The Plantation Mistress
Myth and Reality in History and Literature

Senior Honors Thesis

by
Ronit Charon Gechter

Professor Bergstrom and Professor Harris
June 6, 1996

INTRODUCTION

When people think of the ante-bellum South, the image that comes to mind is often one of a *Gone With the Wind* -inspired white columned plantation mansion with a multitude of slaves, at the beck and call of their genteel master and beautiful mistress. The air is thick and sweet with the scent of magnolias in bloom, and thirsty visitors enjoy mint juleps and fresh lemonade, prepared under the watchful eye of the plantation mistress. The master of the house has little interest in monetary and mundane business affairs. He passes his days with athletic and social pursuits, while acting as a father figure to all his loyal slaves. While he may commit an indiscretion here and there, it is all part of his burden as head of a plantation. His loyal and devoted wife is everything a man could ask for. She is beautiful, graceful, and charming. She keeps the plantation household running smoothly while barely lifting a finger, and she stands by her husband and her family firmly, no matter what situation arises. This is an illustration of the plantation myth. It embodies the spirit that the Old South wished to project for the rest of the world to see.

Central to this myth is the portrayal of southern womanhood in the nineteenth-century American South. Although the mythical plantation mistress was a lofty ideal and a wonderful literary character, she was not a tangible being. Obviously, not all southern belles were beautiful and graceful, and few if any plantation mistresses could conduct the business of the plantation in such an effortless fashion. Quite the contrary: ease and freedom from care characterized the lives of hardly any southern plantation mistresses. Running the domestic aspect of a plantation was hard work, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

Nineteenth-century southern women were placed in a unique position. According to historian Anne Firor Scott, "southern women in the years before 1860 had been the subjects — perhaps the victims — of an image of woman that was at odds

with the reality of their lives."[1] This image of what a woman was to be like was a powerful force. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese points out that "the figure of the lady, especially the plantation mistress, dominated southern ideals of womanhood. That slaveholding ladies were massively outnumbered by nonslaveholding or small slaveholding women challenges any easy assumptions about the relation between the ideal and the reality but does not undermine the power of the ideal."[2] Within their established role in society, this ideal was the ultimate that women could strive for. While the plantation myth was promoted as the reality of the South, southerners knew that it did not exist in real life, but rather in the hearts and minds of the people. The life envisioned by the plantation myth was the dream existence for white southerners, and the role it created for women was the essence of the ideal southern matron.

Despite the fact that the plantation myth's portrayal of southern women was remote from reality, it was widely circulated and accepted in the South as well as the North. It had an enormous effect on southern literature: while some authors chose to abandon it in favor of a more realistic interpretation, more authors embraced and illustrated it in their writing. *Westward Ho, Swallow Barn, Marse Chan, and Gone With the Wind* exemplify the celebration of the plantation myth in literature. Diaries and journals of plantation mistresses and southern girls show that the myth had influences quite real, that its reception was pervasive and evoked a widespread desire to live up to it. An examination of these literary works, diaries, and journals shows that southern society in general, and southern women specifically, embraced the portrayal of women in the plantation myth as ideal, and strove to reach this goal as the highest level of culture and existence available in their ante-bellum society.

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[1] Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics 1830 - 1930* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. X.

[2] Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*(Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), p. 47.

Previous studies have recognized the power of the myth, but have concentrated on different aspects of southern women's history. Two of the most influential authors in this field are Anne Firor Scott and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese. Scott's work has been four fold in purpose. While striving to "add to our understanding of what has been social reality," she has described the culturally defined image of the lady, traced its effects on women's behavior, and analyzed the process through which these ladies later freed themselves from these cultural expectations.[3] Fox-Genovese has approached this historical problem from a gender relations standpoint. She looks at both black and white women in the Old South and their gender roles and identities, in contrast to northern and European women. Although the thesis espoused in this paper is different from these two outlooks, it is not in contrast with them. Rather, the emphasis is shifted from the paths described above toward highlighting the use of the plantation myth as an ideal: the desire of southern women to emulate the myth in reality, while at the same time being quite aware that it was a myth.

BACKGROUND

The Reality of the Plantation Social System through 1860

A word that is often used when describing the historic American South is "peculiar." Whether referring to its people, architecture, or institutions, there seems to be a general consensus that the South has been different from the rest of the country — that it was somewhat strange and exceptional. The prevalence of that impression suggests that understanding the plantation myth requires explaining the

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[3]Scott, p. XII.

unique aspects of the southern social system by returning to the beginnings of southern society: the formation of the plantation system.

The settling of the South began in Virginia and South Carolina in the seventeenth-century. The majority of the first settlers were English people of the middle and lower classes, who were soon followed by people of Scotch and Scotch-Irish descent.[4] These were not people who were running away from oppressive regimes, nor were they fleeing religious persecution; they were merely seeking economic opportunities for themselves. According to I.A. Newby, "they sought not a new England, not a society built according to a purist's dream, but a wider England in which they could participate freely and from which they could derive a full share of benefit."[5]

The motives of the settlers combined with three main factors to lead to the development of the plantation system.[6] The first was the land policy of the southern colonial governments, which facilitated the collection of large holdings of land. There were many ways that policy promoted this. One, the head right system, stemmed from the shortage of labor in the southern colonies. Healthy, strong people were needed to work in the swampy areas of the South, as the old labor force was constantly thinned out by malaria and harsh working conditions. Indentured servants were initially the main labor force, and ships' captains were rewarded handsomely for their repeated deliveries of fresh human labor. The captains were given head rights, which translated into land grants. After a career of hauling indentured servants across the Atlantic, a captain had often amassed a vast land holding in Virginia or South Carolina. In addition to the sea captains, anyone with money could buy land and with that social status much quicker and easier in the southern colonies than back home in England. In this manner, a select few gained

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[4]I. A. Newby, *The South: A History* (U. S. A., Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1978), p. 38.
[5]Newby, p. 38.
[6]Newby, p. 43.

control of much of the available land. These large land holdings were essential for the operation of the plantation system.

A second factor that led to the growth of the plantation system was the suitability of the soil and climate in the southern colonies for growing staple crops. In 1612, John Rolfe introduced what Newby has called "a sweet-scented West Indian tobacco that suited the soil and climate of Virginia and the tastes of English gentlemen."[7] With this, staple agriculture took off in the southern colonies. Tobacco was followed by cotton, sugar, and rice, all of which favored a large, plantation style system of agriculture.

The third factor that influenced the development of the plantation system was not an inside influence nor a quality inherent in the colonies, but rather an outside influence — the encouragement of British mercantilism. Merchants were willing to pay good money for staple crops that could be grown in a plantation setting. This prospect of a constant influx of money from Great Britain was the final impetus in the development of the plantation system of agriculture in the southern colonies.

The result of these three factors was an economy centered on large-scale agriculture. Plantations, and eventually slavery, became a way of life.[8] A select few owned most of the land, and they set up plantations, which consisted of varying amounts of cultivated land, a main house or living quarters, and several outbuildings. The outbuildings were for the smooth functioning and upkeep of the plantation house and crops. They included dairies, necessaries, spring houses, smoke houses, barns, and slave quarters, all of which were often referred to as dependencies. These land owners, or planters, became the heads not only of their own plantations but the leaders of society and politics as well. The practice of plantation agriculture influenced all aspects of life.

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[7] Newby, p. 43.
[8] Newby, p. 43.

Due to the vast acreage of land allotted to each plantation, neighbors were often very few and far between. In addition, many land owners were absentee landlords, living on one of their other plantations, in towns, or perhaps even in another state, further contributing to the isolation of each individual plantation. Because of this self-inflicted isolation, plantations were out of necessity self-sufficient. Each plantation had to have its own labor force for both domestic and agricultural purposes. The African slaves who were the forced successors of the indentured servants fulfilled both of these roles.

As this system emerged, the social structure of the South formed and fermented, until it assumed a pattern that lasted for almost two hundred years. As historian I.A. Newby concluded, "before the seventeenth century had ended, the plantation system complete with grandee owners and African slavery had developed in Virginia and assumed the general form it retained until the civil war."[9] South Carolina was next to implement this system, followed by the rest of the South. Agriculture became the ways and means of the South, and the plantation became the most important part of agricultural production.[10] Almost all of these plantations were owned by white males and worked by black slaves.

