

'Trying to Do a Man's Business': Slavery, Violence and Gender in the American Civil War

Drew Gilpin Faust

Between 1861 and 1865, three fourths of white southern men of military age entered the army of the Confederacy, removing from communities across the American South those very individuals whose unceasing exercise of power and vigilance had maintained order in the region's slave society. With their departure, the social relations of the Old South were necessarily and abruptly transformed. The threat – and often the reality – of physical force, together with the almost equally coercive manipulations of planter paternalism, had served as fundamental instruments of oppression and thus of race control. The white South had justified its 'peculiar institution' as a beneficent system of reciprocal obligations between master and slave, defining slave labor as a legitimate return for masters' protection and support. But in the very notion of mutual duties, the ideology of paternalism conceded the essential humanity of the bondsperson, who turned paternalism to their own uses, manipulating it as an empowering doctrine of rights.

Desiring to see themselves as decent Christian men, most southern slaveholders of the antebellum years preferred the negotiated power of reciprocity to the almost unchecked exercise of force that was in fact permitted them by law. In the paternalistic ideal, whipping was regarded as a last, not a first resort, as a breakdown in a control that was most properly exerted over minds, rather than bodies. Yet violence was implicit in the system, and both planters' records and slaves' reminiscences demonstrate how often it was explicit as well. The ideal of racial reciprocity, of hegemonic paternalistic domination was just that: an ideal articulated more often in proslavery tracts, plantation manuals or agricultural journals than in the day-to-day experience of plantation life. Violence was in fact never far from the minds of either blacks or whites, for overseers carried whips, slaves bore scars of past punishment, and almost everyone had personally witnessed masters' physical coercion of slaves.¹

In the antebellum years, white men had assumed the overwhelming responsibility for slavery's daily management and perpetuation. Just as

paternalism was founded in a belief in the dominance of men within the family and household, so violence was similarly gendered as male within the ideology of the Old South. When the Civil War removed thousands of white men from households across the region, it became unclear how the slave system would be maintained. Called to fight for slavery on the battlefield, Confederate masters could not simultaneously defend it on the homefront.

In many ways, the daily struggle over coercion and control taking place on hundreds of farms and plantations was just as crucial as any military contest to defense of the southern way of life. Slavery was, as Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens explained, the 'cornerstone' of the region's social, economic and political order. Yet slavery's survival depended less on sweeping dictates of public policy than on tens of thousands of individual acts of personal domination exercised by particular masters over particular slaves. The nineteenth century southerner's designation of slavery as the 'domestic institution' thus becomes in retrospect curious and even ironic, for such a term might be seen to imply a contrast with the public or the political. But the very domesticity of slavery in the Old South, its imbeddedness in the social relations of the plantation or yeoman household, made those households central to the most public, most political aspects of regional life. The direct exercise of control over slaves was the most fundamental and essential political act in the Old South. With the departure of white men, this transcendent public responsibility fell to Confederate women.²

Although white southerners – both male and female – might insist that politics was not, even in the changed circumstances of wartime, an appropriate part of woman's sphere, the female slave manager necessarily served as a foundation of the South's political order. White women's actions as slave mistresses were critical to Confederate destinies, for the viability of the southern agricultural economy, the stability of the social order, as well as the continuing loyalty of the civilian population all depended upon successful slave control. On a microcosmic level, the daily interactions of particular women slaveholders with specific slaves yield a striking vision of the master-slave relationship in a new wartime guise, of war-born redefinitions of social power and social roles, and of a society in turmoil.

This essay will examine the experience of one woman in order to explore how the dynamics of war, slavery, gender and mastery played themselves out within a single richly documented context. Lizzie Scott Neblett lived in Texas, far from any direct threat of Union troops. Hers was a situation in which the forces and the internal logic of southern society operated in comparative freedom from the most direct intrusions of war. As a recent historian of Texas slavery has written, 'The Peculiar Institution remained less disturbed in Texas than in any other Confederate state.' Yet even without a Union military presence, the absence of white men would itself change the system profoundly, and transform the white women and black slaves who



Figure 1 *Will and Lizzie Neblett after the Civil War.*

like Lizzie Neblett and her human property became caught up in slavery's wartime disintegration.³

Slave management was not an opportunity white southern women eagerly sought. As one Georgia plantation mistress put it, a woman was simply not a 'fit and proper person' to govern slaves. But like men conscripted into battle, Confederate women of the slave-owning classes often found they had little choice. When Will Neblett enlisted in the 20th Texas Infantry in March of 1863, his wife Lizzie explained that her impending service as agricultural and slave manager was 'a coercive one.' But, she vowed, she would be 'faithful and conscientious in its discharge.'⁴

Already 37 years old, Will Neblett was in poor health – 'Rheumatism, Neuralgia and Bronchial Affections, as well as General physical delicacy of organization,' his service record described it. Designated as 'unable to perform active field service,' Neblett was assigned to the Quartermaster Corps and spent most of the two years remaining in the war stationed in Galveston on the Texas coast. Because the likelihood of losing her husband

to Yankee fire was considerably less than that confronting many Confederate wives, the concerns Lizzie expressed about the difficulties of her own situation may have been proportionately increased. At age 30, she found herself in circumstances very unlike those she had envisioned as an idealistic girl, publishing romantic outpourings in local Texas publications, dreaming of literary reputation, and maintaining an intense and intellectual correspondence with a circle of former schoolmates.

