“... the system which was supposed to raise up the white mistress and enable her to fulfill her social obligations towards her slaves as a beacon of pious morality was the same system which turned many white slaveholding women into jealous and contemptuous sadists ...”
RACE RELATIONS AND THE IDEOLOGY OF DOMESTICITY

A Study of the Women's Antebellum South

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This paper will examine the relationships that existed between white, southern plantation mistresses and their female slaves. These interactions were shaped by the social mores of the 19th century American South, including the imposition of the "ideology of domesticity" on the mistresses. Equally important to the relationships between mistresses and their slaves were the damaging psychological effects caused by the masters' often frequent sexual liaisons with the slaves. Unfortunately, this created an inherent contradiction in the relationships because while the mistresses were preoccupied with the ideology of domesticity, they simultaneously furthered injustice towards slaves when presented with their husband's sexual exploits. Careful examination of interviews from former slaves taken during the Federal Writers' Project of the 1930s sheds light on these complicated and intricate biracial relationships.
INTRODUCTION

Race relations in the Old South have been studied extensively by historians over the last century. One aspect of the interaction between blacks and whites in the antebellum South that is particularly complex was the relationship between white mistresses and their female slaves. These relations were defined by various aspects of their surroundings, including the social mores which dictated their lives and the white men who had absolute control over both the black and white women. White women and their female slaves lived and worked in close proximity to one another, forming intense personal relationships that set the basis for the quotidian dealings between the two groups of women. Additionally, mistresses and their slaves had to interact with each other within the confines of societal expectations placed upon women. Southern plantation mistresses were compelled to follow the “ideology of domesticity,” a dogma which dictated how affluent white women in the South were to act towards their family members, friends, and most importantly, their slaves.

Similarly, slave women had certain social standards to which they were required to adhere. Since they had few legal rights in southern states, slave women were required to be completely submissive to their masters and mistresses. Oftentimes, this unquestionable obedience subjected them to a master’s unwanted sexual advances. Mistresses were usually aware of the sexual relationships between their husbands and female slaves, but since they, too, were at the mercy of the white master, they often took out their anger, hurt, and aggression on their servants. This occurred despite the fact the slave may have been a victim of rape. Ultimately, the social constraints and requirements placed on both white mistresses and black slave women, along with the deep psychological affects of a master’s sexual liaisons with his slaves, were important aspects of slavery which shaped the relationships between mistresses and their female slaves.

THE SOUTHERN WOMAN’S IDEOLOGY OF DOMESTICITY

The ideology of domesticity dictated the social parameters for 19th century American women in both the North and the South. The similarities between northern and southern women’s ideology of domesticity stopped with the integration of the institution of slavery. Southern white mistresses, more specifically the elite plantation mistresses, were expected to reflect the gentility of their class and gender. Never outspoken in terms of political or social matters, like many “brazen” women to the North, the prototypical Southern woman was a warm and gentle mother and wife. She was to be obedient to her husband while at the same time exemplifying ideal Christian piety. Whether her husband was a ruthless politician or a skilled planter, she was to be his moral counterweight and provide him with an example of perfect moral rectitude. A southern woman was virtuous and chaste. Never would a proper southern lady find herself tangled in any kind of sexual scandal; to do so would ruin her marital prospects as well as her family’s honor. Indeed, the Southern lady was a “symbol of gentility and refinement for plantation culture, designed to fill the requisites of chauvinist stereotype by embracing those qualities slave owners wished to promote...”
THE SOUTHERN WOMAN AND HER SLAVE

Part of the ideology of domesticity that southern women strove to fulfill concerned the Southern lady's treatment and interaction with her slaves. As a result, slaveholding women liked to maintain a vision—whether it reflected reality or not—of an organic community on her plantation or farm where she was the head of a biracial family made up of her own children as well as her slaves. As part of her role as head of a black and white, slave and free household, she was to impart religious education to her slaves and be the guardian of moral integrity. According to Thomas Nelson Page, the mistress was essentially a connection between God and those around her, as “she was the head and front of the church; and unmitred bishop in partibus, more effectual than the vestry or deacons, more earnest than the rector; she managed her family, regulated her servants, fed the poor, nursed the sick, consoled the bereaved.”

