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Unmasking the Southern Belle & the Black Mammy: The Intertwined and Violent Nature of Southern Antebellum Womanhoods

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sponsored by Justin Behrend, PhD

ABSTRACT

This essay aims to shed light on a topic that is not often talked about: violence inflicted by white women on the enslaved. The long and unchallenged ideology of paternalism only focuses on white men and lends itself to simplifying the extremely complex hierarchies at play. When studying the contours of womanhood and gender in the antebellum south, many historians revert to long held stereotypes and ignore that gender in this context is intimately tied to race relations and power that is often manifested through violence. Consistently brutalizing slaves was part and parcel of slave mistress' identity. Slavery was not left at the front door of plantation households, it was brought into the home; it cemented deeply ingrained racial and gender hierarchies that can be boiled down to the tension between black female slaves and their white mistresses. The power that mistresses could and did wield has to be acknowledged, and the seemingly insignificant ways that female slaves resisted was essential to claiming their identities as human beings and as women.

I do not know that her master ever whipped her, but I have often been an eye witness of the revolting and brutal inflictions by Mrs. Hamilton; and what lends a deeper shade to this woman's conduct, is the fact, that, almost in the very moments of her shocking outrages of humanity and decency, she would charm you by the sweetness of her voice and her seeming piety. (Douglass, 1855, p. 149)

Frederick Douglass gives this account of his former mistress in his 1855 book, *My Bondage and My Freedom*. This story is important because it highlights an inconsistency in narratives of the southern belle and the dedicated house slave. When studying the contours of womanhood and gender in the antebellum south, many historians revert to long-held stereotypes and fail to acknowledge the intimate ties between

gender, race relations, and the power that is often manifested through violence. Elite white womanhood depended on casting black women as their opposite in every way, allowing themselves their entitled lives of privilege and luxury. Brutalizing slaves was part and parcel of the planter woman's identity, as they came into direct contact with slaves on a daily basis more often than the slave owners, whose overseers acted as a buffer between him and his slaves (Glymph, 2008, p. 24). This paper also examines ways black women resisted and survived their enslavement.

When reading Frederick Douglass' description of Mrs. Hamilton one might assume that only the occasional, crotchety old mistress behaved in such an 'evil' way. The idea that brutal mistresses were a small or nonexistent minority is simply false. In her essay "Mistresses in the Making: White Girls, Mastery, and the Practice of Slaveownership in the Nineteenth-Century South," Stephanie Jones-Rogers explores the ways in which planter class daughters were taught from the earliest days of adolescence how to master the art of owning human property. Jones-Rogers argues that as white southern girls aged with their slaves around them, "they developed relationships of power with enslaved people" (2015, p. 140). Throughout the years, she argues, "slaveownership became an important element of their identities, a fact that would shape their relationships with their husbands and communities once they reached adulthood" (p. 140).

One of the core themes in Jones-Rogers' work is the place that slaveholding parents had on training their children to develop their own techniques as property owners, beginning as soon as they were born. Slaveowning parents would typically assign slaves to their infant daughters, starting the conflict-filled relationship of female ownership and enslavement extremely early (p. 140). Jones-Rogers frames the plantation as a "school" for young white women, a place where they could experiment with and cement their skills as owners of human property. Jones-Rogers points out that "slaveowning parents also allowed their daughters to assume the roles of instructors and disciplinarians very early on" (p. 141).

One example of the cruelty of slaveowning women can be found in the testimony of Henrietta King, who suffered heinous abuse at the hands of her mistress and her mistress' daughter. At about eight or nine years old, Henrietta was tasked with emptying her mistress' chamberpot every morning. While doing this, her mistress also tested Henrietta's loyalty by placing a piece of candy on the counter next to the chamberpot, to see if Henrietta might take and eat it. Kept in a state of constant starvation, Henrietta could not resist the candy after a few days. When Henrietta was questioned about stealing the candy, she denied it:

When she denied stealing it, her mistress commenced whipping her. Henrietta refused to remain still, so her mistress grabbed her by the legs and pinned her head under the rocker of her chair while her young daughter whipped Henrietta. For approximately an hour, her mistress rocked back

and forth on Henrietta's head while her daughter beat her with a cowhide.
(Faust, 1992, p. 37)

This horrific incident left Henrietta deformed throughout her life, unable to even eat solid food. Apparently, the sight of Henrietta was so haunting and disturbed her mistress to the point of giving her to a female relative "who treated her kindly" (Faust, 1992, p. 37).