Marriage and motherhood had compelled a change in her aspirations. Ambition, she explained to her diary soon after her wedding in 1852, now must focus on her husband. 'I am ambitious for *him* I can never gain worldly honors. Fame can never be mine.' Even her hopes of teaching proved impossible, as Lizzie became caught up in a cycle of pregnancies, childhood diseases and family demands. When Will left home in the spring of 1863, Lizzie was awaiting her unwelcome fifth confinement. She was already mother of a ten year old daughter and three sons, ages eight, six and four. The much resented baby Bettie would arrive in May.⁵

Born in Mississippi, Will and Lizzie were both children of slaveowning families who had migrated to the rich cotton lands of Grimes County, some fifty miles northwest of Houston, during the late 1830s. Will's father was a physician, and Lizzie's had been a circuit judge, as well as the master of more than 75 slaves, a holding large enough to place him in the top one percent of Texas slaveholders. When the war broke out, Will had been practicing law for well over a decade, and had just resigned after a year of service as editor of the *Navarro Express*, a staunchly secessionist Democratic paper. In addition, the Nebletts owned eleven slaves, who in 1860 had cultivated the 92 improved acres of a nearly 6000 acre farm to produce 15¼ bales of ginned cotton and 500 bushels of corn. With this force, which they had received from Lizzie's father Judge Scott, the young couple ranked among the top quarter of Texas slaveholders in 1860, but well below the upper three percent of the population who possessed more than 20 slaves and thus qualified as plantation owners. Nevertheless, with real estate valued at \$12,500 and personal property worth \$14,500 in 1860, the Nebletts stood well above the state mean, even among the 27% of Texas families who held slaves and averaged \$7000 in real and \$12,500 in personal property. Lizzie clearly had little right to her complaint that the neighbors were unjust in accusing her of being rich.⁶

Lizzie set about the task before her in the spring of 1863 committed to 'doing my best,' but apprehensive both about her ignorance of agriculture and the behavior she might anticipate from the slaves. Their initial response to her direction, however, seemed promising. 'The negros,' she wrote Will in late April 'seem to be mightily stirred up now, about making a good crop.' Before his departure, Will had arranged to swap slave work with a neighbor in exchange for his assumption of a general supervisory eye over Lizzie and her slaves. Mr. Rivers seemed to Lizzie, however, to be taking advantage of the situation from the outset, using her slaves chiefly to his own profit. And,

in her advanced state of pregnancy, dealing with outsiders was more trying than dealing with her own laborers. 'I look so unsightly & feel that I do so sensibly that a man is a horror to me.' Above all else, however, Lizzie was disgusted by Rivers' lack of shame in acknowledging his own slave children, and she was convinced that if the war did not end she must make different management arrangements after the current crop year.⁷

Anxious about her confinement and then overwhelmed by a difficult and demanding infant, 'cursed like her mother with the female sex,' Lizzie wrote little of her agricultural dilemmas until the harvest season had nearly arrived. And by this time her initial optimism about the blacks' behavior had disappeared. A matching of Lizzie's scattered letter and diary references with the 1860 census count makes possible a rough recreation of the Neblett slaves and their family ties. But because Lizzie often borrowed slaves from other members of her family, it is difficult to achieve an exact congruence between those individuals regularly mentioned as part of her household and those officially listed as belonging to the Nebletts in the public record.

Although the 1860 census enumerator noted that the eleven Neblett slaves occupied two houses, they did not comprise two distinct family groups. Thornton and Nance, who had married in the mid 1850s, were in their late twenties or early thirties and parents of Lee, born in 1857, Henry, born in 1860, and Harrison, an infant when Will departed in 1863. Sarah, who worked chiefly in the house, was in her mid forties, and Lizzie's records make no mention of her family ties. Sam, the oldest male on the place, was of a similar age, and, like many slaves on such small holdings, had a wife belonging to another owner. Joe, probably in his thirties, also had an 'abroad' wife and children, and Will's inability to meet Joe's request that he purchase them was in all likelihood the source of Joe's 'propensity for running about at night and on Sundays.' Tom, Randall, Bill and Kate were all in their mid teens, as was Polly, a house servant on loan from Lizzie's brother in the army. Anticipating the impressment of Randall for hospital detail in Brenham, about 50 miles away, Lizzie reckoned she would have five laborers to cultivate and harvest the corn and cotton crops.⁸

But persuading them actually to work was another matter. 'The negroes are doing nothing,' Lizzie wrote Will at the height of first picking in mid August. 'But ours are not doing that job alone nearly all the negroes around here are at it, some of them are getting so high in anticipation of their glorious freedom by the Yankees I suppose, that they resist a whipping.' Many slave-owners, she noted, had become 'actually affraid to whip the negroes.' Lizzie harbored few doubts about the longterm loyalty of her own black family. 'I don't think we have one who will stay with us.'⁹

Under these difficult conditions, Lizzie reported a cotton crop of eight bales, an achievement well below the 1860 average of 2.5 bales per slave for Texas farms of her size and only a bit more than half of what the Nebletts themselves had realized three years before. In the same letter in which she informed Will of these troubling realities, Lizzie announced her new

arrangements for slave and crop management. She had, as she described it, 'insisted' that another neighbor come to her aid. For \$400 of Confederate money – the equivalent, she estimated, of \$80 of 'good money' – Mr. Meyers would spend a half day with her slaves three times a week. 'He will be right tight on the negroes I think, but they need it, they never feared Rivers one single bit.' And, she implied, they did not fear her either. 'Meyers,' she continued, 'will lay down the law and enforce it.' But Lizzie emphasized that she would not permit cruelty or abuse. She was sure he would not 'have to whip but one or two before the others will take the hint.'¹⁰

But controlling Meyers would prove in some ways more difficult than controlling the slaves. His second day on the plantation Meyers whipped all three teenage boys for idleness, and on his next visit, as Lizzie put it, 'he undertook old Sam.' Gossip had spread among slaves in the neighborhood – and from them to their masters – that Sam intended to take a whipping from no man. Will Neblett had, in fact, not been a harsh disciplinarian, tending more to threatening and grumbling than whipping. Lizzie anticipated, however, that Sam might well prove a problem for Meyers, and her ten year old daughter, Mary, passed this concern along to Sam himself. Sam assured Mary and her eight year old brother Bob that he would run away rather than submit to Meyers' lash: 'he shant whip me.'

