Pious Wives and "Hen-Pecked" Husbands: White Women, Evangelical Religion, and the Honor Ethic in the Old South

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PIOUS WIVES AND "HEN-PECKED" HUSBANDS:
WHITE WOMEN, EVANGELICAL RELIGION, AND
THE HONOR ETHIC IN THE OLD SOUTH

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of History
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In Partial Fulfillment
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Master of Arts

by
Sharon Romeo
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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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James Whittenburg
DEDICATION

To my parents,

Nicholas and Mary K. Romeo
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ABSTRACT

In this study I examine how the South’s evangelical religions offered non-elite white women the opportunity to maneuver definitions of respectability to their own advantage. Prior to the advent of southern evangelicalism in the mid-eighteenth century, the principles of the southern honor ethic dominated hegemonic gender norms. Prescriptively, the only prestigious role for a white woman within this system was as a social ornament to her husband’s position in society. After evangelical faiths spread throughout the South, the evangelicals’ religious discourse positioned itself in opposition to the southern honor ethic and challenged the prescriptive ideal of the “southern belle.”
PIOUS WIVES AND "HEN-PECKED" HUSBANDS:
WHITE WOMEN, EVANGELICAL RELIGION, AND
THE HONOR ETHIC IN THE OLD SOUTH
INTRODUCTION

The history of the Kebukee Baptist Association tells the story of a southern white woman who desperately wanted to join the Kebukee church. The woman's husband, however, pronounced a "great persecutor" by a clergyman, forbade his wife to become a member. She disobeyed him and joined the church during a revival. Later, the unfortunate Elder John Tanner caught the brunt of the husband's fury for performing the women's baptism. The husband sought out Tanner one Sunday morning and shot him in the thigh.1

Evangelical religions possessed the potential to weaken the patriarchal role of antebellum white men. As John Tanner discovered, the gender politics of evangelical religion threatened the mastery of white men over their wives and daughters, even to the point where these men responded with violence. While white women's religious activities did not dispossess the South of its patriarchal culture, evangelicalism did challenge the right of non-evangelical white men to control the religious activities of their wives. Particularly after 1830, evangelical religion placed middle and upper-class white women on a throne of piety and, ultimately, threatened the religious authority of some husbands and fathers. The white southern men who did not join evangelical churches forfeited the

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role of religious leader in their households. This loss of religious authority allowed evangelical women to criticize male behavior and even disobey their husbands when men did not conform to their spiritual beliefs. It is not surprising, therefore, that a husband might shoot Elder John Tanner for encouraging his wife to disobey his orders concerning religious activities.2

The evangelicals' religious discourse interrupted the South's dominant gender system across class boundaries. Large plantation owners and yeoman farmers alike found their authority questioned and curtailed by these new religious faiths. The antebellum South's economic reliance on agriculture and slavery emphasized the position of white men as the head of their families and their farms. This organizational structure, defined as patriarchy in this thesis, dominated southern society and culture. Even yeoman farmers viewed themselves as little patriarchs. Racial loyalty and a commitment to patriarchy, rather than class identification, determined the political positions of both the southern middling class and small farmers. The South's religious domestic conflicts, therefore, took on a critical level of importance because power struggles within the southern family threatened patriarchy—the organizational ideology of the South.3

2 Rhys Isaac, The Transformation of Virginia: 1740-1790 (New York: WW Norton & Company, 1982), presents evangelicalism as a movement that challenged the elite in eighteenth-century Virginia. Whereas Isaac analyzed evangelicalism as strictly a class conflict, Donald G. Mathews, Religion in the Old South, 100-124, portrayed evangelical women as instrumental in the spread of evangelical religions through the South; Mathews also asserted that white women used evangelical religion to assert themselves. In contrast to Mathews, Jean E. Friedman, The Enclosed Garden: Women and Community in the Evangelical South, 1830-1900 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985) interpreted southern evangelicalism, particularly the church discipline, as reinforcing sexual roles and discouraging the formation of women's networks.

3Stephanie McCurry explores the political and racial alliances of yeoman farmers in Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, & the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995)
The masters of the southern world developed their own discourse to affirm their patriarchal ideology. Family, farming, slavery, and blood lines all combined to support the South’s power structure in an ideology historians have labeled the southern honor ethic. This deferential code of behavior included a definition of honor that depended on the community’s perception of a man. Rural southerners depended on communal activities to define where white men stood in the southern hierarchy. White men of all classes identified with each other racially, although within their racial unity different classes of white men possessed varying degrees of prestige and status. Enslaved African-Americans could not possess any honor within this system, and white women could only attain prestige through their association with honorable white men. All white men were capable of possessing honor, and these men determined how much honor they owned by interacting in homosocial activities such as gambling, drinking, dueling, eye-gouge fighting, horse racing, and the distribution of liquor during elections.4

Evangelical strictures often conflicted with the honor-seeking activities of white southern men. Evangelicals used religious discourse to create an ethical commentary on the values promoted by the southern honor ethic. Southern white evangelical women often insisted that their husbands abide by strict evangelical behavior, thus, using their religion to encourage a definition of manliness that contradicted the earlier prescriptions of the honor ethic.

The definition of evangelical behavior in this paper is not specific to a particular denomination, but applies to a Protestant movement that emphasized a personal

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relationship with Christ through the help of the Holy Spirit. In the evangelical experience one must have a profoundly emotional conversion, or a “new birth.” This new birth was the beginning of a life of holiness, and the congregation scrutinized the convert’s subsequent behavior for unpious actions. Evangelical communities expected converts to shun any “sinful” activities, including drinking, dueling, gambling and horse-racing. The battle that evangelicals warred with southern men’s behavior threatened the established gender identities of white men.5

Although evangelical religion did not essentially challenge the role of white men as household leaders, it condemned aspects of male behavior, and attempted to change the culture of honor. Southern patriarchs did not mildly accept this challenge to their power; in extreme cases they violently displayed their displeasure towards evangelicals. In 1771, a group of Virginian Tidewater “gentlemen” stormed into a Baptist meeting house and attacked a man named Brother Waller. The invading men jerked Brother Waller “off of the Stage, Caught him by the Back part of his Neck, [and] Beat his head against the ground.” While one man lashed Brother Waller with his horse whip, Waller’s “Brethren and Sisters” sung praises to God “so that he could scarcely feel the stripes.”6 In the face of this violent beating, Waller’s yeoman congregants continued with their worship service, and they refused to show deference to their gentry attackers.

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5 Two books that discuss the growth of evangelical religion in the Antebellum era are Donald G. Mathews, Religion in the Old South, and Richard Rankin, Ambivalent Churchmen and Evangelical Churchwomen: The Religion of the Episcopal Elite in North Carolina, 1800-1860 (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1993).
6 John Williams, Journal, MS, May 10, 1771, Virginia Baptist Historical Society, University of Richmond, quoted in Rhys Isaac, Transformation of Virginia, 162-163.
The South’s gender system played a critical role in upholding the organizational structure of southern patriarchy. Evangelical discourse, however, contained elements which positioned itself in opposition to this hegemonic ideology by placing limits on the power of white men. When evangelicals asserted that God was the rightful master of every white man, this placed southern patriarchs under a code of behavior determined by religious discourse.7

The evangelical faiths offered a gender system which may have appealed to white women as a way of wielding more power within the family. Evangelicalism granted white women the moral authority to criticize certain male behaviors. It enabled them to be actors in their own lives under the awnings of Christianity; God was a power greater than their husband’s authority. At times evangelicalism could even encourage women to usurp their husband’s commands, as long as this disobedience was used to fulfill God’s greater authority.

These new religions also assigned greater respectability to white women who belonged to the middling classes and to the economic strata of small farmers. The religious discourse of evangelicals criticized the “southern belles” as merely ornamental, rather than useful. White evangelical women coded a critique of the upper class into their oppositional discourse. Elite women could aspire to the status of the “southern belle”, but white women who did not possess the economic resources and the status of the gentry

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class could not attain such prestige. In this paper I define the “southern belle” as a white women who possessed the economic resources of the South’s gentry class. In contrast to the “evangelical lady”, the belle supported the South’s culture of honor and did not convert to any evangelical faiths. Evangelicals sermonized that white women ought to display “useful” characteristics, such as domestic abilities or religious activities, rather than participate in frivolous activities like parties, dancing, or shopping. Less affluent women could attend prayer meetings and church fairs if they did not have the money or status to rub elbows at parties and other social occasions with elite women. These women identified themselves as “evangelical ladies” and they participated in an evangelical discourse that explicitly criticized the frivolous behavior of the “southern belle.” Thus, evangelical women attempted to redefine respectability and status as the possession of evangelical white women, rather than the domain of affluent, non-evangelical white women.

