The Politics of Emasculation: The Caning of Charles Sumner and Elite Southern Manhood on the Brink

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THE POLITICS OF EMASCULATION

The Caning of Charles Sumner and Elite Southern Manhood on the Brink

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

by

James Corbett David

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

Master of Arts

Approved by the Committee, March 2004

Carol Sheriff, Chair

James N. McCord, Jr.

Scott Reynolds Nelson
For My Parents
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Finally, this thesis is dedicated to my parents, George A. David, Sr. and Margaret Grace David, in humble recognition of their steadfast enthusiasm and support over the years. I love them both dearly.
ABSTRACT

In “The Crime Against Kansas,” Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts condemned the institution of slavery and accused several of its most powerful advocates of having illegally conspired to extend their influence into “the virgin” territory of the American West. During the speech, Sumner excoriated the state of South Carolina and was particularly uncharitable toward its beloved Senator Andrew Pickens Butler. Avenging these insults days later, Butler’s second cousin, Representative Preston S. Brooks of South Carolina, approached Sumner at his desk on the Senate floor and beat him into sanguinary unconsciousness with a walking cane.

While historians have long recognized the caning of Charles Sumner as an important signpost on the road to the Civil War, they have overlooked the role that gender ideology and gendered rhetoric played both in the Sumner-Brooks affair itself and in the onset of the war more generally. In this thesis, I reread Sumner’s speech, the poetics of the caning, and the reactions it elicited throughout the country in terms of what they reveal about elite southern manhood and the influence of its ideals on national politics.

Most scholars of the affair have asserted or assumed a pro-Brooks consensus in the South, but some southern Whigs openly repudiated the caning. While most southern men admired passion and thrived on physical confrontation, Brooks’s southern detractors prided themselves on self-control, moderation, rationality, and cooperation—many of the same principles, in short, that drove thousands of white southerners to resist secession and support the Union outright during the Civil War.

While the Sumner-Brooks affair clearly suggests southern diversity (even among elite white men), political rhetoric throughout the country seems to have functioned in remarkably similar ways during this period. By associating adversaries with femininity, childhood, beastliness, and blackness, the nation’s leading men sought to divest them of the most basic prerequisite for political authority—manhood. Manliness and emasculation were, in short, touchstone themes in the political culture of antebellum America, and, as the Sumner-Brooks affair indicates, a preoccupation with these concepts helped to propel the nation to the brink of dissolution.
THE POLITICS OF EMASCULATION:

THE CANING OF CHARLES SUMNER AND ELITE SOUTHERN MANHOOD

ON THE BRINK
PROLOGUE

On May 19, 1856, Charles Sumner stood on the threshold of immortality. It was a defining moment for the Senator from Massachusetts, and one very much of his own design. "The Crime Against Kansas," the two-day oration he was about to commence, had been long in gestation, and the questions it was to address had been heavy on the nation's heart for nearly two years. Everyone who had crowded into the Senate chamber that day—from the men and women in the galleries to the statesmen themselves—had been conscious for some time that the country was approaching a crossroads, a pivotal point in human history even, where the future of human bondage on the one hand and that of the United States on the other might once and for all diverge.

Two years earlier, the Senate had passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Designed and championed by Illinois Senator Stephen A. Douglas, the new law overturned the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which had prohibited slavery in the Louisiana Purchase territory north of the 36°30' line, by granting white, male settlers the right to decide the fate of slavery in Kansas for themselves. Popular sovereignty, theretofore merely a vague abstraction in the minds of ambitious politicians, seemed to many Americans the most democratic solution to the long looming problem of slavery in the American West. In practice, however, the theory proved to be a nightmare of mounting hostilities and violence.
In anticipation of the Nebraska bill’s passage, a Massachusetts man named Eli Thayer began to organize the Emigrant Aid Society (later renamed the New England Emigrant Aid Company) to encourage antislavery settlement and the election of a free-state government in Kansas. When the decisive first legislative elections were held in March 1855, however, the free-state settlers were overwhelmed by scores of armed proslavery men, who, under the command of former Senator David R. Atchison, had stormed into the territory from neighboring Missouri. Mainly through voter fraud and intimidation, these “boarder ruffians” succeeded in electing a proslavery legislature that March. In an attempt to restore order in the territory and stem the flowing tide of violence there, President Franklin Pierce and federal Governor Andrew H. Reeder chose to recognize the new proslavery government, which was based in the town of Lecompton. Soon after, the advocates of free soil set up their own governing body in Lawrence. When Sumner rose to speak on May 19, 1856, then, two opposing governments presided in Kansas, and civil war loomed ominously the horizon.

A paean to the New England Emigrant Aid Company and a wholesale condemnation of slavery, “The Crime Against Kansas” called for the immediate admission of Kansas into the Union as a free state. Sumner’s plea was applauded in many sectors of the North for its eloquence and boldness, but virtually everyone in the South saw the speech as an orgy of vulgarity and vituperation, a reprehensible abuse of free speech. Many of Sumner’s metaphors smacked of sexuality, and the speech was speckled with personal attacks on proslavery senators like Andrew Pickens Butler of South Carolina. Appalled at his harsh ridicule of their longtime
advocate in the Senate, South Carolinians also bristled at Sumner’s suggestion that their ancestors had played a less than gallant role in the American Revolution.

Unbeknownst to Sumner, a relative of Butler’s was in the audience on May 19. Preston S. Brooks, Representative from the Edgefield district of South Carolina, was incensed after hearing day one of “The Crime Against Kansas.” His family and state had been publicly assailed, and the code of southern honor demanded an extra-verbal reprisal. No southern man could suffer such a blatant attack upon the honor and manhood of his state, ancestry, and kin. After considering his options on the evening of May 20, Brooks resolved to “whip” Sumner with an eleven and one-half ounce gutta-percha cane at his earliest opportunity. A formal audience, or duel, could be foregone, as Brooks considered “Black Republicans” like Sumner moral and social inferiors.

On the morning of May 21, Brooks waited nervously for Sumner outside the Capitol. For reasons that remain unclear, the Senator did not enter the building per his usual route, and no blood was shed that day in Washington. In Kansas, however, the bloodletting continued, as a group of proslavery men attacked the free-soil capital at Lawrence. On the morning of May 22, news of the event had not yet reached Washington, and, with unshaken resolve, Brooks again awaited his mark, this time moving back and forth between the porter’s lodge and the Capitol steps. Disappointed in his hopes to confront Sumner out of doors, he entered the Capitol building some time around noon. Finding the Senate in session, he waited in the lobby opposite the chamber’s main aisle. The Senate was set to adjourn early in memoriam of Missouri Representative John G. Miller, and the day’s business ended at 12:45 PM. Upon
adjournment, Brooks took a seat in the back row of the chamber, four desks to Sumner’s left. After waiting for several women to exit the hall, he approached the Senator, who remained in his chair briskly franking copies of “The Crime Against Kansas” to send to friends of the antislavery cause. The cane gripped firmly in his right hand, Brooks reached Sumner’s desk and spoke words to the following effect: “Mr. Sumner, I have read your speech twice over carefully. It is a libel on South Carolina, and Mr. Butler, who is a relative of mine.” Before the end of this statement, Sumner began to move in his desk (which was bolted to floor) as if to rise. With this, Brooks landed a blow across his face, continuing the assault while fellow South Carolina Representative and friend Laurence M. Keitt brandished a cane of his own to discourage any interference. New York Representative Edwin Murray eventually managed to seize Brooks by the arm, while Sumner—by this point a bloody, unconscious heap—fell into the arms of Edwin Morgan, another New York Representative. In the end, Brooks had stricken Sumner between twelve and thirty times about the head and shoulders with all of the passion and force he could muster.

The assault was generally applauded by southern whites and summarily denounced in the North. Dominated as it was by politicians either from or friendly to the South, the Senate declined to investigate the caning, leaving Brooks’s fate up to his peers in the House. In that body, a committee of investigation was appointed, which, after interviewing nearly everyone involved in the incident save the assailant himself, submitted a majority report recommending that Brooks be expelled from the House along with a minority report asking that no action be taken and that the South Carolinian be left at the mercy of the civil courts. Ultimately, the majority report
failed to garner the two-thirds majority needed to expel Brooks, although he and Keitt were both officially censured. Having been subjected to the shame of investigation, Brooks and Keitt promptly resigned their seats, only to be resoundingly reelected by their constituents.

The caning of Charles Sumner strengthened the case being made by members of the nascent Republican Party that the slave interest was composed of barbarians who would stop at nothing, not even the Constitutional provision for the security of free speech, to settle their conflicts and maintain power. In this way, the caning, in tandem with the sack of Lawrence, had an immense influence on the northern men who elected Abraham Lincoln in 1860, setting off a chain of secession that ultimately led to the Civil War.
INTRODUCTION

Scholars of the Civil War era in American history are familiar with the basic contours of the Sumner-Brooks affair. The preceding narrative is intended not only to provide those outside the field with background, but also to reflect for readers of all backgrounds the current conventional wisdom surrounding these events. In the latter regard, the narrative illustrates what historians have included and, more importantly, what they have overlooked in their interpretations of the affair. Perhaps the most glaring of these omissions is sustained gender analysis. Conceptions of manhood have received little more than a one-dimensional gloss in discussions of the caning, and scholars of elite male culture in the Old South have largely neglected gender as a mode of historical inquiry. My hope is that a gender-oriented investigation will complicate and enrich our understanding of the Sumner-Brooks affair and, further, that broader truths about mid-nineteenth-century American politics and culture will emerge in the process.

This is a study of southern gentlemen, their values as well as their deeds. No subculture can be understood in a vacuum, however, and my attention will often turn to the other people, as well as the animals, that inhabited the lives and imaginations of elite southern men. The word elite is not intended to suggest the existence of a cohesive American, or even southern, ruling class.¹ Rather, it acknowledges that the

¹ For the early emergence and ultimate failure of a quasi-aristocratic ruling class in the United States, see Gary J. Kornblith and John M. Murrin, “The Making and Unmaking of an American Ruling
men who drove the country to war during the 1850s were of a privileged, distinctly educated sort. "Throughout the nation, in every kind of milieu and at every level of government," historian Edward Pessen has observed of this period, "political power was commanded not by common men but by uncommonly well-to-do men of prestigious occupations and families."² This is not to say that everyone who held national office from the age of Jackson up to the Civil War was born to privilege. In the South, the poor but educated young man could rise to a position of public leadership, but only, as historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown notes, "if he could qualify as an active member of the male elite."³ Elite mores had to be learned and fastidiously observed by non-elites who aspired to political power in the Old South. Education, in both its classical and social forms, gave statesmen (and the men who covered politics in the nation’s leading newspapers) a public voice and influence that the vast majority of Americans were simply without. Members of the political elite and their values, in short, dominated the sectional debate that preceded the Civil War.

What it meant to be a gentleman varied widely in the United States during the first half of the nineteenth century. This was true not only across sectional lines, but also within them. Sociologist Michael Kimmel has argued that any study of manhood must contain two general foci: the history of the dominant ideal of "man" and that of

² Edward Pessen, *Jacksonian American: Society, Personality, and Politics*, Revised Edition (Urbana, Ill., 1985), 77-100, quotation on 100. Pessen argues that this unequal distribution of political power was even more pronounced at the start of the Civil War than it had been earlier in the century; see 99.

³ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *The Shaping of Southern Culture: Honor, Grace, and War, 1760s-1880s* (Chapel Hill, 2001), 66.
the competing versions that coexist with it. Following Kimmel’s lead, I will identify and analyze the hegemonic strain of elite manhood within the slave states along with the most important of its rival forms, referred to hereafter as Whig manhood. The mode of manliness embodied by Preston Brooks was a hubristic, confrontational, passionate, often violent ideal, one to which the majority of the region’s leading men aspired. Some sons of the South, however, such as Kentucky Senator John J. Crittenden, attached very different meanings to the concept of gentlemanliness and publicly condemned Brooks in the wake of the caning. Their ideology of manhood counseled restraint, moderation, compromise, and non-violent conflict resolution generally. Few southern statesmen acted in perfect accord with either the imperatives of the Brooksian or Whig model, of course. The degree to which they gravitated toward one or the other of these poles, however, often corresponded to radical or conciliatory politics throughout the sectional crisis.

