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Thy Will Lord, Not Mine: Parents, Grief, and Child Death in the Antebellum South

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B.A., Davidson College, 2005  
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An abstract of  
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the  
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2011

## ABSTRACT

Thy Will Lord, Not Mine: Parents, Grief, and Child Death in the Antebellum South  
By Katherine McVane Armstrong

This dissertation investigates the emotions and experiences of planter-class parents in Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia as they grieved the death of a child. Through analysis of prescriptive and consolation literature, sermons, periodicals, and especially the letters and diaries of bereft parents and the friends and family they turned to for support, I argue southern parents' profound difficulty aligning their feelings of loss with the expectations of their society defined their grief. Of these expectations, the idea that mothers and fathers must resign themselves to God's will—that they must say, "Thy will be done"—was the most pervasive, the most crucial, and the most difficult for grieving parents to meet.

Though all too common, the death of a child was a crushing event in the lives of antebellum southern parents that left mothers and fathers deeply saddened, often guilt-ridden or angry, and bewildered with the meaning of their lives in the midst of loss. The need to grieve in accordance with southern cultural dictates only exacerbated these emotions. Still, antebellum southerners' fought to do so, concerned with their honor and determined to demonstrate their piety and their adherence to gender ideals.

A child's death, her parents' grief, and the tension both catalyzed between southerners and their culture changed the tenor of plantation life, altering dynamics between husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters, and masters and slaves.

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clearly, and he did so with much appreciated humor and compassion. Dr. Sally McMillen has been a mentor, friend, and running inspiration since my undergraduate years at Davidson College. I am grateful that she has shared her expertise in southern women's history and pushed me harder than I sometimes liked. And finally, I owe an enormous thank you to my advisor, Dr. Jim Roark. Few people have the ability to encourage while offering criticism, guide while offering academic freedom, and simultaneously foster work/life balance and the expeditious completion of a dissertation, but Dr. Roark does these things effortlessly. I am lucky to have been his student and my work has benefited enormously from his thoughtful insights and vast knowledge of southern history. Perhaps more importantly, I am lucky to count Dr. Roark as a friend and am thankful for his generously-shared wisdom.

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Finally, as it was for southern mothers and fathers, so it is for me—my family is everything. My parents are responsible for my love of history and my love of learning, and I am thankful for their constant encouragement. My brothers don't know how much I appreciate their endless supply of comic relief and subtle reminders that finishing a dissertation while raising a child is an accomplishment of which to be proud. The Armstrongs brought me into their fold and continue to remind me that every day is cause for celebration. Though Matt, my husband, still hasn't figured out why I would want to study history, let alone parental grief and child death, he has supported me every step of the way in words and deeds. I hope I have made him proud. I am lucky to be married to such a genuinely good man. And, of course, there is Grace, who made me a mother, changed me forever, and gave life to the term "mother's love."



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**Introduction:**  
**“A Mortal cannot live without loving and cannot love without suffering”**

In early May 1823, Caroline Mordecai Plunkett was a contented wife and mother. Caroline and husband Achilles spent their days running a school in Warrenton, North Carolina, and raising their young sons, Frank and Charles. By the end of May that same year, Caroline was childless and devastated after Frank’s death from croup and Charles’ death from a similar disease days later. As Caroline grieved, members of her family—the wealthy and prominent Mordecais—sent their condolences. Writing in pitying tones about her plight, each correspondent offered heartfelt sympathy but reminded Caroline that, though childless, she was blessed to have a loving husband. It was for his sake that Caroline’s family called on her to steel herself, resign herself to God’s will, and carry on with her daily duties.<sup>1</sup>

Caroline composed herself temporarily, and although family letters described Achilles too as “afflicted” and “in the deepest distress,” he and Caroline managed to continue running the Warrenton Academy. In the evenings, as sister Ellen Mordecai described, Caroline worked to “restrain her feelings . . . for fear of increasing the anguish of her husband’s bosom.” The Mordecais were deeply impressed by the distraught father and his grieving, but composed, wife. “That is indeed true fortitude,” Ellen wrote, and “we must feel a respect for their grief.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Ellen Mordecai to Sam Mordecai, 18 May 1823, Mordecai Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC (SHC); Rachel Mordecai Lazarus to Caroline Mordecai Plunkett, 15 May 1823, Mordecai Family Papers, SHC; Rachel Mordecai Lazarus to Ellen Mordecai, 25 May 1823, Jacob Mordecai Papers, Perkins Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, NC (Duke).

<sup>2</sup> Ellen Mordecai to Rachel Mordecai Lazarus, 13 May 1823, Jacob Mordecai Papers, Duke; Ellen Mordecai to Rachel Mordecai Lazarus, 18 May 1823, Mordecai Family Papers, SHC; Ellen Mordecai to

Within a year, however, two more deaths shattered Caroline's ability to grieve in the manner deemed appropriate by her society. Achilles' death in 1824 left Caroline a pregnant widow. And, less than two years after the deaths of her other children, Caroline lost the infant son with whom she had been pregnant when Achilles died. In twenty months, Caroline found herself widowed and thrice-childless—an unthinkable tragedy in any person's life and a shattering identity crisis for a southern woman.

In the aftermath of these deaths, Rachel Mordecai Lazarus described her sister's situation as “too much—too much for weak humanity to endure.” Although Caroline professed her trust in God's benevolence and humbly submitted to His “unerring will,” she also admitted that she felt “most wretched,” and her sisters' letters indicate that it was Caroline's sorrow, not her faith, that most shaped her grief. In one letter, Ellen wrote that her sister was withering away, too distraught and preoccupied even to eat. In another, she relayed the gut-wrenching news that upon visiting, she found her “dear Caroline calm in the deepest affliction . . . lying [*sic*] on the bed and her last hope of happiness in this world a sweet and marble corpse beside her.”<sup>3</sup>

As the distressing image of Caroline cradling her dead infant in her arms suggests, Caroline never recovered from the blow dealt to her by her husband's and children's deaths. The Mordecais initially sympathized with Caroline's devastation, but they grew impatient in a matter of months. Caroline refused to return to the family's plantation and

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Solomon Mordecai, 14 May 1823, Mordecai Family Papers, SHC; John D. Plunkett to Ellen Mordecai, 16 May 1823, Jacob Mordecai Papers, Duke.

<sup>3</sup> Rachel Mordecai Lazarus to Caroline Mordecai Plunkett, 6 January 1825, Mordecai Family Papers, SHC; Caroline Mordecai Plunkett to Sam Mordecai, 9 January 1825, Jacob Mordecai Papers, Duke; Caroline Mordecai Plunkett to Rachel Mordecai Lazarus, 3 January 1825, Jacob Mordecai Papers, Duke; Ellen Mordecai to Sam Mordecai, undated 1825, Jacob Mordecai Papers, Duke. See also John D. Plunkett to Ellen Mordecai, 1 January 1825, Jacob Mordecai Papers, Duke, who explained that Caroline had not slept for 48 straight hours before her child's death.



**Figure 1-"Our Baby"**

to the care of her father, Jacob Mordecai, because she was unwilling to “resign the sad consolation of being near the graves of all she loved best on Earth.” She was also disinclined to leave her young nieces and nephews behind, eager as she was to lavish them with unfulfilled maternal devotion. Even as she spoke of resignation, then, Caroline clung to the only remaining links of her family with Achilles. By doing so, she betrayed her father, her family, and her society’s expectations for a grieving mother.<sup>4</sup> When Caroline did return to North Carolina, it was only to be committed to the insane asylum where she died in 1862.

Caroline’s situation was extreme, but child death—including miscarriages, stillbirths, and the deaths of children young and grown—was pervasive in antebellum America and traumatic for those who experienced it. Few parents escaped the trial of

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<sup>4</sup> Rebecca Mordecai to Rachel Mordecai Lazarus, 16 January 1824, SHC; Rebecca Mordecai to Caroline Mordecai Plunkett, 9 January 1825 and 16 January 1825, Mordecai Family Papers, SHC. See also Emily Simms Bingham, *Mordecai: Three Generations of a Southern Jewish Family, 1780-1865* (PhD diss., University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, 1998), 204, 228 and 333-335; Emily Bingham, *Mordecai: An Early American Family* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003), 113-115; remaining January 1825 letters in Jacob Mordecai Papers, Duke and Mordecai Family Papers, SHC.

losing a child and those who did were likely to support a friend or loved one through their loss. Like modern Americans, antebellum Americans, including southerners, understood child loss as *the* great tragedy. The acceptance that they had for death as a universal human experience did not extend to children's deaths; children were supposed to outlive their parents.

This study examines the emotions and experiences of well-to-do southern parents as they grieved the death of a child. By studying planter class mothers and fathers of the Old South—that is, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia—between 1800 and 1860, I seek to understand how elite southern parents reacted to the tragedy of child death and to uncover the personal and social repercussions of their grief. In order to understand parental bereavement, this dissertation evaluates the role of gender in parents' emotional expressions as well as the composition of parents' support networks. That is, who and what supported parents as they reoriented their lives in the wake of loss? It also examines the South's expectations for its mothers and fathers while their children lived, and especially when their children died, and measures how public guidelines for parenthood and "acceptable" mourning impacted the private reality of parents' grief. Finally, this dissertation will assess the impact of child death on the relationships between surviving family members and its effect on the most important unit of southern society—the family.

\* \* \*

Death stalked southern children relentlessly as it did all children in antebellum America. Accidents, diseases, poisonings, and medical ineptitude made infancy and childhood tenuous. As the census shows, in 1850, children under age five accounted for

38 percent of all deaths in the United States; in 1860, 43 percent. At the midpoint of the nineteenth century, 6 percent of children born alive in the Old South died before their first birthdays, and 12 percent did not live to age five. These statistics, of course, do not account for the frequent occurrence of miscarriage and stillbirth or for the deaths of older children. Although southern mortality statistics were not appreciably different than those in other parts of the country, and southerners shared many cultural beliefs with privileged northerners, demographic trends, cultural peculiarities, and a rural, slavery-dependent lifestyle made southerners' grief distinctive.<sup>5</sup> These characteristics also make the South a particularly fruitful context for a study of parental bereavement.<sup>6</sup>

Southern mothers bore more children than other American mothers, and consequently experienced the agony of child death more frequently. Elite white women married around age twenty in the antebellum South, while bourgeois northern women married in their mid-twenties. This earlier age at marriage helps account for historians' estimate that southern mothers raised seven to eight surviving children, while northern

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<sup>5</sup> Children under the age of one accounted for 16 percent of all southern deaths as well as 16 percent of deaths in the rest of the country. Children under the age of five comprised 33 percent of all deaths in the southern states, versus 35 percent in the rest of the nation. Evaluating children's deaths as a percentage of live births reveals that 7 percent of all southern babies born alive died before age one and 14 percent died by age five. In the rest of the country, those same statistics were 9 percent and 19 percent. While it appears, then, that northern child mortality rates were slightly higher than southern rates, 1850 census takers noted the possibility that a cholera epidemic in the urban North had skewed their mortality statistics. See Sally G. McMillen, *Motherhood in the Old South: Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Infant Rearing* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 166-176 and Tables III, V, VI, and VII in Appendix 1; U.S. Federal Census, *Mortality Statistics of the Seventh Census of the United States, 1850*, ed. by J.D.B. De Bow (Washington, D.C., 1850). See also Jane Turner Censer, *North Carolina Planters and Their Children, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 28.

<sup>6</sup> Censer, *North Carolina Planters and Their Children, 1800-1860*, 18-19. See also K. David Patterson, "Disease Environments of the Antebellum South," in Ronald L. Numbers and Todd L. Savitt, *Science and Medicine in the Old South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1989), 152-164. The existence of malaria, hookworm, and yellow fever also made the South a distinctive epidemiological region.

women raised an average of four to five.<sup>7</sup> Other cultural influences added to the reproductive effect of early marriage. Southern planter culture prized submission as an essential quality for ladies, making it less likely that women would voice their desire to limit reproduction or be listened to if they did. Additionally, the submission encouraged by a patriarchal society was exacerbated by southern women's tendency to marry significantly older men.<sup>8</sup>

Unlike the urban North, where limited space, the perception of overcrowding, and easier access to information about birth control encouraged couples to limit reproduction, elite southerners had few such restraints. Instead, the mandates of southern honor compelled men and women to be fruitful and multiply, and at least one historian suggests that the goal of maintaining planter-class control convinced planters that the births of elite white children must match or exceed those of yeomen, slaves, and free people of color.<sup>9</sup> Despite the pain, exhaustion, and anxiety of motherhood, maternity was

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<sup>7</sup> Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Women's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 40, 60; Sylvia D. Hoffert, *Private Matters: American Attitudes Toward Childbearing and Infant Nurture in the Urban North, 1800-1860*, *Women in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 6-7; Joan E. Cashin, ed., *Our Common Affairs: Texts from Women in the Old South* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 14; Wilma A. Dunaway, *Women, Work, and Family in the Antebellum Mountain South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 229-230; Richard H. Steckel, "Antebellum Southern White Fertility: A Demographic and Economic Analysis," *The Journal of Economic History* 40, no. 2 (June 1980): 331-334. Although child mortality rates were roughly equal in North and South in the mid-nineteenth century, maternal mortality rates for southern white women were twice that of northern white women. In 1850, one of every twenty-five white southern mothers died in childbirth. See also McMillen, *Motherhood in the Old South*, 81; Anya Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters: Young Women in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 225.

<sup>8</sup> Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 173-174, 204-226; Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 59-86.

<sup>9</sup> Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 173-174, 224-240; Sally G. McMillen, *Southern Women: Black and White in the Old South*, *The American History Series* (Arlington Heights, Ill: Harlan Davidson, 1992), 58-60; Susan E. Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions: Women, Fertility, and Family Limitation in America, 1760-1820* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 3-8, 15, 274-275. In her study, Klepp argues that American women began a "revolution" in 1763 intended to limit fertility and free women from a lifetime of childbearing. This revolution, however, developed at varying speeds in different regions of the country, and women in the South and West began exercising control over their fertility later—and



essential to women's social identities, whether white or black, free or enslaved.<sup>10</sup> For planter men, children evidenced virility and the ability to master dependents, and were, therefore, crucial to public reputation and masculinity.<sup>11</sup> Apart from their interest in honor, southern mothers and fathers also found great joy in parenthood and valued their children for their companionship and the love they brought to the family.