Perhaps as a result of the advantages these new faiths offered to the female gender, white women consistently converted to evangelical religions in much higher proportions than white men. Evangelical religions, furthermore, attracted southern white women of all classes, although the majority of them belonged to the middling classes. Elite women tended to become evangelical Episcopalians, shunning the high church Anglican practices of their eighteenth-century forebears. Presbyterian and Methodist churches appealed to moderately prosperous southern women, and yeoman farmwomen were often drawn to Baptist services.

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The primary sources in this thesis are drawn from the first half of the nineteenth century. Although evangelical religions in the South grew quickly in both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it wasn't until around 1820 that evangelical faiths became the dominant form of religious worship in the southeast. Thus, my conclusions particularly represent the South after 1820 to the Civil War. The southern evangelical movement began in southern Virginia and North Carolina, and much of the evidence in this paper comes from the small towns of these two states, although I have also drawn some evidence from South Carolina and Georgia. Both town and farm white women are represented in this thesis, although farm women often lived close enough to travel to a church in town.

The first chapter of this thesis, “Evangelical Ladies Versus the Southern Honor Ethic,” explores how southern evangelical religions challenged the honor ethic and the ornamental role of the “southern belle.” The chapter discusses how this ornamental role supported the honor ethic; it also explains why evangelical religions attracted great numbers of southern white women during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Many white southerners, especially those who were members of the elite class, resisted and resented the evangelical activities of white women. These southerners particularly reacted to the threat evangelical ladies offered to the southern honor ethic.

While the first chapter shows how southern evangelicalism challenged the South’s honor ethic, the second chapter, “Sexual Purity, Evangelical Religion, and the Protection of White Women in the Old South,” analyzes how evangelical religion, despite its potential to weaken patriarchy, reinforced the ideology of southern paternalism. Evangelical
discourse contested the limits of southern patriarchy by identifying God as the master of white men. Evangelicals, first defined God as the penultimate ruler of white men, then criticized "sinful" male behavior that could potentially harm white women. These evangelicals attempted to restructure southern ideology by working within paternalism; their ideology did not question the right of white men to be masters of the southern world. Instead, evangelicals insisted that white men adequately "protect" white women, which, in turn, reinforced the position of white men as masters.

Southern evangelicals defined "protection" as behaving according to evangelical strictures, which included providing economically for dependent women, and avoiding "sinful" behavior such as drinking, gambling, and dueling. These religions supported the submissiveness of white women as long as southern men adequately "protected" them. If white women weren't adequately protected according to evangelical dictates, they could become assertive and demand, with the church's support, that men change their behavior. As long as evangelical white women could depend on their male relatives to protect them, they did not threaten the station of white men as masters.

Evangelical religion ultimately provided white women a way to increase their power without disrupting the gender hierarchy that helped maintain the South's slavery-based labor system. While the southern honor ethic required white women to be ornamental complements to their male relatives, evangelical religion emphasized white women's importance as spiritual individuals in their own right. While few white women possessed the economic resources needed to attain the status of the southern belle, many southern women of the middling and yeoman farm classes could adopt the beliefs and
practices of the evangelicals. White women could represent themselves as more useful and perhaps more respectable than southern belles, they could become evangelical ladies.
CHAPTER I

EVANGELICAL LADIES VERSUS THE SOUTHERN HONOR ETHIC

"The idle, luxurious Virginians...they love honor, and generosity, and refinement." Rebecca Broadnax Hicks, an antebellum Virginian, wrote these words while satirizing white planter society in a published novella. While critiquing Virginia society in her fiction, Hicks depicted the evangelical lady as a legitimate role for southern women. Hicks's evangelical women's actions challenged the honor, the luxury, and the refinement dearly loved by her Virginians.

In Hicks's novella, the "southern belle" was represented by the daughter, Louise. Louise possessed "all the peculiar charms of a Virginia country lady, high born and rich"; she displayed a "suburb indolence" and reveled in her weakness and delicacy. Louise typified the role of the southern lady as ornament, gaining prestige only through her beauty, her grace, and her marriage to a rich, honorable man.

Not all of Hicks's characters existed to complement an "honorable" man. In contrast to Louise, the narrator, Jenny, described herself as "more useful than ornamental." Jenny's grandmother understood that Jenny was rather hopeless as a

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10 Ibid., 79.
beautiful southern belle and advised her to “become a missionary to Feejee.” Jenny was not weak and delicate; unlike Louise, she was much more suited to be an evangelical missionary rather than a social success.

Aunt Braxley, the strongest woman in the story, was a fervent evangelical, a “professed expounder and exhorter.” Braxley worshipped her God loudly and firmly with passionate prayers—“fervent, strong, knock-down-and-drag-out improvisations.” She scorned fashion, and produced large tobacco crops by virtue of her skills as a “shrewd, managing business woman.” Aunt Braxley was not shy in public, and “she did not mind rising in a crowded church and giving out an appointment for her neighborhood.” The evangelical Aunt Braxley was also not a retiring, ornamental southern belle; like Jenny, she was more useful than beautiful.

The “southern belle” allied herself with the culture of honor and the southern elite. She was ornamental because her role was to ornament her husband’s arm at social functions. Only elite women could hope to attain the status of the prescriptive “belle”, because she needed to be born to or marry a white man who possessed money and status. White evangelical women, in contrast to the “belle”, participated in an evangelical discourse that explicitly criticized the “frivolous” behavior of the “belles” and implicitly critiqued the gentry class. Many evangelical women may not have possessed the economic resources to buy expensive dresses; likewise many could not hope to attain the social standing of elite women.

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11 Ibid., 80.
12 Ibid., 257.
13 Ibid., 141,257.
Evangelical white women defined themselves apart from the status of their male relations. They correlated piety to respectability, and their individual religious piety did not depend on their husband’s or father’s status in southern society. Unlike the “belles”, these women valued usefulness, which they defined as domestic abilities, or participation in religious activities. Like Aunt Braxley, the “evangelical lady” might help manage a farm, organize religious activities, or consider embarking on a religious mission like Jenny’s possible trip to “Feejee.” These women defined themselves as “evangelical ladies” and they claimed the respectability that white southerners attached to those who could identify themselves as “ladies”.

As evangelical religion spread through the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century South, southerners reevaluated the proper roles for white women. The fictional characters, Aunt Braxley and Louise, represented competing gender definitions for southern women. The construction of the “evangelical lady” vied with the “southern belle” for hegemonic supremacy as the ideal code of behavior for prosperous white women. While elite white women could actually choose between these two prescriptive codes of behavior, both middling white women and the women of yeoman households could only attain the status of the “evangelical lady.” The defection of middling and yeoman women from the code of honor did not actually involve a choice between choosing to be either a “southern belle” or an “evangelical lady”. These white women simply moved from a position of deference towards gentry women to a stance critical of non-evangelical elite women and their cultural values.
Evangelicalism itself can be characterized as a gendered movement which gave some white women the power to redefine themselves. Ultimately these evangelical women worked to restructure the definition of white femininity in southern society. “Evangelical ladies” defined themselves as humans deeply loved and valued by Christ; thus, they possessed importance separate from their husband’s place in the southern hierarchy. Religious women acted on their own beliefs, even contradicting their husbands on occasion. These women became active participants in furthering their own agendas and viewed themselves as more than an audience for their men’s honor.

The significance of women’s evangelical activities in the South was closely tied to the challenge evangelicalism presented to the South’s culture of honor. Before evangelical religion widened the definitions of how a white southern woman could behave, the power a white male relative held over a dependent female was far more absolute. After evangelicalism entered the South, white women could use religion to justify their criticism of “sinful” male behavior. These evangelical white women supported a code of values that contradicted the cultural ideals expressed by the southern honor ethic. Evangelical women and their ministers critiqued male behavior such as drinking, gambling, and dueling. All of these “sinful” behaviors reinforced the South’s honor-based hierarchical society. Evangelical women and their ministers even questioned the value of honor itself.14

The Central Presbyterian, a church newspaper, argued in 1857 that men who worshipped honor “submit themselves to be bound hand and foot, and delivered over to

[honor's] tender mercies, no matter what obligations of prior and more sacred authority
may be violated.” Men who worshipped at “the Pagan temple of Honor” then presented
problems to the evangelical community. As evangelicals worked to create a community
separate from worldly honor, they specifically banned behavior such as immoderate
drinking, dueling, and gambling. Ministers struck directly at the honor system of hierarchy
and deference when they criticized the distribution of alcohol by political candidates to
constituents. This practice symbolized the gift-giving “noblesse oblige” attitude of the
elite to the white community. Evangelicals understood that these elite activities
supported the culture of honor, and their new religiosity presented a challenge to this code
of behavior.

When evangelical religion burst into the eighteenth-century South, it confronted a
white, male-centered culture organized around the quest for honor. Throughout the early
Republic and antebellum eras, the southern honor ethic promoted values like self-
assertion, aggression, and competition. White men sought approval from the male
community through social drinking, fighting, horse-racing, gambling, and dueling. These
activities allowed white men to know their specific place in the social pecking order.
Occasionally white men could even rise in the southern hierarchy by participating in these
homosocial activities.