According to Newby, as the plantation owners "transformed themselves into a landed gentry ... they acquired attributes of high culture and genteel living that set them apart from other classes and provided them with a source of social prestige and, ultimately, with a basis for idealizing and romanticizing their entire class."[11] They accomplished this rather adroitly, catching not only themselves in this web of home made nobility, but enchanting southerners, northerners, and historians of following generations with their story. As a result, "they have escaped the kind of critical

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[9]Newby, p. 44
[10]Newby, p. 127.
[11]Newby, p. 46.

analysis usually applied to social elites."[12] It is because of this that southerners are widely known not as they were, but as they wished to be seen. The most vivacious, wide spread rendition of southern history, and that version which the southern gentry themselves preferred, is that of the plantation myth or legend: "a magnificent physical setting, the virtues of rural life, an organic social structure, class and racial harmony, [and] material sufficiency without the corruptions of wealth or poverty."[13]

The Plantation Myth

According to the plantation myth, the head of the social structure was the southern country gentleman. The southern gentleman was a man belonging to the landed gentry, a man who did not engage in a menial occupation or in manual labor for gain. He presided over everyone on the plantation: the plantation mistress, the overseer, the slaves, and all of the children, black and white, were under his power. This master drew justification for his absolute authority from many sources, a prominent one being the cavalier myth.

The cavalier myth characterized the founding fathers of southern agrarian life as gentry, claiming that the first white men who came to the south, and Virginia especially, were English country nobles. These men were supposedly fleeing Oliver Cromwell and his religious persecution. Since there was no royal or feudal system in America, these nobles became country gentlemen. This did not mean that they gave up their lifestyle. They merely set up a squirearchy, a social system whose classes were not as strictly defined as in an aristocracy, but nevertheless retained a social hierarchy. By embracing this myth, the southern country gentleman presumed to be noble. He had a legitimate reason for leaving his home land, and an ancestral

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[12]Newby, p. 47.
[13]Newby, p. 175.

claim to power in his new land. With this asserted nobility came noblesse oblige, the obligation of honorable, generous, and responsible behavior, and with this noblesse oblige came the rest of the plantation myth.

In this myth, the good and just master of the plantation took seriously his obligation to behave honorably and responsibly. In most matters public and private he acted with honor. His dependents were more like his children, and his family was supreme. Interestingly enough, his noblesse oblige did not extend to certain elements of his morality. He was permitted a great deal of leeway in his extra-marital affairs, and gambling and drinking were among his many vices.

The plantation myth implicitly stipulated that most southern whites lived in plantation households. It presumed that just about every white man was a cavalier master, and that almost every white woman was a southern belle destined to become a plantation mistress. In addition, almost every plantation household was on a grand scale. Mansions were the status quo, as was ownership of hundreds of slaves, and vast acreage of land. These "noble" families did not have children, they "bred," and being well bred was an essential ingredient for a successful social life.

The role of southern women in this myth was particularly defined, but not as individuals. Plantation women were identified in relation to others, as daughters, wives, and mothers. They were supposed to live a moral and virtuous life, and be an example for others to follow. Newby has noted that they were expected to cultivate "the feminine virtues — delicacy, modesty, chastity, love, obedience," and be "happy homemakers, loyal wives, and devoted mothers."[14] The myth imposed that under no circumstances should women find themselves discontent with their God-given lot, nor should they attempt to enter the man's sphere of interests and duties. All of this had to be accomplished joyfully and effortlessly, lest according to Newby "they

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[14]Newby, p. 168.

disgrace their families, 'unsex' themselves, and affront the natural order of things."[15] So goes the plantation myth.

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It is evident that southern reality could not possibly have corresponded to the myth. Although some aspects of it may appear to have a basis in fact, scratching the surface of the plantation myth reveals that it was exactly that — myth. There is no proof to support the claim that the southern plantation masters were descendants of English country noblemen. There is, in fact, proof of quite the opposite, that many different strains of people settled the American South,[16] most of whom were from the middle and lower classes. John Crowe Ransom asserts that the cavalier myth shows more of the southerners' desire for validation and "a culture which was according to the European principles of culture,"[17] than their actual ancestry.

Nevertheless, a squirearchy did develop in the ante-bellum South. The need for a leader existed, and the plantation master filled this role. Although there was no actual nobility in his background, his new social station did bring a noblesse oblige. However, the many accounts of cruelty toward wives, children, and slaves imply that the average planter did not consider this duty to be one of his top priorities. The planters may or may not have treated their slaves as if they were their own children, which they sometimes were, but even if they did that was not necessarily a good thing. One southern preacher described planter husbands as being "of acid temper."[18] That not all of these men lived up to the standards of leadership that the myth demanded of their social position is clearly expressed by one southern belle:

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[15]Newby, p. 168.
[16]John Crowe Ransom, *I'll Take My Stand: Reconstructed but Unregenerate* (New York, Harper & Brothers, 1930), p. 12.
[17]Ransom, p. 3.
[18]Scott, p. 8.

> Shall I say here if not aloud why I have never yet fallen in love? Simply because I have yet to meet the man I would be willing to acknowledge as my lord and master for unconfessed to myself and until very recently, I have dressed up an image in my heart and have unconsciously worshipped it under the name of the ideal my lord and master must be someone I shall never have to blush for, or be ashamed to acknowledge, the one that after god I shall most venerate and respect . . . He must be as brave as a man can be.[19]

Another major fault in the plantation myth is its idea that most southern whites lived in gloriously grand plantation homes with acres and acres of land and hundreds of slaves. In fact, only one half of one percent of all white southerners lived in this fashion. The majority of southerners were non-slaveholding yeoman farmers who lived in log cabins. The class of people known as poor whites was about equal in number to the planter class, one half of one percent. The ends of the spectrum were sparsely occupied, with the majority of the population firmly planted in the middle.

The plantation reality was in contrast with the plantation myth. The plantation myth was false in many respects. Yet, it still managed to shape the lives of southern women through the civil war and beyond. One of the many ways it did this was through its influence on the education of the young ladies of the South.

EDUCATION BEFORE MARRIAGE

The plantation myth promoted a certain type of education, formal and informal, which in turn perpetuated the myth. Many southern women of slave holding families had the luxury of a formal education along these lines. In the 1800s this was indeed a luxury, as public schools did not exist and the majority of

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[19]Sarah Morgan Diary, 6 May 1862, from Scott, p. 23.

southerners could not even afford to give their sons a boarding school type of education, let alone their daughters. Most poor whites and yeoman farmers needed their children at home to help them scratch out a meager living. Plantation families were under quite different circumstances. The black slaves did the rough manual labor, and the plantation master and mistress handled the managerial and organizational duties of the plantation. There was actually very little required of the white children. Since their presence was not necessary for the efficient running of the plantation, their parents could afford to send them away to school. The tuition and room and board were not really a factor, for if the family could spare the labor of the child, it could most likely spare the money for school as well.

By the 1850s planters were served by approximately thirty-two female boarding schools and colleges in the South,[20] such as the Falkener school and Mordecai's Institute for Female Improvement, both in Warrenton, North Carolina. Girls generally attended school between the ages of seven and the mid to late teens,[21] and often left only because they were to be married. Schools ranged in size depending on their location and various other factors, including length of time established and the season of the year. At their peak schools typically had between eighty and one hundred pupils.[22] These schools imparted upon the young women an upper class sensibility, and indoctrinated them with the plantation myth through interaction with both their peers and their teachers.

The formal education a girl received played an integral part in the development of her social skills. The subjects which were taught at the women's academies were not scientific, mathematical, nor business oriented. They were liberal arts such as poetry, literature, and foreign languages, mostly French and

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[20]Christie Anne Farnham, *The Education of the Southern Belle: Higher Education and Student Socialization in the Antebellum South* (New York, New York University Press, 1994), p. 18.

[21]Farnham, p. 44.

[22]Farnham, pp. 41 and 44.

Latin. These studies allowed the young ladies to appear interesting and well-rounded, without presenting themselves as too academically minded. In their education, these young ladies

> had not dipped into the sciences, attempted by some of our sex at the present day; but the study of Latin and French, with general reading in their mother tongue, rendered them intelligent companions for cultivated men. They also possessed the rare gift of reading well aloud, and wrote letters unsurpassed in penmanship and style.[23]

For a young woman to show ability in a "man's" subject was embarrassing to herself, her family, and her suitors. It was because of this that the subjects traditionally regarded as "men's" were completely avoided in women's curriculum. Any type of natural ability in or affinity for mathematics and business was believed to "unsex" a woman and make her less desirable. Women in the ante-bellum south could not afford to appear to be too intelligent — it might cost them their beaus. These beaus' "standard for women was high. They seemed to regard her as some rare and costly statue set in a niche to be admired and never taken down."[24] Men wanted women who were pleasant and entertaining, but not overbearing in their knowledge, and definitely not smarter than themselves. The formal education that these women received helped prepare them for just that role.

