke her anger than that of her husband.

Enslaved women also signified a master’s authority when they were overly positive about his behavior. Susan Austin’s letter to her former owners after they sold her South from Virginia to Georgia demonstrates this phenomenon:

Rebecca Auston you sent me to the cotton country to make me miserable but you sent me here to make me happy. I would not Swapp homes and go back and live with you for the whole world... Rebecca Auston when I was confined

you would not allow me anything to eat for four days but I now have a good home and plenty to eat and no fuss about what I have to do... My good respects to Master George for I was sorrow to leave him but he had such a cruel wife that I am glad that I have left.\textsuperscript{127}

Susan Austin is indirectly highlighting her master’s authority in this letter. She probably knew that her mistress did not have much power, so she could get away with taking out her anger and pain for being sold on her mistress; however, she is nothing but respectful towards “Master George.” Even if Master George had been involved in some of Austin’s more cruel punishments, in the paternalistic system she would not have had the ability to express her anger at him.

Neither plantation mistresses nor enslaved women seemed particularly keen on the system of paternalism. Plantation mistresses, however, accepted the system much more readily because they gained so much status from it. In contrast, enslaved women had no choice but to accept it in practice, but could still resist passively. While enslaved women had nothing to gain from a paternalistic system and experienced sexual and physical abuse, plantation mistresses were protected by the system. Without the paternalistic system, plantation mistresses probably could have had more power, but with the system they were guaranteed a certain status in society that gave them protection. Enslaved women derived none of these benefits from the system.

**Conclusion: So what does it all mean anyway?**

Plantation mistresses and enslaved women like it or not, were tied to a system that promoted the power of white men and denied all women and enslaved black men power. This system shaped how plantation mistresses and enslaved women interacted

\textsuperscript{127} Susan Austin to Unknown, 18 July 1851, Found in *Austin Twyman Papers*, Folder 3, Call #69Au7, Courtesy of University Archives, Swem Library, College of William and Mary.
and perceived each other. These perceptions and interactions were often based on the status of each group within the system. Plantation mistresses had a higher social status than enslaved women, but they constantly had to work to prove that they deserved that status. Despite enslaved women’s lower status, they constantly worked to prove that they did not deserve that status. Plantation mistresses derived their status by insisting on their superiority over enslaved women and men, and enslaved women pushed for a better status by insisting on their abilities despite the negative judgments of their mistresses.

The defense of status for plantation mistresses and the push for status of enslaved women came in their respective discussions of the meanings of “womanhood.” Plantation mistresses asserted their place as women, and depicted enslaved women as lesser women. Plantation mistresses criticized enslaved women’s ability to take care of their own children, to complete simple household tasks, and to support themselves once they gained independence. Meanwhile, enslaved women presented themselves as better than white women by claiming their importance to the successful running of the plantation household, the raising of white children, as well as by accusing plantation mistresses of being cruel and brutal.

All of this status keeping and status pushing was packaged within the rhetoric and framework of paternalism. Plantation mistresses displayed themselves as motherly figures within the plantation household who had the best of intentions for their slaves. Without them, enslaved children would be dead due to their mother’s incompetence, the household would be chaotic, and slaves would have no moral fiber. Enslaved women protected themselves by superficially submitting to the paternalistic
system and characterizing plantation mistresses as motherly, but through this they were also able to indicate the brutalities and inabilities of their mistresses. They wanted to prove that they played an integral part in running the plantation household.

Historians have been skeptical about the ability of black and white women to relate to each other in the paternalistic system, but there are some positives notes to be explored. Mistresses had empathy for pregnant enslaved women because they too had to go through the pain of pregnancy in a time with inadequate medical care. Both groups of women knew that they had little power in the paternalistic system, and although in the end they defended their husbands’ actions, some plantation mistresses also sympathized with enslaved women who were exploited within the system. Enslaved women also recognized their mistress’ lack of power within the system, and sometimes positively portrayed their mistresses in comparison to their masters.

Overall, the system did not make for the best relationships between enslaved women and plantation mistresses. It seems to have created a constant battle for the status of womanhood between enslaved women and their mistresses. Still, some rays of light seem to shine through the clouds of paternalism. The places where one can find empathy between women, such as pregnancy and the sexual double standard, indicate that things may not have been as negative between them as they seemed. A reading of the plantation mistresses’ diaries and enslaved women’s narratives with a recognition of the functions of paternalistic rhetoric leaves the door open for more analysis of positive interactions, and might indicate some level of mutual understanding between elite white and enslaved women.
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