The effect that the caning of Charles Sumner had on the political climate of the 1850s has been widely discussed. The affair has long been recognized, in tandem with Bleeding Kansas, as both an expression of and a catalyst for the cultural and political alienation that led to the Civil War. At least two scholars have gone so far as to argue that the caning, independent of the troubles in Kansas, was the inciting event of the sectional schism. Another supports this conclusion by crediting Sumner with escalating Republican antislavery rhetoric through the use of sexual metaphors in “The Crime Against Kansas.” A more recent study contends that the caning illustrates

the increasing prominence of slavery, race, and democracy in the political ideology and discourse of the period. While, on the whole, these interpretations remain compelling, all of them assume a pro-Brooks consensus in the South and promote a more or less monolithic understanding of elite southern manhood. The latest examination of the affair, for example, flatly states, "For southerners, Brooks’s actions were manly and honorable, vindicating not just his family but also his state, section, and slavery."5

Several historians of elite male culture in the Old South have discussed the caning in the context of what Wyatt-Brown has famously termed "southern honor."6 Few of these authors would argue with historian Brenda Stevenson’s assertion that honor “was a male privilege and priority” in the Old South.7 Nonetheless, gender is addressed only implicitly in their work, and manhood is generally treated as if it were too obvious an aspect of honor to merit much serious analysis. In this way, the

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6 For specific references to the caning in this literature, see Wyatt-Brown, Shaping of Southern Culture, 195-98; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South (New York, 1982), 35; Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., Violence and Culture in the Antebellum South (Austin, 1979), 76; Kenneth S. Greenberg, Masters and Statesmen: The Political Culture of American Slavery (Baltimore, 1985), 144-46; and Gradin, “Losing Control.” For honor more generally, see Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor; Steven M. Stowe, Intimacy and Power in the Old South: Ritual in the Lives of the Planters (Baltimore, 1987); and Kenneth S. Greenberg, Honor and Slavery: Lies, Duels, Noses, Masks... (Princeton, 1996).

relationship between manliness and honor has been largely taken for granted. While certain elements of southern honor (fame, for example) do not seem to have been fundamentally gendered, manhood constituted the very essence of what mid-nineteenth-century Americans meant when they spoke, wrote, and thought about honor, however they defined it. Words such as chivalry, courage, and honor were critical components of an almost universally observed, though hotly contested, vocabulary of manhood during this period. Such words carried fundamentally gendered cargoes and always held serious implications for male gender status. Even pejoratives such as “scoundrel” and “bully,” while not suggesting effeminacy, unmanned those at whom they were leveled. Ultimately, there was no way to offend a gentleman’s honor in the 1850s without calling into question his manliness, and, conversely, no way to emasculate a foe without doing irreparable damage to his honor. This is not to say that the concept of honor should be reduced to virility. Rather, we have to expand our understanding of manhood beyond current conceptions of the macho in order to approach the era of the Civil War on its own terms. Being a

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8 Wyatt-Brown has argued that “issues of honor...cover more than just virility alone”; see Shaping of Southern Culture, xi-xii, 305-06 n. 5. According to Gradin, honor and “virility” were “inextricably intertwined,” but presumably distinct; see “Losing Control,” 123-24. “Manliness and chivalry” are presented as “attendant values” of honor in Orlando Patterson, Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), 94. Only Kristen L. Hoganson has recognized, in reference to a later period, that “at times, congressmen substituted the word manhood for honor with no perceptible change in meaning”; see Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars (New Haven, 1998), 70.  
9 This was as true on Beacon Hill as it was in the South Carolina lowcountry. Surprisingly little, however, has been written about elite manhood in the pre-Civil War North. Most related literature focuses on the “middle-class” and, specifically, on the ascendancy of the self-made man ideal during the latter part of the nineteenth century. See E. Anthony Rotundo, American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era (New York, 1993), and Kimmel, Manhood in America, 1-78. The idea of the self-made man, however, appears to have had little impact on the gender identities of statesmen like Charles Sumner, to say nothing of his more self-consciously Old World southern counterparts.
man in the nineteenth century, after all, very often meant avoiding precisely that
which we now associate with masculinity, namely aggressiveness and physicality.

Following in Wyatt-Brown’s footsteps, most historians of elite male culture in
the Old South have emphasized the universality of honor as an ethical code for white
men throughout the slave states, regardless of sub-region or class.10 I hope to lend a
voice to the chorus of historians who have sought to shatter the southern monolith—
that is, the idea of “the South”—in American memory.11 To state that a dominant
version of honor was understood throughout the slave states gives the false
impression of homogeneity and cultural coherence, even if only among white men, in
a profoundly diverse region.

In spite of the pervasiveness of “southern” honor, Brooks’s behavior was
openly repudiated within the slave states throughout the caning controversy.
Discussing Gail Bederman’s *Manliness and Civilization*, historian Thomas Bender
writes, “Moving beyond conventional notions of cultural hegemony and rejecting the
now overworked notion of ‘contested’ concepts, [Bederman] grasps that such protean
words [i.e. civilization or manliness] can accommodate multiple (and simultaneous)
meanings of different and historically changing valence. No one position is likely to
establish meaning.”12 Unlike Bender, I do not believe that the idea of contestation has
lost its legs. During tranquil times, individuals might have accommodated conflicting

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10 See, for example, Greenberg, *Honor and Slavery*, Preface. For a dissenting view based on class, see
Elliot J. Gorn, “‘Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch’: The Social Significance of Fighting in the
11 For “southern antebellum complexity and diversity,” see William W. Freehling, *The Road to
Disunion: Secessionists at Bay, 1776-1854* (New York, 1990), esp. vii-viii, 569 n. 1. See also Daniel
conceptions of manhood, overlooking, tolerating, or even espousing antithetical beliefs themselves. But in times of crisis, when a well-defined ideal imposed itself, as the Brooksian model of manhood did during the affair, there was resistance, attempts were made to establish or confirm meaning, and people were forced to take sides. Surely no single meaning for manhood was ever universally established in the slave states, but efforts toward this end nonetheless reflected starkly conflicting visions of how society should be governed and what kind of men were fit for the job.

While the values implicit in the code duello have received a great deal of attention from historians, alternative modes of southern gentlemanliness, and particularly those with a secular emphasis, have rarely been recognized. One such ideal derived from the Whig worldview, in which order, self-control, moderation, and conciliation were cardinal virtues. The only southerners who publicly opposed the assault on Sumner were men of the old Whig political persuasion. To be sure, not all southern conservatives objected to Brooks’s violent display of passion, but those

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13 The classic cultural interpretation of Whig political philosophy is Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago, 1979). For the “gentle” mode of southern honor, see Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, Chapter 4. Gentility, in Wyatt-Brown’s formulation, was marked by sociability, learning, and piety, as opposed to the more “primal” virtues encouraged by the dominant ideal. Objections to Brooks’s assault in the South, however, seem to have had little to do with aristocratic refinement and moral uprightness.

14 For southern responses to the caning, see David Donald, *Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York, 1960), 278-311, and Avery O. Craven, *The Growth of Southern Nationalism, 1848-1861* (Baton Rouge, 1953), 223-38. Donald argues that the slave states were more or less united in their approbation of Brooks, while Craven presents a wide range of southern reactions to the attack. For published documents representing the anti-Brooks South, see T. Lloyd Benson, *The Caning of Senator Sumner* (Belmont, Cal., 2003), 168-70. “Even in the South,” Benson notes by way of introduction, “a number of papers portrayed the caning as a threat to conservative ethics of order and propriety. Its advocates drew upon a viewpoint long championed by the Whig party, an organization to which many editors had once belonged. These men condemned the event for undermining the stability and refinement Americans expected from their highest officials. Most importantly, the response by Brooks had been unchivalrous. Brooks had taken Sumner at a disadvantage, thereby undermining his claims of nobility. To these editors, Brooks's pretense of honor had become an excuse for violence and intimidation. The caning had given ammunition to the region's enemies*; see 168.
who did clearly articulated a different conception of what it meant to be a southern gentleman. Historian David Donald has written that American Party dissent in the South during the affair might have reflected "conservatives' positive dislike for Brooks's rash deed, their distrust of fire-eating, and their hope for peaceable adjustment of sectional conflicts, but they were arguments against the policy, not the principle, of the Brooks assault." On the contrary, these reservations had everything to do with principle, perhaps not politically, in the narrow sense of that word, but certainly culturally. What Donald fails to see is that, in the eyes of many old southern Whigs, Brooks had hijacked the very meaning of southern manhood on May 22, 1856, and it seemed clearer to them each day that his sympathizers were leading it into civil war.

No matter how leading American men conceived of manhood in the 1850s, its construction bore a number of interesting similarities throughout the United States. As Peter Stearns has noted, all men "have to carve out some distinctiveness from women." For as long as social meanings have been assigned to sex, the idea of man has been constructed in opposition to that of woman. The feminization of the other was, indeed, a commonplace rhetorical device during this period in both the North and South, regardless of subregion. Men also invoked a number of other, perhaps less obvious, concepts to assail and affirm gender identity. Children, animals, and slaves

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15 The editors of the Richmond Whig, for example, whole-heartedly supported the passionate use of force against Sumner and commended Brooks for it.
16 Donald, Charles Sumner, 306.
18 It should be noted that some feminist theorists have suggested that biological "sex" is just as socially constructed as "gender." See, e.g., Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York, 1990).
all figured prominently in the debates that followed the caning. The infantilization and bestialization of abolitionists in southern rhetoric has not gone unnoticed by scholars of the South. I hope to demonstrate, however, that fire-eaters did not have a monopoly on these tools of the political trade. On the contrary, northern politicians—militants and non-resisters alike—gave as well as they got in the war of gendered words that preceded the Civil War. Though Whig men characteristically avoided its cruder forms, comparative emasculation was practiced with remarkable conformity by men throughout the nation.

Even while they disagreed on the propriety of violence, leading American men drew from the same set of keywords and rhetorical techniques to establish manhood and unmanhood in the era of the Civil War. They knew that their peers, regardless of sectional allegiance, would understand them when they called an opponent dishonorable or compared him to an animal, slave, woman, or child. While such insults were readily perceived, much of the vocabulary of manhood was freighted with very different kinds of meanings in the minds of men. Such ideological divisions had tangible political consequences. As a general rule, for example, the southern elites who saw in Brooks a model for manliness went on to support secession; those who did not either reluctantly joined the Confederate fray or supported the Union unconditionally.

The influence that gender ideology had on the “political” history of the United States has yet to be fully appreciated. This study attempts not only to identify a few of the meanings for manhood that were in play during the pivotal 1850s, but also to begin the long overdue process of understanding how these ideologies operated
within the formal structures of the nation state and, ultimately, how they helped to
determine the course of national affairs.
CHAPTER I

THE CRIME AGAINST SOUTHERN MANHOOD

The day after the caning of Charles Sumner, Michigan Senator Charles Edward Stuart proposed an amendment to Senate rules that would have made it officially "out of order for a Senator in debate to use language reflecting on the conduct or motives of any other Senator, or discourteously or improperly reflecting upon the actions of a State other than the one represented by the Senator speaking." When Preston Brooks explained the provocation for his assault on Sumner in a letter to the Senate one week later, he cited "language which I regarded as unjustly reflecting not only upon the history and character of South Carolina, but also upon a friend and relative." What of this "unjustly reflecting" language? Why was it so dangerous to the Senate and so offensive to Brooks? The explicitly gendered nature of Sumner's attack on Brooks's home state and second cousin Senator Andrew P. Butler lay in the subtext of such apologies for the caning, where it has remained unacknowledged for nearly a century and a half. Close analysis of "The Crime Against Kansas" shows conclusively that Sumner employed gender antagonism, which included but was not limited to his famously sexual metaphors, to precipitate a confrontation with the advocates of slavery in Congress. There is evidence to suggest,

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1 *Congressional Globe*, 34 Congress, 1st Session, 1280. All subsequent references to the *Globe* are from this session. Sumner had mentioned Stuart's home state in the speech, citing its allegedly irregular admission into the Union as a precedent for his proposal to admit Kansas as a free state before it had achieved the necessary population. Given the excitement that followed the caning, however, Stuart undoubtedly had Butler, Brooks, and South Carolina in mind when he proposed this bill.

2 "Assault on Mr. Sumner." Richmond *Enquirer*, June 3, 1856.
moreover, that Brooks understood the speech in terms of personal and collective gender identity. In short, the early stages of the Sumner-Brooks affair indicate that gendered rhetoric (and the ideologies from which it sprung) played an important part in the political dialogue that preceded the Civil War.

In his introductory remarks on May 19, Charles Sumner set out to establish and expose a diabolical plot. In the passage of the Nebraska bill, the actions of the border ruffians in Kansas, and the rhetoric of their apologists in Congress, Sumner saw a disturbing pattern. It all amounted, he argued, to “the rape of a virgin Territory, compelling it to the hateful embrace of Slavery.” “It may be clearly traced,” he continued, “to a depraved longing for a new slave State, the hideous offspring of such a crime, in the hope of adding to the power of slavery in the National Government. Yes, sir, when the whole world, alike Christian and Turk, is rising up to condemn this wrong, and to make it a hissing to the nations, here in our Republic, force—aye, Sir, FORCE,—has been openly employed in compelling Kansas to this pollution, and all for the sake of political power.” With these statements, Sumner allegorically set the stage for the case he was about to unfold. Kansas was cast as the virtuous woman, the slave power entered as the demonic rapist, and chattel slavery was the “hideous offspring” of their despicable union. Physical violence was anathema to Sumner, as his reference to “force” made plain, but in order to tap the consciences of his more belligerent countrymen, he presented the crime against Kansas as the rape of an innocent woman. With these early lines, then, Sumner implored his listeners and

3 T. Lloyd Benson ed., The Caning of Senator Sumner (Belmont, Cal., 2003), 97-98.
readers the country over (for the speech had already gone to press) to assume the role of hero in his chivalric drama.

Sumner's verbal assault on the Palmetto State—its historical memory and defining cultural institution—was designed specifically to put its anxious patriarchs on the defensive. His juxtaposition of South Carolina and the free-soil capital of Kansas bears this point out. "If we glance at special achievements," he said, "it will be difficult to find anything in the history of South Carolina which presents so much of the heroic spirit in an heroic cause as appears in that repulse of the Missouri invaders by the beleaguered town of Lawrence, where even the women gave their effective efforts to Freedom." According to Sumner, then, the free-soil element in Kansas had, in only a few years, managed to surpass in heroism—that manliest of mythic virtues—what South Carolina had contributed to the entire mosaic of America's martial past. More than this, however, he was suggesting that the women of Lawrence had done more in the cause of freedom than any of South Carolina's revolutionary sires.