The explicitly hierarchical nature of the slave South created a fertile ground from
which the honor ethic could grow. Slavery produced the South’s lowest class; enslaved

\[\text{Footnotes:}\]
15 Watchman and Observer, June 19, 1851, p. 178, and Feb. 3, 1848, p. 97, quoted in Ayers,
Vengeance and Justice, 30-31,29.
16 Loveland, Southern Evangelicals and the Social Order, 135.
17 Edward L. Ayers, Crime and Punishment in the 19th-Century American South. (Oxford:
African-Americans existed in a state of dishonor. This allowed the poorest white man to find something in common with the southern elite. The poor white man could do things that a slave could not. He could fight whom he wished, he could drink when he wished, and he could expose his body to physical risk without repercussions from a master. By participating in these behaviors, a white man declared to the rest of society that he was not a white woman or a slave.\(^{18}\)

Antebellum southerners' definition of masculinity focused on men seeking to be honored by their communities. White men reaffirmed their masculinity through honor-seeking activities such as drinking. When men spurned these activities, their manliness could be questioned. Edward Jones Mallett, for instance, quit gambling at the suggestion of his evangelical mother, only to be teased by his friends for his "pious" behavior.\(^{19}\) White men's pursuit of male community approval encouraged the frequency of these honor-seeking activities. As the antebellum era drew to a close, the South stood out as unique in the Anglo-American world for the continued popularity of dueling, and a disproportionate number of southern men died in alcohol-related deaths as compared to northern men.\(^{20}\)

Amidst this frantic search for honor, evangelicalism gained momentum in the southern states. The movement began during the eighteenth century in eastern North Carolina and Southern Virginia. From 1760 to 1830 successive waves of Baptists, evangelical Presbyterians, and Methodists swept the South. Evangelical excitement spread

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 16.
\(^{19}\) Edward Jones Mallett, Memoirs of Edward Jones Mallett (n.p.: by the author [ca. 1885]), 45 cited in Rankin, Ambivalent Churchmen and Evangelical Churchwomen, 119.
\(^{20}\) Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor, 278-281; Ayers, Vengeance and Justice, 14-19.
from the 1801 “Great Revival” at Cane Ridge, Kentucky to previously evangelized states on the eastern seaboard. Between 1830 and 1860 Methodist and Baptist revivals continued to flourish in the South; from the years 1837 to 1839 over 5,000 people became baptized in Virginia alone.\textsuperscript{21}

The evangelical upsurge confronted the elite of southern culture, in particular the “frivolous” behavior of upper-class women. Although evangelical religion also criticized both the backwoods fighting of poor white men and the dueling found in the gentry class, the movement specifically targeted the cultural practices of elite southern women. While the Anglican church taught “proper behavior,... a comely deference to social convention” and tolerated “genteel amusements”, evangelical churches forbade elite recreations such as dancing, ostentatious dress, and drinking.\textsuperscript{22} Evangelicals, after experiencing the “New Birth” of their conversion, committed themselves to a life of holiness that implicitly criticized the ornamentation of upper-class women. Many evangelicals resented the social distinction between their families and the gentry; these families often owned farms, and their economic status placed them in between the gentry and the poorest folk. The Anglican church, in contrast, attracted prosperous planters; those southerners who owned seventy or more slaves overwhelmingly belonged to Anglican congregations. In place of high social rank, evangelicals redefined respectability as usefulness and piety. This allowed evangelical white southerners to define respectability by their own standards, and reject aspects of the elite’s culture of honor.\textsuperscript{23}


\textsuperscript{22} Mathews, \textit{Religion in the Old South}, 9; Rankin, \textit{Ambivalent Churchmen and Evangelical Churchwomen}, xii, 21-22,172-173.

\textsuperscript{23} Isaac, \textit{The Transformation of Virginia}, 161-172; Mathews, \textit{Religion in the Old South}, 35-38.
Great numbers of southern white women converted to evangelicalism during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Although white women converted to evangelical faiths from all sections of southern society, the majority of evangelicals belonged to the middling and yeoman classes. The historian Donald Mathews estimated that women made up about 64 percent of each congregation in the South.\footnote{Donald G. Mathews, “Women’s History/Everyone’s History,” in Vol. 2 of Women in New Worlds: Historical Perspectives on the Wesleyan Tradition, edited by Rosemary Skinner Keller, Louise L. Queen and Hilah F. Thomas (Nashville: Abingdon, 1882): 41; Mathews characterized the Second Great Awakening as perhaps the “greatest organization and mobilization of women in American history.” in “The Second Great Awakening as an Organizing Process, 1780-1830: An Hypothesis.” American Quarterly 21 (1969):23-42.} In some churches, white women constituted a much greater percentage of the communicants. In three North Carolina towns — Wilmington, Newbern, and Edenton — white women made up 90 percent, 86 percent, and 79 percent of the respective church populations.\footnote{Richard Rankin, Ambivalent Churchmen and Evangelical Churchwomen: The Religion of the Episcopal Elite in North Carolina, 1800-1860. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1993:179; For more evidence of women’s participation in evangelical activities see pp. 27-48; Rankin states in his book that “women predominated” every time he found evidence on the sexual ratio of the participants in evangelical activities, (p.34).} The Presbyterian church of Rev. Jesse H. Turner in Fayettesville, North Carolina was a prime example of how white women dominated church services. At one Sunday meeting, Rev. Turner estimated that 70 women and 12 men showed up for service.\footnote{Jesse Turner, Women Ought to Labour in the Church of God: and Men Ought to Help Them; A Sermon Preached for the Benefit of the Female Tract Society, in Fayetteville...1817 (Fayetteville, N.C.: Duncan Black, 1818, quoted in Rankin, Ambivalent Churchmen and Evangelical Churchwomen.} The Raleigh Presbyterian church listed 22 women of its 30 original members in 1816.\footnote{Rankin, Ambivalent Churchmen and Evangelical Churchwomen, 40.} According to southern church membership rolls, the majority of converts to evangelical churches were white women, while white men were more likely to remain unchurched.\footnote{Mathews, Religion in the Old South, 47.}
Evangelical religions attracted these southern women in droves because they offered white women one of the few ways they could modify their domestic life without directly challenging the position of women in southern culture. Within the rigid southern hierarchy, evangelicalism offered better protection to white women than uncontested patriarchy by allowing white women to maneuver definitions of respectability. Before the evangelical reformation, to be respectable meant to be of a higher social class, while after evangelicalism spread through the South, respectability became integrally defined by usefulness, piety, and religiosity.  

An evangelical, godly man offered advantages to women that a worldly, honor-chasing man might not. A man who didn’t gamble, drink intemperately, or duel was more likely to consistently provide economic stability to his wife and daughters.

Evangelical religion offered a divine blessing to women who criticized their husbands’ “sinful” behavior. A southern pastor in the 1850’s not only condemned dueling, he also exhorted white women to stop this deadly activity: “The mothers and daughters of Carolina are involved in a fearful responsibility...It is in their hands to stop this bloodshed and in the name of God I call upon them to do so.” Whether these women were successful in convincing their husbands and fathers to focus on Christ rather than honor is questionable. That these women tried to change cultural constructions to their advantage is important. This new nineteenth-century definition of respectable behavior contained potential advantages to white women that the seventeenth and eighteenth-century definitions lacked. In a culture that presented southern women with few clear ways to

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29 Rankin, *Ambivalent Churchmen and Evangelical Churchwomen*, 172.  
alter the southern gender system, they found a movement that had the potential to improve their lives.

Evangelicals, the majority of whom were women, constituted an organized movement against the behavior of non-evangelical white men. Many southerners, particularly elite men, reacted to this attack by criticizing the behavior of evangelicals as unrefined, emotional and inappropriate. In New Hanover County, North Carolina, one man complained in 1831 that Methodists sounded like "the grunting of a bed of pigs." Earlier in the century, in 1807, Thomas B. Haughton wrote to the future governor of North Carolina that a Methodist conference was the "most detestable farcical scene that ever I beheld." Both races and classes mixed at evangelical services, as observed by Haughton who felt appalled by the mix of various "colours, classes & sects" all congregating at a revival. He was particularly put off by the ecstatic shouting, praying and other forms of experiential religion displayed at the conference.  

White women comprised a significant majority of the white evangelical population in the South, conflating the evangelical challenge into not just a conflict of class values, but also a clash of gendered interests. Evangelical ministers urged male behavior that matched the needs of white women dependent on white men for economic support. Gambling, drinking, and dueling all threatened the well-being of daughters and wives in the old South. The values of elite, non-evangelical southerners battled with those of white women who made up a large proportion of the southern evangelical population. The

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31 Ayer, Vengeance and Justice, 27; Thomas B Haughton to James Iredell, Jr. 11 February 1807, James Iredell Papers, MC Duke University and Moses Ashley Curtis Diary, 1830-36, Moses Ashley Curtis Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill quoted in Rankin, Ambivalent Churchmen and Evangelical Churchwomen, 30.
former group supported the prescriptive ideal of the “southern belle”, while the latter urged white women to adopt the attributes of the “evangelical lady”. These two factions fought for the power to construct the hegemonic definition of white southern femininity.