The rural, isolated nature of plantation life also distinguished southern parents' grief. Plantation mistresses depended upon their children for company, relied on motherhood for social importance and their sense of self-worth, and were exhausted by childbearing and the responsibilities of childcare and nursing. These factors intensified southern women's grieving at the death of a child and made their support networks imperative. Slaveholding life also, however, left women isolated from female friends and family, prompting them to cling to their faith and relationship with God and to rely heavily upon a network of support based on letter-writing. Even those women who

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with less frequency—than women in other regions. Klepp attributes this relatively slow rate of decline to southern elites' desire to ensure the survival of a master class, the difficulty of attaining midwives, contraceptives, and abortifacients on isolated plantations, and the patriarchal culture that made it difficult to convince husbands to limit fertility. See also Steckel, 331-350. Steckel argues that although the birth rate declined in the South over the course of the nineteenth-century, it declined at a rate of twenty-three percent, versus the 50 percent decline observed in the North. This decline, he suggests, had little to do with a desire to limit conceptions. Instead, the birth rate changed due to an increase in the average age and marriage and a decline in the number of women who married at all.

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*, Gender and American Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "Family and Female Identity in the Antebellum South: Sarah Gayle and her Family," in Carol Bleser, ed., *In Joy and in Sorrow: Women, Family, and Marriage in the Victorian South, 1830-1900*, Papers of the Fort Hill Conference on Southern Culture, held at Clemson University in the Spring of 1989 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); McMillen, *Motherhood in the Old South*, 1-6; Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 139-163; Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters*, 216-217. In Jabour's view, maternity was "the final stage of coming-of-age" in the Old South. A woman was not truly a woman until she bore a child.

<sup>11</sup> Southern honor also had the effect of heightening slaveholding southerners' concern with grief standards as the emphasis placed on behavior and public reputation required that bereft parents grieve within acceptable boundaries. Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 153; Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 118-137, 157-158; Lorri Glover, *Southern Sons: Becoming Men in the New Nation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 3-4, 104, 132-133; Steven M. Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South: Ritual in the Lives of the Planters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 128-131, 164-191. See also Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions*, 274-276.

resided in the South's urban areas were frequently separated from the support and companionship of their extended kin and isolated by southern social mores dictating that they never travel.<sup>12</sup> Men, meanwhile, found that plantation life made them an integral part of the domestic space in ways unfamiliar to urban northerners even as it forced them to leave for long stretches of time to conduct business.<sup>13</sup> This dichotomy, and conflicting social expectations for fathers, left men confused about how to treat their children in life and particularly devastated in the event of a child's death.

Finally, the ubiquity of evangelical Christian ideas in southern culture made southerners' expectations of appropriate mourning uniquely strict. Denominational differences and religious affiliation made little difference in how elite southerners mourned. When describing their grief, southerners universally expressed two hallmarks of evangelicalism: the need for spiritual rebirth, and the belief that the Bible was a revelation from God and a guide for proper behavior.<sup>14</sup> According to historian Christine Heyrman, 66 percent of southern whites were "adherents" of an evangelical church by

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<sup>12</sup> See Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 140-143; Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 69-70, 80-82; Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 165; Laura F. Edwards, *Scarlett Doesn't Live Here Anymore: Southern Women in the Civil War Era* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 41-42. Bertram Wyatt-Brown suggests that women's relationship with their children was intense as a means of compensating for "rage against their circumscribed fate and their dependence upon often untrustworthy men." Fox-Genovese and Clinton agree that white mistresses often turned to their children for companionship and support. While slave women had a community in the quarters, the plantation mistress might be the only white woman on the plantation, and often one of only a few white adults.

<sup>13</sup> Anya Jabour, *Marriage in the Early Republic: Elizabeth and William Wirt and the Companionate Ideal*, *Gender Relations in the American Experience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 41-55.

<sup>14</sup> Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 4-5; Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 170-174. See also Dolly Lunt Burge, *The Diary of Dolly Lunt Burge, 1848-1879*, ed. by Christine Jacobson Carter (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), xxvii. Historian Christine Carter's description of Dolly Lunt Burge reflects Heyrman's idea that southerners believe rebirth "came only at the behest of divine mercy" but could be encouraged by "self-abasing inwardness." Burge, Carter writes, "felt overwhelmed with a nebulous sense of her own sinfulness" and struggled with a continuous sense of guilt over her "failed efforts at complete submission to God's will."

1835. Church membership was only “the narrowest measure of evangelical influence,” she writes, because formal religion was only one of the many sources that contributed to southerners’ religious understandings of loss.<sup>15</sup> Because, as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese states, evangelical religious values “merged imperceptibly with the high culture and politics of elites,” even the least religious southerner was well-versed in, and likely beholden to, the evangelical ideals that pervaded periodicals, sermons, advice literature, bereavement manuals, and the written exchanges of pious southerners.<sup>16</sup> This cultural script had a marked effect on southerners’ grief. Parents had either to align with it or react against it; they could not find a niche within it. Parents’ profound difficulty in meeting the religious standards of grief in a society for which religion was an integral part of even secular culture and a critical part of maintaining honor provides a telling indicator of the depth of parental sorrow.

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This study focuses almost exclusively on the parental grief experienced by members of the antebellum South’s ruling class. Enslaved parents also grieved when their children died, though their grief was regularly overlooked or disregarded by their white owners, and yeomen parents, too, lost and mourned children.<sup>17</sup> Although infant

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<sup>15</sup> Heyrman, *Southern Cross*, 3-5 and 261-266; Censer, *North Carolina Planters and their Children*, 6. See also Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 160-163.

<sup>16</sup> Edward R. Crowther, “Holy Honor: Sacred and Secular in the Old South,” *The Journal of Southern History* 58, no. 4 (November 1992): 622-624, 630; Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 44; Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789-1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 4-12, 33-45.

<sup>17</sup> See Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006), 207-226; John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 179-181. See also Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, with an intro. by Deborah Gray White (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999); Dunaway, *Women, Work, and Family in the Antebellum Mountain South*, 229-230, 242-248.

and child mortality burdened southerners of every race and class, elite parents, because of their privilege, kept diaries and wrote letters recording the intricacies of their bereavement.<sup>18</sup> Planter class parents were also the most likely to read advice literature, sermons, bereavement manuals and periodicals that contributed to cultural ideas about grief and social standards for appropriate mourning. How they internalized or rejected these ideas offers telling insights into parental grief.

Southern mothers' reliance on written correspondence for support is just one reason women's voices predominate in this study. Southern advice literature deemed women the emotive sex and contended that the dangers of women's proclivity for unbridled emotion were matched only by the benefits of their natural piety, empathy, and ability to love. In these experts' opinions, God created mothers to shepherd the family through times of death and grief by blessing them with an innate ability to nurse the sick and nurture the suffering.<sup>19</sup> Men, though they loved their children, also had to balance their paternal affection with the need to demonstrate mastery—of slaves, wives, children, and themselves.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, planters were often physically absent from the site of mourning, drawn from the home on business even in crucial, life-altering moments.

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<sup>18</sup> I will examine the caveats in southerners' letters as a reflection of their grief in later chapters. Despite the limitations of such sources, they are particularly valuable in the context of southern life. As Stephen Stowe has argued, letters were often "the very substance of relationships otherwise strained by distance, gender differences, or emotion." Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South*, 4. See also William Decker, *Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America Before Telecommunications* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 9, 39-47.

<sup>19</sup> Jeffrey Steele, "The Gender and Racial Politics of Mourning in Antebellum America," in Peter N. Stearns and Jan Lewis, eds., *An Emotional History of the United States*, History of Emotions Series (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 92-93.

<sup>20</sup> McMillen, "Antebellum Southern Fathers and the Health Care of Children," 516-528.

Focusing on Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia allows me to observe how parents' reactions to child death changed over time even if the distinction between the Old South and the rest of the South was likely subtle, connected as southerners were by their letters and family ties. Unlike the states of the "Old Southwest," which grew dramatically during the antebellum period as planter sons and others moved westward in search of land and new opportunities, the Old South was firmly established by the turn of the nineteenth-century. Furthermore, a precedent exists for treating these states as a distinct region.<sup>21</sup>

I have limited this project to the sixty years between 1800 and the start of the Civil War. These years represent a distinct period in the history of grief and mourning in America.<sup>22</sup> Until the twentieth century, death was omnipresent in America and was a phenomenon with which all Americans were intimately acquainted; family members administered medical care in the home, people died at home, and friends and family prepared and buried the dead at home. Until the early nineteenth century, however, Americans understood death as a corporal, potentially fearful and condemnatory event. Social changes beginning in the eighteenth-century America, such as the declining birth rate, religious awakenings, redefined gender roles, new beliefs about love within the family, and, in the South, the increased amount of leisure time associated with slavery,

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<sup>21</sup> See, for example, David Patterson's contention that the "Atlantic Coastal Plain" represented an epidemiological sub-region within the South. Patterson in Numbers and Savitt, 163-164. See also Joan E. Cashin, *A Family Venture: Men and Women on the Southern Frontier* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 4-7. Joan Cashin treats Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina as the seaboard states in her study of the southern frontier and compares the cohesive culture of the seaboard to the relative chaos of the expanding frontier. A defining feature of Cashin's seaboard is the "elastic" nature of the family. Mother, father, and children were at the core of the family, but each member also depended on their relationships with extended kin.

<sup>22</sup> In several cases, I have referred to parents whose bereavement occurred during the War or in the postbellum years. I have done so, however, only when the child died at home and of causes unrelated to combat or battlefield diseases.

changed the way Americans perceived death. Death, historian Gary Laderman has written, was “disembodied” during the nineteenth century as emphasis shifted from the corpse and rituals surrounding its burial to the soul and its heavenly afterlife.<sup>23</sup> Rather than focusing on earthly separation, nineteenth-century Americans redefined their ideas about death and heaven in a way that allowed them to focus instead on reunion with loved ones after death.<sup>24</sup>

The Civil War marked a change in these trends. Catastrophic levels of death during the war—often on distant battlefields—forced new physical, spiritual and emotional ways of dealing with death. Americans continued to value “decent” burial for the dead but struggled to maintain earlier standards of decorum. Embalming, for instance, once maligned, was often required if those who died were to be buried at home. Hasty, coffin-less group burials, though they appalled the living, became common for both Union and Confederate dead. Letters notifying loved ones of a family member’s death, once focused on the deceased’s “Good Death” and calm resignation, were instead written by strangers who had watched the soldier die an agonizing death from battle wounds or disease, or who had not witnessed his death at all. The Civil War signaled the rise of a professional death industry and with it the gradual transition of death out of the

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<sup>23</sup> Philippe Ariés, *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. from the French by Patricia M. Ranum, Johns Hopkins Symposia in Comparative History, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 58; Lewis O. Saum, “Death in the Popular Mind of Pre-Civil War America,” in David E. Stannard, *Death in America*, with an intro by David E. Stannard (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), 32-37; James J. Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830-1920*, American Civilization (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 35-39; Lewis, *The Pursuit of Happiness*; Daniel Blake Smith, *Inside the Great House: Planter Life in Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 79, 265-66; David E. Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death: A Study in Religion, Culture, and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 70; Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes toward Death, 1799-1883* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 57.

<sup>24</sup> Lewis, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, 96-102; Philippe Ariés, *The Hour of Our Death* (New York: Knopf, 1981), 460-462.

home and into the hospital. It also signaled a change in the way Americans mourned, forcing people to look for new meanings of death. Perhaps most importantly, after six decades of endless discussions of death and heaven, the suffering of the Civil War, Drew Gilpin Faust writes, “exceeded language and understanding.”<sup>25</sup>

Several other research frameworks have shaped this project. First, the work of historians of emotion informed this study. Jan Lewis, Carol Stearns, Peter Stearns and others contend that we must distinguish between emotions and emotional standards. While emotions such as sorrow in times of bereavement, for example, alter relatively little over time, socially and culturally dictated emotional standards change a great deal. Emotional standards, Lewis and Stearns write, “shape the way other people’s emotions, and one’s own, are perceived and evaluated,” and “normally mold, without fully determining, the actual incidence and intensity of certain emotions.”<sup>26</sup> Studying southern parental bereavement, then, requires an evaluation not only of what people felt—or at least, of what they said they felt—but also of how they believed they should feel.

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<sup>25</sup> Laderman, *The Sacred Remains*, 9; Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 62-74, 93, 170-210; Mark S. Schantz, *Awaiting the Heavenly Country: The Civil War and America’s Culture of Death* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008). See also Ariés, *Western Attitudes toward Death* for a discussion of the changes in American death and grief culture in the twentieth century.

<sup>26</sup> Jan Lewis and Peter N. Stearns, “Introduction,” in Stearns and Lewis, *An Emotional History of the United States*, 5, 11; Carol Z. Stearns and Peter N. Stearns, “Introduction,” in Carol Z. Stearns and Peter N. Stearns, eds., *Emotion and Social Change: Toward a New Psychohistory* (New York: Homes & Meier, 1988), 7-8; Carol Z. Stearns and Peter N. Stearns, “Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards,” *The American Historical Review* 90 (1985), 824-827. For more on emotions, see also Barbara H. Rosenwein, “Worrying about Emotions in History,” *The American Historical Review* 107, no. 3 (June 2002), 824-825, 842; William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 1-135; Catherine Lutz and Lila Abu-Lughod, eds., *Language and the Politics of Emotion*, Studies in Emotion and Social Interaction (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), particularly Lutz, “Engendered Emotion: Gender, Power, and the Rhetoric of Emotional Control in American Discourse.”

In examining emotions and emotional standards alike, I have relied on definitions of bereavement, grief, and mourning offered by psychologist and bereavement expert, Catherine Sanders. Bereavement, she writes, “is an objective fact . . . If one has experienced a significant loss, one is in a state of bereavement.” Grief, “represents the particular reactions one experiences while in that state.” And mourning, finally, is “the culturally defined acts that are usually performed after a death.”<sup>27</sup> Just as emotions and emotional standards are unique, so are bereavement, grief, and mourning.

For southern parents, grief and mourning universally followed bereavement. Indeed, this study hinges on planter parents’ powerful emotions in the aftermath of a child’s death. Much of southerners’ grieving likely took place privately, probably in hushed tones and tearful conversations between family members, and never made it into writing. Even so, a great deal of emotion did make it onto paper and the evidence from elite southerners’ personal papers and family burial plots decisively counters the conclusions of family historians like Lawrence Stone who have contended that high child death rates made parents less emotionally attached to their offspring.<sup>28</sup>

In many ways, parenthood was a hopeless task. Nineteenth-century America’s high infant and child mortality rates as well as its high maternal mortality rates made it

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<sup>27</sup> Catherine M. Sanders, *Grief: The Mourning After: Dealing with Adult Bereavement*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1999), 15; Lyn Lofland, “The Social Shaping of Emotion: The Case Study of Grief,” *Symbolic Interaction* 9 (1985), 172-173.

