On the eve of the American Civil War, evangelical religious fervor reestablished women as the moral center of the home, responsible for the virtue of their families. Until recent decades, historical scholarship and public opinion suggested that because of their religion and femininity, white women were largely innocent in the sins of their slaveholding husbands. In reality, the evangelical woman’s relationship with slavery was far more complicated. Plantation mistresses struggled to reconcile this new moral imperative with the violence and ethical problems of chattel slavery, although the system brought them great personal benefit. Unable to fully justify slavery in concert with their moral charter, some plantation mistresses challenged the brutality of slavery, but only when it most dramatically conflicted with their moral mission, and did not question the institution as a whole.

By Breck Radulovic
University of Chicago

Culturally defined by the horrors of racialized slavery, the antebellum South was also the backdrop to an effervescent rise of evangelical religious activity. Although the tune of saving souls, morality in the home, and Christian rebirth enchanted those living below the Mason-Dixon line, the sacred-minded insistence of their clergymen was confronted with a brutal economic practice. If at first evangelicals sought to ameliorate or even end slavery, they soon realized they would have to rationalize it and ethicize it if they were to keep their congregants.1 As evangelicalism acquiesced to slavery, it also reinterpreted familial roles for all those in the Abrahamic patriarchal structure. Evangelicals championed a new role for women in the home, one of moral caretaker, guardian, and proselytizer. In contrast to prevailing social norms that had discounted their value altogether, most evangelical Southern women latched onto a role that elevated their existence beyond their ability to provide aesthetic or reproductive benefit.

Yet, if mothers were entrusted with the moral status of the home, they would have to reckon with the sin of slavery. Few evangelicals fought the notion that slavery brutalized the white family, and so, when slavery attacked the sanctity of the family, women attacked it in return. But when slavery served the ideal of patriarchal order established by proslavery evangelicalism, women allowed it to continue unchallenged. Balancing a moral charter with the desire to maintain the benefits of slave society proved difficult for the women caught between the rise of evangelicalism and the increasingly brittle system of chattel slavery.
LIFE IN THE HOME: A WOMAN AND HER NEEDS
The antebellum period saw the rise of rhetoric valorizing the home as a place of particular moral, spiritual, and gendered significance in both the North and the South. Prominent Northern abolitionists like Harriet Beecher Stowe advocated for the sanctification of the home, as did proslavery Southerners, who saw the separate sphere as a tool of social control. Keen to improve the moral standing of its congregants, Southern evangelicalism appropriated the sanctification of the home as a religious task specific to women. This cult of domesticity intentionally reinforced ideals that tied Southern women to the home and kept them away from the public sphere. For example, in a response to a women’s rights advocate, prominent Southern essayist Louisa McCord penned “Woman and Her Needs” in 1852. In her view, women were not needed in, and were even a detriment to, the public sphere, for their role was “to be the soul of breath, the life, the love-law of that home; the mother, the wife, the sister, the daughter—such is woman’s holiest sphere, such her largest endowment…Such is woman’s noble task. Can any be nobler?”

For many women, particularly those of the plantation class, the answer was no. In being commissioned to care for the home, women received a significant moral task; there would be no need for them to step outside the domestic sphere.

The home became a sacred place, and women’s virtuous love became analogous to God’s grace. A pious home would cultivate a pious family, and as guarantors of the domestic environment, women were chiefly responsible for this piety. Donald Mathews presents the ideal of “Evangelical Womanhood”; women “were endowed with a capacious piety—not that men were thought to be impious, but women were thought somehow to be more intensely and consistently pious because they were assumed to be more emotional and affectionate than men.”

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese’s extensive research into the journals and diaries of Southern women, such as Eliza Carmichael, “a Presbyterian, [who] found that a journal helped her keep her pledge to God,” and Lucilla McCorkle, “[who]…dated all her journal entries by reference to the Sabbath and devoted long passages to…exhorting herself to greater efforts” regarding household chores and maintenance, demonstrates the vital importance of religion to the inner life of Southern women.