The following examples demonstrate how evangelical religion enabled some white women to reconstruct gendered definitions of respectable womanhood. Lucy Byrd, the wife of William Byrd II, and Elizabeth Henry Campbell Russell, the sister of Patrick Henry, present two dramatically different constructions of elite southern femininity in the eighteenth century; these two women represent the differences between a “southern belle” and the “evangelical lady” as defined in this paper. William Byrd’s early-eighteenth-century relationship with his wife exemplified the archetypal marriage of a southern patriarch to an ornamental wife. For example, one day Lucy Byrd wished to pluck her eyebrows before driving into Williamsburg, Virginia. Her husband, William Byrd, insisted that his wife not remove any of her eyebrow hair. Lucy and William argued about the matter, but in the end William Byrd confided to his diary that “I refused, however, and got the better of her, and maintained my authority.”

William Byrd directly connected his control over his wife’s appearance to his superior position of master in his household. If he had allowed Lucy to pluck her eyebrows against his will, this would have shown, in Byrd’s eyes, a tendency for domestic anarchy. Lucy’s submission to her husband demonstrated Byrd’s power over his wife; William Byrd measured his success as master by the deference shown to him by members of his household, which included his wife, his

slaves, and his indentured servants. Even Lucy Byrd’s facial hair reflected on her husband’s evaluation of himself; he reserved the right to determine even the shape of his wife’s eyebrows. William Byrd believed that he “must take care to keep all my people to their Duty,” and Lucy Byrd’s duty included dressing and making up her face according to the dictates of her husband.33

By the end of the eighteenth century evangelicalism had spread through Virginia and North Carolina. Elizabeth Campbell Russell, the sister of Patrick Henry, became a devoted follower of Methodism. Unlike Lucy Byrd, Elizabeth Russell did not participate in the South’s culture of honor by dressing in expensive clothes. Both Russell and her husband converted to Methodism at a revival in western Virginia. Instead of contemplating the state of her eyebrows, Elizabeth Campbell Russell dressed simply in sober black clothing. She also gave away horses and money to clergymen, prayed frequently, and lived in a simple log house built by her second husband. James Madison visited Elizabeth Russell when he campaigned for the presidency in 1808. As Madison entered her home, Russell grasped his hands and pressed him to his knees. Then she “knelt beside him and prayed for him.” President Madison afterward exclaimed that “I have heard all the first orators of America, but I have never heard any eloquence as great as that prayer.”34

Lucy Byrd’s concern with clothes, parties, and prestige bolstered the southern honor ethic, while the evangelical religion of Elizabeth Campbell Russell de-emphasized the importance of feminine dress and physical beauty. Many evangelicals believed that dancing was not respectable, if not outright sinful. White evangelical women scorned the “fripperies” and “frivolous” dress of the southern belle, instead dressing like Elizabeth Campbell Russell, in sober black. When elite women chose not to dress ornamentally, they committed a significant act in altering the domestic rules in upper-class southern households. William Byrd II clearly understood that how his wife dressed, including how she choose to pluck her eyebrows, reflected on him and the amount of power he could claim in his household. When evangelical women scorned rich clothes, they criticized gentry women and the construction of the “southern belle.”

Many evangelical women of the middling and yeoman classes probably could not afford to adorn themselves with the “frivolous” dress of elite southern women. Instead of attempting to emulate upper class women, evangelical discourse created space for white women of these classes to reject elite culture. Evangelical discourse not only scorned the behavior of the “southern belle”, it encouraged a new set of gendered behaviors for white women. Before the establishment of evangelical religions in the South, elite white women pursued beauty, sociability, polite accomplishment and charity. Evangelicals, however, encouraged white women to participate in religious activities.35

Elizabeth Campbell Russell exemplifies how evangelical religions allowed white women to create identities independent of their husbands. Religion gave southern white

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women the authority to pray to God and speak out in support of his commandments. Evangelical women could dress simply for Christ rather than extravagantly for their husbands. Lucy Byrd’s status, in contrast, was generated through her association with her husband. Evangelical religion, however, gave prestige to southern white women independent of their husbands. Unable to gain much power or authority through the ornamental role as southern ladies, evangelical piety helped women unseat men as the religious heads of households, especially if their husbands were not devoted evangelicals. Most importantly, religiosity endowed white southern women with a tool to use in convincing white men to behave in ways that benefited women’s lives.

White men could grant or withdraw the prestige associated with honor, but an evangelical white woman could demand respect as a religious being independent of a white man’s evaluation of her worth. The appeal of evangelicalism to white southern women can be encapsulated in the words of Eliza G. Hill:

Though meaner, than the meanest saint,  
My heavenly Guide I see;  
I hear a voice behind me say,  
That Jesus died for me.36

In 1820, Eliza G. Hill contributed this poem to a book of religious poetry compiled and written by women in the Presbyterian Church of Hillsboro, North Carolina. She was just one of many women who found value in themselves through their evangelical faith because evangelicalism granted worth to the lowest members of the southern hierarchy. Even the

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"meanest saint" could claim Christ’s love. The very idea that all humans possessed great value in God’s eyes ran directly counter to the strict southern hierarchy.

This newly established importance enabled evangelical women to participate in religious activities that did not rely on their relationships with men. Whereas a dancing party strengthened the relationship of a wife to her husband, a woman’s participation at a revival did not rely on her connection to her male relatives. Historian Kathleen Brown, when writing about colonial Virginian women, theorized that the appearance of a white woman in public alone “threatened to disturb the scripting of male hierarchies” precisely because these activities weakened her relationships to men such as her father or her husband.37

Evangelical women threatened the South’s male homosocial culture if they participated, apart from their fathers or husbands, in activities outside the home.38 The mere presence of women involved in activities, such as teaching Sunday School, disrupted the patriarchal community that bestowed honor on its fellow members. Every time white women appeared in public apart from their husbands they defined themselves as legitimate individuals apart from their husbands.

White evangelical women participated in religious activities, such as segregated prayer meetings, where women could meet and talk spiritually apart from men. These activities allowed white women to publicly act on their religious beliefs as individuals, not as appendages to their male relatives. Anne Beale Davis, a Methodist preacher’s wife, held

37 Brown, Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs, 281.
38 Ibid., 277-282.
gender-segregated prayer meetings with "the females" in order to achieve more grace and spirituality for herself.\(^{39}\)

Evangelical religion encouraged women to take their spiritual growth seriously, and share this growth in public with their religious community. Frances Bumpas, another devoted Methodist, wrote in 1843 to her diary that a lady criticized her for not sharing her religious thoughts at a prayer meeting. Mrs. Bumpas was herself pleased, however, when she later expressed her feelings freely at a bible class meeting. Devout evangelical women preferred attending prayer meetings with their fellow congregants to pursuing a social life at dances or parties. As Maria L. Spear, an Antebellum South Carolinian wrote in 1829, she felt more pleasure in her Bible class “than I ever did for the night of a party.”\(^{40}\)

Southern evangelical women, in addition to joining prayer groups and attending church meetings, also formed religious clubs and associations. These clubs flourished in the South, particularly in small towns after 1830. Virginia’s Central Board of Foreign Missions reported an increased concern for Christian missions: “the grandeur of the cause seemed suddenly to break upon the astonished eyes of the congregations... male and female missionary associations were organized in the different congregations. Evangelical women also organized female-segregated religious clubs. Methodist women in Lynchburg, Virginia, organized The Female Missionary Society of Lynchburg and The Auxiliary


Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church. These women believed it was their duty to bring the “good news of salvation to those who know not a Savior.”

Evangelical women often organized groups to run church fairs to raise money for their congregations. The Reveille Methodist Church of Richmond, Virginia reported in their board minutes that “the Ladies were allowed to hold the fair in the Basement of the Church.” This word phrasing implies that women organized the fair, and then presented the plan to the board at a church meeting. Although these women needed to ask the church board for permission to use the church basement, the fair was a women’s activity which they organized and carried out together, apart from the male congregants.

Other church groups existed independently of male authority. One such group was the Female Benevolent Society of the Presbyterian Church in Charleston, Virginia. These women determined where they would distribute their funds by majority votes. Moreover, Lexington, Kentucky sported a Bible Society that filled all of its leadership positions with women, including the offices of president, vice-president, and secretary.