In addition to their formal education, southern girls received an informal education that was far more essential in shaping their behavior than what they learned in school. This informal education was made up of a myriad of daily lessons and experiences which came together to provide an invaluable knowledge of the correct and proper way to behave. One of the ways in which these lessons were conveyed was simply by observing and interacting with one's elders. Plantation

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[23]Letitia M. Burwell, *A Girl's Life in Virginia Before the War* (New York, Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1895), p. 33.

[24]Burwell, p. 36.

homes had many visitors, and young girls learned a great deal by watching their manners and behavior, as illustrated in the following example.

> The constant flow of company at her father's house rendered her assistance necessary in entertaining guests as soon as she could converse and be compatible, so that her manners were easily formed, and she remembered not the time when it was anything but very easy and agreeable to be in the society of ladies and gentlemen.[25]

The environment and possessions among which these young ladies lived also contributed to their informal education.

> Brought up amid antiquities, the Virginia girl disturbed herself not about modern fashions, appearing happy in her mother's old silks and satins made over. She rejoiced in her grandmother's laces and in her brooch of untold dimensions, with a weeping willow and tombstone on it, — a constant reminder of the past, — which had descended from some remote ancestor.[26]

By clinging to tradition, the possessions of southern women educated them in the proper reverence for the time tested and accepted southern ways.

Another skill that the myth expected southern belles to have was the ability to "magically" charm almost any man. This skill was believed to be half innate, half learned, and all important. Since the objective of all proper southern belles was marriage, the ability to weave a magical romantic spell over a man was treated as a very useful trait. Although this was a popular belief and a part of the plantation myth, there is no reference to this ability in most journals and diaries. While the informal education of southern women did seek to make them attractive marriage candidates and instructed them on the proper and most productive manner of coqueting, it did not attend to the magical. This was however, very popular in plantation myth literature, discussed in a later section.

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[25]Burwell, p. 51 -52.
[26]Burwell, p. 50.

Another part of this informal education was supposed to prepare young ladies for the duties and responsibilities that came with marriage. "At that period a girl was expected not only to be an ornament to the drawing-room, but to be also equipped for taking charge of an establishment and superintending every detail of domestic employment on a plantation — the weaving, knitting, sewing, etc. — for the comfort of the Negro servants to be some day under her care."[27] However, there is devastatingly little evidence that suggests girls were actually taught to be thus equipped. This helps to explain why the transition to married life and the acquisition of these type of duties proved such a difficult experience.

TRANSITION TO MARRIED LIFE

The life of a southern woman prior to marriage was not particularly grueling. For the most part, it was filled with leisure time. Late mornings, lazy afternoons, and quiet evenings were often the main components of the day. A fourteen year old Georgia girl noted many times in her journal how uneventful her days were.

> I can scarcely tell how today has been passed. I have done little or nothing but arrange my room and the contents of my port folio. The different packages of envelopes and the note paper &c. I have just finished a hearty supper. I ate a good many preserves and nothing else. This morning I indulged in my old habit of lying in bed late so I did not take breakfast until all the rest had partaken of theirs. I carried my coloured silk apron down stairs this morning after breakfast and Ma made it over again. I took a short nap before dinner which refreshed me a good deal. . .[28]

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[27]Burwell, p. 194.

[28]Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, *The Secret Eye: The Journal of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas 1848-1889* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), p. 71 - 72.

In a subsequent entry she wrote, "Here I am again in the country at Grand Mother's. Yesterday morning I arose quite late and dressed. I however went to school although it was after nine oclock."[29]

This young woman's days were indeed very slow-paced. Aside from waking up late and attending school less than diligently, her most important activity was visiting. Although it was not performed daily, it was normally done on a regular basis. Scott has asserted that "visiting was the essence of life. It filled the need for stimulation now accomplished by newspapers, radio, television, movies, daily mail, and a thousand other distractions."[30] Visiting could range from an all day affair to weeks and even months of staying with family members or friends. The following journal entry records a day long visiting extravaganza.

> Yesterday I dressed and went out visiting in the carriage. I first called to see Susan Knight and found her at home. I then called to see Lizzy Crump and Indiana Clark. The Latter was at her sister's. I then called at Mrs Robinson's to see Ramsay but she was in the country. I left my card and then called on Jane McKeen. She was at home and then called on Emma Cumming. Found Ellen Davies there and of course did not make a very long visit. I then went to see Mary Dawson. She was not at home either. I then made a mistake and called at Mrs Bryson's instead of going to see Mary Mckensie as I had intended. I then went to Mrs D'Antignac's to see Mary Ann but I did not go [in] as I rung the bell and no one came to the door. After dinner I went up to Mrs Morrison's to get Isabel to go to walk. While I was there Laura Chew came in. After she left we went to Dr Eve's but both Mildred and Lizzie were out. I called at Mr. Brahe's . . . We stopped at Mrs Hickman's to see Virginia Whatley sometime in the evening.[31]

This life of leisure was abruptly changed when southern belles married and became mistresses of a plantation. The carefree life of a girl became burdened with the duties and responsibilities of owning and running a plantation. Long, lazy days turned into long, laborious days — and nights. This period of transition was

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[29]Thomas, p. 78.
[30]Scott, p. 43.
[31]Thomas, p. 80.

especially difficult because the young mistress, usually in her mid to late teens, was confronted with the plantation myth in full force. She could either live up to the ideal prescribed by the myth, and satiate her husband, family, and the rest of the community, or she could fail miserably by being unable to perform her numerous tasks in the necessarily effortless manner mythically attained by her mothers and sisters before her.

This was an agonizing time in the life of a southern belle, and many women reflected on their feelings in their own journals, or through communication with their children. One woman remembered her mother telling her "of her distress on realizing for the first time the responsibilities devolving upon the mistress of a large plantation, and the nights of sorrow and tears these thoughts had given her."[32] Yet another woman lamented: "Mamma has told me of her dismay when she found what a big household she had to manage and control. Not long after they were married she went to my father, almost crying, and remonstrated: 'There are too many servants; I do not know what to do with them. . . . I feel like running away.'"[33]

Despite the hardship of this stage in their lives, many women adapted and even flourished in their new environment. Most found themselves very busy, as one woman stated, "My domestic affairs in which I take quite an interest and what little sewing I do cause me to have few leisure moments."[34] Another woman reminisced about her mother's married life following the precarious period of transition, after which her mother "found the life on the plantation a very full one and intensely interesting, but not at all the kind of life she had ever dreamed of or expected, a life full of service and responsibility."[35] These responsibilities were an important part

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[32]Burwell, p. 23.
[33]Elizabeth W. Allston Pringle, *Chronicles of Chicora Wood* (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922), p. 61 - 62.
[34]Thomas, p. 121.
[35]Pringle, p. 66.

of the plantation mistress' mythical image as well as her role in reality. Combined, they made up the duties of the plantation mistress.

DUTIES OF THE PLANTATION MISTRESS

There were many duties to be performed on a plantation, and there were many people to perform them: the plantation master, the plantation mistress, the white children, the overseer, the African slaves, and the occasional white servant. Each person was assigned jobs according to their social station, age, and ability level, and each person was expected to complete these tasks in a timely fashion. Since these duties were essential to the successful operation of a plantation, it follows that the way in which these duties were performed was highly scrutinized. For the plantation mistress, her performance in her daily obligations was a measure of how well she could live up to the womanly standard set forth in the plantation myth.