For Meyers, this very challenge was quite 'enough.' On his next visit to the farm, Meyers called Sam down from atop a wagon of fence stakes. Sam refused to come, saying he had done nothing to deserve a whipping. When Sam began edging away from Meyers, the white man ordered him to stop, then began shooting at him. Sam ran, but was soon cornered. At first he threatened to kill anyone who laid a hand on him, but when Meyers countered by waving his gun, Sam surrendered. Enraged, Meyers beat Sam so severely that Lizzie feared he might die. She anxiously called the doctor, who assured her Sam had no internal injuries and that he had seen many slaves beaten far worse.¹¹

Lizzie was torn about how to respond – to Meyers or to Sam. 'Tho I pity the poor wretch,' she confided to Will, 'I don't want him to know it.' To the other slaves she insisted that 'Meyers would not have whipped him if he had not deserved it,' and to Will she defensively maintained, 'somebody must take them in hand they grow worse all the time I could not begin to write you . . . how little they mind me.' She saw Meyers' actions as part of a plan to establish control at the outset: 'he lets them know what he is, when he first starts, & then has no more trouble.' But Lizzie's very insistence and defensiveness suggest that this was not, even in her mind, slave management in its ideal form, and the criticisms from her rejected neighbor Rivers – 'a damed shame the way Sam was whipped' – stung all the worse when she was told of them indirectly by her own slaves, eager to report this fissure in white solidarity.¹²

Over the next few days, Lizzie's doubts about Meyers and his course of action grew. Instead of eliminating trouble at the outset, as he had intended,

the incident seemed to have created an uproar. Sarah, a cook and house slave, reported to Lizzie that Sam suspected the whipping had been his mistress's idea, and that when well enough, he would run away till Will came home. Perhaps this meant, Lizzie worried, that Sam was planning some act of vengeance against her.¹³

To resolve the volatile situation and to salvage her reputation as slave mistress, Lizzie now enlisted another man, Coleman, to talk reasonably with Sam. Coleman had been her father's overseer and continued to manage her mother's property. In the absence of Will and of Lizzie's brothers, he was an obvious family deputy, and he had undoubtedly known Sam since the slave's days as the property of Judge Scott. Coleman readily agreed to 'try to show Sam the error he had been guilty of.' At last Sam spoke the words Coleman sought, admitting he had done wrong, promising 'he would let Meyers whip him, one more time,' as long as it was not so severe. But Coleman suggested an even more desirable survival strategy, promising him that 'if only he would be humble & submissive . . . Meyers would never whip him so again.'¹⁴

Two weeks after the incident, Lizzie and Sam finally had a direct, and, in Lizzie's view at least, comforting exchange. Meyers had ordered Sam back to work, but Lizzie interceded in response to Sam's complaints of persisting weakness. Taking his cue from Lizzie's conciliatory gesture and acting as well in accordance with Coleman's advice, Sam apologized for disappointing Lizzie's expectations, acknowledging that as the oldest slave he had special responsibilities in Will's absence. Henceforth, he promised Lizzie, he was 'going to do his work faithfully & be of as much service to me as he could. I could not help,' Lizzie confessed to Will, 'feeling sorry for the old fellow . . . he talked so humbly & seemed to hurt that I should have had him whipped so.'¹⁵

Sam's adroit transformation from rebel into Sambo helped resolve Lizzie's uncertainties about the appropriate course of slave management. Abandoning her defense of Meyers' severity, even interceding on Sam's behalf against her own manager, Lizzie assured Sam she had not been responsible for his punishment, had indeed been 'astonished' by it. Meyers, she reported to Will with newfound assurance, 'did wrong' and 'knows nothing' about the management of slaves. He 'don't' she noted revealingly, 'treat them as moral beings but manages by brute force.' Henceforth, Lizzie concluded, she would not feel impelled by her sense of helplessness to countenance extreme severity. Instead, she promised Sam, if he remained 'humble and submissive,' she would ensure 'he would not get another lick.'¹⁶

The incident of Sam's whipping served as the occasion for an extended negotiation between Lizzie and her slaves about the terms of her power. In calling upon Meyers and Coleman, she demonstrated that despite appearances, she was not in fact a woman alone, dependent entirely on her own resources. Although the ultimate responsibility might be hers, slave management was a community concern. Pushed toward sanctioning Meyers' cruelty

by a fear of her own impotence, Lizzie then stepped back from the extreme position in which Meyers had placed her. But at the same time that she dissociated herself from Meyers' action, she also reaped its benefit: Sam's abandonment of a posture of overt defiance for one of apparent submission. Sam and Lizzie were ultimately able to join forces in an agreement that Meyers must be at once deplored and tolerated as a necessary evil whom both mistress and slave would strive ceaselessly to manipulate. Abandoning their brief tryouts as Simon Legree and Nat Turner, Lizzie and Sam returned to the more accustomed and comfortable roles of concerned paternalist and loyal slave. And each recognized at last that his or her own performance depended in large measure upon a complementary performance by the other.

The lines of communication in this negotiating process are likewise revealing of the wider social structure of farm and neighborhood. Lizzie and Sam communicated repeatedly through intermediaries: first her young children, whom Sam perhaps regarded as a means of blunting the impact of the defiance towards which he felt himself propelled; then through Sarah, a black woman to serve as translator between a white woman and a black man; then Coleman, a white man experienced in the language and manipulations of paternalism, who reminded Sam of his appropriate and, in this situation, most wisely calculated role. Slave management here involved not just master or mistress and slave, but, in the phraseology of the Old South, all the family white and black, as well as much of the surrounding neighborhood.¹⁷

Meyers' actions, explicitly cited by Sam's physician as entirely within the law, were nevertheless quietly or overtly criticized by those for whom the paternalistic scenario of slavery remained, even in wartime exigency, far preferable to the harsh realities of physical domination. Rivers was gloating perhaps when he decried Sam's treatment as a 'damed shame,' but he also provided an opportunity for Lizzie's slaves to pressure their mistress to rebuke Meyers and offer Sam an opening for compromise. Eager for her to hear Rivers' disapproval directly, the slaves took the initiative to inform Lizzie that Rivers wished to speak with her, thus demonstrating the part slaves played as communicators and negotiators not just within individual farms or plantations, but across neighborhoods. Yet Rivers, father of his own slave children, could hardly play the virtuous and upstanding paternalist. That role remained to Coleman, who as Scott family retainer and as Sam's former overseer stood midway between Lizzie and her defiant slave. Symbolizing both Sam's and his own longstanding ties with the Scott family, Coleman invoked the class language of paternalism to remind Sam of his place within these traditions of social order and obligation.