The mistress was also to care for her sick slaves, who were only too happy to receive her charity:

Who knew of the visits she paid to the cabins of her sick and suffering servants! Often, at the dead of night, “slipping down” the last thing . . . with her own hands administering medicines or food; ever by her cheeriness inspiring new hope, by her strength giving courage, by her presence awaking faith . . . What poor person was there, however inaccessible the cabin, that was sick or destitute and knew not her charity! Who that was bereaved that had not her sympathy!

Thus, it was the responsibility of the mistress to be the guiding light and protector of not only her white family but her slave family as well. It was essential to the slaveholding ideal of white and black relations that mistresses be seen in this light. This image of the benevolent mother-figure was an integral part of the patriarchal system of southern slavery and was a vital aspect of mistress and slave relations.

Southern mistresses themselves also left behind accounts of how they viewed their relationships with their slaves, and how the ideology of domesticity—though not referred to in such terms—dictated their interactions with their “black family.” These accounts reveal how mistresses and their slaves, and more importantly their female slaves, became closely connected to one another. Mary Polk Branch touched upon this topic when she wrote that “many [slaves] were descendants of those who had served in the same family for generations—for instance, the nurse who nursed my children was the daughter of my nurse, and her grandmother had nursed my mother.” These bonds, which in many cases stretched over generations, were emphasized by the ideology of domesticity because they allowed for the two families, both master and slave, to become closely interconnected. Because of their intimate propinquity, mistresses felt even more obliged to uphold their moral requirements under the ideology of domesticity to these slaves who had been a part of their family for so long.

In a letter to her children after emancipation, Mary Norcott Bryan described the “tender tie that existed between mistress and servant.” Bryan clearly elucidated the fact that there indeed was a close connection between the mistress and her slaves, although her opinion was biased as there was nothing “tender” about the institution of slavery. In another letter, she explained that for the mistress, “such a busy life was hers, the care of many slaves, the responsibility of their souls, teaching them truth and honesty, watching over the sick, entertaining strangers.” These bonds created by slavery were heightened by the generations of slaves who remained within the same family, which allowed the mistress to become closely involved in her slaves’ lives, thereby fulfilling the ideology of domesticity.

A large part of a Southern woman’s social role was to be a beacon of piety, and this was translated to her interactions with her slaves when she involved herself in their religious education. Indeed, the role of the mistress as a religious leader and teacher to her slaves was essential to the ideology of domesticity. One Southern man remarked upon the mistress’s interaction with her slaves in a letter, stating “it is very common for the young ladies of the household to have classes on Sunday of the children as well as grown negroes, to whom they give oral instruction, texts of scripture,
and hymns." This was common in many slaveholding families throughout the South. The Reverend W. E. Northcross, an ex-slave, recalled his religious background in an interview as part of the Federal Writer's Project. According to Northcross, who was a slave in Alabama before the Civil War, “during this time my mistress made all the children, both girls and boys, come to her every Sunday, and she taught Sunday School. The book used was the old fashioned Catechism.”

Northcross also noted, “...It was against the law for them to learn to read and write, so she taught them the Lord’s prayer and a few other things in the book. She said that she wanted them to know how to pray, how to tell the truth and not to steal, and always try to do right in the sight of everybody and in sight of God.”

Although Northcross was a male slave, it is safe to assume that there were also female slaves involved in these religious and moral lessons. Consequently, Northcross’s mistress was fulfilling her duties under the ideology of domesticity by teaching her slaves Christian beliefs and creating an essential aspect of mistress-slave relations in the antebellum South.