Other women, like Grace Latimer Whittle of Norfolk, Virginia, devoted much of their diaries to intense, emotive reflection on their spiritual state. Latimer considered the importance of religion in undated poems titled, “The Holy Spirit,” “A Prayer,” and “Faith,” which read, “Oh may it be my happy lot, / To have that faith and lose it not. / To know I have an heavenly charm/ To shield me from temptation harm, / and may I lose these human fears/ While I pass through this vale of tears.” Accomplished diarist Mary Chestnut relayed her fervor after leaving a sermon during the Civil War:

What a sermon! The preacher stirred my blood. My very flesh crept and tingled. A red-hot glow of patriotism passed over me. Such a sermon must strengthen the hearts and the hands of any people. There was more exhortation to fight and die à la Joshua than meek Christianity, however.
These evangelical women experienced religion viscerally, but the call to fight was an unusual one. Before the Civil War, evangelical womanhood presented a set of ideals that kept women away from worldly affairs. As “the home supplanted the church as the essential Christian community” and “the mother’s role in nurturing the family in Christian love [became] so important…women’s indispensable and unique contribution to religion and morality in the household, offered them honor and respect equal to that of men.” Thus, women exercised their evangelical duties inside the home, rather than by meddling in external affairs. Though the cult of domesticity lent respect to women, it also became a tool of gender segregation.

“Although women certainly were uncomfortable with certain corruptive elements of slavery, most saw little incongruence between their positions as slave mistresses and the ideal of evangelical womanhood.”

**EVANGELICAL WOMANHOOD IN THE SLAVE SOUTH**

According to evangelical men, evangelical women needed to be segregated from the institution of slavery, lest they misunderstand their social role and criticize it. The same affective nature that made them moral guardians of the home might make them improperly empathize with slaves or lead them to condemn the institution entirely. Mathews claims “there is evidence to suggest that women were likely to be thought untrustworthy on the subject of slavery…the special work which evangelicalism had assigned women could have made them sympathetic to slaves.” Slavery was incompatible with evangelical womanhood, or at least men worried that women would see it as such. Despite the fears of their husbands, few women used their moral standing to criticize slavery, at least openly, and rather attempted to bring slaves into the fold of the moral family. A South Carolina physician wrote the following in a letter to the governor: “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.” Slaves were part of the moral edict issued by evangelicalism and slavery an acceptable part of family structure.

Although women certainly were uncomfortable with certain corruptive elements of slavery, most saw little incongruence between their positions as slave mistresses and the ideal of evangelical womanhood. Just as “language of the Bible and sermons shaped country women’s models of female excellence” to see “their purportedly ordained station as a natural manifestation of human and divine order rather than as arbitrary imprisonment,” women saw slavery as part of the divinely ordained patriarchal familial order. Fox-Genovese comments on this acceptance: “Southern ladies took their religious responsibilities seriously, but they were more likely to weave them into their ideals of rank than to draw upon them for criticism of society.” She quotes Virginia Cary, an American prescriptivist author, who said, “Religion, if not most manifest in female deportment, is at least most necessary to enable women to perform their allotted duties in life. The very nature of those duties demands the strength of Christian principle to ensure their correct and dignified performance…” She seems to have been advocating religion as an aid for survival in slave society, rather than as a program for its reform.

Although the moral power of women might have been used to critique slavery far more harshly, given all of its associated sins, Southern women had little interest in denouncing the totality of slavery. Instead, they argued that such a hierarchy was God’s will, and as the primary ambassadors of religion in the home, they were bound to uphold and support the inferior rank of both women and slaves.

Belief in divine ordination seemed to vindicate the slave system for most Southern women. On the eve of Abraham Lincoln’s reelection, Dolly Lunt Burge mediated on what God’s will might be. While “[she] had never felt that slavery was altogether right, for it is abused by men,” she could not see the institution as inherently sinful, because her husband claimed “that if he could see that it was sinful for him to own slaves, if he felt that it was wrong, he would take them where he could free them. He would not sin for his right hand.” She further argued that “the purest and holiest of men have owned them, and I can see nothing in the scriptures which forbids it.” She claimed to never have bought or sold slaves, and to have “tried to make life easy and pleasant to those that have been bequeathed to me.” Instead, Burge attempted to uphold her Christian duty as an evangelical woman to ameliorate the institution as far as possible, without interfering with divine order. In Louisa McCord’s excoriating critique of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, she fervently disagreed that Christian slaveholders must feel uneasy with slavery. Addressing Harriet Beecher Stowe directly, McCord pronounced “[t]here are pious slaveholders; there are Christian slaveholders; there are gentlemanly slaveholders…who own slaves because they think it not expedient only, but right, holy, and just so to do, for the good of the slave—for the good of the master—for the good of the world.” McCord called Stowe a “false
prophet”—not only mistaken in her beliefs, but heretical. Burge and McCord saw slavery as just and divinely ordained, and as such, saw slaveholding as an intentionally ameliorative process for those enslaved. This conditional improvement under slavery reified its position in the patriarchal order, and therefore maintaining slavery fell under women’s feminine duty in the evangelical household.