Lizzie's behavior throughout the crisis demonstrated as well the essential part gender identities and assumptions played in master-slave relationships. As a female slave manager, Lizzie exploited her apparently close ties to the woman house slave Sarah to secure information about the remainder of her

force. 'Sarah is worth a team of negro's with her tongue,' Lizzie reported to Will. Yet Lizzie's gender more often represented a constraint than an opportunity. Just before the confrontation between Meyers and Sam, Lizzie had written revealingly to Will about the physical coercion of slaves. Acknowledging Will's reluctance to whip, she confessed to feeling the aversion even more forcefully than he. 'It has got to be such a disagreeable matter with me to whip, that I haven't even dressed Kate but once since you left, & then only a few cuts – I am too troubled in mind to get stirred up enough to whip. I made Thornton whip Tom once.'

Accustomed to occasional strikes against female slaves, Lizzie called upon a male slave to whip the adolescent Tom, then, later, a white male neighbor to dominate the venerable Sam. Yet even this structured hierarchy of violence was becoming increasingly 'disagreeable' to her as she acted out her new wartime role as 'chief of affairs.' Lizzie knew she was objectively physically weaker than both black and white men around her, and she feared that wartime disruptions of established patterns of white male authority might encourage slaves to resist physical punishments – especially if inflicted by their new – and weaker – female managers. But she confessed as well to a 'troubled . . . mind,' to uncertainties about her appropriate relationship to the ultimate exertion of force upon which slavery rested. As wartime pressures weakened the foundations for the 'moral' management that Lizzie preferred, what she referred to as 'brute force' became simultaneously more necessary and more impossible as an instrument of coercion.¹⁸

The resolution of the crisis concerning Sam hardly brought permanent peace to the Neblett farm. Even as she struggled with the aftermath of conflict, Lizzie found herself faced with unceasing demands from other slaves. When Thornton was gored in the hand by a wild pig, it was to Lizzie that he came for help. He seemed almost scared to death, but Lizzie remained calm, even though she saw his finger was almost severed. Calling upon her experience in domestic needlework, she took 'two stitches through the flesh and tied it, to bring the cut together,' then covered the wound with sugar and turpentine. It was, she reported, the 'hardest sewing I ever done.'¹⁹

Lizzie's medical skills would be taxed more thoroughly, however, by the extended illness of six year old Lee, who in December of 1863 was seized by a flux. Lizzie sat with him for days and nights on end, and administered a veritable pharmacopeia of remedies: mustard plasters, rhubarb, soda, peppermint leaves, cinnamon bark. Removing him from his parents, Nance and Thornton, who, Lizzie complained, 'don't take care of their children,' Lizzie installed the boy in a room in her own house. Although she took 'every precaution,' she assured Will, to prevent spread of the disease and tried to keep her own children out of Lee's room, she still worried that she herself, who had 'spared neither hands nor nose,' would contract the disease. Confident in her own course of therapeutics, Lizzie did not send for

a doctor for almost two weeks, and then was gratified to have him entirely approve her course of treatment.²⁰

Yet at the same time Lizzie recognized and performed all the duties expected of the benevolent slave mistress, she reported to Will the half-heartedness she felt in executing her role. 'I have nursed him closely,' she assured her husband, '& done as much for him as if he was my own child, but have not of course felt the anxiety about him, that I would one of my own.' 'If it was not for the humanity of the thing I had much rather let him lay in his mothers house & died than to run the risk of myself & all the children taking it. . . . I have had a great deal of trouble with him, more than he is worth.' But the 'humanity of the thing,' especially in the case of a child, still had a firm if grudging hold on Lizzie Neblett.²¹

It was much harder to feel that benevolence towards Joe. In the fall of 1863, Lizzie's difficulties in managing Joe combined with fears that he would be seized by Confederate soldiers for military labor and prompted the Nebletts to send Joe to Will in Galveston. But Will found his camp services of little use, and hired him out in Houston. Slave hiring was widespread in Texas, and seems to have become even more common during the Civil War when many families found they preferred reaping profit from their unfree property without bearing the responsibility for their direct supervision. And as Lizzie became increasingly exasperated with slave management, she would ever more strongly urge such a course on Will.

Joe's contract, however, was brief and at Christmas, he was to be returned to Lizzie in Grimes County. But the New Year of 1864 arrived with no sign of Joe, and Lizzie was not at all sure what had become of him. Perhaps, she feared, he had run away or had been seized for government service. By the middle of January, however, Joe appeared with a lengthy and, Lizzie thought, 'plausible tale' to account for his delay: flooding en route, fear of impressment officers, an injury from being kicked by a horse. A letter from Will, who had spoken with Joe's boss, told another story – of Joe's eagerness to be rehired for another year, of his reluctance to return to Grimes, of his improvidence and his delay in departing. Lizzie should, Will urged, make Joe pay her in cash for the work days he had missed. Lizzie mocked Will's suggestion. 'You seem to think I can do more with Joe than you can. You know I cant get money or work out of him.'²²