With such gender baiting in mind, it is not difficult to see how Brooks could have interpreted the speech as an attack on the manliness of South Carolina leaders, past and present. Testifying before the House committee investigating the canning, Henry Alonzo Edmunson, Representative from Virginia, recalled speaking with Brooks about "The Crime Against Kansas" during a chance meeting outside the Capitol on the morning of May 21. According to Edmunson, Brooks had quoted

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Sumner as saying that South Carolina had been “disgracefully impotent during the Revolution, and rendered still more so since on account of slavery.” When Howell Cobb of Georgia, the senior southerner on the House committee, reminded Edmunson that Sumner had actually called the state “shamefully imbecile,” the Virginian replied, “I think the words repeated to me by Mr. Brooks were not exactly those in [Sumner’s] speech.”\(^5\) The words “disgracefully” and “shamefully” are effectively synonymous, but “impotent” and “imbecile” have very different meanings indeed. Brooks’s false memory, as reported by Edmunson, strongly suggests that he had been thinking about the speech in terms of emasculation and, further, that the caning represented an attempt to vindicate or redeem the manly reputation of his beloved state. As Brooks explained at the outset of his resignation speech in the House, delivered on July 14, 1856, “Whatever insults my State, insults me.”\(^6\) An allegation of unmanliness leveled at his state, then, was tantamount to an attack upon his personal status as a man.

Even more controversial than Sumner’s treatment of South Carolina were the insults he leveled at Brooks’s aged and, during the speech, absent second cousin, Andrew Butler.\(^7\) Sumner ridiculed Butler for spewing forth “incoherent phrases” along with “loose expectoration” during the Senate debate over the fate of slavery in

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\(^5\) *Congressional Globe*, 1362.


\(^7\) There has been some confusion concerning Brooks and Butler’s kinship ties. Contemporaneous newspaper accounts referred to Butler as Brooks’s uncle; see also Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., *Violence and Culture in the Antebellum South* (Austin, 1979), 76. Curiously, Kenneth S. Greenberg misidentifies Pierce Butler as the “cousin” in whose honor the caning was undertaken; see *Masters and Statesmen: The Political Culture of American Slavery* (Baltimore, 1985), 26, 144. Bertram Wyatt-Brown, however, correctly identifies Andrew Butler as “the first cousin of Brooks’s father”; see *The Shaping of Southern Honor: Honor, Grace, and War, 1760s-1880s* (Chapel Hill, 2001), 195.
the territories.\textsuperscript{8} The spoken word was invested with special significance in nineteenth-century America, and particularly in the Old South.\textsuperscript{9} As the most important tool in the exercise of political authority, the ability to speak publicly was an essential mark of the planter-statesman. Moreover, oratory was almost exclusively the domain of leading white men in the Old South, and, as such, it was a cardinal component of elite southern manhood. By publicly mocking Butler’s oral faculty, then, Sumner was attacking his identity as a southern gentleman. The Senator from Massachusetts hinted at an even more serious charge, however, when he said, “Nor was there any possible deviation from truth” which Butler had not made during his tenure in the Senate. Though Sumner tempered this most grievous of all accusations—that of mendacity—by ascribing Butler’s untruths to his passions rather than to “intentional aberration,” he nonetheless concluded that Butler could not “ope his mouth, but out there flies a blunder.”\textsuperscript{10}

As offensive as these statements were, most southern newspapers condemned the speech with reference to a different passage. With his famous invocation of

\textsuperscript{8} Crime Against Kansas, 29. The portions of the speech quoted below have been cited many times before, both by contemporaneous commentators and historians. See, e.g., Wyatt-Brown, Shaping of Southern Culture, 195-96, and David Donald, Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War (New York, 1960), 285-86. Wyatt-Brown notes that Butler had suffered a “disabling stroke,” which ostensibly caused what Donald refers to as Butler’s “labial paralysis.”

\textsuperscript{9} For the importance of “oral literature” in the Whig-Jackson period generally, see Daniel Walker Howe, The Political Culture of the American Whigs (Chicago, 1979), 25-26. For the spoken word in the Old South, see Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South (New York, 1982), esp. 46-48. As Wyatt-Brown observes, a southern man’s reputation, indeed his very essence, was “intimately related with how he used his tongue”; see 48. For the significance of oratory at South Carolina College (where both Brooks and Butler had been students), see Drew Gilpin Faust, James Henry Hammond and the Old South: A Design for Mastery (Baton Rouge, 1982), 19-22. See also, Lorri Glover, “An Education in Southern Masculinity: The Bell Family of South Carolina in the New Republic,” Journal of Southern History 69 (2003): 39-70, esp. 55.

\textsuperscript{10} Crime Against Kansas, 29. Greenberg observes that giving the lie was the most common precipitant for duels in the Old South; see Masters and Statesmen, 38-39.
Cervantes, Sumner condemned the sexual politics of slavery through Butler’s example. “The Senator from South Carolina,” he charged,

has read many books of chivalry, and believes himself a chivalrous knight, with sentiments of honor and courage. Of course he has chosen a mistress to whom he has made his vows, and who, though ugly to others, is always lovely to him; though polluted in the sight of the world, is chaste in his sight—I mean the harlot, Slavery. For her, his tongue is always profuse in words. Let her be impeached in character, or any proposition made to shut her out from the extension of her wantonness, and no extravagance of manner or hardihood of assertion is then too great for this Senator. The frenzy of Don Quixote, in behalf of his wench Dulcinea del Toboso, is all surpassed.11

Here Sumner cast Butler as an everyman of the planter class, a stand-in for all southern men who adhered to the code of honor and vigorously defended slavery. On the most basic level, he hoped to expose what he saw as a poisonous paradox at the root of southern culture. What sort of gentleman—a man of honor in his own mind—could align himself with an institution as ignoble as chattel slavery? Apparently, only the most deluded knight errant in the history of western civilization, Don Quixote, could serve as an analog. To Sumner, southern honor was a tasteless joke, resting as it did on the moral crime of human bondage. The Greenville (S.C.) Patriot and Mountaineer was not overstating matters, then, when it fumed that Sumner had “denounced all slaveholders as criminals!”12

On top of all of this, Sumner had used explicitly sexual metaphors in his denunciation of Butler and plantation culture. Was he implying that sexual predation

11 Crime Against Kansas, 5.
was essential to slavery? Surely the phrase “the harlot, Slavery” was intended to suggest that Butler and the planters he represented had sex with their bondswomen. In any case, the editors of the Yorkville (S.C.) *Enquirer* thought Sumner’s indecencies “in very near keeping with the vilest ribaldry let loose from the crowded thoroughfares of Billingsgate.” In theory, standards of decorum helped to distinguish gentlefolk from non-elites, and modesty, especially in the presence of elite white women, was integral to the gentlemanly ideal in all parts of the country. In the eyes of this *Enquirer* editorialist, Sumner had proven himself more suited to the streets of a London fish market than to a national legislature. His prurient innuendoes reaffirmed for southerners not only that Sumner was something less than a gentleman, but also that he was bent on attacking slavery in the most unmanly of terms.

Womanhood played a leading role in the Sumner-Brooks drama. “With the United States Senate gallery filled with American ladies,” the editors of the *Washington Sentinel* complained,

...this senatorial profligate stands forth and audaciously utters language calculated to bring the blush to the cheek of every honest woman within his hearing! He parades with infinite gusto his familiar acquaintance with a style of life, which he so graphically depicts, and

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13 See Michael D. Pierson, “‘All Southern Society is Assailed by the Foulest Charges’: Charles Sumner’s ‘The Crime Against Kansas’ and the Escalation of Republican Anti-slavery Rhetoric,” *New England Quarterly* 68 (1995), 531-57, esp. 533-34, 549. According to Wyatt-Brown, the speech “was a breach of courtesy as well as of ordinary decency by the standards of an age in which reticence on sex was universally observed in educated circles”; see *Shaping of Southern Culture*, 196. This statement may require some qualification, for while “reticence on sex” was required of elites in public and in the presence of white women, sexual language was not necessarily out of bounds in homosocial contexts. In her biography of James Henry Hammond, Faust quotes from a letter written to JHH by a classmate at South Carolina College that makes liberal use of sexual and homoerotic themes. Faust, *James Henry Hammond*, 18-19 n.18.

disregarding the presence his is in, becomes the public insulter of female delicacy, sensibility and refinement. What lady can feel herself secure in visiting the Senate chamber in future, while such a votary of vulgarity is allowed to hold a place on that floor.\(^{15}\)

In his attack on Butler’s manhood, and the code of honor more generally, Sumner had harassed the women in the Senate chamber, upsetting established gender norms in the process. Protecting women from vulgarity and violence was, to be sure, a universally recognized criterion for elite manhood in the slave states during this period, and Sumner had indeed failed, as one scholar writes, “to shield women from his vituperation.”\(^{16}\) But he was guilty of much more than failing to protect women from obscenity. By speaking in such explicitly sexual terms, he had coarsened the women in the Senate chamber, insulted their “delicacy,” and divested them of the purity that the ideal of the lady required in the Old South. Women’s supposedly exalted moral status could be compromised—through no fault of their own—simply by virtue of their exposure to vulgarity. Speaking at his trial for criminal assault on July 7, Brooks no doubt had Sumner in mind when he referred to a “villain who perverts the best feelings of the better sex.” Indeed, Sumner’s crime against women was a cornerstone of Brooks’s defense in court. “Where a sister’s dishonor is blotted out with the blood of her destroyer,” he said, “an intelligent and wholesome public opinion, embodied in an intelligent and virtuous jury, always has, and always will, control the law, and popular sentiment will applaud what the books may condemn.”\(^{17}\) What was manly—in this case, avenging crimes against women with the blood of the criminal—was

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\(^{16}\) Gradin, “Losing Control,” 100. “In not doing so,” Gradin continues, “Sumner violated one important aspect of what it meant to be a gentleman, something which was of fundamental importance to Southern men.”

\(^{17}\) Benson, Caning of Senator Sumner, 198.
right and lawful, no matter what the statute books said. This argument proved compelling, as Brooks left the courtroom of District Judge Thomas Crawford, a Pennsylvania Democrat appointed by President James K. Polk, with only a three hundred dollar fine. The construction of chivalry, or heroic manhood, was based firmly on the idea of the defenseless woman, and, as such, anything that dishonored "the fairer sex," emasculated the men whose charge it was to protect them.

Even in view of Sumner's myriad offences to southern manhood, it is difficult to understand why so many would eventually applaud the caning without reference to the injurious power that words held for most elite southern men. The adage "sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me" would have struck most southern gentlemen as absurd during this period, and it provides a perfect counterpoint to prevailing attitudes toward verbal insult in the Old South. Whatever feelings of self-worth inhabited the recesses of a southern gentleman's soul, their importance paled in comparison to his reputation. In elite southern society, men could only act in accordance with the code of honor and hope that others interpreted their actions favorably. They looked to external social elements—their peers as well as their inferiors—to affirm or disaffirm their manliness and authority.\(^\text{18}\) The

communication implicit in this process was carried out largely through language. It is not surprising, then, that words would be used and interpreted with a special sensitivity in the South. When the House investigation committee recommended that Brooks be expelled from Congress, the Richmond Whig asked, “If the House should expel Brooks for assaulting Sumner, should not the Senate expel Sumner for defaming Brooks?” No doubt, the distinction between verbal and physical violence was peculiarly obscure for many the Old South.

Throughout the Sumner-Brooks affair, “The Crime Against Kansas” was characterized in terms of the violence it perpetrated upon the South. During the House investigation of the caning, James Ricaud, American Party Representative from Maryland, testified to thinking the speech “very violent.” On the opposite end of the southern spectrum (both politically and geographically), the assessment was the same. The Laurensville (S.C.) Herald placed Sumner’s oration firmly in the tradition of the “violent and mad ravings” directed southward by abolitionist demagogues. In an oft-reprinted dueling manual, John Lyde Wilson informed his gentlemen readers that “words used in retort, although more violent and disrespectful than those first used, will not satisfy,—words being no satisfaction for words....When words are used,” he

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19 “The Expulsion of Brooks.” Richmond Whig, June 7, 1856, in Secession Era Editorials. Brooks was never mentioned in Sumner’s speech; the Whig’s statement that Sumner “defamed” him was derived from his kinship with Butler. On the relationship between kinship and honor, see Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor.
20 Congressional Globe, 1365.
continued, “and a blow given in return, the insult is avenged.” 22 While language could threaten or destroy reputation, it was powerless in the rehabilitation of wounded honor. For those who subscribed to Wilson’s code, words were not restorative; only acts or the willingness to engage in potentially dangerous physical confrontations could restore manhood lost. While words were not exactly tantamount to acts, pro-Brooks southerners often equated the two in an attempt to communicate the devastating potential of language in their culture. The Edgefield (S.C.) Advertiser, for instance, expressly linked the speech with the sanguinary harvest it reaped when it reported that Sumner had “emptied one of his vials of vile vituperation on the head of Senator Butler.” 23

Personal responsibility was at the heart of the Brooksian mode of manhood. The only manly words were those that one was prepared to defend and be held accountable for, no matter what the cost. On May 28, the Richmond Whig—a leading, though uncommonly radical, organ of the American Party—referred to Sumner’s supporters as “Nigger-worshipping fanatics of the male gender, and weak-minded women and silly children.” 24 By June 5, the paper’s editors had apparently lost the heart for such gendered epithets, concluding that northern men had become totally impervious to insult. Reporting an anti-Brooks indignation meeting in New York City, the Whig had this to say about the North’s leading men:

These gentlemen—we are willing to believe they are what they claim to be—the foremost characters in New York, set up to be the arbiters

22 John Lyde Wilson, The Code of Honor; or Rules for the Government of Principals and Seconds in Dueling (Charleston, 1858), 32.
of chivalry and true courage. By their discourses and conduct toward others, they furnish us with their idea of a man of honor and heroism. Three hundred miles from the scene of danger, and proclaiming to the world that they repudiate all personal responsibility for insults, they denounce Mr. Brooks as a coward... We confess our inability to appreciate the valor of this proceeding. Wherein its daring manhood consists we are unable to perceive. In all our reading of brave men and heroic nations, we have never encountered any who did not seem to consider that a willingness to incur some degree of personal risk was essential to the attribute of courage; and if we were to subject the wordy heroes of New York to those tests, we should say they were destitute of the first principle of honor and the least particle of generous manhood. To speak of feeling an insult as a wound would be to them an unintelligible jargon. Not one of them ever experienced the sensation implied in the phrase. They are dead to its effects—they are unconscious of its existence.25

The Whig conceived of honor as a two-sided coin. Without the risk of shame or emasculation, manliness was virtually meaningless.26 Since northern men were shameless, they were “destitute of the first principle of honor and the least particle of generous manhood.”27 Virginia Senator James Mason no doubt had this duality in mind when, on May 20, after sitting through day two of “The Crime Against Kansas,” he proclaimed his long-held belief that Sumner was devoid of “manhood in any

26 Scholars of European and American honor have often noted the mutuality of honor and shame. See, e.g., Spierenburg, Men and Violence, 2, and Wyatt-Brown, Shaping of Southern Culture, 296. Wyatt-Brown acknowledges “that some anthropologists have questioned the value or even validity of the twin conceptualization,” but he concludes “that the concepts of honor and shame...possess explanatory power.”
27 The distinction between “a principle of honor” and “a particle of generous manhood” is, typically, unclear here. The passage’s frequent invocation of virile themes—“valor,” “courage,” “honor”—confirms the innate connection, even interchangeability, of honor and manhood in the Old South.
In the North, many of the South’s most powerful men believed, language, no matter how strong or abusive, had little effect on men’s sense of self.