Not all women approved of slavery or all of its aspects, and when they did not do so, it was largely because of slavery’s challenge to the framework of the evangelical family. Mary Chestnut relayed the scene of a slave auction to explain her discontent with the system:

So I have seen a negro woman sold—up on the block—at auction. I was walking. The woman on the block overtopped the crowd. I felt faint—seasick. The creature looked so like my good little Nancy. She was a bright mulatto with a pleasant face. She was magnificently gotten up in silks and satins.…I daresay the poor thing knew who would buy her.…You know how women sell themselves and are sold in marriage, from queens downward, eh? You know what the Bible says about slavery—and marriage. Poor women. Poor slaves.

Chestnut saw little similarity between the slave being sold and her own relationship with Nancy; she was not sickened by the ownership of chattel property, but by the sale and sexual exploitation of slaves.

Similarly, Catherine Clinton claims that “the plantation mistress saw herself as the conscience of the slave South. Generally a mother herself, she opposed the breakup of families; mistresses often pleaded with planters to prevent slave sales that would destroy black families.” Women’s restriction to the domestic sphere meant they had little desire or ability to question the system in its entirety. Although Mary Chestnut was secretly opposed to slavery, most other women seemed content with the notion that slavery was God’s will. It was merely their duty to exercise moral guidance as they did elsewhere in the familial setting, leading them to oppose mixed-race sexual relationships and the breakup of families, but not slavery as a whole. Because women were unable to change either the slave system or their moral responsibilities, they “had to achieve a balance between these values and the deception, self-deception, and contradiction [of slavery].” According to Clinton, women could only protect their conception of evangelical womanhood by lying to themselves and their communities about the realities of slavery.

A WRETCHED COUNTRY: SLAVERY AND THE WHITE FAMILY
This is not to say that women found it easy to live alongside slaves. Some were morally challenged by slavery and others detested the effects slavery had on the white family. Sarah Gayle, wife of an Alabama planter and politician, kept an extensive diary. She found herself to be in deep tension with the slaves she owned, particularly when her husband
was absent and she was forced to be more involved in their management. She was revolted at “myself for suffering my temper to rise at the provocations of the servants. I would be willing to spend the rest of my life at the north, where I never should see the face of another negro.” Gayle sought purity from the slave system, not its eradication. Gayle also fought ceaselessly to repurchase her father’s former slave named Mike and his family after they were sold, writing “[n]o ideas enter my head of cotton, or of corn, or of money—but simply the longing to say once more my father’s old servants, are mine again.” Mike represented her own late parents as a part of her family, yet she saw no disconnect between her need to complete her family and Mike’s status as property. Gayle’s definition of family included her human property, but slaves were unable to prevent their blood relatives from being separated by sale. For Sarah Gayle, slaves were a part of the patriarchal family and the rupture of this family represented her personal failure as a woman and mother. However, she did not value slaves above mere property, and at times detested them for their very existence.