Joe perfectly embodied the independence that southern critics of the hiring system feared as its inevitable outcome. Not only did Joe possess a keen sense of independence from the Nebletts' power, he had also acquired property and skills in transacting business that had made him into an energetic entrepreneur. Lizzie, far less experienced in such matters than he, found herself at a complete loss to control him. When Joe returned to Grimes County, he brought with him a mule, which he used to visit his wife and family. He began feeding the animal with Lizzie's corn, and soon took the girth and stirrup leathers from Will's saddle to put his own 'in riding order.' 'I expect him to take all hands soon,' Lizzie wryly remarked, '& build himself

a stable.' When Lizzie wanted to use the girth for her own animals, she found Nance had locked it up in one of the slave houses. Meanwhile Joe had begun negotiations to acquire a better mount from another slave in the neighborhood. By May, he had gained possession of a horse. He 'is now too proud to ride his old mule,' Lizzie reported.²³

Lizzie acknowledged to Will that the situation must seem on the face of it unthinkable. But, she explained resignedly, 'necessity compells me to do many things I rebel at, when they first present themselves.' She considered killing Joe's steed, but recognized that would just make the slave run away or cease work altogether. And yet Joe's influence threatened to transform the rest of her slave force into small businessmen. Tom had sold her hens to an 'old negro' in the neighborhood, and was discovered cutting down trees to market to the neighbors as firewood.²⁴

Meyers sought to enforce control over both Tom and Joe exactly as he had Sam months before. He gave Tom an unprovoked whipping and succeeded in beating his back raw before Lizzie discovered that the young black had in response run away. When Meyers threatened Joe, however, the slave escaped through the woods and appeared in front of Lizzie before Meyers could lay a hand on him. Lizzie interceded. 'I told him not to whip Joe, as long as he done his work well & that he must not shoot at him, that he might run away & we might never get him & if he never done me any good he might my children.' Slavery in the present had become unworkable. Lizzie could only hope for its future. The balance of power between mistress and bondsmen seemed to have been reversed. 'Joe, is doing very bad – it is his day now certainly, but whether my day will ever arrive or not is . . . exceedingly doubtful.' Freedom had not yet officially come to Texas, but in Lizzie's despairing eyes, the bottom rail seemed already firmly situated on top.²⁵

Forbidden the physical severity that served as the fundamental prop of his system of slave management, Meyers requested to be released from his contract with Lizzie at the end of the crop year. Early on, Meyers had told Lizzie that he could 'conquer' her slaves, 'but may have to kill some one of them.' It remained with Lizzie he explained, to make the decision. In her moments of greatest exasperation, Lizzie was ready to consent to such extreme measures. 'I say do it.' But with calm reflection, tempered by Will's measured advice, considerations of humanity inevitably reasserted their claim. Repeatedly she interceded between Meyers and the slaves – protecting them from whippings or condemning Meyers when he disobeyed her orders and punished them severely. Yet despite her difficulties in managing Meyers himself, and despite her belief that he was 'deficient in judgment,' Lizzie recognized her dependence upon him and upon the threat of physical coercion that he represented. She was determined to 'hold him on as long as I can.' If he quit and the slaves found that no one was coming to replace him, she wrote revealingly, 'the jig will be up.' The game, the trick, the sham of her slave management would be over. Without a man – or part

of a man for three half days a week – without the possibility of recourse to violence that Meyers embodied, slavery was impossible. The velvet glove of paternalism required its iron hand.²⁶

The dependence of slavery upon violence and the Old South's gendering of physical force as male made women regard themselves as ineffective managers. 'I am so sick,' Lizzie wrote Will, 'of trying to do a man's business when I am nothing but, a poor contemptible piece of multiplying human flesh tied to the house by a crying young one, look upon as belonging to a race of inferior beings.' Her angry frustration seemed pointless, and only provoked the slaves to 'meriment,' so Lizzie resorted to private tears as a consolation for her 'entire inability to help myself.' Never had her dependence seemed greater than in this wartime situation of apparent independence and responsibility.²⁷

Central to Lizzie's dilemma were her ambivalence and confusion about the role of physical coercion in social relations. In the Old South, violence was anything but the monopoly of the state. Instead, recourse to physical violence in support of male honor and white supremacy was regarded as the right, even the responsibility, of each white man – within his household, on his plantation, in his community. The outbreak of Civil War, the South's resort to the organized, region-wide violence of military conflict, simply underscored the legitimacy of force in social relations. In battle, white southerners embraced violence as a desirable, heroic means of resolving issues of power. But like the Old South's code of honor, military violence was to be fundamentally male; women were, in the words of one female Confederate, 'barred from the tented field.'²⁸

Yet, as men moved in increasing numbers from the South's households to its battlefields, women of the region's plantation owning elite would be left as the custodians of social order and would find themselves confronting the dependence of their slave society upon the implicit threat, if not explicit use, of force. Throughout the history of the peculiar institution, slave mistresses had hit, slapped, even brutally whipped their slaves – particularly slave women. But their relationship to this exercise of physical power was significantly different from that of their men. No gendered code of honor celebrated their physical power or dominance. A contrasting, yet parallel ideology extolled their female sensitivity, weakness and docility. In the prewar years, exercise of the violence that was fundamental to slavery was overwhelmingly the responsibility and prerogative of white men. A white woman disciplined and punished as the master's subordinate and surrogate. Rationalized, systematic, autonomous, instrumental use of violence belonged to men.²⁹

As a wartime slave manager, Lizzie soon discovered that she could live neither with violence nor without it. The manipulations of paternalism's velvet glove were growing progressively less effective as means of control, yet unrestrained terror, however appealing at times, was, Lizzie recognized, inhumane. Perhaps it had even become dangerous, threatening to provoke

restive slaves themselves to act upon southern society's lessons about the primacy of force. Lizzie in fact worried about violence from her slaves – and especially feared retaliation for Meyer's cruelties. And she wondered too about the origins of mysterious fires that burned her mother's house, her father-in-law's gin and the Nebletts' own property now rented out in Navarro County, for she knew arson to be widely acknowledged as a characteristic slave 'crime.'