The perception of northern shamelessness led such southerners to the conclusion that the North understood only action, and violence in particular. After the caning, some southern editors reveled like anti-Hamlets in the supremacy of the act vis-à-vis the word. “We have heard of a word in good season,” mused the Edgefield (S.C.) Advertiser, “but this is an act in good season.”29 “The first blow has been struck,” rejoiced the Laurensville (S.C.) Herald, “which will be felt keener and longer than all the arguments and warnings ever used in Congress by Southern members.”30 Convinced that words now rang hollow in northern ears, many southern men saw violence as the only manly mode of expression left at their disposal. The Yorkville (S.C.) Enquirer perhaps explained it best: “It has become necessary for the defenders of the South to throw aside argument and sound reason, the weapons of honorable, high-minded combat, and to resort in their stead to the argument of the cow-hide, in avenging insult and protecting their own and the honor of those whom they represent.”31

The dominance of this view in the slave states raises an important question. Was the caning predetermined by the culture in which Brooks had been raised? That is, did he have to physically confront Sumner? Or, was he simply strutting on the

28 Reprinted in Benson, Caning of Senator Sumner, 128. Mason also said that Sumner had used language to which “no gentleman would lend an ear here or elsewhere.” See also “Mr. Mason’s Reply,” The New York Daily Times, May 21, 1856, 1.
national stage, playing a role that he supposed would endear him to his cultural brethren? On some level, gender is always a performance, an impersonation, however unwitting, that passes as natural or real. Nonetheless, cultures can work in a variety of ways—from subtle forms of education to corporeal punishment—to ensure the proper performances at the proper times. When the South was put on the defensive as aggressively as it had been by Sumner, most southern leaders did not merely tolerate passionate violence, they demanded and celebrated it. The frivolous use of force should be avoided in gentlemanly society, Wilson’s manual counseled, but there were cases “where public opinion not only authorizes but enjoins resistance.” Surely “The Crime Against Kansas” put Brooks in just such a situation. The world of large slaveholders was intensely communal and kin conscious, making it a pressure cooker of social expectation and obligation. Brooks, then, was not simply playing at a bit of the rough-and-tumble when he attacked Sumner. He was, rather, fulfilling a duty, the dereliction of which might have had serious consequences.

Emphasizing the social price of nonviolence in his defense of Brooks’s assault, Andrew Butler told the Senate, “I would trust to the instinct of woman on subjects of this kind.” Had Brooks not physically confronted Sumner, Butler argued, “he could not go into a parlor, or drawing-room, or to a dinner party, where he did not find an implied reproach that there was an unmanly submission to an insult to his

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32 Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York, 1990), viii.
State and countrymen." While women were too delicate to witness the violent rituals of manhood (as Brooks’s refusal to cane Sumner in their presence suggests), they were nonetheless expected to reprove the unmanly. Would southern ladies have truly ostracized Brooks for not avenging “The Crime Against Kansas,” as Butler argued? With the benefit of hindsight, Mary Chestnut mentioned the caning in her famous Civil War diary, lamenting somewhat cryptically, “What an awful blunder that Preston Brooks business was!” On the other hand, a woman calling herself “One of Carolina’s truest and most honored matrons” assured Brooks in a letter of congratulations that “the ladies of the South would send him hickory sticks, with which to chastise Abolitionists and Red Republicans whenever he wanted them.”

Whatever elite women’s attitudes were toward the caning, Butler’s point was plain: the prospect of female reproach had practically placed the cane in Brooks’s hand, giving him no choice in the matter of violent reprisal. Brooks himself acknowledged the power of women to distribute or withhold the laurels of manhood. Before resigning his seat in the House, he accused Representative Linus Comins of Massachusetts of carrying arms without the courage to use them. “In my country,” he mused, “the cock that crows and won’t fight is despised by the hens, and even by the pullets, who know a thing or two instinctively. [Great Laughter]” Brooks, no doubt, took great pleasure in the affirmation he received from southern ladies following the

35 Quoted in Bruce, Violence and Culture, 76.
37 Quoted in Donald, Charles Sumner, 305. The reference to “Red Republicans” reflects the association of “Black Republicans” with socialism in the South; see, e.g., George Fitzhugh, Cannibals All!: or, Slaves without Masters, C. Vann Woodward, ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), 194.
38 Congressional Globe, Appendix, 833. Comins was a distant relative of Brooks’s who had taken to carrying arms on his person during the affair. Needless to say, the two kinsmen were deeply estranged.
caning. The respect and commendation of women was, after all, part of what made
him a gentleman. There was, no doubt, a strong performative element in southern
politics and manhood, but it does not seem unreasonable to take Brooks at his word
when claimed, “I had no alternative, but to act as I did.”39 The culture in which he had
been born and bred demanded Sumner’s blood, and, recognizing both an obligation
and an opportunity for distinction, Brooks was eager to oblige.

The leaders of the Old South considered “The Crime Against Kansas” an
inexcusable act of violence. While the caning had confirmed the brutality of the South
for prominent conservatives in the North, the speech had a similarly radicalizing
effect in the South. Sumner had proven what fire-eaters had been saying for over
twenty years, namely that the leading men of the North could not be reasoned with.40
Armed with this assumption, most elite southern men, but by no means all, applauded
the caning, and, almost overnight, Preston Brooks emerged from relative obscurity a
model southern gentleman.

39 Reprinted in “Mr. Brooks’s Letter to the Senate,” Charleston Mercury, June 6, 1856, in Secession
Era Editorials.
40 Benson, Caning of Senator Sumner, 7.
CHAPTER II
CONFRONTATION AND THE CONSENSUS SEEKERS

The full spectrum of mid-nineteenth-century American manhood can perhaps best be represented by a matrix of two intersecting continuums: a vertical axis running from total passion (or emotional indulgence) to total restraint, and a horizontal axis running from physical violence down to pacifism. Those who subscribed to the dominant strain of elite manhood in the Old South, such as Preston Brooks, tended toward both passion and physical violence. While these two tendencies often reinforced one another, they did not always go hand in hand in antebellum America. Robert Barnwell Rhett of South Carolina, for example, was a zealous advocate of states’ rights, but had, by 1850, disavowed personal violence on the grounds that it was inconsistent with his membership in the Episcopal Church.¹ Charles Sumner, moreover, was both a passionate ideologue and a noted non-resister.

Much like passion and violence, self-control and non-resistance were mutually reinforcing, but they did not necessarily operate within individuals in equal measure. Ever striving for cool headedness, Georgia Senator Alexander Stephens nonetheless frequently found himself embroiled in physical confrontations.² Other conservatives, such as Kentucky Senator John J. Crittenden, practiced a more controlled style of manhood and only rarely, if ever, resorted to violence as a means of conflict

resolution. For Whig men like Crittenden, the good life demanded perpetual self-discipline and a mastery over one’s passions. Men of this stripe were a minority among the southern elite, to be sure, but in their opposition to the caning of Sumner, they expressed a set of gendered values that helped to determine their political allegiance both during the affair and beyond. In order to flesh out the distinctiveness of Whig manhood, it is first necessary to better understand the nature of the dominant ideal.

A far cry from the myth of Davy Crockett or a backcountry brawler, Preston Brooks was a southern gentleman, and even the ideal that he embodied required a degree of control over primal impulses. As incensed as he was after hearing a sampling of “The Crime Against Kansas” on May 19, for instance, Brooks waited for the published version to come out on the morning of May 21 before taking action. This decision to deliberate in the face of rage has perplexed at least one eminent historian of the affair. Introspection, however, had been urged as a facilitator of self-discipline for centuries in Reformed Christianity, and by the 1850s, evangelical values had made significant inroads among the southern elite. Perhaps even more importantly for Brooks, the code duello itself, so steeped in procedural minutia and

3 Ibid., 29.
4 David Donald, Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War (New York, 1960), 290.
5 Theodore Dwight Bozeman, The Precisionist Strain: Disciplinary Religion and Antinomian Backlash in Puritanism to 1638 (Chapel Hill, forthcoming), Chapter 6. I am indebted to the author for lending this manuscript. For southern honor and Christianity in the Old South, see Bertram Wyatt-Brown, “God and Honor in the Old South,” Southern Review 25 (1989): 283-95, and Bertram Wyatt-Brown, The Shaping of Southern Culture: Honor, Grace, and War, 1760s-1890s (Chapel Hill, 2001), Chapter 4, esp. 104-05.
ritualism, was expressly designed to temper the violent passions of men.⁶ "Whenever you believe that you are insulted," John Lyde Wilson’s dueling manual advised, “…never resent it there, if you have self-command enough to avoid noticing it."⁷ For many, in both the North and South, emotion made physical violence a somewhat more understandable and forgivable offense.⁸ In spite of this, Brooks admitted to having thought about the assault “very deliberately” in the hours leading up to it.⁹ His willingness to carefully consider such a hostile offense before acting was part of what distinguished Brooks from a rough-and-tumbler, part of what made him a gentleman.

Deliberation did not, of course, guarantee a measured or composed response to insult. The severity of Brooks’s assault on Sumner provides a case in point. Rushing in to stop the affray near its conclusion, Senator Crittenden yelled to Brooks, “Don’t kill him.” Apparently realizing that he had gone too far, Brooks replied, “I did not intend to kill him, but I did intend to whip him.”¹⁰ One can almost hear Brooks huffing and puffing through his words here. Hints of initial regret are even more manifest in the Charleston Mercury's version of the story, which quoted Brooks as saying, “I did not wish to hurt him much, but only punish him.”¹¹ At some point during the assault, moreover, Brooks had stricken himself above the eye with an

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⁶ For the code duello as a means to curb “revengeful passions,” see Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., Violence and Culture in the Antebellum South (Austin, 1979), 74.
⁷ John Lyde Wilson, The Code of Honor; or Rules for the Government of Principals and Seconds in Dueling (Charleston, 1858), 11.
⁸ See, e.g., “Assault in the United States Senate Chamber.” Springfield Illinois State Register, May 26, 1856, in Secession Era Editorials Project, Furman University (http://history.furman.edu/); hereafter cited as Secession Era Editorials with preceding information about the particular article. See also, “What Next?” New York Daily Times, May 23, 1856, 4. This is the same rationale that forgives “crimes of passion” to this day.
⁹ “Resignation of Preston S. Brooks,” Congressional Globe, 34 Congress, 1st Session, Appendix, 832. All subsequent references to the Globe are from this session.
¹⁰ Quoted in Donald, Charles Sumner, 296.
¹¹ Charleston Mercury, May 28, 1856, in Secession Era Editorials.
errant back swing, creating a gash that required dressing later. Clearly introspection
had done little to temper Brooks’s reaction to Sumner’s speech. Caught up in the heat
of the moment, he had lost control. Nonetheless, the pro-Brooks southern press
described the caning in the most dignified terms, calling it a “genteel caning” or a
“handsome drubbing” and assuring its readers that Sumner had been “well and
elegantly whipped.” Most men of means and education in the North put a much
higher premium on self-control and tended to look upon the duel and all other forms
of ritualized violence as brutish relics of an uncivilized past. The Philadelphia Public
Ledger, a penny-paper that likely catered to a predominantly non-elite readership,
found it difficult to comprehend an act as “wanton, brutal, and unmanly” as the
caning of Sumner. The ascendency toward the end of the century of a more
physically assertive, working-class “masculinity” in the North notwithstanding,
northern elites unequivocally associated the indulgence of the “brutal passions” (and,
indeed, most non-military violence) with unmanliness during the era of the Civil
War.