<sup>28</sup> Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 246-249, 651; John R. Gillis, “From Ritual to Romance: Toward an Alternative History of Love,” in Stearns and Stearns, *Emotion and Social Change*, 89-92, 106-110. See also Peter Uhlenberg, “Death and the Family,” in Michael Gordon, ed., *The American Family in Social-Historical Perspective*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1983), 169-177. See also Mary E. Stovall “‘To Be, To Do, and to Suffer’: Responses to Illness and Death in the Nineteenth-Century Central South,” *Journal of Mississippi History* 52, no. 2 (1990), 97-108. Mary Stovall’s argument falls at the opposite end of the spectrum. She perceives southern parents as “unconstrained by societal notions of ‘proper’ restrained grief,” and argues that black and white southerners expressed their emotions openly and “anticipated sympathy and understanding.”



unlikely that a parent would be outlived by all his children. Every parent nationwide should have experienced anticipatory grief—that is, lessened grief because they expected their loss. Because the risk to their children was so high, even those parents whose children’s deaths came suddenly and without warning could be said to have expected the loss. Instead, historian Paul Rosenblatt contends, “the risks of death, the pain, and other trials of pregnancy and childbirth may have led to greater valuing of children, particularly by women. To have risked and invested so much could not be easily justified if one failed to value the product of that risk and investment.” Furthermore, though omnipresent, death was unpredictable in antebellum America. Parents could anticipate the end when their child contracted a widely-feared disease or suffered a catastrophic accident, but even common ailments like colds and coughs could signal the onset of deadly disease. Friends and family members expressed more earnest sympathy at sudden, multiple, or particularly gruesome deaths, but parents’ expressions of grief differed little based on the circumstances of their loss.<sup>29</sup> Even within the hierarchy of the patriarchal plantation household, parents valued each of their children as individuals as well as valuing them for the unique role they played in family dynamics. Despite the constant specter of death, then, losing a child ripped parents to the core each time it happened.

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Because it impacted southerners both as individuals and as social beings, parental grief affected southern households and society. Antebellum southerners, particularly planters and plantation mistresses, have been the subjects of many excellent historical

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<sup>29</sup> Paul C. Rosenblatt, *Bitter, Bitter Tears: Nineteenth-Century Diarists and Twentieth-Century Grief Theories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 53-59; McMillen, *Motherhood in the Old South*, 171.

studies, but the intricacies and repercussions of parental bereavement have been largely overlooked by historians. In his massive study of the South's master class, for example, William Kauffman Scarborough notes of child death, "One can only imagine the emotional toll inflicted upon planter families, especially on mothers, by such distressing losses." Without acknowledging that historians need not "imagine" slaveholding parents' grief since they wrote about it in great detail, Scarborough quickly concludes, "God was seen as the ultimate arbiter . . . they were reconciled to His will, whether for good or ill."<sup>30</sup> Jane Turner Censer, too, gives the texture of bereft parents' grief only a cursory evaluation, arguing that planters' concern with piety and decorum caused them to adhere to a "model of parental mourning that suppressed long or excessively emotional grief."<sup>31</sup> Both scholars fail to cite the struggle beneath the decorum and the religious clichés.

Historians of southern women have evaluated parental grief more thoroughly than others, but have done so only as one piece of their studies on other elements of plantation mistresses' lives. Catherine Clinton, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, and Sally McMillen correctly suggest that women sought consolation from their faith when a child died and rarely challenged the benevolence of a wise Providence. McMillen also references women's ultimate dissatisfaction with religious consolations. Although these scholars recognize the significance of women's grief, however, they do not analyze its nuances or

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<sup>30</sup> William Kauffman Scarborough, *Masters of the Big House: Elite Slaveholders of the Mid-Nineteenth-Century South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 19, 60.

<sup>31</sup> Censer, *North Carolina Planters and their Children, 1800-1860*, 31. See also Lewis O. Saum, "Death in the Popular Mind of Pre-Civil War America," in Stannard, *Death in America*, 34-48; Rosenblatt, *Bitter, Bitter Tears*. Lewis O. Saum argues that "enforced intimacy with death," not just religious beliefs, resulted in antebellum Americans' "stoicism" toward death. Like Scarborough and Censer, Saum overlooks the struggle that went on beneath the surface of the public, stoic façade. Psychologist Paul Rosenblatt has evaluated nineteenth-century loss more thoroughly than any historians, but has done so as a means of re-evaluating twentieth-century grief theories rather than as a means of understanding nineteenth-century loss.

evaluate the fraught path women travelled as they moved from seeking religious consolation to recognizing its impotence as a salve for their pain.<sup>32</sup>

Perhaps because the planter father is a shadowy figure in current historiography generally and because elite southern men often felt conflicted about their own role in the family, planter fathers' grief has received still less scholarly attention. Historians like Mary Stovall and Bertram Wyatt-Brown mention fathers' grief but do not examine the intricacies of their emotions. Stovall notes that white men mourned in spite of the social stigma that discouraged their public expressions of sorrow, but she disregards the tension they felt in doing so. Wyatt-Brown, though he notes that many fathers became "distracted" when their children sickened or died, suggests the concern fathers showed was "perhaps, to make up for prior inattention."<sup>33</sup> Importantly, neither historians of women nor those of men sufficiently emphasize the continuous, grueling fight for resignation that defined southern parents' grief and shaped their lives.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 157; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "Religion in the Lives of Slaveholding Women of the Antebellum South," in Lynda L. Coon, Katherine J. Haldane, and Elisabeth W. Sommer, *That Gentle Strength: Historical Perspectives on Women in Christianity* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), 219; McMillen, *Motherhood in the Old South*, 57, 76-77, 172-173; Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters*, 226. See also Hoffert, *Private Matters*, 177, 195. Hoffert echoes the ideas of scholars of southern women in her study of mothers in the urban North. Bereaved northern mothers, "tended to accept the death of their children as the result of an incomprehensible plan devised by an inscrutable God, and found comfort in the conviction that their children had gone to heaven and were probably better off there."

<sup>33</sup> Stovall, "'To Be, To Do, and To Suffer,'" 103-108. See also Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, xviii, 120-137. See also McMillen, "Antebellum Southern Fathers and the Health Care of Children"; Censer, *North Carolina Planters and their Families*, 16-17, 20-34.

<sup>34</sup> Historian Craig Friend is one of very few scholars to make grief and child death the focus of an article-length study. Friend correctly distinguishes between the idealized deathbed scene of southern publications and the reality of southerners' grief, writing, "the deathbed was more often heartbreaking than romantic," and southern parents' reactions to their children's deaths were far from passive. Instead, Friend writes, parents "grieved deeply over deceased children, expressing guilt, confusion, and frustration at their helplessness." Friend also suggests, however, that "While they did find comfort in imagining their children in heaven, they were not hesitant to express anger with or openly question God's will." See also Scott Stephan, *Redeeming the Southern Family: Evangelical Women and Domestic Devotion in the Antebellum South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 183-220; Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American*

For all Americans, historian Stephanie Coontz contends, family was both a social institution and “an ideological concept through which people express their ideals about how biological and social reproduction ought to be coordinated.” Within the family, Americans have navigated emotions and personal relationships and have modeled social priorities and hierarchies on a small scale. For nineteenth-century southerners in particular, family was the foundation of the social order and the hierarchies of both were a reflection of divine will.<sup>35</sup> Within the household, all white men demonstrated their mastery, slaveholding men practiced their paternalism, women evidenced their social worth by bearing and raising children, and plantation mistresses demonstrated their ladyhood through piety and submission.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, the southern household had religious and social importance as the site where morality and piety were taught and enforced. Finally, southerners’ use of narratives about domestic relations—particularly the relationship between mother and child—as a means of forging a southern identity also lent the planter family cultural importance. The relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters, and free people and slaves, then, had

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*Culture* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1988), 202-216; Carl Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 73-74.

<sup>35</sup> Stephanie Coontz, *The Social Origins of Private Life: a History of American Families, 1600-1900* (London: Verso, 1988), 11-13; C. Vann Woodward, “Introduction,” xxiii, Drew Gilpin Faust, “Epilogue,” 253-254, and Brenda Stevenson, “Distress and Discord in Virginia Slave Families, 1830-1860,” 103-124, in Bleser, *In Joy and In Sorrow*. See also Peter W. Bardaglio, *Reconstructing the Household: Families, Sex, and the Law in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), xi-xii.

<sup>36</sup> V. Lynn Kennedy, *Born Southern: Childbirth, Motherhood, and Social Networks in the Old South* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 11; Jabour, *Scarlett’s Sisters*, 216-217. See also Stephan, *Redeeming the Southern Family*, 133-182.

crucial public repercussions.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the relationships forged at home and the public ideals they reflected were important enough to southerners to fight a war in their defense.

Children's deaths threatened the integrity of the family. Bereft parents were brought to their knees by grief; mothers were wracked with guilt, and fathers were overcome with anger and despair. Although concerns about family, religion, and honor motivated parents to carry on with the necessities of daily life, with mothers and fathers alike stifling their public expressions of sorrow, those for whom they performed recovery were rarely fooled by their feigned resignation and recovery.

Rather than acknowledging the lasting nature of their grief, southern parents touted the ideal of resignation to God's will. For all the rhetoric of resignation, belief in God's benevolence, and evangelical tendency to expect chastisement for their sinfulness, planter parents could not accept their children's deaths without resistance. Neither, however, did they lose their faith or their desire for social acceptance. How grieving parents navigated between their beliefs about proper parenting and appropriate mourning and their knowledge that those standards did not coincide with the realities of their grief is the subject of this dissertation.

The great, glaring oversight in this work is, of course, the absence of slaves, who, though a significant presence in slaveholders' lives, are largely absent from their descriptions of death. Within the plantation South, slavery and family were inextricably linked. Historian Craig Friend contends that "the emotional intersection of family with the racial constructions of southern households" was the defining characteristic of childhood death in the South. As Eugene Genovese has argued, planters' descriptions of

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<sup>37</sup> Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977); Kennedy, *Born Southern*, 3-14.

their families, “white and black,” was not “moonlight-and-magnolias apologetics.” However hollow the reality of the paternalist ideal, slaveholders prided themselves on their paternalism toward slaves. In this study, however, despite the centrality of family, slavery will be at once critical and invisible. Genovese’s insight that the relationship between enslaved and enslaver was “so complex and ambivalent that neither could express the simplest of human feelings without reference to the other,” does not hold true in times of loss.<sup>38</sup>

The rural nature of plantation slavery and the significance that slaves lent to the master class’s behavior at home shaped elite whites’ grief in critical ways. Individual slaves, though, did not feature in bereft planter parents’ support networks. As Steven Stowe has argued, “the proximity of certain black individuals to the white elite should not in the least imply intimacy.”<sup>39</sup> On occasion, planter parents expressed empathy for bondsmen and women grieving the death of a child or suggested that a slave nurse shared their grief at the death of a white child in the household. More often, child death seems to have cemented the distance between the family, white and black.<sup>40</sup>

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Writing about a topic as grim as children’s deaths and parents’ grief seems to demand an explanation. This project began with my advisor, James Roark’s, instruction

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<sup>38</sup> Friend, “Little Eva’s Last Breath,” in Friend and Jabour, 64; Eugene Genovese, “Our Family, White and Black’: Family and Household in the Southern Slaveholders’ World View,” in Bleser, *In Joy and In Sorrow*, 78-79,87; Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books), 1976, 3.

<sup>39</sup> Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South*, xvi-xvii.

<sup>40</sup> For a discussion of white women’s beliefs about black women’s childrearing abilities see Chapter Five. See also Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 47-48; Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 137; McMillen, “Mothers Sacred Duty: Breast-Feeding Patterson among Middle-and Upper-Class Women in the Antebellum South,” *The Journal of Southern History* 51, no. 3 (August 1985): 333-356; Kennedy, *Born Southern*, 192-193.

to me to “wallow in the archives” in preparation for a seminar paper. His suggestion had exactly the effect he had intended; it led me back to southern family papers. Ultimately, it also led to a black-trimmed condolence letter and a much larger project. The letter, written to Virginia Myers McBlair by her friend Betty Namson, expressed sympathy following the death of McBlair’s young child. Amidst her verbose sentimentalism Namson also wrote of an acquaintance who had assured Betty that she believed her children were better off in heaven. Namson hoped her anecdote would encourage McBlair to recognize her child’s departure from “a world so rife with suffering” as a blessing from God.<sup>41</sup> In the same breath that she recognized McBlair’s pain, then, Namson also implied that her friend’s agony was inappropriate for a Christian woman. Although this sentiment initially shocked me, I soon discovered it was a central tenant of the South’s extraordinarily cohesive cultural expectation for those who suffered the loss of a child.

If immersing myself in expressions of other’s suffering was strange to begin with, it became stranger still when I discovered I was pregnant shortly before embarking on a summer-long research trip. I was keenly aware of the irony of spending weeks immersed in others’ grief at the deaths of their children at that same time I looked forward to the birth of my own. Later, writing about parents’ crushing worry over their sick children while my own healthy daughter napped was equally disquieting. For several weeks after my daughter’s birth, I could not write at all. Like many new mothers my love for Grace was matched only by the gripping fear of losing her. Given this new insight, how could I ever adequately describe the agony experienced by a bereft southern parent?

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<sup>41</sup> Betty Namson to Virginia Myers McBlair, February 1845, Virginia Myers McBlair Papers, Emory.

The difficulty of the task was exactly the reason I continued it. The letters and diary entries I have relied upon to reveal the intricacies of southern grief were so heart-breakingly routine in southerners' lives that they have barely warranted mention in subject guides and finding aids. Like childbearing and parenthood, death and grief have often been seen as too mundane and apolitical to warrant mention. And yet, even if children's deaths were common in southerners' lives, they were hardly mundane. Southern planter parents were no less tortured by the loss of a child than parents who suffer the same loss are today, but in antebellum years the event was so common that few perceived it as reason for life to cease, even temporarily. Parents could mourn, but only as they counted their other blessings, continued to praise God, and carried on with daily duties. Perhaps because the subjects of this study moved on so quickly, historians have brushed past their grief too, failing to take notice of how significant a role grief and child death played in southerners' lives.