Violence seemed to permeate the white family as well. Lizzie's ill-behaved children were nearly as exasperating as her slaves and perhaps even more out of control. Bob mistreated the horses; Walter used a cowhide to beat the cat; all the children's faces bore the permanent scars of Billy's fingernails, and infant Bettie cried ceaselessly. Here Lizzie felt empowered to act in a way she dared not with her slaves. Here, with her own young children, a woman need not fear the use of physical force – even if considerations of humanity prompted doubt. Lizzie threatened she would whip Billy every day if necessary '& I do it well when I begin.' 'I can't get him to do anything unless I get the cowhide in hand.' And Bob, she complained, just 'don't mind me as well as he once did.' By the time Bettie had reached 10 months, Lizzie confessed to Will 'I have whipped her several times.' Reporting her aunt's stern disapproval of beating such a small child, Lizzie admitted she was surprised when Will did not scold her as well. As she restrained herself from abusing her slaves, Lizzie turned to abusing her children.³⁰

Frustrated by feelings of powerlessness and incompetence as both slave manager and parent, Lizzie turned to brute force. Will's regime of 'grumbling and threatening' slave management was replaced by the counterpoint of Meyers' cruelty and Lizzie's paternalism; Lizzie and Will's socialization of their children devolved into Lizzie's threats and punishments and the children's own resort to violence with their inferiors – siblings and animals.

Historians and social scientists exploring 'family violence' have concentrated upon its appearances in urban settings, particularly in the industrial North. But the phenomenon, with its invaluable perspective on fundamental issues of social power, deserves historical attention in the South as well. Within slaveholding society, domestic violence took on a distinctive shape and meaning, one that suggests it would most usefully be examined not just in terms of biological family, but within the context of the wider household – the 'family white and black' in which expressions of physical force were structured and influenced by intimate relationships of race as well as age and gender.

The South's social hierarchies created a spectrum of legitimate access to violence, so that social empowerment was inextricably bound up with the right to use physical force. Violence was all but required of white men of all classes and forbidden to black slaves, except within their own communities, where the dominant society regarded it as essentially invisible. White women stood upon an ill-defined middle ground, where behavior and ideology often diverged. The Civil War exacerbated this very tension,

disrupting the broader structures of social order by removing a sizeable portion of the white men and thus compelling women in slaveowning households to become the reluctant agents of a power they could not embrace as rightfully their own. The centrality of violence in the Old South had reflected and reinforced white women's inferior status in that society. Within the Confederacy, it threatened to make women like Lizzie feel growing contempt for their identity as females trying, unsuccessfully, to 'do a man's business.' In their eyes, a man's business it would – and should – remain.³¹

Violence was the ultimate foundation of power in the slave South, but gender prescriptions carefully barred white women – especially those elite women most likely to find themselves responsible for controlling slaves – from purposeful exercise of such authority. Even when circumstances had shifted to make female authority socially desirable, it remained for many plantation mistresses personally impossible. Lizzie's struggle with her attraction to violence and simultaneous abhorrence of it embodied the contradictions that the necessary wartime paradox of female slave management imposed on her individual life. Ultimately and tragically, she embraced violence by exercising power over the most helpless being of all. Lizzie turned in frustration and, I would suggest, self-loathing, to the beating of an infant child – a child who happened to be not just speechless and helpless, but, named for Lizzie herself and 'cursed like her mother with the female sex.'

The role of female slave manager was within the gender assumptions of the Old South a contradiction in terms that left Lizzie longing only for escape: she wished repeatedly to die; to be a man; or to give up the slaves altogether – except, tellingly, for one to wait on her in the house. White women had reaped slavery's benefits throughout its existence in the colonial and antebellum South. But they could not be its managers without ceasing to be what they understood as women. In the absence of men, a society based in the violence of slavery could not stand.

* * *

If he would not hire out his slaves and free her from their management, Lizzie begged Will in the spring of 1864, 'give your negros away and, I'll . . . work with my hands, as hard as I can, but my mind will rest.' A year later Lizzie would have to trouble her mind about slave management no longer. With war's end, Will returned safely from the coast and took up farming once again. By the time of the 1870 census, he was annually paying out \$100 in wages to farm workers and raising 4 bales of cotton, as well as 200 bushels of corn. The value of his real estate had fallen sixty percent during the decade, and his personal property, with the freeing of his slaves, to just five and a half percent of its former value. Lizzie later described 'seven years of struggle together after the war closed,' for in the spring of 1871, Will died of pneumonia, leaving his wife five months pregnant with a third daughter.

A widow at thirty-eight, Lizzie had lived less than half her life. She would survive until 1917, returning to her early literary ambitions as a temperance columnist in the 1880s, and emerging by the end of the century as matriarch of a growing clan of descendants. Ironically, she would pass the last decades of her life in the Austin household of her second daughter, the unwelcome war-baby Bettie. Lizzie Neblett's scattered postbellum letters and papers cannot provide the vivid portrait of a woman's experience that emerges from her Civil War writings. We can never know whether the end of war and its responsibilities had indeed brought her sad and tormented mind to 'rest.'³²

Notes

1. I would like to thank the Johns Hopkins Historical Seminar, Todd Barnett, Nancy Bercaw, John Boles, Barbara Fields, Linda Gordon, Sally Graham, Nancy Hewitt, Shan Holt, Beverly Jarrett, Demie Kurz, Reid Mitchell, Charles Rosenberg, and Steven Stowe for comments and suggestions. For statistics on Confederate military service, see Drew Gilpin Faust, 'Altars of Sacrifice; Confederate Women and the Narratives of War,' *Journal of American History* 76 (March 1990), p. 1213, fn. 27. The literature on U.S. slavery is voluminous. For a recent overview and introduction see Peter J. Parish, *Slavery: History and Historians* (Harper and Row, New York, 1989). The concept of paternalism has been most fully analyzed by Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (Pantheon, New York, 1974). For a contrasting perspective, see Norrece T. Jones, *Born a Child of Freedom, Yet a Slave: Mechanisms of Control and Strategies of Resistance in Antebellum South Carolina* (Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, Connecticut, 1990). For a study of how paternalism operated on one plantation, see Drew Gilpin Faust, *James Henry Hammond and the Old South: A Design for Mastery* (Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1982), Part II. For a statement indicating the desirability of using whipping as last rather than first resort, see 'Governor Hammond's Instructions to His Overseer,' in Willie Lee Rose, ed. *A Documentary History of Slavery in North America* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1976), p. 353, and the Hammond Plantation Manual, ms. in James Henry Hammond Papers, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina.