Another former slave, John F. Van Hook, reported in his WPA Narrative that his master and mistress taught their slaves how to read and write. Again, this took place in an era when slave literacy was illegal in many states. Van Hook noted: “Oh! Why, my white folks took a great deal of pains teaching their slaves how to read and write. My father could read, but he never learned to write, and it was from our white folks that I learned to read and write. Slaves read the Bible more than anything else.” Van Hook’s masters were giving their slaves autonomy while at the same time going beyond a simple display of kindness. It was clear that Van Hook’s master and mistress viewed their roles under the ideology of domesticity as that of the benevolent masters who cared for their slaves so much that they were not worried that the slaves would use their literacy against their masters, but rather towards furthering their religious education.

Many mistresses also fulfilled the ideology of domesticity when caring for their sick slaves by sending for their own doctor and bringing special supplies to the slave cabins. Ex-slave Fannie Griffin recalled how her mistress practiced this act of kindness: “Our massa and missus was good to us when we was sick; they send for de doctor right off and de doctor do all he could for us, but he ain’t had no kind of medicine to give us except spirits of turpentine, castor oil, and a little blue mass.” Although these “remedies” may not have made the slaves any better, they nevertheless indicate the role a mistress played in her slaves’ well-being. By sending for a doctor, instead of simply ignoring an ill slave’s complaints, the mistress fulfilled her duties under the ideology of domesticity by caring for her slaves’ physi-
“Although slavery was inherently brutal and dehumanizing, there were mistresses who, in their efforts to fulfill the ideology of domesticity, provided their slaves with some comfort...”

Although well-being. While slaveholders frequently were concerned about their slaves’ health for pecuniary reasons—if a slave was sick, he or she could not work and therefore generated less profit for the master—the ideology of domesticity played a vital role in a slaveholder’s involvement in his or her slaves’ physical condition. To neglect an ill slave was to reject the social mores which required the master and mistress to be benevolent parental figures to their slaves.

There was a time of year in which Southern women especially personified the munificent mistress, a time of year the slaves looked forward to: the Christmas season. Junius Quattlebaum spoke about his experiences with his “good missus,” Miss Martha, during the Christmas season. Through Quattlebaum’s interview, we can see that at Christmastime, “all the slaves on de plantation had three days give to them, to rest and enjoy themselves.” Although a Christmas break was a common practice among slaveholders in the South, one aspect of Quattlebaum’s experience was not. Quattlebaum recalled that during Christmas, “Missus and de two little misses fixed up a big Christmas tree. It was a big holly bush wid red berries all over it.” Although a Christmas break was a common practice among slaveholders in the South, one aspect of Quattlebaum’s experience was not. Quattlebaum recalled that during Christmas, “Missus and de two little misses fixed up a big Christmas tree. It was a big holly bush wid red berries all over it.”

Quattlebaum also remembered seeing “missus so plain now, on Christmas mornin’, a flirtin’ ‘round de Christmas trees, commandin’ de little misses to put de names of each slave on a package and hang it on de tree for them.” Pearl Randolph described how gifts handed out to the slave children usually were made up of candies, fruit, nuts, and usually some special article of clothing. Thus it is clear that mistresses fulfilled their duties as dictated under the ideology of domesticity through holiday gift-giving. In doing this, they were not only imparting kindness upon their slaves, but also involving them in a Christian holiday, thereby taking a role in their slaves’ religious life. Gifts at Christmas were indeed a large and invaluable part of the mistress’ role of the pious and benevolent white mother-figure to her slaves.

LIFE OF THE FEMALE SLAVE

Unlike their mistresses, female slaves had no standing in white society and were forbidden to fulfill the ideology of domesticity as dictated by southern white society. They assumed certain positions which required them to forgo their status as a woman in the eyes of their white masters and mistresses. They did, however, fulfill the role of the ideal woman within the slave society. Female slave jobs in the Old South ranged very widely, from field hands to domestic slaves. Although white mistresses did come in contact with the female field slaves, the mistress and her female domestic slaves were in a much closer proximity. Domestic slaves were seamstresses, cooks, nurses, and personal servants for the mistress or her daughters. Usually the slave children who were intended for domestic work became companions of either the master or mistress or assisted the older, more experienced domestic slaves.