Stories such as this shatter the illusion of the innocent southern belle that was eerily disconnected from the bloodshed and human property ownership of her day. Further cracking the façade, Stephanie Jones-Rogers argues that even when a young mistress married, her identity as a slaveowner not only stayed fully intact, but was also strengthened. Jones-Rogers argues that "many of these women did not feel compelled to relinquish control over their slaves to spouses and male kin once they married. Instead, marriage marked a point at which their identities were fully realized" (2015 p. 143). Critical evaluation of a patriarchal, slaveholding society includes the women who contributed to it, and challenges the stereotype. When the personal, social, and economic authority that slaveholding women wielded is left out of the equation, an accurate and honest picture of the antebellum South is an impossibility.

Many written works ignore the intentional and cruel violence of white women, and they often argue that there was a camaraderie, or shared experience between black female slaves and white female slave holders. However, the opposite was more often true. For example, Marlie Frances Weiner claims in her book *Mistresses and Slaves* (1998) that the ideology of domesticity white women subscribed to logically "encouraged white women to recognize common experiences with other women. Circumstance and inclination led mistresses to intervene disproportionately on behalf of slave women" (p.121).

It is also common for the dynamics of the plantation household to be ignored, which contributed to the idea that a plantation was only the field where crops were produced. This line of thinking does not look at the domestic sphere and how members of the household, mainly women, actively upheld slavery and reinforced racialized and gendered hierarchies. This essay unravels historical stereotypes about both white and black southern women and addresses why these stereotypes were created and perpetuated. Besides analyzing stereotypes, it presents—through a new lens and a variety of sources—a more realistic view of the ways in which womanhoods played out and interacted in the antebellum South.

WHITE WOMANHOOD UNDER SLAVERY: THE IMAGE

What did it mean to be an elite white women in a slaveholding state? Anne Prior Scott, in her book *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics 1830-1930* (1970), explains that the ideal Southern woman was "a submissive wife whose reason for being

was to love, honor, obey, and occasionally amuse her husband, to bring up his children and manage his household” (p. 4). She explains that as the weaker sex, women were “formed for the less laborious occupations,” meaning these women needed male protection to survive (p. 4). Another important distinction in elite Southern women was their sense of superiority and their ability to lead others to be more morally up-standing.

Thomas Nelson Page writes that the Southern lady’s “life was one long act of devotion—devotion to God, devotion to her husband, devotion to her children, *devotion to her servants*, to the poor, to humanity” (Page, 1897, p. 38). He even goes so far as to call her “the head and font of the church” (p. 38). In general, many contemporary scholars uphold the ideal southern mistress and agree that many women lived up to these standards. The southern belle is too often displayed as being a true or typical depiction of the mistress, and the ways in which most elite white women fell drastically short of this ideal is not as often discussed. In reality, mistresses fell short of the southern belle stereotype in almost every way imaginable. Mistresses were often cruel and used violence to protect their privileged status. They did not share an experience with their female slaves and were not natural abolitionists. Looking at examples of extreme mistress-slave violence opens up a discussion into the contradictory nature of white southern womanhood.

WHITE WOMANHOOD UNDER SLAVERY: THE REALITY

Instead of being figures who selflessly interceded on the behalf of their female slaves, mistresses as slaveholding women wielded a great amount of power in the plantation household. Instead of focusing on a paternalistic system, where any and all power stems from the master, it is necessary to analyze the complex power dynamics of a plantation in a more nuanced way. Even if mistresses were solely confined to their domestic space, they were charged with running their households, and therefore they had direct control over the domestic slaves. Often, this was not a role of peaceful supervision, but of one fraught with whippings, beatings, and psychological manipulation. Slavery as an institution can only be enforced through continual displays of power by the planter class, and mistresses played a critical role in upholding slavery as an institution and protecting their privileged position in society.

Ex-slave Mary Armstrong, born on a farm near St. Louis, Missouri, recalls a few different instances of extremely violent mistresses of her past. On the first page of her transcribed interviews she mentions two different mistresses immediately. A heinous story unfolds with the recollection of Mary’s first mistress, Polly Cleveland:

“Old, Polly, she was a Polly devil if there ever was one, and she whipped my little sister what was only nine months old and jes’ a baby to death. She come and took the diaper offen my little sister and whipped till the blood jes’ ran—jes’ ‘cause she cry like all babies do, and it kilt my sister.