Not everyone in southern society greeted this upsurge of white women’s religious zeal with open arms. The assertive actions of evangelical women disturbed other southerners, who found evangelicalism disruptive to both southern society and domestic life. Virginian John Randolph wrote in 1828 that “Our women ... to the neglect of their

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42 Reveille Church Minutes (Board) (VA State Library Archives): 22.

domestic duties and many to the injury of their reputations, are running mad after popular preachers; or forming themselves into clubs of one sort or another that only serve to gratify the love of selfishness and notoriety." Men like John Randolph accurately perceived the threat evangelical women presented to the religious authority of men in their own households and in public. Evangelicalism encouraged southern white women to attend church, even if their husbands would not; when necessary, some women defied their husbands in order to attend. Mrs. Jones of Mecklenburg County, Virginia, disobeyed her husband’s command not to attend her Methodist church meeting. Later she told her husband that she would not disobey the Lord, her “heavenly spouse.” As white women involved themselves in religious activities, they could defend their actions to their male relatives by claiming that Christ’s dictates to help spread the word of God took preeminence over the duty of white women to obey their male relatives.

The threat evangelicalism presented to the authority of white men angered many southerners. Elite women and non-evangelical white men of any class made up the groups most likely to be opposed to the movement. Mrs. Anne Royall, a native of the upper South and a vocal opponent of evangelicalism, wrote in her 1830 published travel diary that Presbyterians “subverted...the relations of even man and wife” in Fayetteville, North Carolina. Royall lamented evangelical women’s activities, complaining that they transformed Fayetteville’s men into “a noble race of Hen-pecked Husbands.”

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45 George Coles, Heroines of Methodism (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1857) 165.
46 Anne Newport Royall, Mrs. Royall’s Southern Tour, or Second Series of the Black Book (Washington: 1830), in microcard from (Louisville, KY: Lost Cause Press, 1967), 147.
was not the only elite woman to criticize the upsurge of evangelicalism in the vicinity of Fayetteville. Years before in 1812, Mrs. Harrington, who lived in Fayetteville, complained how “everybody almost, have become canting Methodists,” changing the town into “the dullest spot upon the globe.” Mrs. Harrington, an elite woman, may have missed the dances and parties that strict Methodists would have viewed as sinful and frivolous.47

Some southern husbands viewed the evangelical conversion of their wives as a calamity. Mrs. Harrington noted male resistance to the evangelicalism spreading in her North Carolina county, when she wrote that “Sherwood Auld’s wife has caught the infection {of Methodism} to the no small mortification of her husband.”48 Harry Hammond Jr., a professor in Georgia, told his fiancé that he was very much against her being born again. He emphasized his position by writing to her that “it would cause me more pain than you can imagine to hear of your being Baptized or anything like that.” The reason why Hammond felt such intense opposition to his future wife joining an evangelical church is hinted at when in a letter he criticized the type of person who needs to “improve” everything. He complimented his fiancé for not acting like this type of women. This lack of meddling made his “blood warmer and [his] eye brighter”. Hammond probably did not want a wife who might try to “improve” him, or question his authority.49

The southerners least likely to convert to evangelicalism were large plantation owners and other individuals belonging to the South’s highest economic class. These elite

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48 Ibid., 40.
men and women may have viewed evangelicalism as a threat to their position as masters in the southern hierarchy. Other southerners simply feared that the power of white men of all classes was being eroded by evangelical women. Mrs. Royall explicitly captured this fear when she wrote that evangelical women of Warrington, North Carolina, in alliance with the ministers, forced "the men into slavery and ignorance." In this particular instance Royall criticized a Methodist named Mrs. Norris, who led the local women in organizing a fair to raise money for their church. Royall characterized this woman as inappropriately bold, and she may have felt that the woman's religious assertiveness threatened the mastery of Warrington's men. Likewise, when the wife of the President of the University of North Carolina organized students to distribute religious tracts, Mrs. Royall called this woman a "she wild-cat."  

Evangelical women defended themselves against criticism by claiming that they didn't speak and act for themselves, but merely carried out God's will. Thus, these southern women used religious discourse to strengthen the impact of their moral preaching. One southern woman's editorial claimed that God himself "prompts our words. He who speaketh out of the mouths of babes may also speak from a woman's pen." God chose women, the article asserted, as the humble instruments to carry out his divine plan.  

White women's evangelical activity widened the definitions of respectable behavior for southern women. Evangelical women could appear in public not as appendages to men, but as testaments to their religious faith; they strove to be useful, not ornamental in their earthly life. At the same time, these women criticized male behavior that could  

50 Anne Royall, Mrs. Royall's Southern Tour, 60,140-141.
potentially harm their family, like drinking, gambling, and dueling. They used religious
discourse to justify their participation in teaching Sunday school, editing religious journals,
and organizing church fairs. Evangelical women not only invaded the homosocial male-
based culture of the South, they undermined the ideal of ornamental white southern
femininity; these women supported a belief system that existed in opposition to values
associated with the southern honor ethic. The evangelical lady ultimately challenged the
southern belle’s legitimacy as an appropriate model for southern womanhood.

CHAPTER II

SEXUAL PURITY, EVANGELICAL RELIGION,
AND THE PROTECTION OF WHITE WOMEN IN THE OLD SOUTH

In 1808, an Episcopalian named John S. West, who was opposed to the Methodist faith quickly spreading through North Carolina, believed that the right of a husband to hold religious authority over his wife was threatened. He emphasized his belief that a "man has by the law of God such dominion over his wife that she is bound to become a member of any church he prefers." This belief may have degenerated into wishful thinking in many domestic situations by 1855 when a plantation owner complained that his wife traveled into town to listen to a minister’s service, instead of his own service which he performed on his plantation. This chagrined husband criticized the minister, calling him a "spoiled pet" of the "females."

Many southerners, such as the above elite Episcopalians, worried that white religious women would usurp their husbands' authority. While on the surface it appears that these women were mounting an attack against the southern gender order, evangelical women themselves supported the South's paternalistic gender system. These women did

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52 John Stanley, *an Introductory Essay, towards the exposure of a Common Lyar*... (Newbern: n.p., 1810), 1, in Francis Lister Hawks Historical Papers, microfilm at Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC quoted in Rankin, *Ambivalent Churchmen and Evangelical Churchwomen*, 36.

53 John Fanning Burgwyn Diary, 17 June [1855], NC Dept. of Archives and History, Raleigh, N.C., quoted in Rankin, *Ambivalent Churchmen*, 163-164.
attack the prescriptive ideology of the "southern belle" and the South's culture of honor, but evangelical religion became the dominant form of organized worship in the South because it did not ultimately dispute the South's paternalistic culture.\footnote{For an analysis of how southern evangelical religion affirmed the South's dominant power structure, see Chapter Five "'Households of Faith': Gender, Power, and Proslavery Christianity", in Stephanie McCurry's Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).}

Evangelical women did present a potential threat to the patriarchal order of southern society by attempting to place limits on white men's behavior. This potential threat never presented a real danger to the organizational structure of the South because evangelical women themselves supported the ideology that white men ought to control the land, white women, and enslaved African-Americans. White evangelical women successfully contested the legitimacy of patriarchy without limits with a religious discourse which argued that white men ought to display paternal behavior. The discourse expounded by evangelicals articulated a very clear gender system. Evangelicals expected specific behaviors from white men and women, and as long as each sex stuck to its side of the bargain, the structure of southern society could continue relatively undisturbed. In the majority of cases, evangelical white women did not attempt to remove white men as masters of their families; they only argued that white men ought to abide by the paternalistic standards of behavior stipulated in evangelical faiths. White evangelical women demanded "protection" from white men by insisting on appropriate behavior. This behavior, for instance, the lack of excessive drinking, dueling, and disorderly behavior. Evangelicals monitored behavior of its congregants through church discipline. If white
men did not provide adequate “protective” behavior towards their wives or children, 
women could seek redress for their grievances against men, through the church.

Evangelical dictates encouraged men to protect white women, a recurrent theme in 
eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth-century southern culture. Evangelicals defined a 
protective man as one who did not drink intemperately, did not get himself killed in a duel, 
and did not threaten his family by gambling money away. While defining a worthy 
master as a protective one, evangelicals concurrently encouraged white women to submit 
to their Christian husbands, just as they were to bow to Christ’s authority over man. 
Evangelicalism offered greater protection to white women while primarily working within 
the white supremacy and patriarchy of the antebellum South.

The one right owed to white women, many white southerners believed, was the 
right to protection. As George Fitzhugh, in a pro-slavery tract, wrote “woman...has but 
one right, and that is the right to protection.” This right to protection, however, came 
with a condition—that of “the obligation to obey ... a husband, lord, and master.” The 
head of a southern family counted on white women’s submission, just as he counted on his 
mastery of his slaves.

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55 On the meaning of white male protection and its role in upholding the power structure of the 
Antebellum South, see Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South 
(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 51; Victoria E. Bynum, Unruly Women: The Politics of Social 
and Sexual Control in the Old South (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 6-8; 

56 Ted Ownby, Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation, and Manhood in the Rural South, 1865- 
War South, but his discussion on the difference between a southern evangelical culture and a masculine 
culture is relevant to my definition of the “protective” qualities of evangelical white men.