These daily obligations of southern women were extremely demanding. One young girl growing up in Virginia in the mid-1800s noted "that the mistress of a Virginia plantation was more conspicuous, although not more important, than the master."[36] This was mainly because the mistress was in charge of the entire household. Although the master had the final judgment in all matters, the mistress administrated the daily activities of the plantation, and handled almost all of the domestic issues that arose concerning the slaves. This was such a heavy workload that the same young girl was under the impression that no one seemed "to have any care except my mother. Her cares and responsibilities were great, with one hundred

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[36]Burwell, p. 89.

people continually upon her mind, who were constantly appealing to her in every strait, real or imaginary."[37]

One of the main jobs of the planter's wife was to please her husband. This was the predominant factor influencing everything she did, and greatly affected her daily chores. The nightly meals, although not cooked solely by the plantation mistress, were planned and executed at her direction. In doing this, it was important to take seriously any instructions her husband may have given her. One woman always prepared dinner enough for six more people than she expected, due to the fact that her husband wanted to be able to ask last minute guests to dinner that he happened to meet during his daily ride, or whoever he might see on his way home.[38]

The latter was not only an example of a wife striving to please her husband, but also of another one of the plantation mistress' important duties — hospitality. The emphasis on hospitality was very important in aspiring to the mythical plantation image. When one's closest neighbor lived anywhere from one to five miles away, up to a half day's journey, one always had to be ready to receive a visitor that had been traveling for hours. One young lady was so afraid of keeping company waiting

> that she had a habit of dressing herself carefully, arranging her hair beautifully — it was in the days, too, when smooth hair was fashionable — before lying down for the afternoon siesta, "in case" she said, "someone might call, and Uncle Dick had a horror of visitors waiting." This process of reposing in a fresh muslin dress and fashionably arranged hair required a particular and uncomfortable position, which she seemed not to mind, but dozed in the most precise manner without rumpling her hair or her dress.[39]

The plantation mistress was also in charge of those who could not take care of themselves, such as the sick and the children, both black and white. For many plantation mistresses, visiting those under their care was done on a regular basis.

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[37]Burwell, pp. 22 - 23.
[38]Burwell, p. 149.
[39]Burwell, pp. 150 - 151.

One mother "walked out often to the sick-house to see the patients and taste the soup and other nourishment, and then on to the 'chillun's house' to see how their food was prepared, and whether they were all kept clean and healthy. This she did all her life."[40] The plantation mistress not only took care of her own sick, which was a never ending job, but also helped those that were less fortunate or in need around her. It was not uncommon for her to sit up nights with friends, neighbors, or the poor of the neighborhood while there was much to be done at her own home. It was essential that she do this service for others without complaint if she was to live up to the ideal matronly figure's noblesse oblige.

The largest and most time-consuming duty of plantation mistresses was the managing of all of the domestic aspects of the plantation. As Elizabeth Fox-Genovese has concluded, "ownership of slaves relieved slaveholding women of many forms of domestic labor while it imposed upon them the responsibilities of slave management."[41] While it may seem that slaves should have made a plantation mistress' work almost non-existent, their supervision and instruction actually took up much of her time. Much the same way a supervisor manages a store, so the plantation mistress managed her house. She had to decide what needed to be done, arrange the tasks in order of priority, and delegate them to the slaves that were best suited for each separate job. Because no one really began their daily work until the plantation mistress told them what to do, she often had to rise before everyone else to start this process in motion. Once all the slaves had tasks, the mistress had to continually check up on everyone to see that the work was being completed, and done to her specifications. Nothing in the plantation mistress' education had prepared her for the amount or nature of the work that this type of labor management entailed.

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[40] Pringle, p. 91.
[41] Fox-Genovese, p. 29.

Although slaves alleviated much of the drudge work around the plantation, the plantation mistress did do her share. Sometimes there were just not enough domestic slaves to finish what needed to be done, and other times the mistress filled in for sick or absent slaves. When one woman was asked if when she did not appear her time was given up to reading she responded, "No, far from it. While out of sight today I made a pudding, and put the finishing touches to a jar of pickles. Then Molly's baby is ill. Nancy's died last week, so we have a kind of baby epidemic. I had to see the cows fed in Molly's place. She milks and the cow boy is very trifling and inefficient. So I was busy enough."[42] Another woman's diary contains activities ranging from quilting and preparing cloth for a loom to slaughtering 15 large hogs in one day and drying up 22 gallons of lard.[43]

While slaughtering hogs does not seem to fit into the plantation myth's categories of womanly virtues, some women were forced to defy their established roles even more. If the man of the house was inept at planting, if he seemed intent on squandering away the family fortune, or if he died, some women opted to take control of more than just the domestic aspects of the plantation. Anne Firor Scott has noted that "the skill with which many widows carried on plantations suggests that women knew a good deal more about the planting operation than has generally been supposed."[44] This is a very obvious derivation from the plantation myth, but one that was not uncommon. It further illustrates the conflict between myth and reality.

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[42]Mary Boykin Chesnut, *A Diary From Dixie* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 60.
[43]Scott, pp. 32 - 33.
[44]Scott, p. 34.

CHILDBIRTH AND MOTHERHOOD

At the same time that plantation mistresses were performing all of their domestic duties, they were also bearing and raising children — a full time job in itself. Bearing children was one of the main functions of the plantation mistress. In the ante-bellum south, as in many places throughout history, production of heirs was very important. The plantation myth idealized this role of women. Historian Scott has noted that "one of the most persistent threads in the romanticization of woman was the glorification of motherhood ... nothing in the myth emphasized the darker side of maternity."[45] This darker side involved fear, pain, hardship, danger, and grief. The trials and tribulations of motherhood were strong enough to bind women together across color and class lines. One plantation mistress noted regarding pregnant women that "in that condition I think all women ought to [be] favored. I know that had I the sole management of a plantation, pregnant women would be highly favored. A woman myself, I can sympathize with my sex whether white or black."[46]

Although motherhood is not synonymous with an interest in sex, together they are a means and an end. Thus, the glorification of motherhood seems to be at odds with the idea in the plantation myth that ladies were not particularly interested in sex, and that good women avoided having to perform such acts. Although this idea was formed on misguided assumptions about the makeup of the female mind and body, among other false presumptions, it coincidentally had some truth to it. There were no reliably effective methods of contraception in the early to mid-1800s, and sex often ended up in pregnancy. Thus, one of the only ways to prevent pregnancy was to abstain from sexual intercourse. Scott has surmised that "this, more than a

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[45]Scott, p. 37.
[46]Thomas, p. 149.

commitment to ladylike decorum, may have been responsible for the widespread but erroneous view that eroticism was a thing unknown among southern ladies."[47] This aversion to childbearing was a thorn in the side of many southern women, and one woman expressed her belief that "some wives are nothing but trouble, and I am one, I'm not fit for anything but to have children, and that is nothing but trouble and sorrow."[48]

Pregnancy did indeed provide many hardships for women. The sheer number of children that most women bore forced their lives to be dominated by pregnancy and childbirth. For example, one plantation mistress had a total of seven children over a span of 15.5 years, averaging 2.2 years between each child.[49] Taking into account the 9 month gestation period, she had only 1 year and 6 months in between each child to be free of the symptoms and inconveniences of pregnancy, and this does not even include the recovery period from bearing the previous child. To these women, it must have seemed like they were constantly having babies. This undoubtedly affected their other pursuits, and made motherhood a very consuming aspect of their lives. The apparently omnipresent role of childbearing was nowhere present in the plantation myth.

The period of pregnancy in itself brought many hardships on plantation mistresses. Often women took ill toward the later stages of their pregnancy and had to be confined for extended periods of time. One woman who was carrying her first child "was desperately ill, and her beautiful hair was cut as short as possible." After the birth, "her recovery was desperately slow, and it was some time before she could resume her normal life at home."[50] This same woman endured similar circumstances

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[47]Scott, p. 39.
[48]Willis Williams Papers, SHC UNC, from Scott, p.39.
[49]Pringle.
[50]Pringle, p. 81.

with the birth of her next child, as she "was taken ill about two months before the time set for the baby's coming,"[51] and had a premature delivery.