The quintessential domestic slave—about whom many racial stereotypes have stemmed—was the “mammy”, an epithet given to the slave by the whites. She was the image of the ideal domestic slave for the whites. According to Thomas Nelson Page, a white Southerner who lived on a plantation during the antebellum period, the mammy worked the closest with the mistress. She was “the zealous, faithful, and efficient assistant of the mistress in all that...”
pertained to the care and training of the children.” Page elaborated on his description of the mammy’s duties with respect to the white children:

... [F]rom their infancy she was the careful and faithful nurse, the affection between her and the children she nursed being often more marked than that between her and her own offspring. She may have been harsh to the latter; she was never anything but tender with the others.

Page, like so many other white southerners, clearly glorified the position the mammy held within the plantation’s hierarchy. Although he neglected the fact that slaves caring for white children had to treat them well lest they be punished, his account of the mammy’s duties reveals an essential part of the mistress-slave relationship within the slaveholding household.

Slave women were certainly an integral part of their plantation, farm, or household, although their experiences as women during the antebellum period were vastly different from those of their white mistresses. Adeline Johnson told of her tasks as a slave in the WPA Slave Narratives Project, stating that she “never have to do no field work; just stayed ‘round de house and wait on de mistress and de chillun.” This was a common task among slave girls. Irene Roberston, another former slave, carried out much different tasks as a field slave. Living on a large plantation, Robertson had been “raised to work” and “cooked and washed and ironed and done field work all.” Robertson was an example of a slave woman who did her field work and also had to cook, clean, and do other household chores for her family. She was not only responsible for her master’s demands, but also that of her slave family.

SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE
Since the ideology of domesticity did not apply to slave women, they were placed at the bottom rung of Southern society and were subject to brutal sexual exploitation. Especially in the case of master-slave sexual abuse, a male slave was unable to protect his wife, sister, mother, or daughter from the advances of a persistent and morally deficient white master or overseer. As a result, a master’s vicious sexual advances upon one of his slaves caused serious tension between the female slave victim and her mistress. Ultimately, because masters had the ability to sexually coerce their house or field slaves, many of whom may have even been their daughters, the dynamic of the household situation bred an environment for the slave women that “constituted a dense pattern of day-to-day resistance that could at any moment explode into violence.” This violence, excluding the inherent violence associated with the rape of the slave woman by her master, usually manifested itself in the relations between the mistress and the slave victim.

The sexual exploitation of slaves was one of the most brutal and inhumane aspects of slavery, one which deeply and irrevocably affected mistress-slave relations within a slaveholding family unit. It is perhaps logical to assume that the role of the mistress as dictated by the ideology of domesticity would have lessened the harsh reality of human bondage. Yet, because of the nature of a master’s blatant infidelity within his own home, many mistresses, themselves under the complete control of their husbands, were unable to overcome the anger and resentment they felt towards their husbands. Out of this situation inevitably grew “hostility, jealousy, and rage” among both the slave women and their mistresses.

Although slave rape is extremely complex in nature, one crucial facet of the abuse lies in the masters’ unfailing persistence. In fact, some masters were so consumed by their desires that they would stop at nothing until they had succeeded. One master was so determined to have one of his slaves that when she tried to escape, he set the bloodhounds after her. He then caught her and “knocked a hole in her head and she bled like a hog, and he made her have him.” The slave then told her mistress, who said that she should just submit to his will “cause he’s gonna kill you.” This incident displays both the horrors of the sexual exploitation that was commonplace in the antebellum
slavery system and one way white women responded to it. Indeed, this practice was even upheld by the law in the South. The Alabama State law in the nineteenth century stated that the slave woman must give her master “absolute obedience, and subordination to the lawful authority of the master . . . the law cannot enter into strict scrutiny of the precise force employed [by the master], with the view of ascertaining that the chastisement had or had not been reasonable.” Masters could manipulate this law to interpret “absolute obedience and subordination” to include sexual coercion. The sexual power that masters held over their female slaves had dire repercussions for mistresses and their relations with their female slaves.