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12 Stephen W. Berry II, All That Makes a Man: Love and Ambition in the Civil War South (New York, 2003), 247 n. 4.
15 “Sumner—Crampton—Clayton.” New York Daily Tribune, May 24, 1856, 12. For the rise of
“passionate manhood” among the northern middle class, see E. Anthony Rotundo, American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era (New York, 1993), chapter 10, and Gail Bederman, Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917 (Chicago, 1995), 16-20. Bederman associates what Rotundo termed “passionate manhood” with the word “masculinity,” which did not come into common use until well after the Civil War and corresponded with a more physically centered ideology of manhood than did “manliness.”
The occasional loss of control was hardly unmanly by prevailing standards in the Old South, however. The litany of bloody episodes involving southern statesmen during the thirty-fourth Congress alone bears this point out. Early in the session, Arkansas Representative Albert Rusk beat up the Washington correspondent of the New York Tribune (who was, according to the New York Times, “notoriously a non-combatant”) on the Capitol grounds. \textsuperscript{16} South Carolina Representative Laurence Keitt reportedly “beat his washerwoman” at Willard’s Hotel for an unnamed offense on the Sunday following the caning. \textsuperscript{17} And, earlier that spring, Alabamian Philemon T. Herbert, serving as Representative from California, shot and killed an Irish waiter at the same establishment. \textsuperscript{18} While all of these events inspired shock, exasperation, and contempt in the North, they raised relatively little comment or concern among southern men. The leaders of the South were, after all, somewhat less enchanted with the idea of the perfectibility of man than were their more reform-minded counterparts to the north. More often than not, they accepted the male “nature” for what they believed it to be, namely volatile, impulsive, and physically aggressive in the face of insult. \textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{17} Reprinted in the New York Daily Times, May 28, 1856, 1. In response to this episode, the New York Evening Post predicted that the proslavery Washington Intelligencer would briefly dismiss the incident as having stemmed from a “personal provocation,” just as it had the assault on Sumner. 
\textsuperscript{18} New York Daily Times, “Position of the North at Washington—Letter from Gen. J. Watson Webb,” May 28, 1856, 2. Herbert served only one term in Congress and was not a candidate for reelection in 1856, perhaps indicating that this controversy led to his political death in California. However, he promptly moved to Texas, where he eventually became a lieutenant colonel in the Confederate Army. Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=H000526.  
\textsuperscript{19} As Dickson D. Bruce, Jr. notes, a gentleman could “allow his passions to have the upper hand” without stepping outside the pale of the idealized manhood; Violence and Culture in the Antebellum South (Austin, 1979), 74. See also, Nicolas W. Proctor, Bathed in Blood: Hunting and Mastery in the
In fact, too much self-restraint could call into question one's very status as a man in the Old South. After the caning, the editors of the Laurensville (S.C.) Herald admitted their amazement "at the calmness and discretion" that southerners had previously exhibited in Congress. However, there comes a point, they argued, at which "forbearance ceases to be a virtue." With his latest speech, Sumner had "passed that boundary, and it was not in the nature of such a man as Preston S. Brooks to submit to it."\(^{20}\) To act coolly and non-violently in such situations was thought to indicate a less than manly "nature." In keeping with their understanding of the male make-up, most elite men in the Old South expected excitability and violence from one another. This was especially true in times when, as the Yorkville (S.C.) Enquirer put it, sectional battles waxed "hot and strong."\(^{21}\)

Miles Taylor, Representative from Louisiana, believed that the passionate temperament "is just as impulsive in resenting what seems to be a wrong, as it is [in] doing a kindness."\(^{22}\) The most amiable men, then, were also the most passionately protective of their manhood. An editor of the Richmond Whig claimed that "the bosom of high-spirited people" was naturally animated by "a manly sense of resentment."\(^{23}\) Stating the same point negatively, Andrew Butler argued that Sumner lacked the "noble emotion that would become a man and a Senator."\(^{24}\) For Butler, it was precisely Brooks's "noble emotion" that made him a venerable leader and man. Finally, Brooks himself

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\(^{22}\) Quoted in Bruce, *Violence and Culture*, 74.


\(^{24}\) "Mr. Brooks and Mr. Sumner," Congressional Globe, Appendix, 625.
reminded the judge at his trial for criminal assault that “the stern letter of the law” often forgave the indulgence of “the virtuous impulses of nature.”

As Sumner was roundly perceived as a social and moral inferior in the slave states, Brooks had been under no obligation to offer him a duel. According to Wilson’s handbook, a man could be disqualified from participation in formal duels if he was under the age of eighteen or exceedingly aged, if he had been publicly disgraced (“posted,” in the parlance of the times), or if he was a known criminal or lunatic. To which of these categories Sumner belonged was probably open to some debate in the South. After hearing him defend “The Crime Against Kansas” in the Senate on May 20, for example, Virginia Senator James Mason was heard to say that Sumner was “certainly non compos mentis.” No doubt many southerners also considered him a disgraced man on account of his political record, which was overwhelmingly antislavery. Whatever the precise reason, the code directed that Sumner be whipped rather than challenged to a duel.

With this in mind, it seems odd that Brooks decided to treat some of Sumner’s closest allies in Congress as equals during the caning controversy. While, as I have argued, Brooks’s violent response to “The Crime Against Kansas” might well have been psychoculturally determined, his behavior in its aftermath suggests willful
performance. In the three-week interim between the caning and his resignation, Brooks offered "audiences" to several northern Congressmen, including Senator Henry Wilson and Representative Anson Burlingame of Massachusetts and Representative John Woodruff of Connecticut. All three of these men were as outspoken in their condemnation of Brooks as they were in their support of Sumner, approving both the style and substance of "The Crime Against Kansas." When juxtaposed with the logic behind the caning, these confrontations present a paradox. Why were these men worthy of gentlemanly distinction, while Sumner was not?

The incident involving Representative Woodruff is particularly revealing. After the caning, Woodruff delivered an anti-Brooks speech in the House that referred to the assault as a "monstrous violation of all honor and decency." Brooks later explained that this speech had been "a show of manhood which elicited my admiration," one that indicated its author to be "a fighting man, subject to the law of honor." Since Woodruff "spoke like a man," Brooks concluded, "I determined in a very quiet way to treat him as a gentleman." When addressed by Brooks's second, Representative John Houston Savage of Tennessee, however, Woodruff insisted that he had not intended "to hold himself out as a fighting man," and Brooks seemed content to leave the disagreement at that. For most elite southern men, the readiness to fight was an essential criterion for manhood. By challenging Woodruff, Brooks established his willingness to engage in combat, while laying bare the unwillingness of his antagonist to do so. Such gestures were both empty, in the sense that Brooks

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28 For the Wilson challenge, see *Congressional Globe*, Appendix, 631; for the Burlingame challenge, see *Congressional Globe*, Appendix, 656, 833, and Donald, *Charles Sumner*, 308, 311; for the Woodruff challenge, see "Resignation of Preston S. Brooks." *Congressional Globe*, Appendix, 832-33.
probably never expected them to result in an exchange of fire, and full of meaning, insofar as they served his manly appearance. In keeping with his desire to demonstrate a capacity for self-control in the days and weeks following the caning, it seems likely that he was also trying to prove on the national stage that he was able to engage in the fine art of the code duello without wielding a stick or losing his cool. That he had been *compelled* to confront Sumner violently is not in the least inconsistent with such deliberate self-fashioning. Manly display, whether it was violent or not, could be compulsory, willful, or a bit of both. Performance need not be consciously disingenuous, and the fulfillment of duty does not necessarily preclude artifice. As ambiguous and subjective as it often was, the code of honor demanded a certain amount of improvisation in practice, and, not surprisingly, contradictory behavior abounded in the pursuit of manly appearance.29

Means were of little importance to most elite southern men when the ends they achieved were viscerally felt to be right. For all of their regret at the death of reason in the North, these men were emotional, often erratic, beings—hotspurs if you like. Nonetheless, they had a great deal invested in the appearance of self-restraint, as their social authority rested upon their ability to rise above the supposed emotionality of women and the animalism of non-whites. In the end, however, it was passion and

29 On the subjectivity of the code in the early Republic, see Joanne B. Freeman, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven, 2001), xvi-xvii. For the theory of “regulated improvisation,” see Harlan Joel Gradin, “Losing Control: The Caning of Charles Sumner and the Erosion of the ‘Common Ground on which our Political Fabric was Reared’,” (M.A. Thesis, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1981), 65. The author couples this theory with Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of “misrecognition”—a mental process through which individuals delude themselves so as to avoid facing the unfaceable—to explain the existence of contradictory ideologies and behavior within individuals. Self-delusion, however, was unnecessary when southern men understood that Brooks’s ends justified the means he used to achieve them.
violence (administered discriminately of course) that garnered the most laurels among the political vanguard of the Old South. The men who would later lead most of the slave states to war had come to prize hubris and the unwillingness to compromise above cool-headedness, and by 1856, the art of conciliation had lost much of its currency in the political culture of planter statesmen.

The Brooksian model of manliness, though heralded by most southerners, did not go uncontested within the slave states during the spring and summer of 1856. To be sure, southern gentlemen were united in their condemnation of "The Crime Against Kansas," but the caning itself was more prismatic.\(^{30}\) Above all, it was the rashness of the assault—its political myopia, its application in the Senate chamber, its brutality, and its spur-of-the-moment underhandedness—that offended the sensibilities of Brooks's southern detractors. Such minority views of the caning in the slave states indicate that at least two general ideologies of gentlemanliness—one based on confrontation, the other on restraint, conciliation, and consensus—competed for primacy below the Mason-Dixon line in the years immediately preceding the Civil War.\(^{31}\)

\(^{30}\) Avery O. Craven, *The Growth of Southern Nationalism, 1848-1861* (Baton Rouge, 1953), 223-38. Of all the historians of the affair, Craven places the most emphasis on southern dissent. For a different interpretation, see Donald, 304-07. Donald observes that dissent came mostly from Whigs "in the border states and in the larger port cities along the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico." Even still, many of these voices referred to "the southern gentleman" generally, and they reflect cultural disconnects within the South. See also William E. Gienapp, "The Crime Against Sumner: The Caning of Charles Sumner and the Rise of the Republican Part," *Civil War History* 25 (1979): 218-45, esp. 221-22. Looking mainly at the northern response, Gienapp notes, "Some Southerners privately expressed disapproval of Brooks' action." See n.11 for citations.

\(^{31}\) Evidence of Whig manhood should debunk the notion that self-restrained white manhood was somehow new in or unique to the Progressive era, an idea that is widespread in the literature for that period. See, e.g., Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White
The anti-Brooks southern press objected to the assault on a number of counts, all of which implicated Brooks as a dishonorable man. The editors of the Wilmington (N.C.) *Daily Herald* began their repudiation of Brooks on the grounds of honorific procedure. It was not Brooks's responsibility, they argued, "to resent an indignity offered to Senator Butler, even though the latter was his relative and absent."32 This argument was radically out of step with prevailing notions of kinship and honor in the Old South, especially considering Butler's advanced age. Whiggish elites were not generally active participants in the code duello, and their newspapers typically showed little interest in challenging the technical legitimacy of the caning. The *Daily Herald* might have struck the pose of dueling maven in order to gain a broader base of support for the anti-Brooks position, particularly among non-elites who were perhaps less well versed in the finer points of the code. The Louisville *Journal* briefly set out on a similar tack, alleging that Senator Butler, "who is as fiery hearted as he is white-headed, would scorn the thought of letting any younger man take a quarrel with an abolitionist off his hands."33 As disingenuous as these arguments might have been, they were ultimately intended to convey the impression that Brooks had rashly acted

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32 Wilmington (N.C.) *Daily Herald*, May 26, 1856, in *Secession Era Editorials*. 33 Reprinted in "A Fine Old South Carolina Gentleman." New York *Daily Times*, May 28, 1856, 1. The *Journal* went on to refer to Butler as "a gentleman of many fine and generous personal qualities" and, later, as "the fine old South Carolina gentleman," a distinction which the *Times* used as an ironic headline. Given that the anecdotes that followed this praise involved Butler's drunkenness in the Senate, it is difficult to tell what the *Journal's* true feelings about Butler were. At one point, he is described as having "ejaculated" heated queries on Sumner, for example.
out of turn in responding to the speech as he did, and that he had proven himself unmanly by southern standards as a result.

Most critiques of the caning within the slave states were based more firmly on signature Whig values. Brooks’s southern critics immediately recognized the political capital that northern radicals would make out of the assault, for instance. The argument that Brooks had transformed Sumner into an antislavery martyr, however, should not be regarded merely as base political pragmatism. It was that, to be sure, but it also reflected Whig men’s rational approach to politics and life in general. The Louisville Journal regretted the assault “because in the first place it was a very great outrage in itself, and because in the second place it will...greatly strengthen the antislavery and anti-Southern feeling in the Northern States and thus help the Black Republican Party.”34 The Daily Herald, for its part, was not surprised in the least that “the affair has been a perfect Godsend to the Abolitionists.”35 The clouding of consequence, or the breakdown of foresight, was one of the great pitfalls of passion. It was obvious to Whig men that Brooks had caned Sumner without fully appreciating the inevitable fallout, and such irresponsible (not to say childish) behavior was anathema to them.

They also disapproved of the place and style in which the attack was conducted. Though quite critical of Sumner, the Raleigh Register concluded that “the Senate chamber is no place for brawls and fights, and every American citizen must

lament the recent occurrence." The *Daily Herald* thought the caning not only misplaced, but also cowardly in execution. Sumner was attacked under what one of its editors thought "very reprehensible circumstances. [Brooks] caned him in the Senate chamber, and he took him, moreover, at an advantage—while sitting in his chair." The Louisville *Journal* also noted disapprovingly that Brooks had "felled Sumner while the latter was sitting in an arm chair." Brooks's supporters were sensitive to such critiques but were ultimately willing to rationalize or overlook them. During the House investigation, for example, Georgia Representative Howell Cobb lingered overlong on the fact that Sumner's chair was on rollers and that his desk had been raised two inches from the floor to accommodate his long legs. Presumably these revelations proved that Sumner could have risen up and defended himself, but the editors of the *Republican Banner and Nashville Whig* were unmoved:

We do not think that Southern gentlemen can, in their hearts, applaud an attack with a heavy cane upon an unarmed man, pinioned to his seat, and unsuspecting and unprepared for the deadly assault that was made upon him. High-toned chivalry and true courage are inseparable; these qualities are indispensable to a gentleman and should be so to every Senator and Representative. They are nowhere more sedulously cherished than at the South, and there are few Southern men, who, upon a calm consideration of the circumstances, will not agree with us that this assault by Brooks was entirely devoid of either courage or chivalry.40

36 Raleigh Register, June 6, 1856, in Secession Era Editorials.
39 Congressional Globe, 1363.
40 Republican Banner and Nashville Whig, June 4, 1856, in Secession Era Editorials; hereafter referred to as the Nashville Whig. This editorial was reprinted the following day in the Louisville *Journal*. These two papers, which did not have overlapping readerships, might have been in collaboration with one another, frequently sharing editorials in stereotype. I would like to thank T. Lloyd Benson for this insight.
The plea for "calm consideration" was a hallmark of Whig rhetoric. In the context of Whig manhood, men of quality and distinction exercised cool rationality. They did not allow regional chauvinism or a hatred of abolitionists, which they shared with their more passionate countrymen, to cloud their judgment. Doing so would have rendered them as unreasonable and unmanly as the zealots to the north. Presuming to speak for all southern gentlemen, the Nashville Whig attempted to counteract the damage Brooks had done to that cherished ideal. They considered the caning a cheap shot and saw nothing manly in the use of deceptive force. References to the caning as cowardly were ubiquitous in the North, but these Whig men clearly hoped to define elite manhood in regional terms. Southerners knew best about "high-toned chivalry," the writer argued, and it was by their authority that Brooks should be condemned as unmanly.