I never forgot that, but I got some even with that old Polly devil and it's this-a-way... one day old Polly devil comes to where Miss Olivia lives after she marries, and trys to give me a lick out in the yard, and I picks up a rock 'bout as big as half your fist and hits her right in the eye and busted the eyeball, and tells her that's for whippin' my baby sister to death... that old Polly was mean like her husban', old Cleveland, till she die, and I hopes they is burnin' in torment now" (1972, p. 25).

This story provides an example of a female slave fighting back, getting revenge for what her mistress did. This case in particular is interesting because when Mary told Polly's daughter, Miss Olivia who now owned her, what she did to Polly, Olivia simply replied "I guess mama has larnt her lesson at last" (Armstrong, 1972, p. 25). This suggests Olivia was well aware of her mother's slave-owning style, and while she might not have fully agreed, her mother's actions were allowed to continue unchecked. While this shows that even close relatives could show disgust at mistress' violence, that violence in many cases was still allowed to be inflicted without any repercussions.

THE BLACK WOMAN AND THE 'MAMMY': THE IMAGE

While there are many different aspects of black southern womanhood under slavery, it might be helpful to turn to what was imagined by white Southerners as the ideal of black womanhood, the 'Mammy' figure. Studying the Mammy figure helps to outline the sort of expectations female slaves were expected to live up to in order to be considered productive and successful members of society. The stereotypical Mammy figure typically consists of a large black woman past her childbearing years who is solely dedicated to the white family in her care, specifically the children. The most important characteristic of the Mammy was her imagined asexuality. Author Deborah Gray White makes a radical claim about the Mammy figure in her book *Ar'n't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (1999), stating that:

As the personification of the ideal slave, and the ideal woman, Mammy was an ideal symbol of the patriarchal tradition. She was not just a product of the 'cultural uplift' theory, she was also a product of the forces that in the South raised motherhood to sainthood... Mammy was the centerpiece in the antebellum Southerner's perception of the perfectly organized society. (p. 151)

Desexualizing the Mammy was a key component of her character because it meant she was not a threat to the white mistress and the issue of sexual promiscuity between black women and the master could be taken out of the equation. The Mammy was so important because she combined the characteristics of the perfect slave and the perfect woman (White, 1991, p. 61). She was the southern solution to her racial and gendered inferiorities. Because she was seen as the solution and her situation is made possible because of her forced bondage, the Mammy figure was also the perfect exam-

ple as to why slavery was necessary. White argues that “Mammy helped endorse the service of black women in Southern households, as well as the close contact that such service demanded (p. 61).

It is important to recognize that the Mammy figure was not a real person, and even if there were female slaves who fit the description, they were their own people whose sacrifices and seemingly sole devotion to their white family was a means of survival, and not a chosen way of life.

THE BLACK WOMAN AND THE MAMMY: THE REALITY

Playing the role of Mammy in the plantation household was only one of many different scenarios that slave women could operate under. It is critical to realize that resistance to oppression was a major part of slave women’s view of womanhood. In order to gain any sense of human dignity, small acts of resistance not only undermined authority but also laid the groundwork for mobilization after emancipation. Female slaves’ resistance, refusing to work or working very slowly, was a very common interaction that put mistress and slave in a struggle for power. Black women knew that their labor was a commodity white women needed, and they used that to their advantage in order to reclaim time and energy for themselves.

In order to get a better sense of how female slaves felt about their mistresses, it is necessary to turn to first-hand accounts. Harriet Ann Jacobs, born in 1813 in Edenton, North Carolina, escaped from slave labor and became a public speaker and activist. Harriet’s grandmother was the daughter of a planter and a slave woman, and Harriet describes her in a way that is similar to the figure of the Mammy when she writes, under the pseudonym Linda Brent, “She became an indispensable personage in the household, officiating in all capacities, from cook and wet nurse to seamstress” (Jacobs, 1861, p. 3). Harriet notes that her grandmother worked overtime selling baked goods and other food to save money to buy her children’s freedom. This demonstrates that Harriet’s grandmother’s priority was providing nourishment and safety for her own children, and not that for the white family that owned the plantation. When Harriet’s uncle, her grandmother’s son, was sold, her grandmother had money saved to put towards attempting to buy him back. However, this money was used for another purpose, as it was taken from her by her mistress:

