Failed Sisterhood: Expectations and Betrayal Between the Women of the Antebellum South

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Abstract
Mistresses and slave women in the antebellum South lived and often suffered together under an oppressive patriarchy. They all endured a kind of enslavement in a system that reduced all women to the property of White men in some way. Previous historians have argued that this kindled gender solidarity between White and Black women. Others have argued that issues of race, class, privilege, and jealousy prevented the formation of any sense of sisterhood between the two groups of women. However, the issue is more complex than simply discovering whether there was or was not gender solidarity. Although antebellum women did not achieve any real unity, mistress journals and slave narratives reveal that on rare but important occasions they acknowledged the possibility of sisterhood and responded with guilt, betrayal, or anger at their failure to achieve it. These subtler nuances reveal a complicated relationship between mistress and bondswoman under slavery that transcended easy definitions according to race, privilege, or gender.

Black and White women in the antebellum South lived under an oppressive patriarchy. They lived closely related lives as they went about fulfilling their roles as women within the same household. However, instead of being unified by their common experiences under the system of slavery and Southern male power, they were divided. As a rule, factors such as race, class, powerlessness, and privilege were more powerful than any possible feelings of sisterhood as women. Despite their inability to achieve gender solidarity, on rare but important occasions both groups of women acknowledged that there could have been a sisterhood by responding with feelings of betrayal, anger, or guilt at their failure to achieve it. These instances of acknowledging possible unity are just as important to study as the final failure because they reveal a complex relationship between slave women and mistresses under slavery.

Numerous historians have addressed the issue of possible unity among antebellum women. Catherine Clinton in The Plantation Mistress (1982) argued for the power of the similarities of their experiences. In the antebellum South, she
wrote, “white men wielded the power within society, and made all blacks, all slaves, and all women their victims” (p. 221). Clinton contended that because of this shared subjugation, “the bonds of womanhood could and sometimes did cement relationships between owner and owned” (p. 190). According to Clinton, they were united by their shared oppression.

In Within the Plantation Household (1988), Elizabeth Fox-Genovese also recognized the entwined experience of mistress and slave but came to a different conclusion. She asked, “sharing the domination of white men—of the master—did slave and slaveholding women share bonds? Participate in a sisterhood?… the simple and inescapable answer is no” (pp. 33-34). Mistresses benefited too much from the system that included a hierarchy according to race and class as well as gender, and slave women knew that mistresses were “handmaidens of the system as a whole” (p. 144). Yet both historians failed to explore the feelings of betrayal and guilt sometimes expressed by antebellum women as a result of their lack of unity.

There were very important parallels in the experiences of Black and White women, which could easily have fostered the expectation of gender solidarity. They both lived in a unique slave society in which all women were the property of White men. Susan Dabney Smedes (1887), the daughter of a large Mississippi slaveholder, remembered, “it was a saying that the mistress of a plantation was the most complete slave on it” (p. 191). When Mary Boykin Chestnut (1981), a member of the Southern and Confederate elite, saw a slave woman on an auction block smiling for bidders, she understood that all women were bought and sold. She felt “sea sick” with recognition and wrote “you know how women sell themselves and are sold in marriage from queens downward, eh?” (p. 15). She knew that both groups of women suffered in a patriarchy in which all women were owned in some way.

Access to knowledge was severely limited for all women as well as all slaves. It was illegal to teach slaves to read, and masters often used a lack of access to knowledge to control their slaves. Mattie Jackson, a slave born in Missouri who published her memoir in 1866, remembered that her master resented her mother’s intelligence. Mr. Lewis hated her mother because she wanted to be free and independent but also “for reading the papers and understanding political affairs” (Thompson, 1988, p. 20). Lewis saw her knowledge as a threat to his authority. White women did not enjoy much greater freedom in their search for knowledge. Although elite White women were frequently sent to school, it was not to become independent intellectuals. Letitia Burwell (1895), the daughter of a nineteenth-century slaveholding family in Virginia, recounted that education for White women was only to make them “intelligent companions for cultivated men” (p. 33). No woman in the antebellum slave society had easy access to significant knowledge or information.

In her classic 1966 essay, historian Barbara Welter described how antebellum women were restricted by the expectation that they would fulfill the ideal of true womanhood, which included virtues such as submissiveness, piety (or goodness), and purity (p. 152). Submissiveness was especially important, for it was related to women’s roles within slavery in which they were all forced to obey the will of the White man. Letitia Burwell (1895) described the gilded but restrictive nature of the feminine ideal, recalling that women “seemed to be regarded as some rare and costly statue set in a niche to be admired and never taken down” (p. 36). Although at times alluring, the role
of the lady was like that of a prisoner. She was to be delicate, obedient, and sheltered—not independent and free thinking. Her submissive role was vital in reinforcing the authority of the master and the hierarchy of slavery.