For many Whigs, the caning of Sumner was a more dangerous misrepresentation of southern gentlemen than was the speech that had provoked it. Whatever Sumner said, it was Brooks whose conduct truly influenced the way the rest of the world saw and thought about the South. In an article that appeared in both the Nashville Whig and the Louisville Journal, an anonymous southern editor wrote, "However enormous the offense of Sumner, the assault upon him by Brooks was even more unjustifiable. It was an ebullition of brutal passion more consistent with the character of a hired bravo than with that of a high-souled, chivalric Southern gentleman." Surely, the editorial concluded, Brooks could have sought redress from
Sumner without "tarnishing the name of Southern chivalry." Within the slave states, then, there were those who thought the caning manly and those who, quite decidedly, did not. For the latter group, violent expressions of passion were abhorrent. More than this, Whig men feared that the leaders of their section had become, like Brooks himself, overcome by passion. They understood that most elite southern men admired a bit of the ruffian in one another, and they took pains to dissociate the idea of the southern gentleman from Brooks's example.

Words such as "chivalry" and "honor" were no less important to Whig men than they were to pro-Brooks elites. In fact, nearly all elite American men, North and South, drew from the same vocabulary of manhood to describe gender status, but they often used the same words with fundamentally different meanings. It was to Senator John Crittenden's "immortal honor," for example, that Robert C. Winthrop, prominent Boston intellectual and former Massachusetts Senator, appealed when urging his Kentucky friend "to play the part of Pacifier" in Congress in the wake of the caning. The old-Whig Boston Courier argued that while Sumner had "descended to no low blackguardism," it was Brooks who had "transgressed every rule of honor which should animate or restrain one gentleman in his connections with another." The paper concluded that "there is no chivalry in a brute...no manliness in a scoundrel." Save, perhaps, for a semantic quibble about Sumner's gentlemanly status (which the Courier would undoubtedly have conceded), southern Whig men concurred with these sentiments. The use of the word "restrain" is critical here, for

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41 Nashville Whig, June 4, 1856, in Secession Era Editorials.
42 Robert C. Winthrop to John J. Crittenden, June 3, 1856, Crittenden Papers, Library of Congress.
43 "The Attack Upon Mr. Sumner." Boston Courier, May 23, 1856, in Secession Era Editorials.
while honor was primarily (though not exclusively) a positive or motive force for those of the Brookesian persuasion, it possessed a far stronger negative or restrictive component for Whig men. When manliness meant acting out for some southerners, that is, it often meant reigning oneself in for others.

Of all Brooks’s southern critics during the affair, no one was more nationally respected or more archetypal than Crittenden. After completing his course of study at the College of William and Mary in 1807, Crittenden served as an aide-de-camp to a general and a governor during the War of 1812 and went on to embark on a remarkably successful career in politics and law. A conservative Whig throughout his life, Crittenden supported congressional non-interference with regard to slavery and opposed the annexation of Texas and the Mexican War. During the presidential campaign of 1848, it became clear that the aging Henry Clay, Crittenden’s mentor and friend, was no longer a viable presidential candidate. Ever the political pragmatist (though never to the detriment of his core values), Crittenden gave his support to Mexican War hero Zachary Taylor, an exemplary Whig man in his own right, and was instrumental in his successful bid for the White House. With secession on the horizon in December 1860, he conceived a compromise package, known as the “Crittenden propositions” or the “Crittenden Compromise,” calling for a Constitutional amendment reinstating the Missouri line and guaranteeing slavery in the District of Columbia. With the second wave of secession following Fort Sumter—in which Virginia, North Carolina, Arkansas, and Tennessee left the Union—little more than a month away, Crittenden urged compromise to no avail at the Virginia-led peace convention in Washington. Committed to peace and union, however, he took
the lead in charting the Unionist line taken by his state throughout the sectional schism.44 Personally Crittenden was as moderate and unflappable as he was politically. Kentucky congressman William J. Graves once noted that “in Kentucky and wherever else he was well known, no man was more distinguished for his mildness, and humility” than Crittenden.45

During the caning controversy, Crittenden was frequently cited in the North as proof that some southern men were still worthy of gentlemanly distinction. It was Crittenden, after all, who had wrested what remained of the shattered cane that had toppled Sumner from Brooks’s hand. He was also the only southern man to immediately express his “disapprobation of such violence” on the spot.46 At the Faneuil Hall indignation meeting of May 24, the outraged citizens of Boston, more than four thousand strong, praised Crittenden in the second of their five resolutions. The massive congregation declared its perception of “a strange disregard for chivalric principles” in Brooks’s actions, but “in the conduct of such men as Senator Crittenden,” it added, “we gladly recognize proofs of the fact that in all sections of the country there are men of high honor.”47 In their gratitude, Pennsylvania Republicans “eulogized Senator Crittenden for his manly conduct” at their convention in late May.48 While he would certainly not have wanted his actions to be perceived as an endorsement of Sumner, abolitionism, or the Republican Party, Crittenden’s

46 Congressional Globe, 1359; see also, Kirwin, 316.  
values were in basic accord with those of many northern conservatives. He would have agreed, for instance, with New York *Courier and Enquirer* editor J. Watson Webb when he counseled northern politicians in Washington to “openly and manfully, but quietly and in gentlemanly and courteous language, to speak their honest convictions.” Unlike those of the dominant southern ideal, the imperatives of Whig manhood had champions on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line.

Whig men were averse to every species of extremism, for when passionately asserted, it disturbed the social order. Some, of course, had a vested economic interest in slavery where it existed already, and volatile sectional relations were, quite simply, bad for business. But reticence and self-control seem to have been in the bones of Whig men like Crittenden. The editors of the Louisville *Journal* believed that Sumner and Brooks, “the fire-eater and the Abolitionist,” were both “deficient in the right sort of spirit.” Physical violence and vituperation, as well as the indulgent radicalism that engendered them, were antithetical to the tenets of Whig manhood. In his letter to Crittenden about the caning, Winthrop reassured his friend that he had “the strongest aversion to Mr. Sumner’s political cause and style of debate.” But he confessed his inability to see “how any highminded and honorable man, as Mr. Brooks is presented to be considered in Carolina, [could] have...proceeded to such extreme violence!”

This sensibility linked conservative New Englanders to men like Crittenden in the

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51 In the speeches of Daniel Webster, Howe identifies two oratorical styles: the “forensic” and the “inoffensive.” Sumner practiced the former, which “was avowedly disputatious...and expressed male-male rivalries in ritualized form.” Howe, *Political Culture of the American Whigs*, 221.

52 Winthrop to Crittenden, June 3, 1856, Crittenden Papers, Library of Congress.
slave states and, in many cases, united Whiggish elites throughout the Civil War. Unlike the increasingly influential fire-eating set, many southern Whig men never saw regional pride and trans-sectional cooperation as mutually exclusive. That the caning made the South look bad in the North was especially regrettable to Whig men, for sectional animosity made political cooperation more difficult. Many southern conservatives, moreover, had political and personal friends in the North and wanted to keep them.

As troubled as they were both by “The Crime Against Kansas” and the violence of the caning, Whig men refused to give up on language, reason, debate, and compromise. Indeed, to do so would have been unmanly in their eyes. Pointing to Chinese idolatry in California, Mormon bigamy on the plains of New Mexico, and a host of other issues threatening the nation aside from the Sumner-Brooks business, the Nashville Whig lectured its readers in a characteristically pedantic tone: “It is no time for the exercise of passions and prejudices. Plain truths, calm deliberation, wise counsels, and a reciprocal spirit of forbearance and conciliation will alone suffice to bear us safely through the difficulties and danger by which we are surrounded.”

Winthrop echoed this sentiment. “A word fitly spoken,” he assured Crittenden, “would be like apples of gold in pitchers of silver.” Many in both the North and South had lost faith in “calm deliberation” and “forbearance” during the affair. The Pittsburgh Gazette, for example, warned, “The voters of the Free States, in vindication of their own manliness, will hereafter, in addition to inquiring of

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53 Nashville Whig, June 4, 1856, in Seccession Era Editorials.
54 Winthrop to Crittenden, June 3, 1856, Crittenden Papers, Library of Congress.
candidates, will you vote so-and-so[?], have to enlarge the basis of interrogation, and demand an affirmative answer to the question, Will you fight?" The assumption underlying this view was that "cut-throat Southerns will never learn to respect Northern men until one of their number has a rapier thrust through his ribs, or feels a bullet in his thorax."\textsuperscript{55} According to the Charleston \textit{Mercury}, "The South has become generally convinced that it is by hard blows...that the sectional conflict is to be settled."\textsuperscript{56}

For Whig men, on the other hand, the peaceable preservation of the Union was a cardinal priority during the affair and beyond. The dissolution of the country, Crittenden had written in 1848 during his tenure as Governor of Kentucky, represented the "\textit{consummation of the greatest evil that can befall us}."\textsuperscript{57} In the heat of the excitement over the caning, Amos A. Lawrence, the Massachusetts cotton magnate, asked Crittenden to "use the influence that your character commands in all parts of this country to avert the evils which threaten from the indulgence of sectional feeling at this time." Lawrence employed a facile, but illustrative metaphor to urge Crittenden to quell the indulgence of passion in Washington. "According to the newspaper accounts of the late disgraceful assault in the Senate," he wrote, "you are represented as clasping your arms around the assailant, so now take your stand between the representatives of the North and the South and rebuke the passions which impel them to forget each others virtues and the bond of union which they are

\textsuperscript{55} \textit{The Attack on Mr. Sumner.—} "Pittsburgh \textit{Gazette}, May 24, 1856, in \textit{Secession Era Editorials}.

\textsuperscript{56} \textit{The Right View of the Subject,} Charleston \textit{Mercury}, May 30, 1856, in \textit{Secession Era Editorials}.

\textsuperscript{57} Quoted in Kirwin, \textit{John J. Crittenden}, 548.
weakening."\textsuperscript{58} It was to fellow Whig men in the South that conservative northerners like Lawrence turned in the time of sectional crisis. They understood that conciliation, compromise, and consensus were governing principles for men like Crittenden. Protecting the Union was not more important than protecting the South for Whig men; rather, these two duties were tantamount to one another. It is interesting that when secession began in 1860, its advocates most commonly referred to their Unionist countrymen as "submissionists."\textsuperscript{59} Many Whig men begrudgingly gave into the dream of secession partly, no doubt, under the weight of such gender baiting; John Crittenden, though no friend to abolition or equality, did not.

While men like Preston Brooks paid lip service to the virtue of self-control, Whig men were steadfastly committed to it as a means to rationality, moderation, and Union. They were united across sectional lines in their contempt for both Sumner and Brooks; in their minds, the principals in the caning controversy were zealots whose unfiltered passion, brutality, and blackguardism threatened to rend in two what their ancestors and constituents had entrusted to their authority. As Whig men saw the world, self-control engendered moderation, and moderation facilitated compromise, which represented the only viable path to peaceful sectional relations and a strong, healthy Union. The indulgence of passion and the use of force, regardless of the

\textsuperscript{58} Amos A. Lawrence to John J. Crittenden, May 24, 1856, Crittenden Papers, Library of Congress.
provocation, were, quite simply, antithetical to their idea of what a leading American man should be.
CHAPTER III

THE SYMBOLICS OF SUBMISSION

The personal stakes in the politics of slavery were extremely high for gentlemen-statesmen in the mid-nineteenth-century United States, and the threat of emasculation loomed large when and wherever men debated the subject. Antislavery rhetoric often stuck at the core of elite southern men’s sense of themselves as powerful players in national politics and patriarchs at home. Due to their declining, minority status within the Union, many southern men harbored feelings of inferiority vis-à-vis their free-state counterparts, and the “defensive-aggressive” style of politics that this perception fueled left many northern leaders feeling violated and abused.1 As the caning so dramatically illustrated, this cycle of humiliation could easily escalate into violence.