Before I realized that southern fathers mourned their children just as intensely as mothers, I focused my research efforts on southern women's expressions of grief. Initially, I wanted southern mothers to express anger at being asked to move on with life after losing one—and in many cases, more than one—child.<sup>42</sup> I expected them to rail against a God whom they believed both ordained them to motherhood and then took their children to punish them for idolatry or to teach them “benevolent” lessons. I hoped that when they received the condolence letters that called for them to “kiss the rod” that chastened them and give thanks to God for their children's deaths, mothers would lash out, commenting on the absurdity of such requests. I have spent the duration of this

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<sup>42</sup> Francis and Margaret Dickins, for example, lost four of their nine children and Kate and Gaston Meares suffered the deaths of at least three of their six children.



project trying to blunt my search for women's backlash against a system that set them up to feel like failures and then silenced them when they grieved the death of their children and the illusion that they could be perfect. As much as I wanted to find the latent feminism described by Catherine Clinton, I instead discovered the culture of resignation described by historians like Joan Cashin and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese. Southern women accepted, valued, and helped to define the boundaries for grief assigned to them by authors and clergy even as they struggled to uphold them.<sup>43</sup>

Gradually, I have also grown to wonder what good it could have done southern parents to question their faith and reject God in their times of loss. In a society so focused on God, and for people so isolated from support by marriage and cultural standards if not by geography, how could losing faith in God make the death of a child less painful? The anger and demands for justice that I so hoped for would have required an overhaul of southern culture and the way that women at least viewed their place in it. Women accepted their place in society, but mothers shaped southern culture as much as southern culture shaped them. Experts believed southern mothers could not perform their maternal duties without guidance, and southern mothers, it seems, agreed. "Experts" rarely had the answers, but southern mothers recognized they did not always have them either. Just as I have turned to advice books on "sleep-training," potty-training, and discipline, and then determined which advice to accept and which to reject, southern mothers sought advice in areas where they believed they fell short—particularly medical

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<sup>43</sup> See Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*; Joan E. Cashin, *Our Common Affairs: Texts from Women in the Old South* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Fox Genovese in Koon, Haldane, and Summer, 207-209; Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 47, 96-97. See also Jean E. Friedman, *The Enclosed Garden: Women and Community in the Evangelical South, 1830-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), xi-xii, 11, 22, 37.

care and coping with loss—and then discerned which of them was useful. In short, southern mothers—and fathers I have come to learn—could simultaneously accept and reject cultural standards and advice, shaping themselves, their families, and their society in the process.

**Chapter 1**  
**“To love children is the dictate of our nature”: Motherhood and  
 Fatherhood in the Old South**

In a letter to his sister Fanny, John Randolph outlined his opinions about womanhood and motherhood. “Do you know,” he asked, “that, next to a sweet disposition, I consider cheerfulness as the most valuable quality a woman can possess.” A sweet disposition, he went on to explain, not only made a woman pleasant company, but ensured the proper upbringing of her children. Randolph expounded, “I do not believe it possible that the offspring of a peevish, morose woman should be free from the same fait [*sic*], especially if brought up with her and I have no hesitation in saying that the mother of a family, who is not cheerful . . . does her husband & her children one of the most serious injuries that she can inflict upon them.” The woman with sufficient cause for expressing sadness, Randolph believed, was the rare exception.<sup>1</sup> Even if they had cause, most women should put aside their worries and feign cheerfulness in order to raise happy, well-adjusted children. By doing so, they succeeded at their most important social role—motherhood.

Fanny, like most elite southern women, would have agreed with Randolph’s conviction that women had a responsibility to maintain a pleasant demeanor. His words reflect widely-discussed and widely-accepted social expectations for southern women. Eliza Wilkins Bruce of Virginia, for instance, echoed the words of many mothers when she scolded herself for indulging her grief in a letter to her husband. Although she wished for her husband’s return to the family plantation, Bruce also knew that his homecoming would be a bittersweet reminder that she had hoped to present him with a

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<sup>1</sup> John Randolph to Fanny Bland Coalter, 31 December 1805, Tucker-Coalter Family Papers, Duke.

daughter who could “walk and say Father.” Instead, her little one was dead. Depressed and lonely, Bruce shared her feelings with her husband because, she wrote, she had no one else in whom to confide. She also, however, offered a last minute attempt to comply with social expectations by assuring him, “I will not write anymore about it. The indulgence of such feelings unfits me for the other duties I have to perform.”<sup>2</sup> Eliza knew that she would be wise to mask her sorrow with a cheerful façade and carry on with her duties.

Although elite southerners understood male and female “spheres” differently than well-to-do northerners, they shared a belief that because men and women were fundamentally different, their roles within the family and within society should be too. As Randolph’s letter reflects, southerners believed that a woman’s proper role was to be a mother. In the words of popular author Lydia Howard Sigourney, “The love of children, in man is a virtue; in woman, an element of nature.” In fact, Sigourney stated without hesitation, because it was a “dictate of nature” for women to love children, any woman without an overpowering maternal instinct was “not right.”<sup>3</sup>

While elite southern women sought fulfillment and acceptance solely within the plantation household as devoted, sacrificing mothers, planter men sought balance between their private and public roles, and the distinction between the two was often blurry. Gender expectations for southern men pulled them in the competing directions of

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Douglas “Eliza” Wilkins Bruce to James Coles Bruce, Undated 1854, Bruce Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, VA (VHS).

<sup>3</sup> Lydia Howard Sigourney, *Letters to Mothers* (Hartford: Hudson and Skinner, 1838), vii, 47-49.

business pursuits, political service, mastery of the household, devoted fatherhood, and maintenance of honor.

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Expectations for appropriate motherhood and fatherhood grew out of a conversation between public discourses led by authors, clergymen, doctors, and individual beliefs. Book authors and their readers, periodical contributors and subscribers, pastors and their congregants, and friends and relatives writing and talking to one another participated in an exchange of ideas aimed at defining what was expected of parents during their children's lives and deaths. The ways that elite southern parents experienced and described parenthood, child death, and grief are the topic of later chapters. This chapter will examine the ideas presented within southern culture about what it meant to be mothers and fathers, and chapter three will evaluate ideas about grief and consolation.

By examining the way that "experts" wrote about parenthood and bereavement, I hope to establish the boundaries within which parents experienced child death. Psychologist Paul C. Rosenblatt argues that modern parents' responses to grief are limited by culturally established "domains."<sup>4</sup> It seems probable that the same concept applied to nineteenth-century grief even if the cultural boundaries were different. Examining ideas about parenthood and grief that circulated in the antebellum public realm offers insight into the mental "domains" which existed for individuals living in Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia. Understanding the context of southern elites' grief is essential to evaluating it.

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<sup>4</sup> Paul C. Rosenblatt, *Parent Grief: Narratives of Loss and Relationships*, Series in Death, Dying and Bereavement (Philadelphia: Taylor and Francis, 2000), 2-3.

Printed sources contributed to southern cultural beliefs about both parenthood and proper mourning. Although men, particularly ministers, physicians, and teachers, usually authored advice books and sermons, women made substantial contributions to periodicals as authors and editors. Church organizations, too, spread the word by way of publications. *The Home Circle*, *The Ladies' Repository*, and the *Southern Lady's Companion* are just three of the many southern periodicals published by religious organizations. Regardless of authorship, few discernable distinctions exist between the remarks made in sources with religious authors and those authored and edited by laymen and women. Religion was simply too entrenched in nineteenth-century American culture for truly secular publications to exist.<sup>5</sup>

Authors' worldviews mattered little, of course, if no one read them, but historians agree that elite white southerners comprised a literate, eager audience. The reasons southerners turned to advice literature differed by age, gender, and stage of life. Historians Lorri Glover and Steven M. Stowe have each argued that guides for young men flooding the nineteenth-century market appealed to southern parents worried about cultivating their sons' gentility and leadership skills. When southern sons left home to attend school, planter parents worried about the effects of college debauchery on their sons. Reading advice literature that, in Lorri Glover's words, suggested gentility was "not simply internal" but "required self-conscious cultivation, public display and societal affirmation," armed planter parents with the rhetoric to remind sons about the importance of reputation, offering them a modicum of control. For husbands and fathers, advice literature had the added benefit of calling on female dependents to be cheerful,

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<sup>5</sup> Catherine M. Kerrison, "By the Book: Advice and Female Behavior in the Eighteenth-Century South" (PhD diss., The College of William and Mary, 1999), 51.

submissive, and constantly helpful—a welcome message in a patriarchal society. Indeed, historian Catherine Kerrison argues, for women, literacy hardly mattered—if the material in advice literature served men’s interests, women would hear it read aloud to them.<sup>6</sup>

Although they might have learned what advice literature had to say even if illiterate, elite southern women could and did read. In the years after the Revolution, Americans’ desire to mold their children into educated citizens resulted in an emphasis on education for females as well as for males. After all, how could an uneducated mother be expected to educate her children? According to Catherine Clinton, southern women profited from this emphasis, routinely borrowing and exchanging books with friends and taking joy from reading amidst the isolation of their lives.<sup>7</sup>

Book lists are rare, but plantation mistresses’ commonplace albums provide evidence that advice literature and periodicals were among the material that women exchanged with one another. For elite antebellum women, Catherine Kerrison argues, “commonplace books were repositories of treasured words culled from wider readings.” Southern mothers frequently transcribed poems and other quotes from the periodicals and

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<sup>6</sup> John E. Murray, “Family, Literacy, and Skill Training in the Antebellum South: Historical—Longitudinal Evidence from Charleston,” *The Journal of Economic History* 64, no. 3 (September 2004): 774-775; Lorri Glover, “An Education in Southern Masculinity: The Ball Family of South Carolina in the New Republic,” *Journal of Southern History* 69, no. 1 (Feb 2003): 43-51; Steven M. Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South: Ritual in the Lives of the Planters*, New Studies in American Intellectual and Cultural History (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 128-129; Kerrison, “By the Book,” 117. See also Steven M. Stowe, “The Rhetoric of Authority: The Making of Social Values in Planter Family Correspondence,” *Journal of American History* 73, no.4 (March 1987), 916, 922-929. Glover and Stowe suggest that the many iterations of Lord Chesterfield’s *Letters to His Son* were particularly popular.

<sup>7</sup> Carl N. Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 73-75; Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman’s World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 124-125, 138, 172-173. For a description of “republican motherhood” and new ideas about education for women see Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty’s Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Cornell: Cornell University Press), 1980; Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture by the University of North Carolina Press, 1980). See also Anya Jabour, *Scarlett’s Sisters: Young Women in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 47-82.

books they read into their commonplace albums, evidencing their preferred reading material. North Carolina resident Juliana Paisley Gilmer, for example, kept a scrapbook that included clippings and transcriptions from the *New York Daily*, the *Western Democrat*, the *Evening Gazette*, and the *Presbyterian Banner* among others publications.<sup>8</sup> Commonplace albums like Gilmer's also reflect women's evaluations of their reading. North Carolina native Ann Swann included the note, "(true!)" after transcribing some remarks about the difficulties of contending with grief.<sup>9</sup> Simply noting a source indicated a woman's belief in its importance.

As evidenced by women's commonplace albums, periodicals were particularly popular among southerner readers, perhaps because they were affordable and available by mail. Historian Candy Gunther Brown contends that in 1850, twenty-eight religious periodicals circulated 50,000 copies to southern readers, meaning that there was one subscription for every ninety-six people. Historian Franklin Mott estimates some 685 periodicals (excluding newspapers) circulated in the United States by 1850. Many of these lasted just months, but others ran for decades. *The Christian Index*, for example, began publication in 1829 and is still in print. Of these nearly 700 magazines, publishers

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<sup>8</sup> Kerrison, "By The Book," 153-157; Juliana Paisley Gilmer Scrapbook, pages 5-29, Addison Gorgas Brenizer Papers, SHC.

<sup>9</sup> Ann Sophia Green Swann's Commonplace Album, Poems commemorating Mary, 6 November 1835, "Grief," September 1840, "The Death of the Household Darling," April 1839, "The Dead: I love them Still," Swann Family Papers, SHC. See also Undated entries beginning in the late 1840s, Mary E. Baxter Gresham Commonplace Book, Duke; Copy of Rev. A. A. Lipscomb, "Chastened Grief. At the Grave of a Son," published in the *Sunday Magazine*, Undated, Stanley Family Papers, Hargrett Special Collections Library, University of Georgia, Athens, GA (UGA); 16 January 1862, Diaries of Fannie Page Hume, Shirley and Albert Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA (UVA); Emma P. Alston's Cookbook, Undated, Alston Family Papers, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, SC (SCHS); Amelia M. Howard, "On Death," undated; "A Mother's Affection," undated; "To the memory of my infant daughter," 15 November 1837; Eliza Jane, "Affection beyond the grave," 8 April 1835, Louisa Adeline Muldrow Album, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC (SCL). Poetry reminiscent of that which appeared in published sources filled Louisa Muldrow's commonplace album. See also Undated 1854 poetry, Mary Davis Brown Album, SCL.



intended some—Mott calls the exact number “impossible to fix” given the overlap between women’s magazines, “Home Journals,” “Family Visitors,” “Household Monthlies,” and religious magazines focused on women—for a female audience, others for southerners more broadly, and a smaller subset still for southern women or southern men in particular.<sup>10</sup> Despite Mott’s exhaustive study of American magazines, it is difficult to say exactly what southern parents read, though *The Southern Literary Messenger*, the *Virginia Evangelical and Literary Magazine*, *The Home Circle*, and the many iterations of *The Southern Christian Advocate* had particularly long runs in print. Periodicals came and went with dizzying frequency, parents read magazines to which they did not subscribe, making circulation estimates uncertain, and periodicals culled material from many sources, often citing other periodicals.<sup>11</sup>

Southerners’ interest in reading materials published outside the South makes determining their reading preferences still more difficult. In many cases, southern authors published with northern presses. James Ewell’s self-consciously southern medical manual, *The Planter's and Mariner's Medical Companion*, for example, was

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<sup>10</sup> Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789-1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 148; Franklin Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines, Volume 2: 1850-1865* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1938), 4, 9-11, 56; Jonathan Daniel Wells, “A Voice in the Nation: Women Journalists and the Early Nineteenth-Century South,” *American Nineteenth Century History* 9, no. 2 (June 2008): 166, 168-169, 174-176. See also William A. Alcott, *The Young Husband; or, Duties of Man in the Marriage Relation*, Family in America (Boston, 1838; reprint New York: Arno Press, 1972), 191; Mary E. Chamberlaine to Mr. John B. Clark, 1852, Alston Family Papers, SHC. See also Eliza Middleton Fisher to Mary Herring Middleton, 19 December 1854, in Eliza Middleton Fisher, *Best Companions: Letters of Eliza Middleton Fisher and Her Mother, Mary Hering Middleton, from Charleston, Philadelphia, and Newport, 1839-1846*, ed. by Eliza Cope Harrison, *Women’s Diaries and Letters of the South* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), 416. Alcott contended that the whole family could benefit from reading periodicals. Eliza Fisher commented that she sent her family members “Xmas tokens in the shape of books,” which she knew would “certainly be more valuable than trashy Annuals.”