Many women faced similar hardships during their pregnancies, which often translated into extremely dangerous situations. One plantation mistress was lucky enough to be visiting family in Charleston when her baby came, "for had she been taken ill at home, with a doctor far away, she probably would not have lived."[52] The isolation of plantations did not bode well for women who had any complications with their pregnancy. Even if a doctor reached them, it was often too late. One father insisted on naming his newborn girl after his wife because "the doctor had told him that mamma could not possibly recover."[53] Another woman felt that her only escape from the misery of childbirth and its hardships was to wish for an early death.[54]

If the mother did recover, her troubles were far from over. Often after all the pain and agony of childbirth and recovery, the child did not survive. The description of an unsuccessful delivery is not at all uncommon in diaries and journals from the period. One such notation reads:

> I was interrupted last evening while writing. . . . when I returned I found Ma quite sick. She had been taken while we were at church. We sent for Dr. Joe Eve. He came and remained until three oclock [a. m.]. I was up until five the next morning when I lay down on the sofa in the sitting room and slept till after seven. Ma being so ill Sister [Anne] and I remained in the nursery. About three Ma gave birth to an infant boy but mortality ne're gained immortality for he never breathed.[55]

The grief felt for a stillborn baby was just one aspect of the emotional roller coaster of motherhood. Babies created much anxiety within the plantation household. One woman remembered that her "mother spent a very anxious time in

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[51]Pringle, p. 86.
[52]Pringle, p. 81.
[53]Pringle, p. 87.
[54]Scott, p. 39.
[55]Thomas, p. 102.

the first year of her eldest child's life. He was very delicate, and mamma knew nothing about babies. The plantation nurses seemed to her very ignorant, and she was afraid to trust the baby to them."[56] The same woman whose husband named their infant daughter for the mother in fear that she would not survive was grieved by her little daughters feeble appearance. "Mamma looked at her, and then with something of her wonted spirit said: "You may call her Adele if you like! Poor little soul, she cannot live! Take her away!"[57] This mother's youngest daughter described herself as being "a miserably delicate, nervous baby," and stated that she had "heard mamma say that for months they were afraid to take me out of the house at all. They had a hard struggle to keep me alive."[58]

Even if children survived the tenuous stages of infancy, their survival was still precarious. In less than one month three of the five children of a plantation mistress, ages 11, 9, and 3, were killed by scarlet fever.

> Robert was playing, when he suddenly dropped his playthings and put his head in mamma's lap, saying he felt sick. It was the dread disease. His illness was terrible from the first, but very short. He died. Then Fanny took it and followed rapidly. My poor mother was prostrated with her passionate grief. ...In a few days the beautiful Louise was taken ill and died. I cannot bear to think of my mothers suffering at this time. The tragedy of it![59]

The very real toll of bereavement that this quote exemplifies was not understood nor treated in the plantation myth.

Motherhood was a primary element in the life of a plantation mistress. At the same time that it was a joy and a blessing, it was painful both emotionally and physically. It was a common, bonding experience for women at the same time that it

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[56]Pringle, p. 82.
[57]Pringle, p. 87.
[58]Pringle, p. 100.
[59]Pringle, p. 94 - 95.

was an intensely private affair. One thing is for certain: it was never easy. The plantation myth completely ignored this darker side of childbearing and motherhood, but it was impossible for women not to notice it. Though they tried to face it with the required cheerfulness and bravery, it was undoubtedly a terrifying experience.

SLAVERY AND SOUTHERN MISTRESSES

The institution of slavery pervaded every aspect of the lives of white southern women. Slave-owning southern women were surrounded by slaves at nearly all times during the day. This reality of being surrounded by slaves is in contrast with the plantation myth's portrayal of the presence of slaves. The plantation myth painted a picture of just the right number of slaves to do all of the work, with the mistress still having time for quiet reflection and plenty of privacy. This however, was seldom the case. From the moment a plantation mistress awoke, her house was full of domestic slaves, busily completing the chores of the day. If she went outside, the grounds of the plantation contained numerous field hands, drivers, and skilled slaves such as blacksmiths and carpenters. Whether she went into town on an errand, to a neighboring plantation for a visit, or on an extended vacation, she was always accompanied by at least one slave. There was hardly a single moment in her daily routine when she was completely devoid of the presence of slaves. Even in the middle of the night she might be summoned to the slave quarters because of an emergency.

Because of the constant presence and influence of slaves, southern women formed ideas and opinions concerning slavery that were relative to their own unique situation in life. This situation did not have the same effect on all southern matrons;

while some women outwardly showed their distaste for slavery, other women defended it to their end. One woman went so far as to write the memoirs of her life in Virginia with one driving purpose: to defend the slave holding society that she knew and loved. Interestingly enough, in doing this she consciously or unconsciously upheld and perpetuated the plantation myth. The dedication of her book reads:

> Dedicated to my nieces, who will find in English and American publications such expressions as: "cruel slave owners"; "inhuman wretches"; "southern taskmasters"; "dealers in human souls," etc. From these they will naturally recoil with horror. My own life would have been embittered had I believed myself to be descended from such monsters; and that those who come after us may know the truth, I wish to leave a record of plantation life as it was. The truth may thus be preserved among a few, and merited praise may be awarded to noble men and virtuous women who have passed away.[60]

The author of this passage openly acknowledges that she wishes to paint a picture not of cruel or harsh masters, but rather of noble men and virtuous women, words that bear a strong resemblance to those used to describe the plantation myth.

Even though many women such as the one described above staunchly defended the slave-owning society that they lived in, they often objected to owning slaves themselves. Toward the end of the civil war, one woman expressed her fears and beliefs in a most provocative fashion.

> I had decided that in case of the Yankees taking possession of Augusta I would remain there if I could, but the exiles of Atlanta has taught me that a different destiny awaits me if Sherman reaches here, and that he will do so I firmly believe to be only a matter of time. Yet Macon and Andersonville appear to be in more imminent danger than Augusta, but to you my new Journal, my new friend I will confess that what troubles me more than anything else is that I am not certain that Slavery is right.[61]

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[60]Burwell, p. IV.
[61]Thomas, p. 238.

This woman facing Sherman's devastating "march to the sea," had heard news from Atlanta of what awaited her, and yet she was most worried about whether or not slavery was right. This illustrates how difficult it must have been for these women to come to grips with the world in which they had lived all of their lives, and how ill-prepared the myth left southern women for that situation. To be standing at death's door and wondering about something that was as natural to them as waking up in the morning is an awesome indication of the deep-seated indecision and conflict that faced southern plantation mistresses concerning slavery.

The issues that made southern women question the institution of slavery were not the same as those in the standard abolitionist argument. They were not reasons based on the evils of owning human beings as chattel, nor on the cruelty of masters. They were reasons that were based on southern women's daily interactions with slaves, and the ways in which the slaves affected their personal lives, but they were also shaped by the belief in planter nobility posited by the plantation myth. One mistress stated, "We are human beings of the nineteenth century and slavery has to go, of course. All that has been gained by it goes to the North and to Negroes. The slave owners, when they are good men and women, are the martyrs. I hate slavery."[62] The same woman happened by the sale of a "fancy woman," a slave intended to be used as a mistress, and recorded:

> I have seen a Negro woman sold upon 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. She seemed delighted with it all, sometimes ogling the bidders, sometimes looking quite coy and modest; but her mouth never relaxed from its expanded grin of excitement. I dare say the poor thing knew who would buy her. My very soul sickened. It was too dreadful. I tried to reason. "You know how women sell themselves and are sold in marriage, from queens downwards, eh? You know what the Bible says about slavery, and marriage. Poor women, poor slaves."[63]

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[62]Chesnut, p. 164.
[63]Chesnut, pp. 10 - 11.

When she later passed by the same location with a visitor she noted, "Just then our walk led by that sale of Negroes; the same place that I saw before. 'If you can stand that, no other Southern thing need choke you,' I said. She said not a word. After all it was my country and she was an English woman. There are ugly sights all over the world. I could see she was sorry for me in her heart."[64]

One major reason for southern women's distaste for slavery was the work involved with owning numerous slaves. For plantation mistresses, to own slaves was "to assume the care and responsibility of hundreds of Negroes, soul and body."[65] In this respect, plantation mistresses echoed the standard white burden argument that was part of the plantation myth. This argument states that the white man is duty bound to take care of the inferior, savage race of Africans, that it is the white man's burden to christianize and civilize the blacks, and that the best way to do this is through the institution of slavery. In a similar respect, the plantation mistresses felt that they were responsible for the spiritual education and guidance of slaves as well as the basic food and clothing that the slaves required. Much of the plantation mistress' waking hours were spent instructing the slaves, nursing their sick, and planning for their needs. Many women grew weary of these duties, and felt that life would be easier without all of the slaves to worry about. Apparently even young girls felt this, for a few young ladies from slave-holding families in Virginia remarked that girls who did not have slaves must be much happier.