During the era of the Civil War, there were somewhat subtler means of asserting manliness than attacking an adversary with an unmistakably phallic, gold-headed walking stick, however. Comparative emasculation—the suggestion that a man was or might become like something other than a man—represented a rhetorical alternative to the use of force. Governing authority was coded male (and white) in the nineteenth century, and political views were often undermined through the emasculation of those who promoted them. Women, children, animals, and slaves

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were key reference points for elite male preeminence in the "natural" order of things during this period, and leading politicians frequently sought to discredit their opponents by associating them with such living and breathing symbols of submission.²

In the Old South, no word implied emasculation quite like "submission."³ When a "secret whisper or artful innuendo" undermined reputation, dueling maven John Lyde Wilson believed that the offended party "must be more or less than man to submit in silence."⁴ To be sure, self-denial and cosmic resignation were high virtues for some American men, particularly in devout northern circles. In a letter to William J. Allison about the troubles in Kansas, Quaker poet John Greenleaf Whittier lamented the resort to firearms by the free-state settlers there, concluding that "almost anyone can fight even in a bad cause but the sublime self abnegation of martyrdom is rarely found."⁵ In a sermon delivered to the people of Boston only days after the caning, Henry Ward Beecher spoke of "suffering" as "a remedial power," one that helped to free man from "his animal nature." He no doubt had Sumner in mind when

² In her book, National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men (Durham, 1998), Dana D. Nelson applies the theory of "altero-referentiality" to the early Republic. Concentrating on Indians, women, and African-Americans, Nelson maintains that white manhood was defined and stabilized "through multiple, multiplying calculations of otherness"; see esp. 36-37, 63 (for quotation), 125. However, during the nineteenth century, I would argue, the idea of "National Manhood" was very often subverted through white men's projection of "otherness" onto one another.
³ For the concept of submission in the Old South, see Harlan Joel Gradin, "Losing Control: The Caning of Charles Sumner and the Erosion of the 'Common Ground on which our Political Fabric Was Reared','" (M.A. Thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1981), 120, 124.
⁴ John Lyde Wilson, The Code of Honor; or Rules for the Government of Principals and Seconds in Dueling (Charleston, 1858), 6-7.
⁵ John Greenleaf Whittier to William J. Allison, August 9, 1856, John Greenleaf Whittier's Letterbook, Quaker Collection, Magill Library, Haverford College.
he claimed that no great principle can “come to power until it has had martyrs.”\(^6\) Christ-like submissiveness had significantly less currency for most in the Old South than it did for men like Whittier and Beecher. Wilson, for example, was more than a little skeptical about saintly forbearance, calling it “utterly repugnant to these feelings which nature and education have implanted in the human character.”\(^7\) Though the anti-Brooks southern press never seems to have objected to the caning on spiritual grounds, the Richmond *Enquirer* was quick to link its apostasy to feminine conscience. Attacking such Whiggish papers as the Wilmington (N.C.) *Herald*, one editorialist mused, “It is much more manly to adopt the violent vocabulary of the [New York] *Tribune* than to insinuate disapprobation in the meek accents of a conscience-smitten saint.”\(^8\) In the rough world of southern statecraft, submission almost always made one less than a man in the eyes of those who perceived it.

For many in the South, “The Crime Against Kansas” marked the death of language in the free states. This meant that all that words facilitated—reason, debate, compromise, and, indeed, civilization itself—was understood to have perished there as well. According to the *Enquirer*, it was “an idle mockery to challenge” northern men in Congress. “It is equally useless to attempt to disgrace them,” the editor complained, for “they are insensible to shame; and can be brought to reason only by an application of cowhide or gutta percha.”\(^9\) In the wake of Sumner’s speech, non-violence had become tantamount to submission in the eyes of most southern

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\(^8\) “The Sumner Discipline—The Needful Remedy.” Richmond *Enquirer*, June 3, 1856.

\(^9\) Ibid.
gentlemen. Facing a hostile, irrational enemy without the use of force would have resigned the South, in the words of the Richmond Dispatch, “to lie still and submit uncomplainingly to every species of injury and contumely.” Brooks apologists often invoked such rape imagery. To submit, the Dispatch suggested, would have been to allow northern zealots to violate the South in much the same way that men often raped women. In this way, feminine helplessness was hypothetically projected upon the self in counterfactual justifications of force. Southern politicians and commentators clearly expressed what they saw as the psychic and social cost of non-violence when they underscored the potential for their subjugation and feminization.

When directed at another, feminization not only compromised the manliness of its object or target but also conveyed his otherness and, thus, asserted the manhood of the feminizer. When Brooks learned that Representative Edwin Morgan of New York had publicly called him a “villain,” he promptly shot back, referring to Morgan as a “certain feminine gentleman.” This was to say that Morgan occupied a marginal gender space, that of the womanly man. However comic or casual his intent might have seemed, Brooks was also reaffirming his own normality by arbitrating gender norms in this way. Similar dynamics were at work in southern press coverage of the sack of Lawrence. The Charleston Mercury reported, for example, that while northern newspapers were sounding the “battle-cry of the Free-Soil warriors in Kansas,” a correspondent of the New York Tribune had been spotted fleeing Lawrence “like

11 “Resignation of Brooks.” Congressional Globe, 34 Congress, 1st Session, Appendix, 831. All subsequent references to the Globe are from this session. For the word “villain” as a precipitator of honorific encounters, see Kenneth S. Greenberg, Masters and Statesmen: The Political Culture of American Slavery (Baltimore, 1985), 38.
LOT’S wife from Sodom.” Alluding to the story in Genesis in which Yahweh turns Lot’s wife into a pillar of salt after she disobediently looks back at the doomed city while in flight, the *Mercury* added that the correspondent was so frightened that he could not have turned into anything quite as “solid” as she had. Such a man was soft, worthy only of a female analog (one closely linked to the origin of the word “sodomy” no less). Like Brooks, the editors of the *Mercury* reaffirmed their solidity, along with that of their state and section, by publicly observing the cowardice and effeminacy of a rival male.

Feminization was by no means an exclusively southern mode of invective. In “The Crime Against Kansas” Sumner had degraded South Carolina men by suggesting the martial superiority of the female denizens of Lawrence. Just as the Richmond *Enquirer* linked southern disapprobation of Brooks to the “meek accents” of conscience, northerners frequently feminized one another. On May 20, the day Sumner completed his speech, Illinois Senator Stephen Douglas compared what the Senate had just heard “to a patchwork bedquilt, made up of all the old calico dresses in the house.” With this domestic flourish, Douglas placed the speech’s composition outside the pale of manly endeavor, thereby undercutting its political authority. Sewing, after all, was women’s work in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century United States, and the idea of a quilted congressional speech was, no doubt, quaintly oxymoronc to Douglas’s audience. By his own implication, Douglas was not a

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matronly weaver of quilts, but rather a plain speaking man who constructed his arguments from that most virile of fabrics, the Constitution of the United States of America.13

Brooks's response to Morgan’s “villain” insult invoked another key marker for American manhood, that of the child. If Morgan “will ‘hold still’ when I get a hold of him,” Brooks told the House with comic relish, “I’ll not hurt him much.”14 Surely the command to “hold still” was intended to evoke the image of a father spanking a disobedient child. Several pro-Brooks papers in the South made similar analogies in descriptions of the caning. The Mercury, for example, declared that it had been Brooks’s “duty to chastise Mr. SUMNER for his insolence.”15 An editorialist for the Richmond Enquirer echoed this sentiment. “If the man-senator will not hold himself responsible for such insults to his fellow Senators,” he wrote, “what is to be done? nothing in this wide world but to cow-hide the bad manners out of him, or good manners into him.”16 The emphasis placed on “man-senator” underscored the irony of the phrase, which, of course, conveyed that Sumner was neither a proper man nor a worthy Senator. In a subsequent piece, the Enquirer added, “These vulgar abolitionists in the Senate are getting above themselves, they have been humored until they forget their position. They have grown saucy and dare

14 “Resignation of Brooks.” Congressional Globe, Appendix, 831.
15 Charleston Mercury, May 28, 1856, in Secession Era Editorials.
16 “Mr. Brooks’s Chastisement of Mr. Sumner.” Richmond Enquirer, May 30, 1856.
to be impudent to gentlemen!" Taking a comparatively charitable approach, the Richmond *Dispatch* reminded its readers that the “rude fellows” from the North in Washington had never been properly educated in the “the rules of gentlemanly intercourse.” Nonetheless the paper counseled firmness with such inexperienced specimens, concluding, “‘he who spares the rod spoils the child.’” Throughout the affair, Brooks was either cast as or assumed the role of patriarch, the father figure whose firm hand was needed in the social education of a saucy child.

Even more than femininity and childhood, gendered references to the subhuman pervaded caning controversy discourse. Once the likes of Sumner “understand that for every vile word spoken against the South, they will suffer so many stripes,” the Richmond *Enquirer* assured its readers, “...they will soon learn to behave themselves, like decent dogs—they can never be gentlemen.” Affirming the decision to whip rather than challenge Sumner, the duel savvy Henry Bedinger wrote to Brooks on June 13, 1856, “the rapier or pistol for gentlemen, the cudgel for dogs.” Reporting that Brooks had “made at” Massachusetts Representative Calvin Chaffee in a hotel bar after hearing him regale a crowd with his “not very flattering” opinions of the assault, the paper noted that Chaffee had very nearly gotten “from Mr. Brooks some of the sauce with which he had previously basted Mr. Sumner.” In this

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18 “Abolition Demands.” Richmond *Dispatch*, May 27, 1856. Unlike feminization, infantilization was rarely, if ever, used by northerners in political debate. This might well have reflected sectional variations in child rearing practices, for elite southern men played a far greater role in the upbringing of their children during this period than did their northern counterparts. For fatherhood in the Old South vis-à-vis the North, see Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York, 1982), Part II, esp. 117-48.
conceit, Sumner was a wild animal that Brooks had not merely conquered but prepared for consumption.21

Northern leaders and commentators were no less prone than southerners to project the animalistic onto their antagonists. In his rejoinder to Douglas’s attack on “The Crime Against Kansas,” for instance, Sumner let loose a string of bestializing barbs. In an unscripted and characteristically passionate moment, he attempted to reign himself in after saying, “No person with the upright form of man—”. When Douglas immediately egged him on, yelling, “Say it! say it!,” Sumner obliged: “The noisome, nameless animal, whose nature it is to discharge venom, is not a proper model for a United States Senator.”22 In the internally contentious northern press, the man as domestic animal was a persistent motif. The editors of the New York Times charged that Brooks sympathizers in the North, such as the Post and Courier of Boston, “lick submissively any insolent hand that may be raised for Slavery.”23 These papers were not run by independent men, the Times suggested, but rather by the pets of southern masters. In a New York Tribune piece that referred to Brooks as a “wild beast,” one correspondent maintained that southern congressmen had lost “the

21 “Mr. Chaffee,” Lynchburg Daily Virginian, June 2, 1856. Hundreds of similar examples could be cited. The Richmond Whig, for example, had only one complaint with caning: Brooks should have employed “a horsewhip or cowhide” rather than a cane. Reprinted in the New York Daily Times, May 26, 1856, 4. The phenomenon of bestialization in the Old South has been well documented. For the southern backcountry, see Elliot J. Gorn, “Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch”: The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry,” American Historical Review 90 (1985): 18-43, esp.28-33; for self-bestialization among the non-elite as a form of rebellion against bourgeois values, see Caroll Smith-Rosenberg, Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America (New York, 1985), 95-101. Among scholars of the affair, only Gradin has discussed this phenomenon; “Losing Control,” 107-114. He argues that southerners had packed all of the evil they perceived in the world into an abolitionist caricature that, ultimately, personified at a safe distance what they most feared in themselves. His conclusions rely heavily on Winthrop Jordan’s seminal history of American race relations, White over Black, and Clifford Geertz’s essay on Balinese cock-fighting, “Deep Play.”
22 “Mr. Sumner’s Rejoinder.” New York Daily Times, May 21, 1856, 1.
instincts and feelings which distinguish the civilized man from the savage,” and went on to regret that “our Representatives are compelled to associate with these creatures at Washington and recognize them as gentlemen.”24 In a similar vein, the editors of the Pittsburgh Gazette thought turning the other cheek to “them,” meaning southern statesmen, analogous to throwing “pearls before swine.”25 The emphasis placed on the word “them” served as a reminder that for the educated and political elite, the projection of beastliness always established distance or otherness, which, in turn, underscored the humanity and, specifically, the manhood of the projector.

Political authority was coded white as well as male in the mid-nineteenth-century, and throughout the country enslavement was linked firmly to blackness in white men’s minds. In accordance with their commitment to conciliation, Whig men rarely engaged in the more overt forms of rhetorical alienation, but even they rarely missed an opportunity to level the term “Black Republican” at the members of Sumner’s party.26 Republicans often bristled at this epithet and were by no means above responding in kind. Though not directly related to the affair, the Keitt-Grow incident provides an interesting example. The debate over Kansas’s statehood was still going strong in early February 1857, when a drunk Laurence Keitt, who had assisted Brooks in the caning several moths earlier, called Pennsylvanian Galusha Grow a “Black Republican puppy” before charging him during a late night session of the House. Before knocking the sleepy, inebriated South Carolina gallant to the floor, Grow assured everyone in attendance that he would not let any “nigger driver” treat

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26 See, e.g., Louisville Journal, May 28, 1856.
him like one of his chattels.27 These crude, commonplace pejoratives suggest that any association with black men, be it in regard to their rights or enslavement, could be understood to dilute one's political authority in antebellum America.

Surprisingly, some in the South needed to be reminded that black skin and public pronouncements were incongruous. In the afterglow of the assault on Sumner, the Columbia *South Carolinian* proudly detailed the overwhelming support for Brooks in that city. The paper made a point of singling out the approbation of slaves as "the crowning glory" of Brooks's "good deed." Though recent research casts some doubt on the authenticity of such accounts, the *South Carolinian* reported that the city's slaves had taken up "a handsome subscription" with which they intended to procure "an appropriate token of their regard" for Brooks, whose action, the paper argued, had done so much to secure "their rights and enjoyments as the happiest laborers on the face of the globe."28 The Charleston *Mercury* did not share the *South Carolinian* 's exuberance at such apparent affirmations of the social order from below. Sternly lecturing its capital-city counterpart, the *Mercury* underscored what it saw as the folly of entertaining the political opinions of slaves:

> When, in the Capital of the State, slaves are permitted, nay, applauded, and urged to take part in our political movements—to unite in popular demonstration—to raise subscriptions and present their tokens of approval to our public men—it is, indeed, a spectacle as disgusting as it is novel. We blush for the State when such things are permitted. If our slaves can publicly congratulate, may they not publicly condemn?...Such a proceeding, while it offends every sentiment of

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27 This altercation is described in Stephen W. Berry II, *All That Makes a Man: Love and Ambition in the Civil War South* (New York, 2003), 47-49, quotations on 48.