**MISTRESSES’ REACTIONS:**
**IGNORANCE OR VIOLENCE**

Mistresses reacted to their husbands’ infidelity in various ways, either by simply ignoring it, considering it a disgraceful but inevitable part of the Southern slave society, or by inflicting punishment upon the female slave victim. According to one southern slaveholding woman, Mary Chestnut, many mistresses ignored the fact that their husbands sexually exploited their female slaves. She claimed this was a common occurrence since

> Like the patriarchs of old our men live all in one house with their wives and their concubines, and the mulattoes one sees in every family exactly resemble the white children—and every lady tells you who is the father of all the mulatto children in everybody’s household, but in her own she seems to think they drop from the clouds, or pretends so to think.

To ignore that within their own household there were children who were borne out of their husband’s infidelity must have caused deep psychological repression. This discretion was, however, a part of the ideology of domesticity; genteel southern women were expected to keep the knowledge of their husband’s unfaithfulness quiet. Yet, these mistresses were only human, and many took out their frustrations on the only people over whom they held power: their slaves.

James Henry Hammond, a famous Southerner, was involved in a close and extensive sexual relationship with one of his slaves, as well as her daughter. His wife, Catherine, became deeply bitter about Hammond’s infidelity and “attempted to end [the liaison] by demanding the sale or effective banishment of his slave mistresses.” Despite the fact that Hammond never did sell the slaves, this instance reveals important aspects of mistress-slave relations in the antebellum south. Neither Catherine nor the slaves who were the victims of Hammond’s sexual coercion were able to force the master to take any action, whether it be the cessation of his sexual advances or the sale of the slaves. Thus, all women involved were forced to submit to Hammond’s ultimate demands. Yet, instead of empathizing with the plight of the slaves, Catherine instead chose the only option that would allow her to maintain the façade of a genteel southern woman, which was to punish the slave women by attempting to have them sold away from the plantation where they had family or close friends.
Many slave women who were victims of their master’s sexual exploitation never had the opportunity to share their stories with the world, making it difficult for historians to study thoroughly the psychological ramifications of their masters’ sexual advances, as well as how it affected their relationships with their mistresses. The Federal Writers’ Project again provides us with some insight into the mistreatment they received from their mistresses. These resources are flawed, however, because many of the slaves the WPA chose to interview concealed their true feelings towards the brutality of slavery because they did not want to become targets of the deep-seated racism still prevalent in the South during the 1930s. Still, they must not be disregarded, as they give an invaluable insight into the lives of slaves until the Civil War.

An interview with Hannah Plummer revealed a particularly brutal aspect of slave-mistress relations. Hannah described how her mother had been subject to her mistress’ violence, stating, “Missus Caroline whupped her most every day, and about anything. Mother said she could not please her in anything, no matter what she done or how hard she tried. Missus would go up town and come back and whup her.” In fact, Hannah’s mother was so badly treated, that on one occasion,

Miss Caroline went up town, an’ come back mad. She made Mother strip down to her waist, and then took a carriage whup an’ beat her until the blood was runnin’ down her back. Mother said she was afraid she would kill her, so she ran for the woods and hid there, and stayed there for three weeks.

Whether she was so cruel to Hannah Plummer’s mother because of a sexual relationship with her husband is something we cannot glean from the interview itself. There were, however, no other mentions throughout the interview of “Missus Caroline’s” brutality towards other slaves. Moreover, most mistresses saw their female slaves as subhuman and did not take into account the psychological damage that may have been caused by rape. Because of this dehumanization of their slave women, it was much easier for mistresses to let their anger and frustrations out on the vulnerable slaves.