> "Girls! I have been longing and longing for a silk-velvet cloak, but never could get the money to buy one. But last Sunday, at the village church, what should I see but one of the Joneses sweeping in with a long velvet cloak almost touching the floor! And you could set her father's house in our back hall! But, then, she is so fortunate as to own no Negroes."

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[64]Chesnut, p. 18.
[65]Pringle, p. 8.

> "What a Happy girl she must be!" cried a chorus of voices. 'No Negroes to support! We could go to New York and Niagara, and have velvet cloaks, too, if we only had no Negroes to support! But all our money goes to provide for them as soon as the crops are sold!'[66]

Obviously these young girls are not taking into account the fact that had there been no slaves on their fathers' plantations, then there would have been no crops in the first place. It is also unlikely that a young girl from a non-slave owning family would be able to afford something that a young girl from a slave owning family could not afford. Nevertheless, the point still stands — southern women from slave holding families did not always relish the ownership of slaves. One woman went so far as to say, "as to the emancipation of the Negroes, while there is of course a natural dislike to the loss of so much property in my inmost soul I can not regret it — I always felt that there was such a great responsibility — It is in some degree a great relief to have this feeling removed."[67]

The second major reason for the dislike of slavery that southern plantation mistresses shared was the infidelity of their husbands. While it was a tender subject, seldom spoken about directly, many women alluded to it in their journals. The mere presence of mulattos in southern states, where marriage between the races was illegal, is an indication that there were extra-marital affairs being conducted. Along the same lines, the presence of mulatto children in their plantation households were indications to women that their husbands were not being, or at least had not been, entirely faithful. In the beginning of her fifth year of marriage, one woman commented, ". . . Lurany [a female house slave] interrupted me just now bringing in Lulah— and giving a new turn to my thoughts— What a remarkably pretty child she is and as white as any white child. There is some great mystery about Lurany's

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[66]Burwell, p. 82.
[67]Thomas, p. 265.

case."[68] The mystery was no mystery at all, but the fact that the father of the child was none other than the plantation mistress' own husband.

This same woman was embittered by her husband's infidelities to the point of composing imaginary letters to the wives of northern generals who did not travel through the south with their husbands. To "Mrs. Gen. Sherman" she wrote a letter mocking Sherman's deeds against the women, children, and wealth of the south. She recoiled at the thought of the elevation of the Negro race, and exclaimed:

> be satisfied Madam your wish has been accomplished. Enquire of Gen Sherman when next you see him who has been elevated to fill your place? You doubtless read with approbation of the delightfully fragrant ball at which he made his debut in Atlanta? Did he tell you of the Mulatto girl for whose safety he was so much concerned that she was returned to Nashville when he commenced his vandal march? This girl was spoken of by the Negroes whom you are willing to trust so implicitly as "Sherman's wife." Rest satisfied Mrs Sherman and quiet the apprehension of your northern sisters — your husbands are amongst a coloured race whose reputation for morality has never been of the highest order — and these gallant cavaliers are most of them provided with "a companion du voyage" — intensely southern woman as I am I pity you.[69]

Mary Boykin Chesnut was even less timid in her anger:

> I wonder if it be a sin to think slavery a curse to any land. Men and women are punished when their masters and mistresses are brutes, not when they do wrong. Under slavery, we live surrounded by prostitutes, yet an abandoned woman is sent out of any decent house. Who thinks any worse of a Negro or mulatto woman for being a thing we can't name? God forgive us, but ours is a monstrous system, a wrong and an iniquity! Like the patriarchs of old, our men live all in one house with their wives and their concubines; and the mulatoes one sees in every family partly resemble the white children. Any lady is ready to tell you who is the father of all the mulatto children in everybody's household but her own. Those, she seems to think, drop from the clouds. My disgust sometimes is boiling over. Thank god for my country women, but alas for the men! They are probably no worse than men

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[68]Thomas, p. 167.
[69]Thomas, p. 254.

everywhere, but the lower their mistresses, the more degraded they must be.[70]

In the same tone, she noted "the glaring inconsistencies of life."

> Our Chatelaine locked up Eugene Sue, and returned even Washington Allston's novel with thanks and a decided hint that it should be burned; at least it should not remain in her house. Bad books are not allowed house room except in the library and under lock and key, the key in the Master's pocket; but bad women, if they are not white and serve in a menial capacity, may swarm the house unmolested.[71]

This attitude reflects the myth idea that the African-American slaves were faulty beings whose presence imposed on the plantation mistress and her cavalier husband.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of the struggle of southern women to come to grips with slavery was its relationship with their religion. Most plantation mistresses were Christians, in belief as well as practice. While these women opposed slavery on the grounds discussed earlier, they supported it from a religious perspective. Just as opponents of slavery used the Bible as part of the foundation of their argument, slave owners used it as justification for owning slaves. They came to interpret parts of the bible as not only sanctioning, but requiring slavery. One plantation mistress stated,

> I alone know the effect the abolition of slavery has had upon me. I did not know until then how intimately my faith in revelations and my faith in the institution of slavery had been woven together — true I had seen the evil of the latter but if the bible was right then slavery must be — Slavery was done away with and my faith in God's Holy Book was terribly shaken. For a time I doubted God. The truth of revelations, all — everything — I no longer took interest in the service of the church.[72]

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[70]Chesnut, pp. 21 - 22.
[71]Chesnut, p. 44.
[72]Thomas, pp. 276-277.

Slavery was so central to these women that if slavery was wrong, then their whole southern way of life was wrong as well. Everything they had known since they were children was improper. The men in their lives who were supposed to be so genteel and competent would not seem as such. There was a trade off that southern women thought about daily. They could continue their lives the only way they knew them to be, with slavery, however unhappy it made them, or they could oppose slavery and be rid of its nasty effects on their lives, but they would lose their southern way of life and everything they knew and trusted, perhaps even their religion.

While many southern matrons despised slavery, they felt that it must be perpetuated. Their religion was a major factor in determining this. Not only did it sanction or require slavery, but it envisioned positive aspects of slavery for blacks. The religious plantation mistresses believed that they were saving the souls of the African-Americans that were under their care. A plantation mistress who was doubting the righteousness of slavery asked herself, "Why do I not free them?" Her answer was, "This if I could, I would not do, but if Mr. Thomas [her husband] would sell them to a man who would look after their temporal and spiritual interest I would gladly do so."[73] There was a certain sense of personal obligation to look after the souls of one's slaves.

This was also used as a rationalization for owning slaves. The same woman who wrote her memoirs with the purpose of painting a favorable picture of her ancestors included in her book a conversation with a former slave. With regard to the slave's station as royalty in her homeland of Africa, a child stated,

> "Maum 'Ria, you must be dreadfully sorry they took you away from all that, and brought you to a strange land to work for other people." Maum Maria stopped her work, rose to her full height — she was very tall and straight — clasped her hands and said, dropping a deep courtesy as she

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[73]Thomas, p. 239.

spoke: "My chile, ebery night on my knees I tank my Hebenly Father that he brought me here, for without that I wud neber hev known my Savior!"[74]

The christianization of the slaves was part of the argument that slavery was actually a good thing for the blacks, that they were better off than if they were free in America or savages in Africa. As the religion of the slaves was the plantation mistress' responsibility, it was an area of great concern for her, and influenced her views on the legitimacy and goodness of slavery. While many mistresses were opposed to slavery on personal grounds, under the influence of the plantation myth they supported it for religious reasons.

The plantation myth required southern mistresses to uphold the institution of slavery, when in reality many mistresses did not support the peculiar institution. Whether it was due do moral, marital, or labor related reasons, many plantation mistresses were uncomfortable with owning Africans as chattel. In an economy dependent on slave labor, this was not an acceptable view. Although plantation mistresses tried to hide their ill feelings and conform to the plantation myth, they confided in their diaries their unhappiness under the yoke of slavery.

SOUTHERN WOMEN AND MYTH IN LITERATURE

There are particular genres of literature that pervade the ages, that do not loose their grip on human imagination, that still catch the fancy of readers, even today. Plantation myth literature is one such genre. It has enjoyed an amazing resiliency to changes in society and culture, and remains a very popular brand of fiction. Looking back through its history, it can be said that it has reflected and

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[74]Pringle, p. 54.

perpetuated the plantation myth, and has glorified and exacerbated the proper role of women in that myth. Following are three examples of plantation myth literature. One dates from before the Civil War, one from shortly after it, and the other from the 1930s. All were immensely popular novels, and thus allow us to glean out elements of the influence of the plantation myth on popular culture.