When women did examine slavery’s moral failings, their critique centered on the detriments slavery posed to the white family. In their view, slavery corrupted children by instantiating a predilection to violence in them. Two different women, Anna Matilda Page King of Georgia and Virginia Cary of Virginia, wrote on the influence of slavery on children. King asked that her husband sell their slaves and “leave this wretched country” because “to bring up boys on a plantation makes them tyrannical as their slaves and “leave this wretched country” because “to bring up boys on a plantation makes them tyrannical as well as lazy, and girls too.” Cary’s advice book warned that “the child is allowed to tyrannize over the unfortunate menial appointed to gratify its wants. Parents allow this abuse of power without being aware of its fatal tendency.” Although Cary blamed parents generally, mothers were particularly to blame if their children had moral failings because of their role as moral anchor of the home. King lacked the authority to counter slavery’s brutalizing effects on her children while in slave society, so she exercised her moral voice to beg her husband to remove their family from it. Both women focused on the perversion of boys likely because girls were seen as unfailingly pious, just like their mothers. Neither woman acknowledged the debasement of black children and families central to the institution of slavery, even though many of them claimed that slaves were also a part of their families. Perhaps they believed they were divinely entrusted primarily with the care of their own children’s souls and socially confined to the domestic sphere. Slavery was partially in the domestic world and partially in the political, economic, and masculine world. Although many women considered the care of their slaves to be part of their moral responsibility, the white family was supremely important in their religious charter. If they allowed slavery to corrupt their children, they were damning not only their children’s souls, but their own.

Many women believed that slavery polluted the souls of fathers just as it polluted those of boys. Wives’ fears of their husbands’ sexual relations with slaves ran the gamut from blaming the slave alone to recognizing the full moral culpability of their husbands as sexual predators. The empathetic fear of the exploitation of female slaves and disgust at racial mixing led Gertrude Clanton Thomas to condemn the actions of both her husband and her father, who had fathered children by slaves, in her private journal. She thought light-skinned female slaves were “subject to be bought by men, [sic] with natures but one degree removed from the brute creation and with no more control over their passions—subjected to such a lot are they not to be pitied… oh is it not enough to make us shudder at the standard of morality in our Southern homes?” Here, it was not slaves who are characterized by animalism, but white slaveholders.

However, as pitiable as the condition of “Fancy girls” was, white Southern women, according to Thomas, had it far worse: “Southern women are, I believe all at heart abolitionists [sic] but then I expect I have made a very broad assertion [sic] but I will stand to the opinion that the institution of slavery degrades the white man more than the Negro and oh exerts a most deleterious effect upon our children.” She assigned blame to white men for their sexual abuse of slaves, but then removed their ultimate culpability by pointing to the institution of slavery as the root of this evil, without acknowledging white men as the cause of slavery as well. Her admittedly broad claim that all women were abolitionists exhibits the degree to which women recognized slavery as harmful to the moral sanctuary of the home.

Mary Chestnut also based her judgment of slaveholders’ sexual relations with slaves on their effect on the white family. She critiqued Stowe’s despicable character of Simon Legree as a failure of didactic fiction, writing:

> a magnate who runs a hideous black harem with its consequences under the same roof with his lovely white wife, and his beautiful and accomplished daughters? He holds his head as high and poses as a model of all human virtues to these poor women whom God and laws have given him…you see, Mrs. Stowe did not hit the sorest spot. She makes Legree a bachelor.

The term used at the time was “licentiousness,” referring to these sexual relationships while euphemistically ignoring the violence inherent in them. For Chestnut, the sin of slavery was compounded when it occurred in the presence of the innocent white family, rather than among men alone. The disconnect between the reasons Southern women criticized slavery and the ones for which Northern women did was articulated in Chestnut’s comment; insofar as Southern women were willing to attack slavery, it was for their own sake and the sake of their families, not out of concern for the enslaved.
Slavery also allowed, and even glorified, male violence, to the horror of many evangelical women. Fox-Genovese claims that slavery shaped the Southern ideal of white masculinity through its “generalized ritualization of brutality, dominance over women, formal political democracy, celebration of the unbridled independence of free white men, and especially racism.” Dominance was as inextricable from male duty as piety was from female, and men adapted as readily to this paradigm as women did to theirs. However, there were times when women believed their moral imperative superseded their husband’s right to paternal authority, and would intervene on behalf of slaves. Fanny Cassady, a house slave owned by Mistress Sally and Master Jordan, later told of her mistress’ revulsion at her husband’s actions.

In Cassady’s words,

[Master Jordan] leveled [the gun] at Leonard [a slave] an’ tole him to pull his shirt open. Leonard opened his shirt an’ stood dare big as er lack giant sneerin’ at Ole Marse. Den Mis’ Sally run up again an’ stood ‘tween dat gun an’ Leonard. Ole Marse yell to Pappy an’ tole him to take dat woman out de way, but nobody ain’t moved to touch Mis’ Sally, an’ she didn’ move neither; she just stood there facin Ole Marse. Then Ole Marse let down the gun. He reached over an’ slapped Miss Sally down, den picked up de gun an’ shot er hole in Leonard’s ches’ big as yo’ fis’. Den he took up Mis’ Sally an’ toted her in de house.