Carolina society, is calculated to bring ridicule and disgrace upon the whole movement [of southern rights].

Clearly the Mercury recognized the revolutionary implications of “negroe” participation in public debate. The use of the possessive pronoun “our” in reference to “political movements” reflects the fact that governance had long been the domain of white men. Nonetheless, the author betrays an understanding that the white monopoly on political power was a tenuous, even artificial, thing; it was something that needed to be policed and vigilantly enforced.

Several scholars have observed that male slaves were, by definition, men without honor in the Old South. Like women, all male slaves were, in theory, essentially submissive and, therefore, devoid of manhood. An implicit recognition of slave humanity might well have underlain the master-slave relationship, but, by definition, slaves lacked the desideratum of American manhood—Independence. All slaves were seen, on some level, as subhuman in the plantation South. Certainly

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29 "A New Era." Charleston Mercury, May 29, 1856, in Secession Era Editorials. Though anti-Brooks southerners were aware of this episode, it is not clear which side they supported. The Republican Banner and Nashville Whig reprinted this Mercury editorial, adding only the cryptic headline “Most Ridiculous” by way of comment. Since the South Carolinian was quoted at length in the Mercury piece that the Nashville Whig reprinted, it is unclear at whom the headline was directed. In any case, the Mercury’s position qualifies Sinha’s contention that “in the aftermath of the caning, South Carolinian slaveholders were eager to represent the feelings of their slaves”; see “The Caning of Charles Sumner,” 250.

30 Orlando Patterson, Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), 10; see also, Kenneth S. Greenberg, Honor and Slavery: Lies, Duels, Noses, Masks... (Princeton, 1996), 39.

31 Eugene D. Genovese, Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made (New York, 1976), 5. Genovese’s work rests largely on the idea that “paternalism’s insistence upon mutual obligations—duties, responsibilities, and ultimately even rights—implicitly recognized the slaves’ humanity.” Nonetheless, without freedom, not to mention white skin, the idea of slave (even black) manhood was oxymoronic for whites in the Old South. For the argument that slaves maintained a healthy sense of their own manhood, see Bertram Wyatt-Brown, The Shaping of Southern Culture: Honor, Grace, and War, 1760s-1880s, 4-5. It was no doubt possible for black men to maintain a sense of “inner manliness” in the face of enslavement, but the extent to which they were emasculated in slavery (not
many were treated as such. Confident, rebellious slaves like the young Frederick Douglass, for example, were handled like horses in need of “breaking.” Most men in the country, including Douglass, understood the submission inherent in slavery to be antithetical to manhood.

It did not take an especially critical eye to see that the assault on Sumner smacked of slave discipline. The caning was often characterized as a “whipping,” a mode of punishment reserved almost exclusively for slaves in the plantation South. Lamenting the implications of his censure at the hands of the House committee, Brooks shockingly expressed the connection between Sumner and a slave in terms of rights. “If I go to my home, and find that one of my slaves has behaved badly in my absence,” he said, “and I direct him to be flogged, I may be charged with—to use language familiar here—‘[a] crime the blackest and most heinous.’” In Brooks’s mind, his right to cane Sumner was tantamount to his right to punish chattels. In some sense, then, Brooks had enslaved Sumner on May 22, 1856. What that meant for men who identified with the Senator from Massachusetts was not, of course, actual slavery, but rather a very real sense of manhood lost.

Throughout the affair, northern men expressed their dread of enslavement and emasculation by articulating a nearly apocalyptic vision of the future in which they would be forced to cower before the patriarchs of the South beneath the disciplinary

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32 For Douglass’s experience under the “nigger-breaker” Mr. Covey, see Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself, David W. Blight, ed. (Boston, 1993), 71-94.
34 “Resignation of Mr. Brooks.” Congressional Globe, Appendix, 832. Brooks was referring to language used to describe his assault on Sumner here.
trappings of slavery. New York political commentator James Watson Webb observed that if northern men did not “openly and manfully” express their commitment to free speech, “we shall all, and speedily too, become as completely the slaves of the Slave power, as are their plantation chattels.”35 The more militant New York Tribune conceived of a future in which the Capitol had been “turned into a slave plantation where Northern members act under the lash, the bowie-knife and the pistol...If, indeed, we go on quietly to submit to such outrages, we deserve to have our noses flattened, our skins blacked, and to be placed at work under task-masters; for we have lost the noblest attributes of freemen, and are virtually slaves.”36 Apparently, one of “the noblest attributes of freemen” was white skin. In the North and South, manhood was defined not only in terms of freedom, but also in opposition to disfigurement, blackness, and enslavement.37 Northerners used rhetorical self-enslavement in much the same way that southerners used potential self-feminization. For men in both sections, the fundamental implication was the same: to be depicted or treated like a woman or slave portended the loss of all the privileges and authority that manhood conferred.

37 For the importance of the face in elite southern culture, see Kenneth S. Greenberg, “The Nose, the Lie, and the Duel in the Antebellum South,” American Historical Review 95 (1990): 57-74. Greenberg seems to suggest that the symbolism of the nose was a part of a peculiarly southern “language of honor,” though clearly it was not. For a similar interpretation applied to non-elite men in the southern backcountry, see Gorn, “‘Gouge and Bite,’” esp. 28. For white male identity among the northern working class, see David R. Roediger, The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class, Revised Edition (London, 1999).
What can be gleaned from the largely bygone tropes of comparative emasculation about the mid-nineteenth-century United States? To begin with, words like "feminine," "chastisement," "dog," and "nigger"—no less than "honor," "chivalry," and "courage"—were part of a vocabulary of manhood that all leading men understood. The rhetoric of the day was speckled with hostile applications of these gendered terms, indicating the salience of emasculating rhetoric in Civil War era discourse. It is plain that before non-elites were called to man cannons and take up carbines, their superiors engaged in an extended and undeniably gendered war of words.
CONCLUSION

_Ever Able, Manly, Just And Heroic;_
_Illustrating true Patriotism_
_By his devotion to his Country;_
_The whole South unites_
_With his bereaved family_
_In deploiring his untimely end._
_"Earth has never pillowed_
_Upon her Bosom a truer Son._
_Nor Heaven opened wide her Gates,_
_To receive a manlier spirit."_

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_Preston S. Brooks will be Long, Long Remembered_
_As one in whom the virtues loved to Dwell_
_Tho' sad to us, and dark this dispensation._
_We know God's wisdom_
_Orders all things well._

_- Preston S. Brooks's Epitaph_¹

The caning of Charles Sumner portended a tempest of epic proportions on the horizon, but its author did not live to help guide his section through the travails of the revolution ahead. After suffering for five days from a sore throat and coughing fits, Preston S. Brooks died on January 27, 1857. Etched into the obelisk that marks his grave is the assurance that he “will be long, long remembered as one in whom the virtues loved to dwell.” Invoked twice in Brooks’s epitaph, manliness was among the most important of these virtues for the patriarchs of the Old South, in part because it encompassed so much of what was considered good in men. Passion, strength of body

¹ Reprinted in T. Lloyd Benson, _The Caning of Senator Sumner_ (Belmont, Cal., 2003), 203.
and will, self-restraint, courage, honesty, loyalty, sociability, professional acumen—all of these and more were invested in leading ideologies of manhood during the era of the Civil War. It was the ways in which these attributes were conceived and the degrees to which they were emphasized by leading individuals throughout the country, however, that helped to stoke sectional hostility and spur military conflict.

Many in the North were uneasy with the style and substance of "The Crime Against Kansas," but most were positively outraged by the manner in which Brooks had avenged it. In practical terms, they considered the assault a violation of the constitutional right to freedom of speech, perhaps the most sacred of democratic principles. A more visceral aversion to such violence, however, drove thousands of northerners to publicly proclaim their disapproval of Brooks at indignation meetings throughout the region. That so many had come to the defense of such a widely detested agitator was deeply disconcerting to southern men. When "A Looker On" lamented in the Richmond *Enquirer* that northerners were "not amenable to the code of honor," he asked, "What are Southern men to do if they may not whip their detractors as Brooks did?" This was a desperate plea, one in which the threat of secession was palpably implicit. The identities of those who related to Brooks rested on values which, though dominant within the slave states, had come to be seen as unmanly, even criminal, by the majority of Americans. Without the ability to meet verbal attacks with physical violence, southern men like Brooks could not, in their own minds, be men at all.

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The twin pillars of manhood in the Old South were independence and mastery. It was with the cultivation and expansion of the latter quality that educated, ambitious southern men truly distinguished themselves from the other freeholders in their midst. Large-scale slaveholding notwithstanding, national politics offered them an arena in which to exercise leadership and find fame. The marginalization of the South in Washington D.C., which the prospect of a free West augured after the Wilmot Proviso of 1846, did more than threaten the institution of slavery. It also struck at the core of southern men’s sense of self-importance and command. “How far does your authority extend,” Brooks asked the northern members of the House of Representatives in his resignation speech of July 1856, “Across the Potomac? To my home?” Referring to the House committee’s attempt to expel him, he continued, “if your authority goes into the Senate Chamber, and even when the Senate is not in session, why should it not go into the ante-rooms and down the steps of the Capital? Why not pursue me into the Avenue—into the steamboat—to my plantation?”

Slavery was, without question, the driving issue in national politics after 1846, but male egos as well as chattels were at stake during these years; indeed, the two were deeply interrelated for planter-statesmen like Brooks. The right to preside over subordinates, white as well as black, was crucial to the self-image of such men, many of whom felt their grasp on the reins of the Republic slipping in the mid-1850s.

Much about the cultural composition of the Old South and its relationship to the North comes into focus in light of the events of May 1856. The sectional

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polarization that the caning uncovered (and helped to engender) seems to support the notion of a distinctive South, but nothing as complex as southern culture or the Civil War can be explained in absolute terms. Contrary to his epitaph, "the whole South" did not unite with Brooks's bereaved family upon his death. A minority among the slave-state elite voiced principled objections to his most famous act and, in so doing, articulated an alternative vision of what it meant to be a southern gentleman. To be sure, not all southern Whigs promoted the culture of moderation, self-control, and rationality that I have termed Whig manhood. Those who did, however, were very often at variance with the advocates of "southern rights" and secession. The ethics of the Confederate elite have, nevertheless, largely come to define what we now think of as southern. In his enduringly influential book, *The Mind of the South*, W. J. Cash wrote, "Proud, brave, honorable by its lights, courteous, personally generous, loyal, swift to act, often too swift, but signally effective, sometimes terrible, in its action—such was the South at its best." Turning to the darker side of the culture, he added,

> Violence, intolerance, aversion and suspicion toward new ideas, an incapacity for analysis, an inclination to act from feeling rather than from thought, an exaggerated individualism and a too narrow concept of social responsibility, attachment to fictions and false values, above all too great attachment to racial values and a tendency to justify cruelty and injustice in the name of those values, sentimentality and a lack of realism—these have been its characteristic vices in the past.4

At first blush, Cash's description seems remarkably apt, but with the likes of Kentuckian John J. Crittenden in mind, its limitations are glaring. Southern Whig men never possessed a tendency toward violence or "an incapacity for analysis," nor were they inclined "to act from feeling rather than from thought." In fact, they

defined themselves as men in opposition to such failings. To ignore the tradition of Whig manhood, or dismiss those who espoused its values as anomalous, is to promote an artificially homogenous image of the southern elite. In terms of cultural sensibility, some leading southern Whigs had more in common with northern conservatives than they did with the confrontation-minded fire-eaters in their midst. While they require further attention, these connections and disconnections undoubtedly contributed to the reluctant rebellion and outright Unionism of some of the South’s most accomplished men.

Trans-sectional continuities were not limited to Whiggish elites in the mid-nineteenth-century United States. Political rhetoric functioned in remarkably similar ways throughout the nation during this period. With varying degrees of vitriol, men on all sides of the debate over slavery sought to alienate their enemies by establishing their otherness and unmanhood. Women, children, animals, and slaves were all invoked in formulaic attempts to divest leading men of public credibility. While Whig men refrained from the more overt forms of rhetorical alienation, they consistently linked their opponents to indulgence and disorder, concepts with feminine, bestial, and infantile connotations of their own.

The 1850s were arguably the most internally tense years in the annals of American politics. In the wake of the Mexican War, a tide of sectional acrimony gradually swept consensus seekers, North and South, toward the margins of the national debate over slavery in the American West and, ultimately, into political irrelevance. Gender ideology played a critical role in this process of polarization. The prospect of northern hegemony in the expanding Union was profoundly humiliating
to most of the South's leading men. Faced with the gendered forebodings of political and cultural marginalization, southern rhetoricians systematically linked conciliation to submission. At the same time, the refusal to compromise emerged in the slave states more plainly than ever before as a bona fide gender imperative. The ideological linkage between manhood and public authority in the American mind ensured the rhetoric of emasculation a place in political discourse throughout the nineteenth century. As the 1850s progressed, an increasingly bold northern opposition compelled most elite southern men to revert to the culture of confrontation in which they had been born and bred. In this way, the war of words that marked the Sumner-Brooks affair escalated into the bloodiest test of masculine wills in American history.
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