In addition, a woman’s piety and goodness were essential in supporting the system of slavery. As Fox-Genovese observed (1988), the mistress was the “feminine face of paternalism that endowed ownership...with whatever humanity it could muster” (p. 132). She served as a defense of slavery as well as the one to whom slaves should go to plead their cases. This role engendered in slaves hopes of compassion from the mistress and could easily stimulate in female slaves further hopes of gender solidarity from kindly fellow women.

For Black and White antebellum women, their primary roles were as mothers and wives. They were both required to reproduce, either heirs or more slaves (Clinton, 1982, p. 206). Mary Boykin Chestnut (1981) frequently expressed in her journal her fear that she was a failure because she was childless. She knew she was, in a way, disappointing her entire society. For slave women, motherhood was also inextricably tied to the profit of the master (White, 1985, p. 110). Fanny Kemble (1863), an English actress who married an antebellum Georgia slaveholder, saw that the slave women understood this. She observed that they:

have all of them a most distinct and perfect knowledge of their value to their owners as property; and a woman thinks, and not much amiss, that the more frequently she adds to the number of her master’s live stock by bringing new slaves into the world, the more claims she will have upon his consideration and goodwill. (p. 29)

As mothers, women fulfilled their roles within the slave society. For slave women, however, their roles as mothers within slavery contradicted their own roles as mothers within the family unit, when their families were sold apart or they found themselves unable to protect their children. This created a huge conflict for slave women as their prescribed roles within slavery clashed with their roles within the family. White women did not experience this conflict because their roles as wives and mothers coincided with their roles as women supporting the masters of the slave system.

Both Black and White women suffered as wives from the sexual exploitation of slave women. The master, in abusing his female property, violated the marriages of both women and disallowed Black women from attaining the virtue of purity essential for true womanhood. According to Barbara Welter (1966), without purity a woman was considered “no woman at all, but a member of some lower order” (p. 154). The sexual exploitation of slave women was painful for White wives as well. Herself the wife of a South Carolina senator, Mary Chestnut (1981) observed that the master who was ruining slave marriages in the quarters left at home “his wife and daughters [who] in the might of their purity and innocence are supposed never to dream of what is as plain before their eyes as the sunlight, and they play their parts of unsuspecting angels to the letter” (p. 169). Both women suffered at the hands of the master, who was required to respect neither.

However, the White woman, in her innocence and suffering, was fulfilling her gender role. The master that the mistress was required to obey was her own family member. Mary Chestnut (1981) and her group of friends could be brutally honest about slaveholding men and the impact the sexual exploitation of slave women had
on mistresses, explaining that “Mrs. Stowe [mistress] did not hit the sorest spot. She [made] Legree a bachelor” (p. 168). They were quick to qualify any criticism, however. They admitted that although they could be critical of their men, they “are soft enough with them when they are present” (p. 170). These were their men, and good women were expected to gently forgive their faults.

For mistresses, their roles as women were, as Fox-Genovese (1988) pointed out, “natural extensions of their personal relationships as wives, mothers and daughters” (p. 192). In fact, if a woman was not able to restrain her male relatives and consequently suffered by their actions, that too was part of her expected role and the good she did. As Welter (1966) noted, she would ensure that “the world would be reclaimed by God through her suffering” (p. 152). White women’s roles as women coincided with their roles within a slave society, forced them to be quiet in their suffering, and ensured that they would identify with their men as good and dutiful wives and forgiving mothers rather than break with the system to identify with Black women as sisters.

To make the prospects of sisterhood even more remote, White women had a weak sense of gender solidarity among themselves. They were often alone and isolated from friends and family on large rural plantations while their husbands traveled attending to business. Slaves lived within large slave communities with friends and family. Often, on plantations that had large slave populations and an absentee master, the mistress was much more isolated than her slave counterpart (Fox-Genovese, 1988, p. 39). White women did not form a strong sense of group identity with other White women and therefore had difficulty including slave women in a sisterhood they barely experienced themselves.