On another occasion, when Cassady’s mother made a mistake in the kitchen, Jordan ordered Sally to strike Cassady’s mother as punishment. Sally obliged, but did so half-heartedly, provoking Jordan to say, “Hit her, Sally, hit de black bitch like she ’zerve to be hit.” Sally did so, but later ran to the kitchen weeping to apologize to “Mammy.” As these occasions illustrate, evangelical women were forced to balance their innate and religious horror at their husband’s violence and the general brutality of slavery with their duty to be obedient to their husbands. Actions by white women like Sally demonstrate both the risks and inefficacy of attempting to challenge the power dynamics of evangelical slave society. The inability to curb a husband’s violence must have been appalling to an evangelical woman, for “[e]vangelicals believed that even ‘men whose souls seem to be brutalized by long habits of cruelty and crime’ could be reformed ‘by pious women.”

The inability to shepherd a husband and children towards moral goodness was often a twofold failure for women; first, it represented their inability to create a moral standard in the home, and second, this tension revealed that not only men resorted to domestic violence to maintain household order. Although Lizzie Neblett was afraid to be violent toward her slaves, she was willing to do so toward her children because she did not fear their reprisal. As her children became more tyrannical—“Bob mistreated the horses; Walter used a cowhide to beat the cat; all the children’s faces bore the permanent scars of [her son] Billy’s fingernails”—so too did Lizzie. She threatened to “whip Billy every day if necessary,” and wrote to her husband that she “[had] whipped” her ten-month-old baby “several times.” She too expressed an agonizing desire to sell her slaves in her husband’s absence because of slavery’s effect on herself and her children. She saw herself transformed into a cruel mother, failing to rear virtuous children, and failing to be virtuous herself. She attributed these sins almost entirely to slavery. Because her husband was away fighting in the Civil War, she further condemned slavery for the disintegration of her family. Although she recognized her failure to live up to the ideal of evangelical womanhood, Neblett avoided placing blame on herself.

**FEMALE VIOLENCE IN THE SLAVE SYSTEM**

While women lived in fear of what slavery would do to their families, they also feared what violence slaves themselves would exact upon their white masters. Part of the moral edict of women was to maintain God’s intended order in their homes, yet nearly all of them blanched at disciplining slaves for fear of experiencing vengeful violence. For example, the slave Mary Armstrong blinded her mistress with a rock in retribution for the beating that killed Armstrong’s sister Polly. The mistress’ daughter reportedly responded, “Well, I guess Mama has learnt her lesson at last.” Frances Kemble explained women’s sensitivity to violence, “I know Southern men are apt to deny the fact that they do live under a habitual sense of danger; but a slave population, coerced into obedience, though unarmed and half-fed, is a threatening source of constant insecurity, and every Southern woman to whom I have spoken on the subject has admitted to me that they live in terror of their slaves.”