She had laid up three hundred dollars, which her mistress one day begged as a loan, promising to pay her soon. The reader probably knows that no promise or writing given to a slave is legally binding; for, according to Southern laws, a slave, *being* property, can *hold* no property. When my grandmother lent her hard earnings to her mistress, she trusted solely to her honor. The honor of a slaveholder to a slave! (Jacobs, 1861, p. 3)

It is important to note here the direct use of the term slaveholder Harriet uses to describe her grandmother's mistress. She never groups masters and mistresses into different categories of authority, she refers to them both equally as slaveholders and god-breathing machines. She is careful to document in her autobiography how it was her grandmother specifically who provided for her needs, not her mistress, which clashes with the still widely held belief that mistresses were the head of an extended family who took pains to provide for her slaves.

RESISTANCE OF FEMALE SLAVES UNDER MISTRESS' OPPRESSION

One of the defining characteristics of slavery in general is slave resistance to the system that oppressed them. While what history remembers is often large-scale uprisings led by black men, it is also important to analyze the daily, micro-resistance that female slaves participated in. Female slaves defiantly resisting their mistresses exposed the cruelty of their mistress' behavior and cracked the façade of the romanticized plantation household.

Mistresses painstakingly detailed in their journals the harrowing task of 'training' their female slaves and how often their slaves defied them. Tryphena Blanche Holder Fox, a slaveholding mistress born in Massachusetts, complains about the work ethic of her slave Susan in her diary:

Susan goes by fits and starts—good three or four weeks & then so ugly & contrary that an angel could hardly keep mild & pleasant. To-day it has been a push, hurry, push, to get the washing anywhere near done & though it is four o'clock she is just hanging out the colored clothes. (1997, p. 75)

Susan also had multiple children while working for Tryphena and would refuse to work for the four weeks following a birth. She would run away often and leave her children with Tryhpena, but she would always return and maintain a slow working pace, demonstrating some mobility and capacity for manipulation.

Mistresses were affected by the pain and violence that surrounded them, and often saw slaves as a burden. Even if they wished for that burden to be removed from their lives, they would never relinquish the core belief of black people as an inferior and servile class. A main concern that mistresses voiced in their personal diaries was the strain that the management of slaves placed on them personally. So, when historians claim that white southern women were natural abolitionists, what they mean is white southern women wanted to be free from seeing and interacting with black people while also demanding their labor.

Amelia Akehurst Lines, a slaveholder who was also born and raised in the North, reveals her hatred unabashedly, writing: "We have eaten our share of negro filth. Anna

and I do *despise* the race. I wish the abolitionists had to eat sleep and live with them. until they had enough of their ‘colored brothers and sisters’ (Lines & Dyer, 1982, p. 192).

White and black womanhood in the antebellum South is a complex and deeply interconnected entity that can be difficult to navigate. Above all, planter class white women in many cases wielded authority over their plantation household and also upheld the institution of slavery forcefully, through brutal acts of violence. The plantation household brought the white mistress into constant contact with domestic slaves, who were typically women. Unmasking the still prevalent stereotypes of docile and well-cared-for slaves and ornamental southern belles is necessary to attempt to have a more realistic sense of how southern gender hierarchies actually operated. Planter women’s entire identities rested on the fragile idea that they were entitled to control black female labor. This put limitations on female slaves’ ability to create spaces for their own needs and the needs of their families. Thavolia Glymph, author of *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (2008), puts it very succinctly when she writes:

White Southerners measured themselves partly in the distance that separated them from enslaved (and free) black people. Southern white women were expected to measure that distance in their gentility and in certain habits—order, punctuality, and frugality. Black women represented the obverse of all these things, which is why mistresses could rail about the inefficiency of slaves even when they in fact completed their work. (p. 74)

Not only did the female slave have to be weary of sexual assault from masters, overseers, and other slaves, but they also needed to live up to the impossible standards of their mistresses. White planter women could sometimes find themselves in positions of real authority over other human beings, and as people they were largely interested in protecting their privileged place in society. If planter women’s identities rested on subjugating black women, and black women were constantly resisting oppression, that means that on the whole black and white southern women were in a constant state of conflict and struggle.

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