57 George Fitzhugh, Sociology for the South, or the Failure of Free Society (Richmond, VA: A. 
Morris, Publisher, 1854) 214-215.
Evangelical white women defined themselves as sexually pure, pious, and respectable. These labels reinforced the role of white southern women as symbols of purity to be protected by white men. White women exchanged their submission for this offer of protection. If white men accepted the dictates of evangelical morality, then white women accepted their husbands as the undisputed head of the household. Most white women did not require their husbands to accept the theological underpinnings of their religion, but they did expect their husbands to protect and provide for them. If, however, men fell short of fulfilling their role of protector, women challenged their authority, and they often used the symbol of Christ to give their complaints greater moral authority.

Southern white men viewed the protection of white women’s sexual “purity” as one of their most important duties. The enslavement of African-American women emphasized the importance that white men placed on the purity of their white female relatives. While white southern culture defined African-American women as “dishonored”, sexually-loose “jezebels”, white women’s sexual “purity” became supremely important for cementing the southern caste system. If a white woman conceived a child with a black man, this undermined the institution of slavery. Since white women’s sexuality could be so threatening to southern power structures, any taint of sexual impropriety could “contaminate” a white woman.

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59 Martha Hodes, “The Sexualization of Reconstruction Politics: White Women and Black Men in the South After the Civil War,” in *American Sexual Politics: Sex, Gender, and Race Since the Civil War*, ed. John Fout and Maura Tantillo (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993): 59-74. Hodes’ article concerns Reconstruction, but her conceptualization of how both race and class determined the sexual “purity” of southern women is critical to this chapter’s thesis.
60 Victoria E. Bynum, *Unruly Women*, 9-10; Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1985), 27-61; Dolores Janiewski,
White southern men identified southern women who needed to leave their home to work as unprotected and possibly impure. While touring the textile mills in the North Carolina Piedmont, one antebellum industrialist commented that this work saved “poor girls who might otherwise be wretched.”^61^ Ironically, prosperous white southerners viewed these very girls as “wretched”, because their position of being poor and unprotected held some similarity to the status of unprotected black women slaves.

The South’s racialization of work also served to “degrade” white women who engaged in work outside the household. African-American women worked at labor considered undignified for white women, and this strict separation of labor further cemented the antebellum South’s racial system. Although southern manufacturers racially segregated the workers in their textile mills, poor white women offered a great affront to the construction of white southern womanhood. They violated the precept of white women’s purity, merely by working outside the home. Likewise, when economic necessity required white women to work in the fields, this also offended prescriptive behavior for white women. Frederick Law Olmsted, while touring the antebellum South, noted that poor white girls who worked outside the home were not respectable and, “it was not agreeable to have them in your house.”^62^ An Alabama agriculturist exclaimed that “drudgeries” hurt white women’s “delicate purity.”^63^


^62^ Frederick Law Olmsted, A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States In the Years 1853-1854... Volume 1 (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1904), 92.

White men felt more than a slight distaste at the thought of women working outside of the home in a "degraded" state. James H. Hammond, an elite South Carolina slaveholder, wrote how he detested poor white girls: "Somehow—God forgive me—I never could bear poor girls. When pretty and pure I pitied but nevertheless avoided them." 64. "Poor girls" lived in the South without an adequate protector, leaving them vulnerable to sexual violence or "seduction." Without an "honorable" protector, white women could indeed become "wretched" in the eyes of some southerners. White southern women may have viewed evangelical religion as a way that they could define themselves as respectable, and they could achieve this respectability without the monetary resources available to elite women.

For white women, the role of the "evangelical lady" held other advantages besides the acquisition of additional protection from their husbands. Evangelical religion reinforced the idea that white women "naturally" behaved piously. 65. Although piety probably could not help a southern women's reputation if economic necessity forced her to work outside her home, religiosity may have been attractive as a tool of protection against being labeled as vulgar or sexually impure. Many moderately prosperous women could never hope to gain the prestige associated with high born affluent women, but they could still claim the status of a lady. If nothing else, piety could give the appearance of protection; a white woman might take comfort in her title as a religious woman, and she

65 Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, 113.
could hope that her religiosity would protect her from the degradation to which poor white women could be subjected.

While piety offered the possibility of protection to white women, it simultaneously offered comfort to anxious southern patriarchs that their wives or daughters would not shame them with a bad reputation. It became essential for antebellum southern white women to be defined as pious if they wished to be classified as respectable. The piety associated with an evangelical woman could also make her more attractive as a prospective bride. One southern man, writing to his friend, encouraged his friend’s pursuit of a woman named Emma Anthony who was “a Methodist of fine family — pretty face and figure as you know and is worth morally 100,000,000 and pecuniarily 7 or 8 thousand.” While the 7 or 8 thousand was obviously an attraction, the moral dependability of Emma Anthony added to her desirability as a wife. The piety of a white woman, like Emma Anthony, could affirm the honor of her future husband. Religion was a double edged sword — protecting a women’s reputation, while more rigidly boxing her into a prescribed definitions of ladylike behavior. One southern woman wrote in 1825, that impiety “is not less sinful in men then in women, but public sentiment exacts a much more strict observance of decorous and pious conduct from our sex than from yours.”

Although white women’s piety may have threatened the exclusive role of her worldly master with the rule of Christ, it also rigidified racial and gender stereotypes that

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67 JA Graves to William Augustus Townes, April 30, 1848, Townes Papers, SCL, quoted in Steven Stowe, Intimacy and Power in the Old South, 98.
affirmed the South's power structure. The critical role played by "pure", protected white women in upholding the southern power structure should not be underestimated. White women became, in the words of historian Jacqueline Dowd Hall, the "ultimate symbol of white male power." While evangelical religions helped strengthen the definition of who could be a "respectable" southern women, white women's piety reinforced the southern hierarchy by making her more pure, more holy, more "white." The symbol of the sexually pure white woman gave white men an object to protect, and it racialized the need to protect white femininity as opposed to black femininity. This construction of pious white femininity increased the distance between "respectable" white southern women and "degraded" black southern women.

Southern church discipline, through church trials, helped to bolster the reputation of white evangelical women as sexually pure. These churches expelled any woman with the taint of sexual impurity. This church intolerance towards feminine sexual impurity bolstered the pure reputations of those evangelical women whom the churches did not cite for sexual misconduct. While the male members often had their punishments revoked and their offenses forgiven, women were rarely forgiven for sexual misconduct, including adultery, abortion, fornication and illegitimacy.

These trials distinguished southern evangelicals from those in the north after 1830. While southern evangelicals continued church discipline into the early twentieth century, northern churches generally ceased their church trials by the early 1830s. Evangelical congregations used church discipline to enforce the reciprocal responsibilities they

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believed white southern men and women owed each other. The church trials may have significantly strengthened the southern construction of white men as "protectors" of pure, pious, white women. While a woman could be excommunicated for "leading a Lewd or Obscene life," like Sister Mary E. Darricot of the Byrd Presbyterian Church in Virginia, church congregations cited men for offenses which might endanger the protection of their wives and children. The Wheller Primitive Baptist Church minutes cited the brothers Nichols, O'Brien and Sumner for abusing their wives. Evangelical religion provided a curb on the authority of white masters over their wives and daughters by bringing men to trial for beating their wives, gambling family money, drinking, fighting and disorderly conduct.71

When evangelical religion swept the South in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, it offered a way for white women to persuade white men to increase their protection of non-elite white women. The Reverend Robertson Gannaway wrote that prior to converting to Methodism, he sinned as a "very profane swearer and persecuted [his] wife."72 Aside from swearing, Gannaway wrote little to explain specifically how he "persecuted" his wife. He could have gambled or drank; both of these common male activities threatened the security of white women dependent on men for economic support and physical protection. The converted evangelical man, who criticized these activities, might offer security to white women that an unconverted man would not. In a patriarchal society that expected white women to obey their male relatives, religion

71 Jean Friedman, Enclosed Garden, 17,18.
offered a way for white women to demand better protection from their husbands without violating the social order of the South.

The line between a respectable white woman and a degraded one often depended on successful protection by a white man. If white women perceived that evangelicalism could encourage protection, they might use it. The protection of white men was all-important to a white woman, who lived in constant danger of that protection disappearing. Many white southern women lived in vulnerable situations, and circumstances could all too easily force these women outside of the house into "unrespectable" work. Elizabeth Killbrough Carrigan experienced how easy it was to lose a protector. When her husband died, her brother-in-law sued for the family's North Carolina farm. In the absence of familial support, Carrigan moved herself and her children to a textile factory in Gaston County, near Charlotte, North Carolina, with the expectation that her daughter could earn money in the textile mill. When her husband lived, he provided adequate economic support for his family. Once moderately prosperous, after her husband died the family descended to the "degraded" status of poor southern women.73

The evangelical discourse of southern whites by the 1830s increasingly correlated white "respectable" femininity with spirituality, piety, and salvation.74 The religious fervor that many evangelical women displayed caused some men to assume that white women's capacity for religious feeling far exceeded that of men. These women might possess the ability to save not only their own souls, but the souls of their male relatives. The Reverend William Hooper claimed that women "not only have greater facilities for working out your

73 Freeze, "Poor Girls Who Might Otherwise Be Wretched..." in Hanging by a Thread, 38-39.
74 Mathews, Religion in the Old South, 112-113.
own salvation, but have an importance influence on the salvation of your male relations."\(^{75}\)

White women became responsible for teaching religious values to their children, husbands, and Sunday school classes.