In addition, gender roles dictating White women’s work lives led to a weak sense of agency. Their work reinforced their feelings of subjugation and unimportance. Having slaves meant that ladies did not have to do domestic chores or work the land. While many, such as Clinton (1982), have tried to emphasize how hard mistresses worked, more often in their diaries and journals one finds lists of parties attended and a preoccupation with social calls and dresses worn. They felt what they did was inconsequential. Mary Boykin Chestnut (1981) admitted, “we know of our insignificance” (p. 142). Their principal source of power was through their men, not themselves. Missouri slave Mattie Jackson remembered how her mistress decided to punish her for celebrating the Union victory at New Orleans (Thompson, 1988). In a rage “she went immediately and selected a switch. She placed it in the corner of the room to await the return of her husband at night for him to whip me” (p. 15). The mistress could not act on her own; all of her power lay in her relationship with her husband.

On top of feelings of weak agency, it was difficult for mistresses to challenge the authority of a husband who owned other human beings and a system that, if challenged, could endanger them. As Fox-Genovese (1988) observed, when church and law preached obedience of slaves to their master and when a man was allowed to kill his slaves, it was much harder for a woman to disobey him because he had extraordinary power in their society. Eliza Andrews (1908), a member of the antebellum Georgia slaveholding elite, recalled that slavery “was according to the Bible, and to question it was impious and savored of ‘infidelity’” (p. 13). She equated
challenging slavery with challenging the church and her husband. Mary Chestnut (1981) saw that a woman who questioned her subordinate position in society was “a dangerous character…Suppose the women and children secede?” (p. 181). Although half joking, Chestnut here illuminated an important part of the relationship between mistress and slave. If the women and children rebelled against the slave system, they would be questioning the authority upon which the entire system depended, the total and complete authority of the master. They were aware that if they withdrew their support and the system fell, they could also be victims of violent consequences. White women could not lightly challenge the system by forming gender alliances that defied other important social structures and relationships.

Repeatedly, in this slave society, mistresses also chose the great privilege they enjoyed as slave owners over the possible benefits of sisterhood. They were the elites in an elitist society. Eliza Andrews (1908) described the slave-owning class of the antebellum South as “intensely ‘class conscious’” (p. 2). Letitia Burwell (1895) remembered how she and her sister visited the slave cabins of their antebellum Virginia plantation “on which occasions no young princesses could have received from admiring subjects more adulation. This made us happy as queens” (pp. 2-3). She also wrote about the proper conduct of White women, describing how “model women…managed their household affairs admirably, and were uniformly kind to, but never familiar with, their servants” (p. 34). In their world, it was improper to bridge the large gulf of class and privilege from which they benefited immensely.

White women, maybe most importantly, were too blinded by race to see slave women as potential allies. Harriet Jacobs, a slave born in 1813 in North Carolina (2001), saw that “it had never occurred to Mrs. Flint [her mistress] that slaves could have any feelings” (p. 891). Letitia Burwell (1895) felt it was literally her race’s duty, given to them by God, to elevate the savage slaves to a state of civilization. Burwell commended what she saw as her ancestors’ good deeds:

what courage, what patience, what perseverance, what long suffering, what Christian forbearance, must it have cost our great-grandmothers to civilize, Christianize, and elevate the naked savage Africans to the condition of good cooks and respectable maids!…. If in heaven there be one seat higher than another, it must be reserved for those true Southern matrons, who performed conscientiously their part assigned them by God—civilizing and instructing this race. (pp. 44-45)

She could not see that slaves would feel anything but gratitude for the generosity of slave owners. Georgia mistress Eliza Andrews (1908) observed, “It did seem a pity to break up a great nation about a parcel of African savages” (p. 220). It was a huge leap for mistresses blinded by prejudice to see “savages” as fellow women, much less as potential allies.

Both Clinton (1982) and Fox-Genovese (1988) posited that mistresses often took their anger out on slaves because they were helpless to confront the patriarchy that oppressed them. In some ways, their double victimization with slave women drove a larger wedge between the two groups as opposed to uniting them, as “Southern white women were powerless to right the wrongs done them…some did strike back but not always at Southern patriarchs, but usually at their unwitting and powerless rivals, slave
women” (Fox-Genovese, 1988, p. 41). Harriet Jacobs (2001) chronicled the impact of masters’ infidelity, explaining that “even the little child, who is accustomed to wait on her mistress and her children, will learn before she is twelve years old, why it is that her mistress hates such and such a one among the slaves” (p. 774). In these cases, the intimacy of experience actually served to crush any sense of gender solidarity.

Slave women, on the other hand, had a much stronger sense of gender solidarity. In the fields, women were often separated into all-female gangs or groups. During the time she spent on her husband’s Georgia plantation, Fanny Kemble (1863) remarked upon the way the task system on their plantation was “graduated according to sex” (p. 14). She even noted the presence of gangs of pregnant women (p. 39). In the kitchen or at the creek where they washed their clothes, Black women could create a sense of space in which they were powerful and proud, where men as well as White women were not allowed and, therefore, increase their sense of agency and self-respect (White, 1985). According to historian Deborah Grey White (1985), “rather than being diminished, their sense of womanhood was probably enhanced, and their bonds with one another made stronger” (p. 12). For Black women, there was a sisterhood.