Women were responsible for the orderliness of slaves, particularly when their husbands were away, but were terrified of evoking the ire of slaves and provoking violence themselves. Ada Bacot described disciplining slaves as “a most unpleasant duty to perform.” She wrote, “I had to do this morning & see them punished. My very soul revolted at the idea, but I knew if I let it pass I would have more trouble so I thought the best way was to have a stop put to it at once. I hope I shall have nothing more of it.” Part of her moral duty was to maintain order, but her “soul revolted” at violence, forcing her to balance woman’s ideal nature with her responsibilities as a slaveholder. Women also resented their urges to discipline slaves, as Lucilla McCorkle did: “I find myself—and so does my dear husband find, that I am getting too hard in my manner toward her [Laura, a slave] foibles. God forgive me…I felt a good deal irritated at Laura’s disobedience…I often get out of patience but I know it is wrong.” If slavery could corrupt boys and transform them into miniature tyrants, it could also cause women to depart from ideals of gentleness and sympathy. When McCorkle’s husband became the softening influence in her life, she abdicated her feminine role.
As with all ideals, that of the demure, genteel evangelical woman had those who flouted its expectations. After exposure to years of brutality, some women no longer cared to curate an image of sympathy and morality. Clinton traces a slave mistress’ diary from 1815 to 1832. In 1815, the woman wrote that she was “awakened this morning by the screeching of a female slave who was fleeing from the whip of her enraged master. I never witnessed such a scene…her neck torn and bloody, her eyes swollen…I live, it is said with one of the best masters.” Seventeen years later, the mistress described having a slave whipped in her diary. Recognizing her moral decline, she begged “Father of mercies, guard my heart and keep me from the seductions of evil. Oh how callous are the hearts of this people.” As the ideal of the evangelical woman developed in the slave South, the unnamed mistress above had inverse moral growth, changing from an empathetic and reluctant participant in slave society to one who engaged in its egregiousness. An uncharitable analysis of evangelical womanhood might argue that it encouraged women to turn a blind eye to the horrors of slavery to slaves, as long as their souls and the souls of their families were protected. The frame of feminine piety allowed the woman to conceive of slavery as a personal attack on her moral wellbeing, rather than a societal sin. As such, she was not responsible for slavery or its broader effects, but only for its influence on the home.

Most tales of women’s harshness come from interviews with former slaves, and even then, only exceptionally brutal mistresses were seen worthy to mention, as often their violence paled in comparison to slaves’ treatment at the hands of their husbands. Only 40 percent of slaves in Works Progress Administration interviews mentioned mistresses, and of those, 35 percent were negative. Whether these women were always violent or if they bent to the pressures of the slave system is unclear in many cases, as they were unlikely to recount instances of their violence in private journals.

CONFRONTING GOD’S WILL AT HARPERS FERRY
While women were unlikely to discuss their violence, or tended to gloss over their husbands’ violence in their journals, many were quick to discuss the threat of slave violence in their private recollections, and nearly all considered these acts of violence to be against the will of God, as in their view, God had ordained slavery. The events of John Brown’s raid on Harpers Ferry forced Southern evangelical women to consider that perhaps slavery was not cohesive with evangelicalism. However, in the immediate aftermath of Harpers Ferry most were convinced that God’s righteousness had protected them. For example, Susan Bradford Eppes published her girlhood diaries from the antebellum and Civil War periods in Through Some Eventful Years. Supposedly written when Eppes was fourteen, the entry from two days after John Brown’s raid on Harpers Ferry reads as such:

October 18th, 1859—The horrible, horrible time that has come to us; our world seems turned topsy-turvy. We feel that we can trust none of the dear black folks who, before this, we had relied on at every turn. I am afraid to say a word for fear it will prove to be just what should have been left unsaid…What will become of us? Will our Father in Heaven let us be destroyed? Will the people we have always loved put torch to our homes and murder us when we seek to escape? That is what John Brown was urging them to do.

Some days later, her slave Frances threatened that “you white folks will know a heap you ain’t never knowed before.” Perhaps Frances was referring to “the day appointed by the abolitionists for a general outbreak among the slaves of the South,” which the evangelical widower Elizabeth Lindsay Lomax also feared, until “their plan was defeated by the goodness of God.” Lomax’s Leaves from an Old Washington Diary seems to be a
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more reliable source than Eppes’ “diary,” and is far more staid in its assessment of Harpers Ferry. The truthfulness of Eppes’ diaries is in question, as there is evidence to suggest that the diaries were fabricated or heavily altered before publication. Eppes’ husband was murdered by a former slave in 1904, perhaps explaining her fixation on the violence of slaves and complicating the narrative described in her diary.

Keziah Brevard was an unmarried, female slaveholder and thoroughly condemned Brown for what she viewed as immoral and areligious violence:

That wretch John Brown—if he had come as one of Christ’s Apostles & preached down sin he might have been the instrument of good. But he came down to cut our throats because we held property we would not do otherwise with, was preposterous. Did God set the children of Israel to cutting their Masters throats to free them from bondage—no—no—he brought them out of Egypt in his own peculiar way & he can send Africas [sic] sons & daughters back when he knows they are ready for their exode….But I do hope & pray that every one [sic] will be made to suffer here on earth who mars the peace of another.54

Brevard’s diary, while seemingly confident in the exaction of God’s justice, belied the Southern concern that perhaps evangelicals were on the wrong side of God. Brevard did not seem to disagree that Brown thought himself a prophet, but rather critiqued his methods by comparing them to Scripture. However, her analysis of Exodus forgets the death and violence that made the liberation of the Israelites possible.