Southern evangelical women’s involvement in church activities reinforced the association of white femininity with religious piety. The Reverend Samuel Worchester, for example, wrote a letter to the *Religious Intelligencer* praising the charitable work of southern women’s clubs and comparing the women involved to those who followed Jesus and assisted the apostle Paul. In 1818, the Rev. Samuel C. Caldwell of Mecklenburg County, NC wrote of his surprise at the “unusual assistance” the ministers of his county received from multiple charitable institutions, tract societies and Sunday schools run by women. He specifically commended “the ladies in Charlotte and Sugar Creek,” North Carolina for making their pastor a member of the American Bible Society and of the United Foreign Missionary Society. Evangelical women were also recognized by the Tract Society of Charleston, South Carolina, which praised “the execution of the female sex in these pious labors” of distributing religious tracts.\(^{76}\)

Aside from joining church clubs, by the 1850’s a few prosperous evangelical women managed and edited southern religious periodicals. In North Carolina and Virginia, southern women ran three of these papers: *The Weekly Message*, from Greensborough, North Carolina,; *The Kaleidoscope, A Family Journal Devoted to*


Literature, Temperance, and Education, from Petersburg, Virginia; and The Family Christian Album, published in Richmond, Virginia. The three women who ran these journals all labeled themselves as the “proprietresses” and “editresses” of their periodicals. Both the editresses of the Weekly Message and the woman who ran the Kaleidoscope belonged to the Methodist church. The Family Christian Album itself is nondenominational, but its articles adhere to the style of faith determined by evangelicalism.77

These southern family periodicals spread the message that Christian women should dutifully provide moral and religious instruction to their sons, husbands and fathers. The proper sphere of women, these journals exclaimed, was “the celestial sphere!” Dutiful women, furthermore, ought to be “angelic ministrants” not only to their relations, but to the “sons and husbands and fathers of the nation.” God himself was responsible for endowing white women with the qualities of gentle persuasion and goodness. These God-granted qualities could justify the moral superiority of southern women and their criticism of any male behavior that ran counter to evangelical dictates.78

Because women could not attain status in the same manner as men, wives and daughters might gain more worth in the eyes of others through the cultivation of piety. This piety could be used to prop up the moral authority of white women — offering them a chance at greater power in the domestic circle. Evangelical women could even use the

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77 These three papers are The Kaleidoscope: A Family Journal, Devoted to Literature, Temperance, and Education (VA Historical Society), of Petersburg, VA, ed. by Mrs. R. B. Hicks; The Family Christian Album (VHS), of Richmond, VA, ed. by Mrs. E. P. Elam; and The Weekly Message (The Southern Collection, The University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill) of Greensborough, NC, ed. by Mrs. Frances Bumpas after her husband, Sidney D. Bumpas, died in 1851.

superior authority of God, in alliance with their ministers, to explicitly challenge the behavior of white men by decrying the prevalence of dueling, drinking, and gambling. Representative E. A. Nisbet proclaimed women’s highest duty as “the moral regeneration of the world” in a published letter to the *Southern Ladies Book*. He reminded men that they “do much need regeneration, in some particulars at least.”

Southern evangelicals placed religious white women on a pedestal of superior piety and virtue relative to white men. From this pedestal evangelical women could critique the behavior of their husbands if they acted counter to evangelical dictates. Evangelicalism encouraged women to instill religious and moral values in both their children and their husbands. Southern religious periodicals identified the mother as responsible for not only her family’s fate after death, but for their actions in this world: “Yes, on the MOTHER to whom Almighty God instructs the charge of immortal souls, will rest the responsibility of their acts.” White women used moral suasion not only to advocate morality, but to further causes that would benefit their own interests, such as discouraging their husbands from drinking.

Evangelical women who encouraged temperance did not work for reforms completely out of the goodness of their hearts: they used moral suasion to achieve interests specific to white, moderately prosperous women. They understood that

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drunken men presented a potential threat to their families and their wives. Rebecca Broadnax Hicks, a Methodist editor of a Virginian periodical that urged temperance, viewed herself as a friend to her sex "determined to do all in [her] power to arrest an evil which, like all social evils, falls heaviest upon her [women] who is least able to bear it." Mrs. Hicks could empathize with other women who had to put up with drunks; Hicks’ own husband died of “Del[irium] Tremens,” which was commonly understood to be an alcohol-related death. Her husband was not a very good provider for her; in a letter to her father, Mrs. Hicks complained that “Dr. Hicks rests rather too much.”

Southern evangelicals targeted intemperance as behavior that ran counter to a godly life, and they attacked both elite and poor people’s alcohol consumption. Alcohol was no stranger to the South, and during the antebellum era many southern men died as a result of alcohol consumption. Even unmarried southern women understood the great dangers that a drunk husband could offer to his family. Amanda Roberts, an eighteen-year-old Virginian women in 1844, observed the drunken behavior of a Mr. Carr, and judged this man to be “a perfect wreck of former hopes...given up to that mighty destroyer intemperance.” Intemperance is a perfect example of a male activity which threatened the protection of dependent women and children.

When evangelical women lacked adequate protection they felt justified in using evangelical structures to challenge the behavior of their husbands. Jane Chancellor Payne,

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82 “Our First Temperance editorial,” The Kaleidoscope 1:16 (May 2, 1855): 124.
a Methodist and an Antebellum Virginian, exemplified how a southern white woman could use her religion to insist on better protection from her husband. She kept a diary describing her husband's intemperance and how evangelical religion helped combat his alcoholism. The diary starts out with a dedication for her daughter and a poem describing the harm that alcohol wrecked upon her life:

When I think upon our once bright home
And comforts that we had
And now reflect that we have none
It almost runs me mad.  

Although Jayne Chancellor Payne was born to a prosperous family, her household was barely viable because of her husband's frequent unemployment and the money he spent on alcohol. She inherited real estate and slaves, but her husband sold all of the items and spent the cash. He usually worked as a teacher, and Jane Chancellor Payne took in needlework to supplement their income. Their precarious economic situation meant that the family often moved around Virginia, and they even boarded with her brother, a clerk working in civil service in Washington DC for a time. Jane Payne's frustration and anger poured into her journal entries and her poetry. Her husband insisted on treating his friends to alcohol, and Mrs. Payne despaired of his detachment from religion and Christ.

The complaints and pleas of Mrs. Payne were apparently ignored by her husband, and Mrs. Payne concluded the "no earthly power" could weaken the hold alcohol had over her husband. Mr. Payne accused his wife of usurping his authority with her nagging, and apparently Jayne Chancellor Payne decided to search for a more powerful authority than a

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85 Jane Chancellor Payne, Diary, 1834-1856, Manuscripts, Virginia Historical Society, March 4, 1835.
86 Ibid., April 19, 1835; March 21, 1834.
mere wife to effect change. In her despair Jayne turned to evangelical religion. On November 16 of 1839, she attended a church meeting, and being pleased that the service was mixed with both Methodists and Baptists, she hoped that the spirit of God would “unite the soldiers ...”. Economic circumstances forced the family to move from Fauquier County, Virginia, to further west in Clarksburg, Virginia, “with the hope of bettering our spiritual as well as temporal concerns for a firm belief that change of society would beget change of habits.” Apparently Mrs. Payne hoped that a change in location and neighbors might help curb her husband’s drinking habits.87

Mrs. Payne persuaded her husband to accept evangelical religion in 1843 when he joined a Methodist church and received a baptism. Mrs. Jayne Payne felt that she had won a battle against intemperance because her “husband had given public evidence of his allegiance to a heavenly master”. It is significant that Mrs. Payne noted the authority of a master over her husband. Her happiness did not last as Mr. Payne subsequently withdrew from their church. He began drinking again, and in a drunken rage, threatened to abandon her and take their children with him. Mrs. Payne wrote in her journal how this threat deeply angered her because when they married he had sworn to “protect” her. He had failed in his most important obligation as a white southern man. In June of 1843, Mrs. Payne felt such despair that she wrote in her diary “if there is a hell on earth it is that experienced by the wife of a drunkard.”88

For the next seven years Mr. Payne alternated between living a life of temperance and evangelical religion, and falling back into alcoholism. In 1845, they joined another

87 Ibid., August 15, 1835; February 10, 1838; November 16, 1839; December 31, 1841; April 5, 1843.
88 Ibid., April 5, 1843; April 15, 1843; June, 1843.
Methodist church in Parkensburg, Virginia. After becoming church members, her husband signed the Washington Temperance Pledge. His wife was “grateful to God for the Temperance of her husband.” Her husband even became a secretary for the church officers, which greatly pleased his wife. The next time when her husband began to drink, the congregation rallied around Mrs. Payne. The congregants prayed for Mr. Payne in church and in his house, and Mr. Payne successfully gave up alcohol, and the church reinstated him as a member. Her husband’s temperance was not always constant, but in 1851 Mr. Payne gave up alcohol for good and joined the Sons of Temperance. Mrs. Payne praised the church members for their help in admonishing and advising her husband when he would fall back into drunkenness. In particular, she was very thankful the church congregants did not excommunicate him.89

Jayne Chancellor Payne’s diary exemplified the advantages evangelical religion provided to some southern women. The church rules and congregants chastised her husband when he indulged in alcohol, but the church community did not thrust him from their midst. Instead, the evangelical community rallied around his wife, lending her support and exhorting her husband to embrace the sober evangelical lifestyle once again.