2. On women and southern households, see Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household* (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1988); on Confederate women as slave managers, see George Rable, *Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism* (University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1989), pp. 114–121 and Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1970).

3. Randolph B. Campbell, *An Empire for Slavery: The Peculiar Institution in Texas, 1821–1865* (Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1989), p. 231. See also James Marten, 'Slaves and Rebels: The Peculiar Institution in Texas, 1861–1865,' *East Texas Historical Journal*, 28 (January 1990), pp. 29–36; Ralph A. and Robert Wooster, 'A People at War: East Texas During the Civil War,' *ibid.*, pp. 3–16; B. P. Gallaway, *The Dark Corner of the Confederacy: Accounts of Civil War Texas As Told By Contemporaries* (William C. Brown, Dubuque, 1968) Ernest Wallace, *Texas in Turmoil* (Steck-Vaughn, Austin, 1965); Randolph B. Campbell, *A Southern Community in Crisis: Harrison County,*

Texas, 1850–1880 (Texas State Historical Association, Austin, 1983); Vera Lea Dugas, 'A Social and Economic History of Texas in the Civil War,' unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, (University of Texas, Austin, 1963).

4. Amanda Walker to the Confederate Secretary of War, 31 October 1862, Letters Received by the Confederate Secretary of War, RG 109, M437, R79, W1106, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; Lizzie Neblett to Will Neblett, 26 April 1863, 3 January 1864, Lizzie Scott Neblett Papers, Barker Texas History Center, University of Texas, Austin.

5. Compiled Service Records of Confederate Soliders Who Served in Organizations from Texas, National Archives. See notation of 18 March 1864. Clippings of Lizzie's publications appear under pseudonyms such as 'Agnes Lyle' and 'Meg Merrilies' in her Scrapbook, 1851, Lizzie Scott Neblett Papers, Barker Texas History Center, University of Texas, Austin. Quotation is from Lizzie Scott Neblett's Diary, 14 April 1852, *ibid*.

6. Eighth Census of the United States, 1860. Free Schedule, Slave Schedule and Agricultural Schedule, Navarro and Grimes Counties, Texas, National Archives. Campbell, *Empire*, p. 193, p. 68; Richard G. Lowe and Randolph B. Campbell, *Planters and Plain Folk: Agriculture in Antebellum Texas* (Southern Methodist University Press, Dallas, 1987), p. 82; Lizzie Neblett to Will Neblett, 20 March 1864. See also Randolph B. Campbell and Richard G. Lowe, *Wealth and Power in Antebellum Texas* (Texas A&M University Press, College Station, 1977). See *Navarro Express*, 24 March, 28 July, 21 December 1860. On slavery and society in East Texas see Abigail Curlee, 'A Study of Texas Slave Plantations, 1822–1865,' unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, (University of Texas, Austin, 1932). Lizzie and Will's son William wrote a letter in 1935 indicating that he was sending Curlee a personal reminiscence of slavery for use in her work. W. T. Neblett to Mattie Hatcher, 19 March 1935, Lizzie Scott Neblett Papers, Barker Texas History Center, University of Texas, Austin. On Grimes County, see Irene Taylor Allen, *Saga of Anderson* (Greenwich Book Publishers, New York, 1957); Grimes County Historical Commission, *History of Grimes County* (Taylor Publishing Company, Dallas, 1982); Eric Lee Blair, *Early History of Grimes County*, n.p., 1930. On women in Texas, see Annie Doom Pickrell, *Pioneer Women in Texas* (E. L. Steck, Austin, 1929); Evelyn M. Carrington, *Women in Early Texas* (Jenkins Publishing Company, Austin, 1975); Ruthe Winegarten, *Texas Women: A Pictorial History* (Eakin Press, Austin, 1986).

7. Lizzie Neblett to Will Neblett, 26 April 1863.

8. Eighth Census of the United States, Slave Schedules, Navarro and Grimes Counties, Texas, 1860. Lizzie Neblett to Will Neblett, 9 and 3 January 1864. On Thornton's marriage, see Will Neblett to Lizzie Neblett 2 August 1856. On Sam's abroad wife, see Lizzie to Will Neblett, 5 August 1863; Lizzie to Garrett Scott, n.d. 1850s. On Joe's family see Lizzie to Sallie Scott, 3 March and 19 September 1858, Lizzie to Will 12 February and 26 April 1863(quote). For examples of transfers of slaves within the family, see the Neblett's exchange of Miele, an unsatisfactory female slave, for Nance, Will Neblett to Lizzie Neblett, 25 July and 2 August 1856. Recreating the Neblett's agricultural operations and slave force is complicated by their move in 1861 from Navarro back to Grimes County.