<sup>11</sup> Mott, *A History of American Magazines, Volume 2*, 9-11; Franklin Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines, Volume 1: 1741-1850* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1938), 301-303.

published in Philadelphia. After 1825, a number of periodicals were intended for a national, rather than regional audience, and what historian Ann Douglas calls consolation and sentimental culture's "hostility" toward the North's competitive, individualistic society made northern advice literature appealing even to southern readers. Southerners were pleased to read criticism of traits they attributed to the northern bourgeois and its free labor system. Finally, southerners could read northern and European advice literature and interpret it in distinctively southern ways. Prescriptive literature published both North and South, for example, agreed that "virtue" was the most important quality a woman could exhibit. In the North, however, "virtue" was synonymous with industriousness and frugality, while in the South, in historian Catherine Clinton's words, "the plantation aristocracy celebrated virtue in the cult of chastity." Readers, then, often understood the same words in different and regionally-distinctive ways.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, periodicals, regardless of their intended audience or place of publication, presented a relatively consistent definition of "good" parenting. Regardless of which periodicals they read, then, southern parents received a similar message.

While it is clear that women read and internalized written ideas about motherhood, it is not as obvious how men reacted to such sources. Few remarked upon their reading, and advice literature's ideas about masculinity opposed social mores rather than reinforced them. Social messages about masculinity and fatherhood were more complex than those about femininity and motherhood. Consequently, men had more

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<sup>12</sup> Mott, *A History of American Magazines, Volume 2*, 200; Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1988), 203-207; Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 137. See also Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South*, xvii. Stowe contends that southern elites knew they shared gender values with their northern counterparts "but perceived them as being different in the South, more weighted and extreme."

space within which to forge a unique understanding of how to behave. As Lorri Glover and Steven Stowe contend, advice manuals' emphasis on readers' cultivating social acceptance rather than morality appealed to southern fathers and served as a parenting tool. Advice literature also, however, contained messages that would have galled southern men.<sup>13</sup> Most prominently, advice authors emphasized sexual self-control. Although they deemed celibacy selfish given motherhood's central role in women's identities, advice authors like William Alcott also argued that excessive sexual forays wasted men's energy and endangered society. Yet southern men regarded sexual experiences and a vigorous sex life as laudable as long as both were handled with gentlemanly discretion.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the very idea of seeking another man's instruction on masculinity would have been distasteful to southern masters. It seems possible, then, that while planters accepted the ideas of advice literature as a tool for controlling others, they rejected the use of advice manuals for themselves.

Whether men read advice literature or not, prescriptive authors' commentary on masculinity and fatherhood provide a mirror for social beliefs which is revealing for historians. Indeed, many authors wrote in self-conscious opposition to accepted ideas about masculinity and the role of men in the household. Whether or not planters read advice books, others read such literature, judged men against its dictates, and helped make the ideas it expressed ubiquitous by relaying them to friends and family. The very

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<sup>13</sup> Lorri Glover, *Southern Sons: Becoming Men in the New Nation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 49-50; Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South*, 128-129. See also Robert L. Griswold, *Fatherhood in America: A History* (New York: BasicBooks, 1993), 2-3, 33.

<sup>14</sup> Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South*, 11; Phillip A. Gibbs, "Self Control and Male Sexuality in the Advice Literature of Nineteenth Century America, 1830-1860," *Journal of American Culture* 9, no. 2 (Summer 1986): 38-39; Glover, *Southern Sons*, 56; Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 295-297.

ministers, physicians, and teachers who preached and wrote on the subjects of parenthood and consolation wrote private letters as individuals even as they published for a wider audience.<sup>15</sup>

The advice literature southerners read, discussed, and heard about shaped the way they viewed their world. When a southern child died, a parents' understanding of gender ideals shaped the way they grieved. Authors of advice literature exalted motherhood and wrote mothers into the center of the family's domestic life while failing to say much at all about parenthood directly to men. In this way, southern print culture saddled women with the burden, first, of keeping children healthy, and second, of modeling proper Christian faith in the event they died. It left men, meanwhile, with little guidance about how they should feel about their children in health, much less in death. For men and women alike, southern culture dictated the family's centrality even as it offered paradoxical expectations of how to behave within the plantation household.

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For southern women, family was everything. Family membership—first as daughters and then as wives and mothers—was the defining element of women's identities, particularly for those on rural farms and plantations. For many, personal identity and their identity as a mother were one and the same.<sup>16</sup> Bettie Hickok had six

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<sup>15</sup> For examples of consolation letters exchanged by ministers and their friends and relations, see L.W. Curtis, "Pastor of Presbyterian Church," to his "Dear Afflicted Friends," John Wilfong, Jr. and Barbara Eva Lavinia Wilfong, 24 February 1845, John Wilfong Papers, Duke; Mary J. D. Bissell to her "Dearly beloved pastor," James B. Ramsey, 5 August 1849, John Wilfong Papers, Duke; Lot Jones to his brother, Reverend Edward Neufville, 15 July 1833, Bulloch Family Papers, SHC.

<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*, Gender & American Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 197; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "Family and Female Identity in the Antebellum South: Sarah Gayle and Her Family," in Carol Bleser ed., *In Joy and In Sorrow: Women, Family, and Marriage in the Victorian South, 1830-1900*, Papers of the Fort Hill Conference on Southern Culture, held at Clemson University in the

living children and was bewildered by her friend Mary Davis's family situation: "Judy tells me you have only one child." "Is it possible," she questioned in disbelief. "How do you employ your time?"<sup>17</sup> Hickok's questions to her Virginian friend might just as easily have been, "Aren't you afraid of becoming childless?" or "How do you ensure your importance to the family?" As her letter suggests, slaveholding women looked to motherhood as the livelihood that occupied their time, as the calling that made them important to their families and to society, and as the primary source of companionship, love, and affection. Southerners praised the power of "mother's love" and the unbreakable link it created between mothers and their children, and mothers helped cement that social construction by writing privately and publicly about the devotion they felt for their offspring.<sup>18</sup>

Elite southern women's outspoken love of their children reflected a genuine emotional connection as well as women's internalization of their society's tendency to both exalt and restrain motherhood. Though it is clear why women concerned themselves with motherhood, it is less obvious why southern social commentators cared so much

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Spring of 1989 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 19; Eugene Genovese, "'Our Family, White and Black': Family and Household in the Southern Slaveholders' World View," in Bleser, *In Joy and In Sorrow*, 74-75, 78; Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 38-40; Wyatt-Brown, 173-174. See also Jean E. Friedman, *The Enclosed Garden: Women and Community in the Evangelical South, 1830-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 35-37.

<sup>17</sup> Betty Hickok to Mary Miller Davis, 20 February 1859, Mary Miller Davis Papers, Duke.

<sup>18</sup> Sally G. McMillen, "Mothers Sacred Duty: Breastfeeding Patterns among Middle-and Upper-Class Women in the Antebellum South," *The Journal of Southern History* 51, no. 3 (August 1985), 339-349; Jan Lewis, "Mother's Love: The Construction of an Emotion in Nineteenth-Century America," in Rima D. Apple and Janet Golden, eds., *Mothers and Motherhood: Readings in American History* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1997), 52-53, 58-67. See also Elisabeth Badinter, *Mother Love: Myth and Reality: Motherhood in Modern History*, with a foreword by Francine du Plessix Gray (New York: Macmillan, 1981), 114. Badinter, too, discusses "mother love" as a nineteenth-century construction. In the French context, she contends, mother love aided a movement to "urge mothers back to their 'instinctive' activities" and thereby control women. For more on the development of a concept of family in the United States, see Stephanie Coontz, *The Social Origins of Private Life: a History of American Families, 1600-1900* (London: Verso, 1988), 12-13.

about it. The well-to-do in both North and South shared gender values, and glorifying motherhood as women's divine calling was hardly unique to southerners. The nature of the plantation household, however, ensured that southerners' devotion to motherhood was distinct from northerners' adherence to domesticity. Unlike northerners' celebration of domesticity, southerners' exaltation of motherhood offered little opportunity for a public voice. Because the plantation was the site of production and the place of planters' daily endeavors, it could never be a place for southern women to claim as their own.

Additionally, because slave woman carried out many daily domestic tasks, particularly cooking, southerners did not understand toiling in the kitchen or tending to the chores of the house as labors of love. Instead, motherhood was southern women's "sphere," and even in that, women were expected to bend to their husbands' advice when it was offered.<sup>19</sup>

Social commentators nevertheless lauded mothers as pivotal to society, and, Steven Stowe contends, published advice literature intended "to surround the woman's sphere with a firm band of words." A combination of factors pushed southerners to advise women about motherhood. Most significantly, the private sphere had public importance in the slaveholding South, and ensuring that women devoted themselves to motherhood offered one mechanism of control over the household and the women in it. Historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese contends that "women, to be ladies, had to have servants." In fact, women also had to be servants to be ladies. As maternal adviser T.S.

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<sup>19</sup> Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 61-66, 98-99; Peter W. Bardaglio, *Reconstructing the Household: Families, Sex, and the Law in the Nineteenth-century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), xiv, 24; Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 226. See also Degler, *At Odds*, 28, 66-68, 73. Degler's argument that domesticity was an alternative to patriarchy suggests that domesticity could never have existed in the antebellum South. The idea that children were innocent, precious, and fundamentally different from adults took hold in the South, changing women's roles within the family as well.

Arthur insisted in *A Advice to Young Ladies on Their Duties and Conduct in Life*, “There is no means of returning to God, and to true order except by denying self; and this we do when we seek, in all the various relations of life, to discharge our duties for the sake of good to others.” Southern social theorists, Fox-Genovese continues, “forcefully insisted that all social relations—notably those of slavery—depended upon and were grounded in the natural and divinely sanctioned subordination of women to men.”<sup>20</sup> Lauding maternal devotion rather than domesticity or the power of feminine “influence” helped ensure that women would prioritize their family’s needs over their own. It simultaneously ensured that planters retained their mastery over the household. In historian Catherine Clinton’s words, “In a biracial slave society where ‘racial purity’ was a defining characteristic of the master class, total control of the reproductive females was of paramount concern for elite males.”<sup>21</sup> By convincing women they had to be selfless and subservient in order to be valued, advice authors aided planters in controlling women.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ann Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 4-21; Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South*, 52; Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 197; T.S. Arthur, *A Advice to Young Ladies on Their Duties and Conduct in Life* (Philadelphia: John E. Potter, 1860), 242. See also Genovese, “‘Our Family, White and Black’,” in Bleser, *In Joy and In Sorrow*, 74; Arthur, *A Advice to Young Ladies*, 246-247. Although Catherine Clinton has called plantation mistresses the “slaves of slaves,” I do not take the argument that far. Society expected women would be selfless and subservient, causing them to serve their husbands and children as a demonstration of their femininity. As a result of their service, mothers were placed on a pedestal. This was constricting, but it did not come close to making women slaves.

<sup>21</sup> Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 6. See also Mary McCartin Wearn, *Negotiating Motherhood in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, Studies in American Popular History and Culture (New York: Routledge, 2008), 5-6 for more on the “oppressive idealism” used to contain women, slaves, and the poor. See also Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 200-203; Thomas Nelson Page, *Social Life in Old Virginia* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1897), 38-42, quoted in Scott, *The Southern Lady*, 5. Christine Heyrman contends that evangelicals insisted women might earn “eternal bliss” by devoting themselves to their families as part of their overall cowing to the whim of planter men. Rather than be marginalized by allowing women a prominent voice within the church, clergy counteracted planters’ concern over their wives’ conversion by conflating piety and domesticity and shepherding women back into the “safe” roles of wife and mother.

<sup>22</sup> See Sylvia D. Hoffert, *Private Matters: American Attitudes Toward Childbearing and Infant Nurture in the Urban North, 1800-1860*, Women in American History (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989),

Encouraging women's devotion to motherhood also served the needs of evangelical Christianity. Ministers relied on the family to foster piety and help police behavior. Consequently, anything that challenged the family challenged the church and the community. This, combined with the expectation that family's most important purpose was to make children "susceptible" to conversion, lent significance to parents' behavior. By ceding their own needs and wants for the sake of the family and by working tirelessly to restore equilibrium whenever something was amiss, women fostered stability in the household. Reverend Robert May explained the dire consequences of poor, godless parenting when he described the 1811 Richmond Theater fire, which killed forty-two "young persons." May questioned grotesquely, "What must their parents feel? I think I see their burnt and mangled bodies, wrapped carefully up, and carried to their houses of mourning from the house of mirth." He suggested the deceased children were messengers from God who warned, "Shun the theatre: avoid the haunts of Satan, the

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9-10, 67-71, 142. Sylvia Hoffert's study of northern motherhood reveals that similar rhetoric could have very different intentions. Northerners, too, emphasized the importance of motherhood as a mechanism of control, albeit within the context of domesticity. While southerners were most concerned with the maintenance of a hierarchical slaveholding society, northerners hoped to control the social impact of industrialization, urbanization, and immigration. Northern society viewed proper motherhood as essential to perpetuating "a strong American republic." By encouraging a particular type of motherhood, advice authors hoped to combat the effects of "social and technological changes" that were "undermining traditional ways of dealing with pregnancy, childbirth, and child rearing."

Even as they pushed motherhood, however, authors undermined women's confidence in their bodies and their ability to parent. The way that elite northerners understood childbearing shifted in the early nineteenth century. Rather than viewing women's suffering in childbirth as the result of Eve's original sin—"in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children"—middle- and upper-class northerners came to believe that refinement weakened women's reproductive systems. Consequently, conceiving childbirth as pathological became desirable, as difficult pregnancies were the mark of good-breeding. Similarly, advice authors convinced parents that careful management was crucial to children's health, causing them to be "overwhelmed with a sense of inadequacy." Their intuition and God's will were not enough; parents must be studied in the art of parenting in order for their children to survive. See also Regina Markell Morantz, "Nineteenth Century Health Reform and Women: A Program of Self Help," in Guenter B. Risse, Ronald L. Numbers, and Judith Walzer Leavitt, eds., *Medicine without Doctors: Home Health Care in American History* (New York: Science History Publications/USA, 1977), 77-80, for more on how women grew to be viewed as "weak, sickly, dependent, and ornamental."



destroyer of your souls. Seek for real pleasure. Do not pursue the phantom of imaginary happiness, which will at last deceive you.” By allowing their children to be “partakers in the sins of others,” Richmond parents had also allowed their children to be “partakers in their punishment.” Had they shepherded their children into more pious activities, the Theater Fire could have been less tragic.<sup>23</sup> Here was a terrifying example of what happened when parents failed to demand Christian behavior. Given the potential for such tragedy and the pivotal role of mothers in children’s spiritual education, evangelicals believed they had a stake in women’s behavior.