Uncle Tom's Cabin, published in 1852,[75] "became an American best-seller almost immediately."[76] It is the story of a pious and faithful slave who goes by the name of Uncle Tom. Uncle Tom is the property of a kind master, Mr. Shelby, who unfortunately comes upon hard times. Tom is sold to a slave trader to pay off his master's debt, but not before his distraught mistress promises to redeem him as soon as is humanly possible.

On his journey down the river, Tom befriends a beautiful little white girl, who convinces her Papa to buy Tom. Although Uncle Tom misses his wife and children and his old master and mistress, he is content in his new home. His new master is extremely liberal, and allows Tom much free time to study his beloved Bible — his old mistress and her son had taught him how to read. The years pass and Tom's little mistress dies, and her father soon after her. Tom's new master had promised him his freedom, but his unexpected death came before the papers were drawn up. Once again, Uncle Tom must be sold.

At a New Orleans auction house Uncle Tom is purchased by a cruel, harsh master by the name of Simon Legree. The uncommonly faithful Tom attempts to do right by his new master, but Legree is simply too cruel. Tom's devout Christianity does not allow him to perform acts that are morally wrong, such as whipping fellow slaves. Legree resolves to break Tom's spirit one way or another, but ultimately fails.

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[75]*Uncle Tom's Cabin* appeared in installments in a weekly magazine between June 5, 1851 and April 1, 1852. The first time it was published in its entirety was in March of 1852.

[76]Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly* (Columbus, Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1969), p. V.

Following a severe beating in which Uncle Tom refuses to renounce his faith and inform on fellow slaves, Tom lies slowly dying. His first master's son, George Shelby, comes to redeem him, but he is too late. Tom dies happily, knowing that he is going to a better place, to eternal salvation.

Uncle Tom's Cabin is a moving story filled with memorable characters. Uncle Tom is the ideal slave of the plantation myth. He considers his master's life over his own, and he is faithful and religious to the end. Legree is the harsh master of northern tales, who fits into the plantation myth as well, because Legree is not a southerner — he was born and raised in New England. Thus, Legree embodies the southern feelings of northern greed and callousness. And, Mrs. Shelby, the wife of Tom's first master, is the mythical plantation mistress.

> Mrs. Shelby was a woman of a high class, both intellectually and morally. To that natural magnanimity and generosity of mind which one often marks as the characteristic of the women of Kentucky, she added high moral religious sensibility and principle, carried out with great energy and ability into practical results. Her husband, who made no professions to any particular religious character, nevertheless reverenced and respected the consistency of hers, and stood, perhaps, a little in awe of her opinion.[77]

The ever goodly Mrs. Shelby is appalled at the thought of selling any of her slaves, who are "her people." She begs her husband not to sell Uncle Tom, and protests:

> 'Why not make a pecuniary sacrifice? I'm willing to bear my part of the inconvenience. O, Mr. Shelby, I have tried — tried most faithfully, as a Christian woman should — to do my duty to these poor, simple, dependent creatures. I have cared for them, watched over them, and known all their little cares and joys, for years; and how can I ever hold up my head among them, if, for the sake of a little paltry gain, we sell such a faithful, excellent, confiding creature as poor Tom . . . ?'[78]

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[77]Stowe, pp. 25 - 26.
[78]Stowe, p. 56.

When all of her efforts to hold on to Uncle Tom fail, she renounces slavery and its evils:

> 'This is God's curse on slavery! — a bitter, bitter, most accursed thing! — a curse to the master and a curse to the slave! I was a fool to think I could make anything good out of such a deadly evil. It is a sin to hold a slave under laws like ours, — I always felt it was, — I always thought so when I was a girl, — I thought so still more after I joined the church; but I thought I could gild it over, — I thought, by kindness, and care, and instruction, I could make the condition of mine better than freedom — fool that I was!'[79]

This book was widely read by women in the south, and many of the same sentiments are echoed in their diaries and journals. As if the words that Harriet Beecher Stowe gave to her characters were not drastic enough, Mary Boykin Chesnut reacted even more strongly to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but on the point of miscegenation.

> I hate slavery. You say there are no more fallen women on a plantation that in London, in proportion to numbers; but what do you say to this? A magnate who runs his 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 the model of all human virtues to these poor women whom god and the laws have given him. From the height of his awful majesty, he scolds and thunders at them, as if he never did wrong in his life. . . . You see, Mrs. Stowe did not hit the sorest spot. She makes Legree a bachelor.[80]

Marse Chan, written in 1887, is a short but poignant "Tale of Old Virginia." It is the story of two young lovers, raised as neighbors since they were very young children. The young man, Marse Chan (Master Channing in slave dialect) is forced into a duel with the young woman's father, Cun'l Chamb'lin (Colonel Chamberlain). Although Cun'l Chamb'lin is at fault, the southern code of honor does not permit Marse Chan to back down. Cun'l Chamb'lin shoots first, and misses. Instead of killing him, Marse Chan fires his pistol in the air and says, "I mek you a present to yo'

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[79]Stowe, p. 58.
[80]Chesnut, p. 122.

family, seh!" This upsets Cun'l Chamb'lin immeasurably, and the young woman, Miss Anne, has no choice but to side with her father. From then on she is cold to Marse Chan.

Some time later he joins the army, and is called to serve in the Civil War. Before he leaves, he meets Miss Anne secretly and professes his life long love for her, and asks her to marry him if he returns from battle. She says that it is impossible, and that she does not love him. He goes into battle heartbroken, a changed man. He seems to seek out danger, and volunteers for the most dangerous missions.

One evening as he is sitting by the camp fire, he overhears a man speaking poorly of Miss Anne and Cun'l Chamb'lin. He knocks the man down and comes very close to another duel. Miss Anne receives word of what Marse Chan has done, and tells her father. He breaks down and asks Miss Anne, "Do yo' want 'im?" She says that she does, and writes to him right away of her undying devotion to him. He receives the letter, and plans to come home and marry her, but is killed in the next battle. His body servant brings him home in a coffin.

Miss Anne mourns Marse Chan, and stays with his parents until they die shortly thereafter. She then goes to the hospitals to nurse the sick, and catches a fever. "De fever an' Marse Chan's bein' kilt dataway hed done strain her, an' she died jes' fo' de folks wuz sot free."

This story is recounted by a faithful ex-slave who professes that "dem wuz good ole times, marster — de bes' Sam uver see! Dey wuz in fac'! Niggers didn' hed nothin' 't all to do — jes' hed to 'ten' to de feedin' an' cleanin' de hawses, an' doin' what de marster tell em' to do." Written in 1887, this is a perfect example of plantation myth literature shortly after the Civil War. The young lovers live on adjoining plantation estates, their slaves are happy and faithful — even after emancipation, and Marse Chan and Miss Anne behave both with honor and nobility.

Miss Anne is a characterization of the perfect southern belle. She is loyal to her father while under his care, even though she is forced to slight the man she really loves. Only when her father releases her from his bridal chains can she surrender herself to her lover. And even though there is never any legal bond between them she remains true to Marse Chan in death, and expires of grief for him. Just as in the plantation myth, Miss Anne is not an individual in her own right, but a daughter, a fiancé, and a would be widow.

Gone With the Wind, written in 1936, is perhaps the most famous piece of plantation myth literature. The epic love story of Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler epitomizes the South of the plantation myth. There are mansions left and right, happy slaves that continue to serve their masters after the war is over, and southern belles spinning their magical webs over every man in sight: "What Melanie did was no more than all Southern girls were taught to do — to make those about them feel at ease and pleased with themselves. It was this happy feminine conspiracy which made Southern society so pleasant."[81]

On the outside, Scarlett is the quintessential southern belle. But inside, she rebels against the conventions of society. "Scarlett exercised the same charms as Melanie but with a studied artistry and consummate skill. The difference between the two girls lay in the fact that Melanie spoke kind and flattering words from a desire to make people happy, if only temporarily, and Scarlett never did it except to further her own aims."[82] In doing so, Scarlett spells out much of the plantation myth. While thinking about her informal education she remarked that,

> It seemed such a terrible waste to spend all your little girlhood learning how to be attractive and how to catch men and then only to use the knowledge for a year or two. When she considered her training at the hands of Ellen and Mammy, she knew it had been thorough and good

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[81]Margaret Mitchell, *Gone With the Wind* (New York, Avon Books, 1936), p. 156.
[82]Mitchell, p. 156.