9. Lizzie Neblett to Will Neblett, 18 August 1863.

10. Lizzie Neblett to Will Neblett, 17 November 1863; Lowe and Campbell, *Planters and Plain Folk*, p. 162.

11. Lizzie Neblett to Will Neblett, 23 and 17 November 1863.

12. Lizzie Neblett to Will Neblett, 23 November 1863.

13. Lizzie Neblett to Will Neblett, 29 November 1863.

14. Lizzie Neblett to Will Neblett, 29 November 1863.

15. Lizzie Neblett to Will Neblett, 6 December 1863.
16. Lizzie Neblett to Will Neblett, 6 December 1863.
17. On this and other occasions Lizzie seems to acknowledge a special bond with Sarah, a slave woman, that enables Lizzie to use her as an intermediary and a source of information about other slaves. There is apart from these references very little in Lizzie's letters and diary that directly addresses the issue of the relationship between white and black women. It is clear, however, that on Lizzie's farm at least, it is the male slaves who are seen both as the more significant discipline problems and as potential objects of fear.
18. Lizzie Neblett to Will Neblett, 26 April 1863. On Sarah's eavesdropping on other slaves see also Lizzie Neblett to Will Neblett, 4 and 25 November 1863. Lizzie's comments on whipping appear in Lizzie Neblett to Will Neblett, undated fragment of letter [1864].
19. Lizzie Neblett to Will Neblett, 17 November 1863.
20. Lizzie Neblett to Will Neblett, 13 December 1863.
21. Lizzie Neblett to Will Neblett, 6–7 February 1864; 13 December 1863.
22. On slave hiring in Texas see Campbell, *Empire*, pp. 82–92; on another Texas woman's preference for hiring out over personal management during the Civil War, see Randolph Campbell, *A Southern Community in Crisis: Harrison County, Texas, 1850–1880* (Texas Historical Association, Austin, 1983), Chapter 9. Lizzie Neblett to Will Neblett, undated fragment [1864].
23. Lizzie Neblett to Will Neblett, 19 April 1864; 3 May 1864. On Joe's intention to use the mule to visit his family, see Lizzie Neblett to Will Neblett, 12 February 1864.
24. Lizzie Neblett to Will Neblett, 23 April 1864.
25. Lizzie Neblett to Will Neblett, 15 and 23 April 1864.
26. Lizzie Neblett to Will Neblett, 12 February, 3 July, 5 June 1864. Lizzie wrote similarly of her management elsewhere, noting, 'I *pretend* to be chief of affairs.' (emphasis added). Lizzie Neblett to Will Neblett, 25 October 1863.
27. Lizzie Neblett to Will Neblett 28 August 1863; 15 and 5 April 1864.
28. Augusta Jane Evans, *Macaria; or, Altars of Sacrifice* (West & Johnston, Richmond, 1864), p. 163. On honor and violence, see Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1982) and Edward L. Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19th Century American South* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1984).
29. Catherine Clinton cites an unpublished study by Elizabeth Craven that finds, based on slave narratives and WPA interviews, that only 10% of slaves claimed to have been whipped by mistresses, 30% to have been ordered whipped by mistresses. Eighty percent reported that mistresses had little or no authority. Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (Pantheon, New York, 1982), p. 187. On women's assumption of their incapacities as slave managers see also Clarence L. Mohr, *On the Threshold of Freedom: Masters and Slaves in Civil War Georgia* (University of Georgia Press, Athens, 1986), p. 221; Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1970), p. 88; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, pp. 206, 313. For a perspective on women and violence in the postwar South, see Laura F. Edwards, 'Sexual Violence, Gender, Reconstruction and the Extension of Patriarchy in Granville County, North Carolina,' *North Carolina Historical Review* 88 (July 1991), pp. 237–260.
30. Lizzie Neblett to Will Neblett, 13 August 1863; 13 December 1863; 28 October 1863; 17 May 1864; 12 March 1864. Contemporary scholars of family violence emphasize the importance of distinguishing between punishment and abuse. Linda Gordon, in particular, stresses the significance of cultural and historical perspectives in

establishing that distinction. I view the disapproval of Lizzie's aunt and the anticipated disapproval of Will as indications that whipping a ten month old baby was not generally regarded as acceptable child-rearing in white families of nineteenth century Texas. See Linda Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence* (Viking Penguin, New York, 1988), pp. 5, 180. Historian Philip Greven makes the case for regarding all physical punishment as abuse in *Spare the Child: The Religious Roots of Punishment and the Psychological Impact of Physical Abuse* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1991). For a view of the repercussions of the violence of slavery within the black family, see Brenda Stevenson, 'Distress and Discord in Virginia Slave Families, 1830-1860,' in Carol Bleser, ed., *In Joy and Sorrow: Women, Family and Marriage in the Victorian South, 1830-1900* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1991).

31. No one has as yet systematically explored the role of lower class white women as agents of violence. Because I am here dealing with slave managing women, I am, of course, addressing the issue of privileged women. Gender prescriptions for southern women, as I have argued elsewhere, tended to try to deny class differences, but for contrasts in terms of behavior by class, adequate research simply has not been done to serve as the foundation for generalization. See Faust, 'Altars'. On family violence generally, see Linda Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives*; Demie Kurz, 'Social Science Perspectives on Wife Abuse: Current Debates and Future Directions,' *Gender and Society* 3 (December 1989), pp. 489-505; Wini Breines and Linda Gordon, 'The New Scholarship on Family Violence,' *Signs* 8 (1983), pp. 490-531. In keeping with my perspective here, Breines and Gordon emphasize the social context of family violence and its patterning in accordance with wider dimensions of social power. They also note that 'child abuse is the only form of family violence in which women are assailants as often as men.' See also Linda Gordon, 'Family Violence, Feminism and Social Control,' *Feminist Studies* 12 (Fall 1986), pp. 453-478; Elizabeth Pleck, *Domestic Tyranny: The Making of Social Policy Against Family Violence from Colonial Times to the Present* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1987) uses some data from the South. For other examples of slave mistresses demonstrating the tension between ideology and behavior regarding white women whipping slaves, see Emily Lyles Harris who whips, but finds it a 'painful necessity,' and Alice Palmer, who wants to whip but does not because she finds 'the idea of a lady doing such a thing . . . repugnant.' Emily Lyles Harris, 22 February 1865, Diary, Winthrop College; Alice Palmer to Hattie, 20 July 1865, Palmer Family Papers, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia.

32. Ninth Census of the United States, Population Schedules and Agricultural Schedules, National Archives. Lizzie Neblett to Will Neblett, 20 March 1864. Lizzie Neblett, *Reminiscence*, 25 May 1912; Lizzie Neblett, Scrapbook [1880s]. After the war, baby Bettie came to be called Lizzie, like her mother.