Finally, in the years before the Civil War, southerners called on descriptions of motherhood as a means of defending and distinguishing the South. Although rhetoric about motherhood overlapped in the North and South, historian V. Lynn Kennedy contends that, “rather than seeing a shared American value system, those interested in constructing a distinct southern identity used ideas of childbearing and motherhood to assert that difference.” Defending against the criticism of northerners like Harriet Beecher Stowe who showed that southern mothers abandoned their children to the care of slave women and callously tore slave mothers from their own children was particularly important to southern writers. If slaveholding southerners were to unite under the banner of their superior culture, southern mothers had to be the most virtuous, the most pious, and the most devoted to their children.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 44, 97-99; Rev. Robert May, *A Voice from Richmond and Other Addresses to Children and Youth* (Philadelphia: American Sunday-School Union, 1842), 10-17, 31.

<sup>24</sup> V. Lynn Kennedy, *Born Southern: Childbirth, Motherhood, and Social Networks in the Old South* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 7, 13-16.

Whatever their motivation, southerners took meticulous care to describe the boundaries of acceptable motherhood meticulously and to praise that natural propensity of women to meet these boundaries. Because, author T.S. Arthur commented, “The affections of a man are, as a general thing, guided by his reason; and the reason of a woman, as a general thing, is guided by her affections,” women had the ability to love with abandon and devote themselves to parenthood.<sup>25</sup> A mother’s “tender affections” and central role in the life of her infant garnered the child’s “sympathies, its confidence, and its love,” according to one contributor to *The Southern Ladies’ Companion*. “What more does she need for its government?”<sup>26</sup> When careful to temper their own maternal affection with men’s more rational guidelines for childrearing, then, mothers were in the perfect position to raise healthy, pious, and honor-worthy youngsters.

Southern advice authors imbued motherhood with unparalleled importance and responsibility. William Alcott, one of the nineteenth century’s most prolific advice authors, informed readers that mothers “plant the seeds of nearly all the good or evil in the world.” English physician William Buchan, moreover, emphasized the implications of such staggering influence when he stated, “No subsequent endeavors can remedy or correct the evils occasioned by a mother’s negligence.” Even the most skillful physicians might find it impossible to “mend what she, through ignorance or inattention, may have unfortunately marred,” he observed.<sup>27</sup> Though careful to acknowledge that a husband

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<sup>25</sup> Arthur, *Advice to Young Ladies*, 167.

<sup>26</sup> Ralph W. Allen, “A Mother’s Influence,” *The Southern Ladies’ Companion* 2, no. 10 (January 1849), 232-234.

<sup>27</sup> William A. Alcott, *The Young Mother or, Management of Children in Regard to Health by Wm. A. Alcott, author of The Young Man’s Guide, and Editor of The Moral Reformer*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Boston: Light & Stearns, 1836), 29; William Buchan, *Advice to Mothers, on the Subject of their Own Health, and on the*

was “lord over his own household,” periodicals and advice literature made women responsible for the home in no uncertain terms. In the words of Reverend A.G. Stacy, “Home is one of the sweetest words in the English language . . . . There infancy is cradled, childhood nurtured, youth guarded, manhood inspired, age supported. There sickness is healed and sorrow soothed . . . . Will the mothers in our own day and country awake fully to their responsibilities and privileges?”<sup>28</sup>

If a husband was “lord” of his domestic space, *Home Circle* author David Kinnear likened a wife to the sun—“the centre of a domestic system, and her household as planets around her, reflecting her genial rays and basking in her benign influence.” As the center of the household, women must lead by cheerful example and model proper “education, manners, habits, usage, and sentiments of society.”<sup>29</sup> Authors also counted on mothers to be spiritual educators and protectors of health, emphasizing these two roles more than any others. William Buchan, for instance, felt called to provide women with a guide to their children’s medical treatment because he attributed high infant mortality to “improper management or neglect.” Physician William Dewees suggested that although mothers and fathers shared responsibility for their children’s health, “very much depends on her.”<sup>30</sup> While striving to keep their children healthy, women were also charged with preparing them spiritually for death.

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*Means of Promoting the Health, Strength, and Beauty of their Offspring* (Philadelphia: John Bioreu, 1804), 3.

<sup>28</sup> A.G. Stacy, “Mothers and Missions,” *The Home Circle*, June 1856, 248-249.

<sup>29</sup> David Kinnear, “Woman,” *The Home Circle* 5, no. 11, November 1859, 674-678.

<sup>30</sup> William Buchan, *Domestic Medicine, or, A Treatise on the Prevention and Cure of Diseases, by Regimen and Simple Medicines: With an Appendix, Containing a Dispensatory for the Use of Private Practitioners* (Edinburgh: Printed for Bell & Bradfute, Peter Hill, Doig & Stirling, J. Thomson, Jun. & Co.

A mother could, an article in *The Home Circle* explained, either plant “seeds of truth” or “prejudice her child against the truth.” Consequently, mothers also had the ability to “poison or heal” society since the South could only be as strong as each of its families. Raising pious children required more than just leading them in prayer or teaching them Scripture. Good mothers, authors agreed, led by example, exhibiting proper Christian behavior every hour of every day. Author John Abbott explained, “The parent must strive to be herself just what she wishes her child to be.” If she wanted her children to “look to God sincerely . . . as their Father and their friend,” she had to do the same.<sup>31</sup> Minister Josiah Askew agreed, “Actions speak louder than words, example than precept. You walk in one way, and endeavor to train your child in another, and you will very soon see him behind you in the same path.” Mothers had to police their children’s behavior and control their own. Women had their greatest opportunity to model confidence in God, Abbott wrote, when facing life’s sorrows, particularly the sorrow of losing a child. Fortunately, by modeling resignation to God’s will, and thereby

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and Adam Black, by John Moir, 1812), vii-viii; William P. Dewees, *A Treatise on the Physical and Medical Treatment of Children*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea & Carey, 1829), xi-xii.

<sup>31</sup> “Mothers: Their Duties and Responsibilities,” originally printed in Wesleyan Methodist Magazine, *The Home Circle*, January 1860, 41-45; John S.C. Abbot, *The Mother at Home; or, The Principles of Maternal Duty Familiarly Illustrated* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1852), 34-35, 168-169, 210-211. See also “Weep with Those that Weep,” *The Ladies’ Repository* 5, no. 2 (February 1870), 152. Mothers influenced not only children’s spirituality, but men’s spirituality as well. In the moralistic “Weep with Those that Weep,” “Bettie” cried over the casket of another child beside the child’s father. When Bettie told the man, “Mamma says we’ll meet our little buried sister in heaven if we love God, and tell the truth, and do to others as we would have them do to us,” and questioned, “But you’ll try to meet your little girl in heaven, won’t you?” he promptly agreed to attend services. By raising a pious child, Bettie’s mother had indirectly brought about a grown man’s salvation. In addition to praising ministers and churches, this author also proclaimed, “Thank God that there are mothers who teach their children how to go to heaven!”

encouraging their children's piety, mothers could reassure themselves that their children had gone to heaven in the event that a son or daughter died.<sup>32</sup>

While Abbott guided his female readers in a gentle, if patronizing tone, emphasizing the positive impact they could have, other authors berated mothers for "prejudicing" their children against religion. A female contributor to the *Southern Ladies' Companion* challenged, "When you gather your little ones around you, and pray for them to be adorned with a meek and quiet spirit, are the hands placed on their little heads adorned with rich jewelry?" Another editorial argued simply, "Could we look into thousands of families to-day, where discontent fights sullenly with life, we should find the chief cause of unhappiness, want of religion in woman." In prisons and "in places of crime, misery, destitution, ignorance" southerners could witness "in all its most horrible deformity, the fruit of irreligion in women." Women alone had the power to cause or to prevent the depravity of southern society.<sup>33</sup>

As published ideas about mothers' piety suggest, antebellum southern expectations for motherhood were rife with paradox and contradiction. Advice literature simultaneously exulted and chastised the nation's mothers, expressing great faith in women despite characterizing them as weak-willed and dangerously emotional. Although southern commentators on parenthood encouraged an active domestic role for men, most reserved their greatest praise for the virtues of motherhood. Of women, for example, southern author Adam Goodlett gushed, "We cannot but be astonished at the

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<sup>32</sup> Josiah F. Askew, "On the Training of Children," in *The Southern Methodist Pulpit* vol. 1, 1848-1849, ed. by Charles F. Deems (Richmond: C.H. Wynne), 126-131; Abbott, *The Mother at Home*, 169.

<sup>33</sup> A Mother, "A Word to Mothers," *The Southern Lady's Companion* 2, no. 6, September 1848; "Is Religion Beautiful?" *The Home Circle*, March 1855, 120.

fortitude, the courage, the devotedness, the fidelity to her duties.” “Place man in her situation, and compel him to perform the duties of woman,” he continued, “and he would soon either degenerate into a savage, or sink into perfect insignificance.” Without a “historian to record his deeds of benevolence and patriotism,” a man in the domestic space would grow lazy and useless.<sup>34</sup> Women’s greatest natural talent, then, was their willingness to toil in obscurity in the thankless role of wife and mother and to suffer without complaint or recognition.

Without irony, Goodlett and other authors of prescriptive literature suggested that women’s natural, maternal instincts must be informed by expert advice and tempered with masculine rationality. Physician William Buchan, for example, felt that his “proper instructions” could equip women to avoid those diseases which were “almost always the consequences of mismanagement,” “fatal mistakes,” and physicians, who, like medicine and uninformed women, did “mischief twenty times for once that they do good.” Buchan also, however, called on mothers to embrace their maternal instincts and shun the use of nurses even as he argued that maternal love must be tempered with “control of reason.” “Mothers should never forget the fable of the monkey snatching up one of its young in a moment of alarm, and, in order to save it from danger, squeezing it with so close an embrace as to occasion its death,” he warned.<sup>35</sup> Goodlett wrote that nothing was more

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<sup>34</sup> Goodlett, *The Family Physician: Or Every Man’s Companion, Being a Compilation from the Most Approved Medical Authors, Adapted to the Southern and Western Climates. To which is Added an Account of Herbs, Roots, and Plants, used for Medical Purposes with Directions How They are to be Prepared so that Every Man Can be His Own Physician, Together with a Glossary of Medical Terms. With an Appendix, Containing a New and Successful Mode of Treating Asiatic Cholera* (Nashville, TN: Printed at Smith and Nesbit’s Steam Press, 1838), 474-4

<sup>35</sup> Goodlett, *The Family*, 474-475; Buchan, *Advice to Mother*, 3, 53, 77. See also A.M. Mauriceau, *The Married Woman’s Private Medical Companion: Embracing the Treatment of Menstruation ... Pregnancy ... Discovery to Prevent Pregnancy ... to Prevent Miscarriage or Abortion* (New York: s.n, 1847), 219; A Native Georgian, “Miscellaneous,” *Southern Rose* 4, no. 11 (23 January 1836, 85). Like Buchan, who

“preposterous” than a mother, “who thinks it below her to take care of her own child, or who is so ignorant as not to know what is proper to be done for it.” Finally, William Alcott felt sure that “every intelligent mother” would seek the knowledge necessary to keep her children healthy. Alcott’s book, *The Young Mother*, reflected his certainty that every woman was destined for motherhood and that every woman needed his help lest they suffer grievous results.<sup>36</sup>

As Buchan hinted, the relationship between women and physicians featured prominently in advice literature for mothers but was a subject of great debate. Some authors, like Buchan, condemned physicians for their harsh, unsuccessful treatments. In southern society many physicians relied on planter patronage and were seen as planters’ social inferiors.<sup>37</sup> Women—though exalted for their role as mothers—fell even lower in the social hierarchy than physicians. Should a woman, then, rely on her maternal expertise, or bow to the advice of a doctor? At least one North Carolina woman, Mary Chamberlaine, weighed her options when she questioned a male correspondent about whether he was an “allopathist” or a “disciple of Hahnemann.” Despite being “intimate . . . with many Drs of the old school,” Chamberlaine wrote, “we are, that is I am a Homeopath & hope you are also.” Although Chamberlaine decided for herself, women

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warned against forcing “some purgative slop” into ill children, Mariceau condemned the “reprehensible custom” of medicating children at the first sign of illness. “A Native Georgian” related the tale of a father who discovered that the cause of his child’s crying was simply that he had a feather in his ear, which both the mistress and mammy had overlooked in their frantic belief that something was seriously wrong. See also Rima D. Apple, “Constructing Mothers: Scientific Motherhood in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” in Apple and Golden, 90, who refers to the insistence that women required expert medical advice to raise healthy children as “scientific motherhood.”

<sup>36</sup> Goodlett, *The Family Physician*, 1; Alcott, *The Young Mother*, 40-44, 209-210, 332. See also Arthur, *Advice to Young Ladies*, 239.

<sup>37</sup> See Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006); Sally G. McMillen, *Motherhood in the Old South: Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Infant Rearing* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990).

who looked to advice literature for recommendations on how to handle physicians in the nursery found conflicting answers.<sup>38</sup>

Advice literature, so cohesive in its other ideas about motherhood, divided on the topic of physicians. “An American Matron” attributed the nation’s high child mortality rate to “some gross mismanagement in mothers or nurses,” blaming mothers, not fathers, physicians, disease environments, or God, for children’s illnesses and deaths. The same author flew in the face of male physicians and advice authors by writing, “these gentlemen must pardon me if I think, after all, that a mother is her child’s best physician, in all ordinary cases; and that none but a mother can tell how to nurse an infant as it ought to be nursed.” Popular southern author James Ewell agreed that a mother would know when physicians’ recommendations did not apply to her child and urged her to act accordingly.<sup>39</sup> Yet, others warned mothers to beware of doctors like Ewell, suggesting that he would harm children not only with his heroic measures but with his cautions against following professional medical advice as well. *The Home Circle’s* “Sick Room” column, for instance, commanded mothers to “be careful to understand a physician’s directions, and to *obey them implicitly*.” If a mother doubted the doctor’s skill, she was

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<sup>38</sup> Mary E. Chamberlaine to Mr. John B. Clark, 1852, Alston Family Papers, SHC. See also Eliza Middleton Fisher to Mary Herring Middleton, 19 December 1854, in Fisher, *Best Companions*, 416. Unlike Chamberlaine, Eliza Fisher scoffed at alternative medicine. Her mother’s alternative remedies did little while the “dreaded calomel” benefitted her child. Consequently, Fisher had a “proportionate respect for Alleopathy.”