When Mrs. Payne wrote in her diary that her husband accepted a “heavenly master” at his Methodist baptism, her word choice was extremely significant. After her husband became an evangelical, he recognized that a higher plane of rules and dictates existed that ought to govern his behavior. Mr. Payne publicly recognized that in his own house he did not rule supreme; the behavioral restrictions demanded by an evangelical God replaced the absolute mastery of the white southern male. Prescriptions for

89 Ibid., March 9, 1845; March 9, 1845; December 23, 1855.
evangelical men and women did not ultimately threaten the white man's right to head his household; evangelical theology confined the behavior of white men and women to the explicit role of master and subordinate. If a husband, however, did not fulfill his prescribed role, the evangelical wife felt justified in marshaling her church's resources against her husband.

Many evangelical women made a bargain — submission to white men, in exchange for Christian behavior from them. White evangelical women would not trade their submission for male protection unless a man could provide them with economic stability. The white women most likely to accept this bargain belonged to moderately prosperous families. The majority of southern evangelicals belonged to the South's middling and yeoman classes; they were neither elite, nor poor. While yeoman farmer's wives could participate in this exchange, the economic situation of "unprotected" poor and working-class women, like those who worked in the textile mills, found themselves in an economic situation which did not enable them to trade "submission" for male "protection". These poor women existed outside of the protection of white men for various reasons. Members of the elite probably perceived these working-class and poor women as lacking respectability because they lacked adequate male "protection" in terms of economic support. White women who lacked the ability to trade their submission for protection were more likely to assert their rights in ways that directly challenged the gender system. After all, poor women could not reap the dividends of either the pure patriarchal gender system advocated by elite men or the gender system presented by evangelicals. Likewise, white women living in one of Richmond's working class neighborhoods, the Oregon Hill

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90 Donald G. Mathews, Religion in the Old South, 37-38.
community, rioted during the Civil War when food became scarce and expensive. At these times of stress, evangelical religion may have given poor and working-class white women the authority and confidence to protest when they did not receive the protection that so many southerners saw as a white woman’s right. The following two examples show poor and working-class white women, who existed outside the framework of white male protection, and directly challenged southern gender roles.

Agriculture dominated most of the South, but the Piedmont region of North Carolina contained several textile mills. White girls and women made up the vast majority of the work force in these mills. In 1850, North Carolina contained 28 textile factories, with a labor force of 1,117 female workers and 442 male workers. Mill owners often searched for widows with girl children because they would work for low wages. For example, the 1860 census listed widows as the head of the household for 46 percent of the population in Randolph County, North Carolina, a region which provided mill labor. These families often did not possess a male provider, and white women and girls earned their own wages by working outside the home. White southern men, by their own definition, failed to adequately protect these white southern women.91

In 1850, one of these factory owners forbade his workers from attending Methodist church services because he disliked the “egalitarian ideals” in the sermons. The “morale of organization” broke down in the factory, and someone burned down one of the

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mill’s buildings. The owner restored order only when he retracted the order concerning attending church and rehired several workers he dismissed for going to the services.92

In this example poor southern women rioted when barred from church services. Another instance of civil disorder instigated by evangelical women occurred during the Richmond Bread riot. The Civil War had driven up bread prices drastically, and the city apparently was having trouble distributing food to needy families. A group of working-class women from the poor neighborhoods of Richmond met at the Belvidere Hill Baptist Church to organize a demonstration protesting the food shortage. These southern women decided they wouldn’t put up with the food shortage without making a public statement of their outrage.93

The ensuing bread riot violated prescriptive gender constructions that white southern women should obey white male authority. The Richmond Examiner responded angrily to this violation, labeling the women who participated in the riot “a handful of prostitutes, professional thieves, Irish and Yankee hags and gallows birds.”94 The newspaper could not admit that white, native-born southern women would so blatantly violate “proper” feminine behavior by rioting in the streets of Richmond.

For moderately prosperous white men who provided their families with adequate “protection” and economic support, evangelical religion often reinforced the rigid southern power hierarchy. When these men failed to act in a protective manner, white

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evangelical women of the yeoman, middling, and elite classes all worked within the hierarchy to meet their own needs. Jayne Chancellor Payne, for example, marshaled her church's resources to combat her husband's drunkenness. Evangelical religion—through church trials, peer pressure and other avenues—provided the means for curbing male behavior undesirable to white women while not challenging the right of Christian white men to command white women. White southern men did not have to abdicate their roles as masters of their own household if they behaved according to evangelical dictates. These dictates promoted the concept that an important duty of white southern men was the protection of white women. The ideal of the protective white man fed into a pro-slavery ideology that supported the South's power structure; the successful protection of white women helped white southerners differentiate black women from white women. White southerners could portray black women and white women as opposites—if black women labored in the field, white women did not.

Some white southern women, unlike moderately prosperous evangelicals, lived beyond any hope of economic viability or male protection. These women could not strike the bargain of submission to men in exchange for protection. The combination of poor white southern women and evangelical religion could be explosive—as demonstrated by both the bread riot and the textile workers' disorderly behavior. White evangelical women only blatantly defied their prescribed role in the gender system if confronted with dire economic circumstances. If white men did not adequately provide protection to southern evangelical women, the women could and did challenge the right of men to rule.
CONCLUSION

Prior to the advent of southern evangelicalism in the mid-eighteenth century, the principles of the southern honor ethic dominated hegemonic gender norms. Prescriptively, the only prestigious role for a white woman within this system was as a social ornament to her husband's position in society. After evangelical faiths spread throughout the South, the evangelicals' religious discourse positioned itself in opposition to the southern honor ethic and challenged the prescriptive ideal of the "southern belle."

Evangelical religions attracted great numbers of southern white women from the middling and yeoman classes, largely because evangelicalism offered non-elite white women the opportunity to maneuver definitions of respectability to their own advantage. White evangelical women utilized religious discourse to mount a class-based criticism of elite southern women. After evangelicalism spread through the South, evangelical women used religious discourse to correlate respectability to piety. Evangelical white women, the majority of whom belonged to the middling and yeoman classes, were not able to attain the "respectability" of the "southern belles." Unable to afford the "fripperies" and expensive dresses of affluent southern women, they rejected the elite's culture of honor and redefined themselves as "evangelical ladies."

Evangelical religion reinforced the ideology of southern paternalism by promoting white men as the "protectors" of dependent white women. Church trials, which demanded
that white men act protectively towards white women, distinguished southern evangelicals from their northern counterparts. Southern congregations continued their trials into the early twentieth century, long after the practice of church discipline had ceased in the north. Some historians have characterized these church trials as evidence of southern white women’s lack of agency and victimization. White men did preside at these trials, and white southern women obviously lacked agency in the sense that they could not participate in passing judgment on the defendant. These trials did, however, support white evangelical women in their prosecution of drunk or disorderly white men, and they also ensured that white female church members of good standing possessed a reputation for sexual purity. By enforcing a strict reputation of white evangelical women as sexually pure, church women of good standing women helped protect their own reputations by correlating religiosity to purity.  

Evangelical discourse ultimately placed limits on the boundaries of acceptable white male behavior, and the discourse insisted that husbands and fathers protect their female dependents. This definition of “protection” included avoiding alcohol, dueling, gambling, and other activities that threatened the security and prosperity of white “respectable” women; if white men resisted evangelical proscriptions, women justified their complaints of male behavior with divine support. Evangelicalism allowed white women to criticize “sinful” male behavior. Consequently, the evangelical faiths supported a gender system which may have offered white women a way of wielding increased power within their families. Evangelical religions did, however, support a clear gender system within a paternalistic framework. These religions insisted on the submissiveness of white

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95 Jean Friedman, Enclosed Garden, 17,18.
women, as long as southern men avoided “sinful” behavior and provided adequate “protection.” Evangelical white women, the majority of whom belonged to the middling and yeoman classes, used religious discourse in an attempt to improve their lives without threatening the rigid social order that supported the South’s slave labor system.
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