> because it had always reaped results. There were set rules to be followed, and if you followed them success crowned your efforts.[83]

More than once, Scarlett had to be reminded of this.

> When you are trying to get something out of a man, don't blurt it out as you did to me. Do try to be more subtle, more seductive. It gets better results. You used to know how, to perfection. But just know when you offered me your — er — collateral for my money you looked as hard as nails. I've seen eyes like yours above a dueling pistol twenty paces from me and they aren't a pleasant sight. They evoke no ardor in the male breast. That's no way to handle men, my dear. You are forgetting your early training.[84]

Scarlett's mother, Ellen, and her sister-in-law, Melanie, are more perfect examples of the ideal southern woman. Ellen instructs Scarlett, "Always remember, dear, you are responsible for the moral as well as the physical welfare of the darkies God has entrusted to your care. You must realize that they are like children and must be guarded from themselves like children, and you must always set them a good example."[85] When Melanie dies, Scarlett realizes that "she was seeing through Rhett's eyes the passing, not of a woman but of a legend — the gentle, self-effacing but steel-spined women on whom the South had builded its house in war and to whose proud and loving arms it had returned in defeat."[86]

Scarlett knew that she was not like Ellen and Melanie. Many times throughout the novel she lamented that she could not be as good and perfect as her mother, try as she may. The fact that the heroin of the story is a calculated, unnatural southern mistress comments on the falseness of the plantation myth, and southern women's enduring desire to live up to it despite its contradiction with reality.

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[83]Mitchell, p. 175.
[84]Mitchell, p. 577.
[85]Mitchell, p. 465.
[86]Mitchell, p. 1012.

Gone With the Wind provides the mythical setting and the mythical characters. Tara is the grand plantation, Mammy is the loyal slave, Scarlett is the beautiful and entrancing southern belle, and Ellen and Melanie are the womanly ideals. When all of these come together, this epic embodies and becomes the plantation myth.

These literary works exemplify that the plantation myth was and is alive and well in popular culture. People today are still effected by books like *Gone With the Wind* - they color their knowledge and perceptions of the South. Plantation myth literature, illustrated by the three books discussed above, both reflected and perpetuated the plantation myth, and continues to do so. The question is then, why was this myth created?

CREATION OF THE MYTH

Explanations for the plantation myth and the role of women in it are entwined with reactions to northern industrialism. Both northerners and southerners were upset by the changing economy and culture in the north. Many southerners perceived this as an agrarian versus industrial issue, which for them translated into cavalier versus Yankee.[87] The rise of industrialism with its filth, inner cities, and poverty prompted an idealization of agrarianism, and the south as a symbol of that. Many people, including the 12 Southerners, felt that in the industrial north

> man was losing contact with the natural world, with aesthetic and religious reality; his machines were brutalizing and coarsening him, his quest for gain blinding him to all that made life worth living. The tenuous and frail spiritual insights of western civilization, achieved so

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[87]12 Southerners, *I'll Take My Stand* (New York, Harper & Brothers, 1930), p. XIX.

> arduously over the course of many centuries, were being sacrificed. The result, if unchecked, could only be dehumanization and chaos.[88]

In this industrial society, certain aspects of life were threatened. They included religion, manners, conversation, hospitality, sympathy, family life, and romantic love,[89] all of which were usually attributed to the woman's sphere of influence. The south appeared to remain constant and pure in a changing world. Southerners held up the image of the Old South as the ideal lifestyle.[90] With the romanticization of the agrarian/plantation lifestyle the myth surrounding the plantation mistress flourished.

Southerners tended to feel that the romanticization of women in the plantation myth was a distinctly southern phenomenon. This is mainly because they felt that their women were extraordinary, that they lived up to their description as other women could not. A Virginia country doctor reproved his friend's children for wishing to live in New York by saying,

> You could not find on Fifth Avenue such women as your mother and grandmother, who never think of themselves, but are constantly planning and providing for others, making their homes comfortable and pleasant, and attending to the wants and welfare of so many negroes. And that is what the women all over the south are doing, and what the New York women cannot comprehend. How can anybody know, except ourselves, the personal sacrifices of our women?[91]

One of the young girls who was a recipient of the above quote agreed with it as an adult. She commended her mother and the plantation mistresses of that genre when she stated,

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[88]12 Southerners, p. XII - XIII.
[89]12 Southerners, p. XXIV - XXV.
[90]12 Southerners, p. XIII.
[91]Burwell, p. 64.

> These model women also managed their household affairs admirably, and were uniformly kind to, but never familiar with, their servants. They kept ever before them the Bible as their constant guide and rule in life, and were surely, as nearly as possible, holy in thought, word, and deed. I have looked in vain for such women in other lands, but have failed to find them.[92]

As much as southerners liked to think that their women were unique in their abilities and manners, the romanticization of womanhood was nationwide. The rampant industrialism of the eighteen hundreds left man searching for the ideals of an earlier age. According to Barbara Welter, "he could salve his conscience by reflecting that he had left behind a hostage, not only to fortune, but to all the values which he held so dear and treated so lightly. Woman, in the cult of True Womanhood."[93]

There were four main elements to this cult, which became the standard by which women were judged: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Welter asserts, "put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife — woman. Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement or wealth, all was ashes. With them she was promised happiness and power."[94] With these elements women were not only supposed to dispense comfort and cheer, nurse the suffering, and mother good Christians, they were also "to uphold the pillars of the temple of God, of civilization and of the Republic."[95]

Was the plantation myth distinctly southern or part of a national cult of womanhood? Mrs. Chesnut hinted at the answer to the enigma of the origins of this myth. In comparing her southern sisters and their northern counterparts, she wrote that southern women were, "educated at Northern schools, they read the same

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[92]Burwell, p. 34.
[93]Barbara Welter, *The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820 - 1860* American Quarterly, 18, 1966, pp. 151.
[94]Welter, p. 152.
[95]Welter, pp. 152, 162 - 163, and 171.

books as their Northern contemporaries, the same daily papers, the same Bible. They have the same ideas of right and wrong."[96] At the same time that the women from the two regions were the same, they were different. The difference was that southern women lived among slaves, in a plantation society. Scott has noted that

> the idea of the lady was part of the larger American and even Anglo-American culture of the nineteenth century. Southern women were a particularly interesting part of that whole, however, because in the South the image of the lady took deep root and had far reaching social consequences. The social role of women was unusually confining there, and the sanctions used to enforce obedience peculiarly effective.[97]

Thus, at the same time that the role of women in the plantation myth was part of the national cult of True Womanhood, it was a peculiar adaptation to the ideal for women, and uniquely southern.

CONCLUSION

Southern history is riddled with myth and legend. From its unique origins to its peculiar institutions, the South has an aura of romance and mystery that often shrouds the truth. Americans, both northerners and southerners, have embraced this clouded vision of a magical land. At the heart of this phenomenon is the plantation myth, and central to the myth, the idealized role of southern women.

This role for women was not entirely unique to the South, but it was magnified and expanded for the plantation mistress. Southern women strove to achieve the perfection that the myth called for, even though the goal was practically unattainable. The South used the myth as an ideal, and tried to convince themselves

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[96]Chesnut, p. 163.
[97]Scott, p. X - XI.

that it was reality, when in fact plantation mistresses lived a much different story. While plantation mistresses strained to appear as the mythically perfect wife, mother, and housekeeper, they labored under a burden too heavy for most women, and attempted to hide the difficulty with which they accomplished their tasks.

From early on in their lives southern women were indoctrinated with their proper role according to the plantation myth. Although both their formal and informal education were geared toward producing this ideal, the period of transition from southern belle to plantation mistress was still extremely difficult. Once married, they took on a great number of duties, many of which involved raising their children and caring for their slaves. Throughout all of this the plantation mistress struggled to uphold the plantation myth, which completely ignored the hardships and emotional aspects of these parts of southern women's lives.

The influence of the plantation myth reached into literary works not only of the mid-1800s, but well into the 1900s, and is still evident today. The plantation myth remains a paradox, an ideal that was in conflict with reality, yet heartily embraced by the people it influenced. Is this paradox an essential element of all idyllic myths? That question remains to be answered, but what is clear is that the plantation myth was an American Dream of sorts — the ideal way to lead a life, and the perfect image of a woman.

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