<sup>39</sup> An American Matron, *The Maternal Physician; a Treatise on the Nurture and Management of Infants, from the Birth Until Two Years Old. Being the Result of Sixteen Years' Experience in the Nursery*, ed. by Charles E. Rosenberg. Medicine & Society in America (New York: Arno Press, 1972), 5-10; James Ewell, *The Planter's and Mariner's Medical Companion: Treating, According Most Successful Practice, I. The Diseases Common to Warm Climates and on Ship Board. II. Common Cases in Surgery, as Fractures, Dislocations, &c. &c. The Complaints Peculiar to Women and Children. To Which Are Subjoined, a Dispensatory, Shewing How to Prepare and Administer Family Medicines, and a Glossary, Giving an Explanation of Technical Terms* (Philadelphia: John Bioren, 1807), 266. See also Ewell, *The Planter's and Mariner's Medical Companion*, vii, 270, 280, 286.



to “dismiss” him and employ someone else. Choosing to treat her child without medical expertise was apparently not an option.<sup>40</sup>

When illness struck, southerners counted on mothers’ unfailing patience and compassion in the nursery. Advice authors recognized that this role burdened women with a disproportionate amount of suffering, but contended that the female constitution equipped mothers to endure affliction and to witness it in others. Understandings of maternal love led one magazine contributor to write that from the moment of conception, “every holy feeling that a mother’s love ever knows—every fond hope that a mother’s love ever forms—every cherished idea of purity and virtue and innocence” centered on her child. Consequently, with a child’s death, “she heard the knell of all her worldly hopes.”<sup>41</sup> “No one feels the death of a child as a mother feels it,” an author for *The Ladies’ Repository* agreed. A father experienced “a heaviness in his heart,” “a keen sense of loss,” and possibly even “weeping over crushed hopes,” but mothers’ constant care for their children gave their grief unmatched intensity. Furthermore, although others might comfort themselves that a child’s death signaled her “blessed immortality,” a mother could never do so. Instead, the author wrote, “Rachel will weep for her children—Even when there have been several children, I have seen the remembrance of the lost little one cast a gloom over the mother’s brow that the health and mirth of the rest

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<sup>40</sup> “The Sick Room,” *The Home Circle*, July 1855, 328-330. See also Alcott, *The Young Mother*, 212-213, who scoffed at women’s fears that physicians might make their children sicker.

<sup>41</sup> “A Mother’s Love,” *Lady’s Book*, January 1836, 4. See also Nancy M. Theriot, *Mothers and Daughters in Nineteenth-Century America: The Biosocial Construction of Femininity*, Revised edition of the Biosocial Construction of Femininity, 1988 (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 22-23, 65-67.

have failed to dispel.”<sup>42</sup> Even if she attempted to mask her sorrow, then, elite southerners believed sorrow to be as inevitable for mothers as their desire for motherhood.

A mother’s devotion to her nursing duties only made her more invested in a child’s fate. “In sickness,” W.W. Jones wrote in the *Southern Ladies’ Companion*, “the depth, the moral grandeur of maternal love, is most strikingly exhibited.” After others had tired of toiling at the bedside, “she smoothes the pillow of her suffering loved one,” taking on her patient’s agony as her own and disregarding her own needs on behalf of another.<sup>43</sup> Caroline Olivia Laurens evidenced her adherence to this ideal as her husband languished on their return voyage to Charleston. After noticing his rapid decline, Laurens wrote, “I said to myself ‘now is the time for exertion’ No crying no giving up but stick to your duty.” Despite her initial resolve, Laurens could neither keep herself from crying nor maintain a cheerful demeanor for her husband’s sake.<sup>44</sup> Toiling tirelessly to care for a loved one only made women more vulnerable to the devastation that accompanied a death in the family.

The anguish accompanying maternal love and devotion, authors argued, could have laid women low if not for their unique ability to handle others’ suffering. Author Eliza Ware Farrar believed the experience of being physically frail equipped women to care for others. As the recipients of care, mothers were well versed in “how to avoid the

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<sup>42</sup> “Maternal Bereavement,” *The Ladies’ Repository* 11, October 1851, 396; “The Graves of Infants,” *The Child’s Newspaper* 1, no. 7, 18 March 1834, 21-22.

<sup>43</sup> W.W. Jones, “Maternal Affection,” *The Southern Ladies’ Companion*, December 1848, 225-226.

<sup>44</sup> 14 October 1827 and 19 October 1827, Caroline Olivia Laurens Diary, SHC. Laurens also demonstrated the responsibility she felt for her family’s moral upbringing when she noted that she could never forgive herself that her husband had not been sufficiently religious before his death. John, in fact, told her, “you neglect me.”

awkward actions from which they have themselves suffered, and how to apply the remedies which have alleviated their own pains.” More importantly, southerners believed that God created women with the skills necessary to cope with their natural propensity for suffering. As an editor for the *Ladies’ Repository* explained, women were “endowed by an all-wise Creator with a *peculiar power of endurance*.” “She bears with meek composure,” this editor continued, “what drives man to despair,” which was exemplified when, during times of affliction, “the father and husband is paralyzed, and rendered helpless, while the wife and mother is roused to efforts almost superhuman.” While men were the hardier sex, then, the “feeble mother’s strength” shined through in times of suffering and loss.<sup>45</sup> A contributor to *The Southern Lady’s Companion* agreed that women were specially designed by God to care for others. Endowed with empathy, courage, and “a powerful fortitude to bear suffering herself, and to look with calm sympathy, with self-possessed, but feeling solicitude on the sufferings of others,” women’s place was at the side of ailing loved ones. Together, “feeling and fortitude” made a woman “the active angel of mercy that God designed her to be.” Only when women failed to exercise self-possession could their sensibility become a liability in administering care and handling the pressures of doing so.<sup>46</sup>

Emotion, particularly maternal affection, was simultaneously lauded and maligned as women’s greatest asset and greatest potential liability. To be effective in the role of mother, southerners believed, women must control negative emotions and strive to

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<sup>45</sup> Eliza Ware Farrar, *The Young Lady’s Friend*, *Women in America: from Colonial Times to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Boston: American Stationers’ Co., 1837. Reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1974), 59; The Editor, “Woman’s Sorrows,” *Ladies Repository, and Gatherings of the West* 2, April 1842, 110.

<sup>46</sup> “Woman in the Sick Room,” *The Southern Lady’s Companion*, 19, no. 7 (November 1850): 145-147.

maintain a continuously cheerful demeanor. From the moment of conception, domestic medical manuals argued, mothers' feelings affected their families. In William Buchan's estimation, the inability to be cheerful could even stand in the way of becoming a mother as he blamed "barrenness" on grief, fear, anxiety—each a passion that could stop menstruation. Once pregnant, the same emotions were still to be avoided. Instead, a woman's "sweetness and serenity of temper" could benefit her child in the womb. Southern native James Ewell agreed that "nothing can be of greater importance to a pregnant woman, than cheerfulness," but noted that when an expectant mother became upset, worrying over her emotions for too long would only exacerbate the effects of her anxiety on the fetus.<sup>47</sup> The burden of mothers' proper feeling was greater in phrenologist O.S. Fowler's estimation. While "every pang of grief you feel, will leave its painful scar on the forming disk of their souls," he warned, "Every exercise of anger, every feeling of temper, every item of crossness and fretfulness" had similar effects. Failure to control negative emotions was nothing less than rendering one's children "demoniacal, when you can make them angelic." Should a child be sickly, tempestuous, or poorly behaved, then, it was the mother who could be blamed.<sup>48</sup>

Cheerfulness was warranted during pregnancy, William Goodlett argued, because "in multiplying and replenishing the earth, you are fulfilling an imperious command of an

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<sup>47</sup> Buchan, *Advice to Mother*, 11-12, 542-543; Ewell, 243. See also John C. Gunn, *Gunn's Domestic Medicine: A Facsimile of the First Edition*, Tennessee editions (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1986), 54-55, 56; Dewees, *A Treatise on the Physical and Medical Treatment of Children*, 26. Dewees was unique in his belief that women harmed themselves by believing there was a direct link between the mental health of a mother and the physical health of her fetus. Much more often, doctors and parenting experts warned against a mother's emotional agitation during pregnancy.

<sup>48</sup> Orson Squire Fowler, *Maternity; or, the Bearing and Nursing of Children, including Female Education and Beauty* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1848), 16, 131-133, 211. See also Fowler, *Maternity*, 107-120, 122. Fowler offered page upon page of anecdotes from friends and examples from the Bible evidencing his idea that a woman's mental state was imprinted on her child.

Almighty power, in which he will never desert you.” That God also dictated women would bear children “in sorrow” only meant that women must resign themselves to the pain of labor. In William Buchan’s estimation, those who resigned most to their situation suffered least.<sup>49</sup> Like Buchan and Goodlett, southerners called on women to remain cheerful and serene from the conception of a child to its death.

Advice literature, periodicals, novels, and letters from friends bombarded women with the message that the best mothers feigned happiness for the sake of others and that mothers could strive for no greater achievement than cheerfulness. Author John Abbott urged women to control their feelings with “a system of rigid discipline,” suggesting that without doing so it would “be in vain for us to hope to curb the passions and restrain the conduct of those who are looking to us for instruction and example.” A mother’s ability to curb her children’s passions and command their obedience, Abbott believed, was crucial to their care.<sup>50</sup> Others argued that women must be cheerful not for pragmatic reasons, but because doing so was required of any real lady. Even when her “feelings may be harrowed up by other matters,” Sallie Ann wrote in *The Southern Lady’s Companion*, a southern wife must treat her husband with kindness and affection. Furthermore, a husband’s cross, cold, or indifferent mood should be met only with pleasantness.<sup>51</sup> Rachel Mordecai, too, told her sister Caroline that despite her crushing

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<sup>49</sup> Goodlett, *The Family Physician*, 503; Buchan, *Advice to Mother*, 26.

<sup>50</sup> Abbott, *The Mother at Home*, 42-43, 59, 90-91. Abbott argued that it was especially important for a mother to be able to command obedience when she needed to administer repugnant medications. That Abbott devoted two full chapters to the topic of maternal discipline suggests that cementing their status as an authority figures was difficult for women throughout the country, not just those whose attempts were stymied by an honor culture that insisted upon masculine rebellion.

<sup>51</sup> Sallie Ann, “How to Avoid the First Cross Word, *The Southern Lady’s Companion* 22, no.3, June 1853, 80-81.

grief at the loss of her children, she must trust God's decision "for all our sakes."<sup>52</sup>

While other family members had the right to cry, stomp, and vent, mothers were taught they must always supply the patience and warm feelings necessary to maintain a serene household.

Mothers were to dedicate themselves to their husbands and children if they hoped to attain happiness. At the very least, T.S. Arthur argued, by behaving appropriately, mothers could avoid the guilt associated with "consciousness of having wronged that child" if one died. Consolation manual author A.C. Thompson implied that every death was evidence of neglect when he wrote that death was God's kind way of taking children "away from the imperfect training of parents here." Given the responsibility for family members' health and happiness that society placed on women, southern mothers took the weight of a child's death upon their shoulders and—if they wanted to comply with society's expectations for them—stifled expressions of their grief. As Arthur and Thompson's words suggest, being entrusted by southern society with the responsibility of raising healthy, pious children offered mothers little power in return. Rather, mother's responsibility for their children's health was wielded as a sword by experts, and pointing to the South's high child mortality rate as an example of mothers' failure was all too common.<sup>53</sup>

Perhaps the most important point to be made about southern understandings of motherhood is that women accepted and helped cultivate these sentiments. After

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<sup>52</sup> Rachel Mordecai to Caroline Mordecai Plunkett, 9 January 1825, Mordecai Family Papers, SHC.

<sup>53</sup> Arthur, *Advice to Young Ladies*, 246-247; Augustus Charles Thompson, *Gathered Lilies; or, Little Children in Heaven* (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1858), 42-43. See also Farrar, *The Young Lady's Friend*, 319.

rereading Susan Warner's popular novel, *The Wide, Wide World*, whose heroine, Ellen Montgomery, prioritized submission and cheerfulness, Virginian Fannie Hume commented on the "exquisite & truthful passages [*sic*] in it." Although she also noted that Ellen's emotions were "much overdrawn," Hume accepted the sentimental novel's message. South Carolina native Emma Alston's cookbook also reflected her acceptance of southern expectations. The cookbook included a clipping that noted the death of a woman whose "excellence shone in all her life." In life and death, the snippet suggested, this southern mother "enjoyed . . . the love and esteem of all who knew her" as the result of her "nature kind and gentle" and her "disposition modest and retiring."<sup>54</sup> Hume and Alston viewed their world with the expectation that women should become contented mothers who protected their children's health, piety, and well-being.

Southern understandings of motherhood played a pivotal role in shaping women's grief. By emphasizing women's responsibility for their children's well-being while simultaneously suggesting that a natural proclivity for parenthood was insufficient preparation to perform the task correctly, southern print culture encouraged women to blame themselves for their children's deaths. By suggesting that real women should always be cheerful and that a mother's state of mind impacted her family, these sources also succeeded in stifling women's ability to cope with loss.

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<sup>54</sup> 16 January 1862, Diaries of Fannie Page Hume, UVA; Emma P. Alston Cookbook, Alston Family Papers, SCHS. See also Alice H. Dickinson to Eliza Jane DeRosset, 7 June 1855, DeRosset Family Papers, SHC; Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South*, 128. In much graver times, Kate DeRosset Meares demonstrated her acceptance of society's ideas about motherhood. Although she bore her grief at the death of her daughter with "great fortitude" and forced herself to exhibit a collected, albeit visibly somber, demeanor, Meares could not hide her guilt. It broke Kate's heart, one visitor explained, "that she was not aware of Maggie's danger until she was in a hopeless state." Meares believed she had failed as a mother when she was unable to prevent or cure her daughter's illness. Her perception was quite common among elite southern women.