The normative gender ideal of the fragile, delicate woman did not apply to bondswomen and therefore increased their sense of agency. Separated from their husbands and children in their roles as wives and mothers, Black women were made to do men’s work in the fields and were frequently sexually violated, therefore denying them the possibility of chastity (Fox-Genovese, 1988). In response, they formed their own gender ideal: the strong independent woman (White, 1985). Old Elizabeth, a slave born in antebellum Maryland, remembered bracing herself to “gird up my loins now like a man” (Andrews ed., 1988, p. 9). When Sojourner Truth (2001), a Northern slave of the early republic and antebellum periods, challenged her mistress, she felt amazed as she was flooded with power: “Why, I felt so tall within—I felt as if the power of a nation was within me!” (p. 599). These powerful Black women were not the Southern ladies who were able to act only through their husbands and fathers. Once forced to break the gender stereotype of delicate women, slave women found a new kind of strength.

This deviation from the gender norm served slave women well; while mistresses were suffering in silence for the good of their families, slave women found ways to control their day-to-day lives. Harriet Jacobs (2001) noted that although her master “had power and law on his side; I had a determined will. There is might in each” (p. 831). Mattie Jackson got into a fight with her mistress, who “flew into a rage and told him [the master/husband] I was saucy, and to strike me” (Thompson, 1988, p. 15). The master beat her badly until her mother came into the room, at which point he stopped because “he was aware my mother could usually defend herself against any one man, and both of us would overpower him” (p. 16). The mistress had to act through her husband. Mattie and her mother did not need a man. They were strong women— even stronger together.

Possibly because slave women were forced to adopt new gender ideals and sources of feminine power, they looked not to their husbands or fathers but rather to other women for solidarity. In the case of Jackson and her mother, this approach was successful, but when slaves looked to the mistress for help, they did not always find the source of power they were looking for. Slave women and men frequently approached
Fanny Kemble (1863) with requests for help on her husband’s plantation. However, even in her prescribed role as a woman who might help make slavery humane, she felt the limitations placed on her. She felt powerless to help and reported, “I am anxious to spare both myself and them the pain of vain appeals to me for redress and help, which alas! it is too often utterly out of my power to give them” (p. 25). After all, Kemble was not the master of the plantation and felt her resulting lack of power. Had she been able to respond to the needs of slave women, Kemble’s actions could have led to a sense of gender solidarity. However, because she had no independent agency in the plantation patriarchy, she could not respond when slave women turned to her, a fellow woman, for help.

North Carolina slave Harriet Jacobs (2001) looked to White women not only for compassion but also for actual sisterhood in the face of slavery. She addressed her slave narrative to free women, pleading, “rise up, ye women that are at ease!...Give ear unto my speech” (p. 743). She later remembered the approach of New Year’s day, when slave families were most often sold apart, and appealed to White women: “Oh, you happy free woman, contrast your New Year’s day with that of the poor bond-woman!” (p. 761). The White mother should understand the slave woman’s plight for although the slave woman “may be an ignorant creature, degraded by the system that has brutalized her from childhood…she has a mother’s instincts and is capable of feeling a mother’s agonies” (p. 761). Jacobs recognized the possibility of gender solidarity and called on White women to recognize slave women as sisters, fellow women, and fellow mothers.

When Harriet Jacobs’ master, Dr. Flint, pursued a sexual relationship with her, Jacobs felt sorry for his wife (2001). She identified her mistress as a sister and saw clearly their mutual suffering. Causing Jacobs confusion and hurt, Mrs. Flint responded with hatred instead of sympathy. Jacobs could not understand why, especially given the fact that she “had far more pity for her [Mrs. Flint] than he had, whose duty it was to make her life happy” (pp. 777-778). Jacobs felt their shared suffering at the hands of the same man should have united them, should have strengthened their bond. Instead Mrs. Flint turned her anger on Jacobs.