In Mary Chestnut’s response to Harpers Ferry, she claimed, “Hitherto, I have never thought of being afraid of negroes. I had never injured any of them; why should they want to hurt me? Two-thirds of my religion consists in trying to be good to Negroes.”55 Even when personally affected by violence, after a slave killed her cousin, Chestnut claimed that “nobody is afraid of their own negroes. These are horrid brutes—savages, monsters—but I find everyone, like myself, ready to trust their own yard. I would go down to the plantation tomorrow and stay there even if there were no white person in twenty miles.”56 Chestnut, like many evangelicals, believed that God protected her from slave violence. For a devout evangelical and slaveholder, a revolt was unthinkable because it would mean God was no longer on the side of white slaveholders.

Each of these four women were keen to address the impossibility of a successful slave revolt. Some, like Lomax and Brevard, were confident an insurrection could not possibly be God’s will. Eppes and Chestnut were sure they had treated their slaves quite well, and therefore had nothing to fear. In various ways, all of these women attempted to assimilate the events of Harpers Ferry into worldviews shaped by evangelicalism. Eppes and Lomax prayed for the souls of John Brown and his conspirators. As Brevard bucked the image of the ideal evangelical woman due to her unmarried and slave-owning status, she reckoned with her moral culpability for being in the position of the Egyptians. Chestnut claimed that taking care of slaves was an intrinsic part of her evangelicalism—two-thirds, in fact.57 These reactions to Harpers Ferry also call into question Frances Kemble’s argument that women were more afraid of slavery than their husbands, as most incendiary responses to John Brown were male.58 Women were concerned with the threat of insurrection because of the simple fear of violence, but also because they were wary of disruption of the society that had granted them such an immense moral task. By threatening to destroy slavery, Brown threatened the place evangelical women had made for themselves in Southern society. Because women’s roles, ability to save their souls, and source of social identity were so linked to the patriarchal family order, a challenge to slavery, an intrinsic part of that order in slave society, was a challenge to an evangelical woman’s entire being.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps the threat of slave insurrection and impending civil war should have concerned Southern women more than it did. Many of the formally published diaries examined in this article were heavily edited after the Civil War, but few removed the author’s assurances of God’s grace. However Southerners at the time interpreted God’s will, the balance between slavery and morality soon proved untenable for the rest of the nation. Southern evangelical women might have come to realize that their moral calling was at odds with their husbands’ economic desires if given more time and latitude to experiment with anti-slavery thought. Yet, Lizzie Neblett’s lament during the Civil War, in which she characterized herself as “a poor contemptible piece of multiplying human flesh…looked upon as belonging to a race of inferior human beings” illustrates the striking lack of awareness Southern women had to the parallels between their condition and that of their slaves.59 They may have never truly challenged slavery, despite its tensions with their religious commission. And as much as Southern women tried to forestall violence and the collapse of patriarchal order with genteel moralism, within decades of the rise of evangelical womanhood, women and evangelicals would have to reframe a woman’s duty in a new utterly foreign post-slavery society. **
Endnotes

[1] John Wesley argued for the moral impermissibility of slavery in 1773’s *Thoughts upon Slavery*. Other evangelicals argued that slavery was morally permissible if used to improve the condition of slaves and convert them to Christianity. Wesley, John. *Thoughts Upon Slavery*. London: R. Hawes, 1976.


[22] Chestnut, 15.


[27] Fox-Genovese, 365.

[28] Clinton, 190.

[29] Clinton, 95-96.


[31] Clinton 198.


[33] Weiner, 76.

[34] Fox-Genovese, 313.


[38] Faust, 190.


[40] Clinton, 87.


[45] Clinton, 185.

[46] Clinton, 185.

[47] See *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.


[50] Clinton, 188.


[52] Eppes, 119.


[56] Clinton, 195.

[57] Clinton, 195.


[59] Faust, 189.