The brutal relationships between slave women and their mistresses, the result of sexual exploitation by masters, were not unknown to other slaves on the plantation. Austin Steward, a slave on Captain William Helm’s Virginia plantation, recalled his experience with his mistress’s brutality towards her slaves. The institution of slavery, he said, “hardens the heart, benumbs all the fine feelings of humanity, and deteriorates from the character of the slaveholders themselves—man or woman.” In his commentary, Steward touched upon the role that the ideology of domesticity played in mistress-slave relations and how white woman should have exhibited Christian benevolence towards their slave women, but oftentimes acted the opposite. Because society dictated that the mistress was to be a pillar of virtue and kindness, it would follow that she should have acted so towards her slaves. Steward asserted that it was slavery that caused her to be so harsh because “otherwise, how could a gentle, and in other respects, amiable woman, look on such scenes of cruelty, without a shudder of utter abhorrence.” Instead, these slaveholding women of the Old South “can and do use the lash and
cowhide themselves, on the backs of their own slaves, and that too of their own sex!"xxxvii Slaveholding women, no matter how society may have imposed certain mores upon them, were still capable of certain atrocities because of the horrors of slavery, namely the sexual coercion of their slave women by their own husbands.

CONCLUSION

Within the slaveholding south, white mistresses were expected to impart benevolence and religious direction on their slaves as part of their duties as genteel white women under the ideology of domesticity. Yet, these mistresses were not always able to live up to social expectations when they were faced with their husband’s sexual exploitation of female slaves. Here lay one of the great ironies of the institution of slavery in relation to the ideology of domesticity; the system that was supposed to raise up the white mistress and enable her to fulfill her social obligations towards her slaves as a beacon of pious morality was the same system that turned many white slaveholding women into jealous and contemptuous sadists as they took out their frustrations and impotence in the face of their husband’s sexual liaisons with their slaves.

There were some slaveholding women, however, who did try to live up to the expectations placed on them by the ideology of domesticity. As the WPA Slave Narratives Project shows, many slaves were aware that their mistresses could soften the otherwise harsh realities of the slave system. Mistresses were able to both provide some respite for the slaves within the brutality of slavery while at the same time fulfilling their duties under the ideology of domesticity. They accomplished this by teaching their slaves to read and write, caring for them when they were sick, giving out presents during the Christmas holiday, and teaching them about Christianity.

This is not to say, however, that the mistresses who were kind to their slaves because of the ideology of domesticity were innocent bystanders within the slave system. They were often just as guilty as the brutal overseer or master, condoning the repressive and dehumanizing nature of slavery. It was through the ideology of domesticity that the mistress could fulfill her supposed God-given duties to care for the “barbarian” slaves, while simultaneously living up to the societal expectations placed upon them as part of the Old Southern culture. In doing this, they accepted white supremacy and the dehumanization of their black slaves, acknowledging that due to their supposed superiority, they were required to guide and teach their seemingly dim-witted slaves.

Mistresses contributed even more to the brutality of slavery when they succumbed to anger and resentment about their husbands’ infidelity with their slaves. As the white slaveholding women of the South witnessed the sexual exploitation that occurred in their homes, they often ignored their social and Christian duties to be kind and loving towards their slaves. Instead, they took their anger out on the women who were merely the victims of their master’s lascivious nature. Ultimately, whether a white mistress was kind to her slaves or whether she was brutal because of the sexual exploitation that was a large part of slavery in the antebellum South, she was still a guilty party within the brutal slave system that existed in the United States for over 200 years.

ENDNOTES

i. Clinton (17)
ii. Fox-Genovese (100)
iii. Page
iv. Ibid.
v. Branch
vi. Bryan
vii. Ibid.
viii. Weiner (80)
ix. Northcross
x. Ibid.
xii. Houston
xii. Ibid.
xiii. Van Hook
xiv. Griffin
xv. Quattlebaum
xvi. Ibid.
xvii. Ibid.
xviii. Randolph
xix. Stevenson (187)
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