Jacobs, revealing her expectation of unity, felt deeply betrayed by this lack of compassion between women. She lamented, “the mistress, who ought to protect the helpless victim, has no other feelings toward her but those of jealousy and rage” (2001, p. 773). She saw that White women could have and should have seen Black women as sisters who deserved their help and protection. It caused her great pain when her childhood mistress, whom she loved like a mother and who was a foster sister to her own mother, died but did not free Jacobs in her will. The mistress had promised her “dying mother that her children should never suffer for any thing; and when I remembered that, and recalled her many proofs of attachment to me, I could not help saving some hopes that she had left me free” (p. 754). Jacobs was devastated when she found out that her mistress had not freed her. Her hopes of freedom were disappointed, and she felt a profound sense of betrayal. Jacobs revealed the deep personal hurt she experienced, admitting, “I would give much to blot out from my memory that one great wrong” (p. 754). What she wished to forget more than anything was not the period of being harassed by Dr. Flint or the seven years she spent almost immobile in hiding to free her children; it was the betrayal by her once beloved mistress and fellow woman.
Slave women also demonstrated their feelings of betrayal and revealed their expectations of at least compassion if not gender solidarity through the profound anger they reserved for cruel mistresses who abused female slaves. It was harder to accept abuse or cruelty at the hands of another woman. Missouri slave Mattie Jackson felt special hatred for the pitiless mistress who caused the death of her little brother (Thompson, 1988, p. 12). The White woman made her mother keep the young boy in a box because otherwise he would take up too much of his mother’s time. Eventually, on the morning he died, “it made no impression on my mistress until she came into the kitchen and saw his life fast ebbing away, then she put on a sad countenance for fear of being exposed, and told my mother to take the child to her room, where he only lived one hour” (p. 12). The callousness of the mistress shocked Jackson. She further described how the mistress would whip one little girl every night to teach her to wake up early to tend to the mistress’ own children (p. 10). Jackson described the master as “severe” but complained more bitterly that with the mistress, “it appeared impossible to please her” (p. 10). She made a point of noting that the mistress was crueler than the master, all the more brutal because she was a woman, a fellow mother.

New York slave Sojourner Truth (2001) told the story of a young woman and mother, “of fine appearance, and high standing in society, the pride of her husband, and the mother of an infant daughter,” who savagely beat her slave Tabby to death (p. 630). Truth reported that it “caused my blood to stir within me, and my heart to sicken at the thought” (p. 631). Truth was obviously upset by this story because both the perpetrator and the victim were women. It was more disturbing and therefore worthy of retelling in her narrative because the murderess was a young woman and young mother from whom Truth expected gentleness and compassion toward other women—not savage violence.

Harriet Jacobs (2001) moved past pity for Mrs. Flint and toward hatred when she scathingly observed that she “like many southern women, was totally deficient in energy. She had not strength to superintend her household affairs; but her nerves were so strong, that she could sit in her easy chair and see a woman whipped, till the blood trickled from every stroke of the lash” (p. 758). Mrs. Flint was a hypocrite and a traitor as she watched another woman whipped. The woman who had once been a possible sister had betrayed Jacobs and all women, and she hated her as such.

White women also recognized the possibility of sisterhood. Georgia mistress Fanny Kemble (1863) struggled to see slave women as fellow women, guiltily recognizing her failure when she did not. When an old woman asked her to come see “many, many of my offspring,” Kemble stopped, suddenly realizing that although she “looked like a crooked ill built figure set up in a field to scare crows, with a face infinitely more like a mere animal than any human countenance I ever beheld,” this “creature…was a woman” (p. 45). On another occasion, Kemble stopped to caress a slave infant and noted “the caress excited the irrepressible delight of all the women present—poor creatures! who seem to forget that I was a woman, and had children myself, and bore a woman’s and a mother’s heart towards them and theirs” (p. 20). She saw that, as a rule, White women failed to reach out to Black women as sisters. Elizabeth Lyle Saxon (1905), a suffragist and social reformer born in antebellum Tennessee, even came close to abolitionism through her identification with slaves as women. She complained bitterly of the American woman’s position in society and “the
shame of her repression” (p. 14). These feelings led her to admit that “southern in every vein and fiber of being though I was…I saw slavery in its bearing upon my own sex. I saw that it teemed with injustice and shame to all womankind, and I hated it” (p. 14). It was not as an abolitionist that she criticized slavery—but as a woman. Saxon dutifully returned to the South at the outbreak of the Civil War after having lived in the North with her husband for some years. However, for a moment she had seen slave women as sisters and felt the pain of their common suffering in a society that enslaved them both.

Examples like these reveal that, although White and Black women in the antebellum South did not form an effective sisterhood, they occasionally recognized that gender solidarity was possible. Some women, especially slave women, expected at least compassion if not unity. Both mistress and slave responded to the lack of solidarity differently—sometimes with guilt, sometimes with feelings of betrayal or anger. Either way, they revealed a complex relationship as women dealing with issues of race, class, privilege, jealousy, and gender under a harsh patriarchy. In the end, they missed out on what could have been a powerful alliance.

References