Family was crucial to southern men, and planters adopted distinct roles at home and in public, as fathers and as men. Because mastery—an essential component of southern masculinity—required control of one’s dependents, fatherhood could play an important role in men’s identities. Furthermore, historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown contends that although it was “not quite respectable or manly to be too domestic,” men viewed their children as extensions of themselves, making fatherhood crucial to their masculinity and sense of honor.<sup>55</sup> Still, men could also prove their ability to master as husbands and, of course, as slaveholders. While young, men had to respect their fathers just as daughters did, but coming of age required that young men establish an identity apart from the family patriarch. Planter men had to navigate what historian Michael P. Johnson calls the “transition from subordination to dominance” within a plantation which both schooled sons to submit to their fathers and trained them for dominance over their own households. Unlike southern women, then, southern men had identities as individuals. Being a father was not men’s only means of proving their social worth.<sup>56</sup>

While a multifaceted identity allowed fathers more freedom than mothers had, it also left them without well-defined guidelines for how to behave. Southern advice literature wrote women into the center of the family, convincing women that, in obstetrician and author William P. Dewee’s words, “an awful responsibility is attached to the title of ‘mother’,” but offered little instruction to southern men about how to be

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<sup>55</sup> Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 134-137. See also Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>56</sup> Michael P. Johnson, “Planters and Patriarchy: Charleston, 1800-1860,” *Journal of Southern History* 46, no. 1 (February 1980), 57-58; Stephen Berry, ed., *Princes of Cotton: Four Diaries of Young Men in the South, 1848-1860* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), xi-xii; McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds*.



fathers.<sup>57</sup> These authors understood social expectations that men be independent, controlled neither by people nor by doctrine, and consequently published relatively few books for fathers. Furthermore, Americans believed that men and women's differences reflected God's intention that they complement one another. If women were specially created by God for parenthood, then men should complement that role, not share it.<sup>58</sup> Finally, northern advice literature about fatherhood did not translate to a southern audience as easily as literature for mothers did, leaving a small pool of advice literature to interest southern patriarchs.<sup>59</sup>

Instead of defining fatherhood, advice literature outlined how men could be successful businessmen and husbands and implied that being a good husband would translate into being a good father as well. Unlike women's prescriptive literature, which hinged upon issues of marriage and motherhood, men's manuals usually concluded with a single chapter on marriage, offering no instruction whatsoever on parenting.<sup>60</sup> While marriage was a springboard to motherhood for women, it was the necessary prerequisite for leadership to men. As historian Lorri Glover explains, once young men had been

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<sup>57</sup> Dewees, *A Treatise on the Physical and Medical Treatment of Children*, xi-xii.

<sup>58</sup> Kerrison, "By The Book," 74; Claudia Nelson, *Invisible Men: Fatherhood in Victorian Periodicals, 1850-1910* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1995), 4, 13-14, 42-43; Stephen M. Frank, *Life with Father: Parenthood and Masculinity in the Nineteenth-Century North* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 24-32; Craig Thompson Friend and Lorri Glover, eds., *Southern Manhood: Perspectives on Masculinity in the Old South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), x-xii.

<sup>59</sup> E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: BasicBooks, 1993), 10-20.

<sup>60</sup> For examples of men's advice literature ending with a single chapter on marriage, see T.S. Arthur, *Advice to Young Men on their Duties and Conduct in Life* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, 1853); William A. Alcott, *Gift Book for Young Men; or Familiar Letters on Self-Knowledge, Self-Education, Female Society, Marriage & c.* (Auburn and Buffalo: Miller Orton & Mulligan, 1854); Henry Lunettes, *The American Gentleman's Guide to Politeness and Fashion; or, Familiar Letters to His Nephews, Containing Rules of Etiquette, Directions for the Formation of Character, etc. etc. Illustrated by Sketches Drawn from Life, of the Men and Manners of our Times* (New York: Dergy & Jackson, 1857); Charles Butler, *The American Gentleman* (Philadelphia: Hogan & Thompson, 1839).

trained by their parents, educated in academic institutions, and married “reputable women,” they “needed only to prove their capacity for leadership—over businesses, politics, and slaves—to fully validate their manhood.”<sup>61</sup> Leading a household was crucial for manhood, but being an involved, nurturing father was not.

That few manuals existed specifically to teach men how to parent is not to say that authors had nothing to say on the subject. In fact, authors demanded fathers’ active role in the household lest children be spoiled by mothers’ coddling, and expected fathers’ assistance with tempering the effects of maternal love. Author William Alcott, for example, called on young husbands to stay close to their wives at least in the early years of marriage, as new wives and mothers needed a man’s wise counsel. In the South, Bertram Wyatt-Brown contends, “antebellum judges, planters, and editors” agreed that “if only fathers would assert their rightful authority . . . southern manhood would yet revive to meet the challenges of a world gone mad for innovation and venality.”<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, Steven Stowe argues, “Gentlemen were exhorted in language that implied they always were under the gaze of dependents and that a misstep could mean more than mere personal failure.”<sup>63</sup> Advice literature made it clear that fathers influenced their children as much as mothers did and that leading by good example was crucial to the

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<sup>61</sup> Glover, *Southern Sons*, 4, 132-133. See also Daniel Wise, *The Young Man’s Counselor; or, Sketches and Illustrations of the Duties and Dangers of Young Men. Designed to be a Guide to Success in this Life and to Happiness in the Life which is to Come* (Cincinnati: Published by Poe & Hitchcock, for the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1865), 241; Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South*, 51; Nelson, *Invisible Men*, 4, 13-14, 42-43, 202. Author Daniel Wise counseled young men to seek a spouse who, among other things, could “assist him in his affairs, soothe his sorrows, lighten his cares, purify his joys, and educate his children,” suggesting that women, not men, would do the educating and a father must therefore select his stand-in wisely.

<sup>62</sup> Alcott, *The Young Husband*, 55, 228-235; Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 169; Frank, *Life with Father*, 2, 25-30. See also Degler, *At Odds*, 73-74, 78.

<sup>63</sup> Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South*, 131.

family and to society. Understanding that southern masters had little interest in being told how to treat their children, however, authors generally reserved their commentary on fatherhood for offhand remarks.

Like advice about motherhood, advice about fatherhood was rife with paradox. As historian Stephen Frank contends, medical advice and scientific literature told men that becoming fathers—that is, proving their virility—was a crucial part of manhood. The same literature also suggested that women, not men, were naturally inclined to parenthood. Prescriptive literature both emphasized men’s duty to provide for their families and prove themselves in business yet chastised them for being drawn away from home too often.<sup>64</sup> The very existence of commentary to guide men indicates that cultural ideas about fatherhood did not reflect the reality of men’s domestic lives.

Advice authors generally wrote to a female audience, only occasionally adding a note to men, but those comments authors did make reveal their belief that however unreceptive men might be, they needed instructions as much as women. Advisers’ arguments reflect their society’s belief that men did a disservice to their families and society by sacrificing family life for business pursuits and by hesitating to demonstrate affection or embrace their role as fathers. William Buchan described a father who stood by “like a statue” and watched his daughter burn to death, paralyzed by shock and

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<sup>64</sup> Frank, *Life with Father*, 24-32, 51, 91-92. In the northern household, Frank contends, romantic love and devoted fatherhood were used “as modern means of exercising domestic authority.” Advice authors argued not for men to give up their masculinity in order to participate in child-rearing, but for them to broaden their definition of masculinity to include “marital manliness.” See also Vasantha Lynn Kennedy, “Partus Sequitur Ventrum: Narratives of Childbirth and Motherhood in the Antebellum South” (PhD diss., The University of Western Ontario, 2004), 258; Drew Gilpin Faust, *James Henry Hammond and the Old South: A Design for Mastery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 320-327, for a detailed explanation of the paradoxical relationship between James Henry Hammond and his sons. All three men’s struggles for mastery and the honor it brought hindered their ability to demonstrate love for one another and put them “on a collision course.”

ignorant of the steps necessary to save her in order demonstrate fathers' need for his instruction. A contributor to the *Gospel Messenger and Southern Episcopal Register* more subtly implored, "those who stand in the awful and important relation of parents" should focus on their children, allowing those without children to seek public office. This comment could only have been directed to men; a southern magazine would neither encourage mothers to seek public duties nor imply that they might choose not to bear children. The same magazine would, however, plead with planter fathers of young children to leave political offices and business dealings to others and turn their attention to balancing feminine child-rearing tactics at home.<sup>65</sup>

Many authors implied that they targeted mothers not merely because women were uniquely suited to parenthood, but because men usually were absent from the household. Author O.S. Fowler voiced a widely held belief about men when he called on them to stop their "drive, drive, hurry, hurry, tew, tew [*sic*], long enough to learn your duty to your wife while bearing your children." If men could be convinced to sacrifice their business pursuits and financial endeavors occasionally, Fowler argued, maternal and infant mortality rates would decrease.<sup>66</sup> John Abbott similarly implied that he wrote for a female audience in part because he had little faith in men's desire to participate at home.

"Lest it should be inferred from what has been written, that the *whole duty* of family

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<sup>65</sup> Buchan, *Advice to Mother*, 91-92; "A Hint to Religious Parents," *Gospel Messenger and Southern Episcopal Register* 3, no. 27 (March 1826), 80.

<sup>66</sup> Fowler, *Maternity; or, the Bearing and Nursing of Children*, 33-38, 40. See also Henry Lunettes, *The American Gentleman's Guide to Politeness and Fashion; or, Familiar Letters to His Nephews, Containing Rules of Etiquette, Directions for the Formation of Character, etc. etc. Illustrated by Sketches Drawn from Life, of the Men and Manners of our Times* (New York: Dergy & Jackson, 1857), 99, 101. While Fowler pleaded with men to stop working long enough to aid their wives during pregnancy, Lunettes called on them to treat their wives as women, not as business partners. "Remember," he wrote, "while you are forming habits, in this respect, how sensitively constituted are the gentler sex, how easily pained, how easily please." "Domestic politeness" was essential to healthy wives and a happy marriage.

government rests upon the mother,” Abbott noted, “I would briefly remark, that no father can be justified in releasing himself from a full share of the responsibility.” William Alcott, too, wished more fathers would take an interest in their children but felt such a desire was unrealistic. Though he might “read of a Cato once in three thousand years, who was in the habit of quitting all other business in order to be present when the nurse washed and rubbed his children,” Alcott wrote, “Our passion for gain, in the present age, is so much more absorbing and soul destroying than the passion for military glory, that we cannot expect many Catos.” Consequently, “All, or nearly all, must devolve on the mother.”<sup>67</sup>

Pleading with fathers to take greater interest in their wives and children and involve themselves more at home was a common thread in advice to men. In his manual for *The Young Husband*, Alcott urged men to spend their leisure time at home, arguing that staying out late was one of fathers’ “greatest sins.” Furthermore, he suggested, men would do well to be kinder to their wives, refraining from reminding women of their weaknesses, caring for them when they were sick, and remembering women too had difficulty transitioning into their roles as wives and mothers. Another writer for the *Gospel Messenger and Southern Episcopal Register* argued that men’s participation was essential to creating a Christian household and raising godly children. By participating in his children’s lives and getting to know them, a father became better equipped to train them.<sup>68</sup> Finally, proud southern physician Adam Goodlett applauded American women

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<sup>67</sup> Abbott, *The Mother at Home*, 297; Alcott, *The Young Mother*, 254-255.

<sup>68</sup> Alcott, *The Young Husband*, 140-150, 267-268, 374-375; “On the Education of Youth,” *Gospel Messenger and Southern Episcopal Register* 4, no. 48, December 1827, 371. See also *Christian Index* 7, no. 32 (8 December 1832), 361.

for “delighting” in raising their children rather than employing full-time nurses and nannies while simultaneously implying that fathers’ “inattention” to their children’s healthcare was “one reason why females know so little of it.” Goodlett’s remarks were unusually bold, though he couched his chastisement in terms of women’s ignorance and the need for men’s expertise in the plantation household. Men could parent better than their wives, they just chose not to.<sup>69</sup>

Like Goodlett, Dr. William Dewees took a hard line in arguing that it was “both unfortunate, and unjust” that “care of early education should so exclusively devolve on the mother.” Mothers had enough to worry about as they tried to avoid Dewees’ long list of miscarriage-inducing hazards during pregnancy (including overheating by “dancing in very hot weather,” eating “flatulent vegetables,” and lounging about too many hours in “warm feather beds”), to lead by spiritual example, to tend to domestic tasks, and to preside over their family’s health. In Dewees’ estimation, mothers needed a break, and the most effective way of giving them one was for fathers to begin “partaking in this arduous and interesting duty.” Advice author William Cobbett empathized with fathers’ need to be away from home to attend to business. This would not, however, “if he be made of good stuff, prevent him from doing his share of the duty due to his children.”<sup>70</sup>

Duty was a central element of authors’ pleas to men. T.S. Arthur contended that home was “a man’s true place” and the location of his “first duties.” If a man failed to uphold his childrearing duties, William Cobbett questioned, “What right has he to the

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<sup>69</sup> Goodlett, *The Family Physician*, 18-19.

<sup>70</sup> Dewees, *A Treatise on the Physical and Medical Treatment of Children*, xiii, 17-18, 257; William Cobbett, *Advice to Young Men and (incidentally) to Young Women in the Middle and Higher Ranks of Life in a series of Letters addressed to a Youth, a Bachelor, a Lover, a Husband, a Father, and a Citizen or Subject*, intro. by George Spater (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980; First edition published in 1830), 235.

sole possession of a woman's person; what right to a husband's vast authority; what right to the honourable title and the boundless power of father . . . ?"<sup>71</sup> Mothers, these authors suggested, doted on their children out of a divinely ingrained affection for their offspring; fathers doted because doing so was a critical duty of manhood.

Authors adopted several approaches to convince fathers that they should prioritize parenting. They asserted that parenting was a masculine duty and a necessary counterpoint to mother's influence at home. Additionally, authors justified domestic involvement by establishing its manliness, hoping fathers who wanted to be involved but were embarrassed to do so would be swayed by their logic. Author Charles Butler, for example, assured men that the nursery was an acceptable location of respite for busy men. "To partake with children in their little pleasures," he remarked, "is by no means unmanly. It is one of the purest sources of mirth." Yes, Butler implied, playing with one's children was frivolous—certainly not as crucial to fathers as it was to mothers—but it was a simple joy which men should embrace. South Carolinian advice author E. P. Rogers, moreover, contended that domestic life was indispensable to true manliness because it offered an arena within which men could, like history's greatest man—Jesus—demonstrate grace, wisdom, honesty, and "command over his passions." Men, then, should not be ashamed of their desire to participate with the family, but should embrace it as a way to evidence their honor. An article in the *Charleston Gospel Messenger and Protestant Episcopal Register* similarly cited a Biblical patriarch as an assurance that family participation was a masculine behavior. The article, "On Affliction," likened David's grief to Jesus' because he so readily resigned himself to God's will, setting an

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<sup>71</sup> Arthur, *Advice to Young Men*, 96, 99; Cobbett, *Advice to Young Men*, 235. See also Alcott, *The Young Husband*, 98.

example for dependents in his household. While others cited grief as an excuse to neglect their families and the other aspects of their lives, this author wrote, David, “immediately after his loss, attended to his religious duties, and from the house of God went to his own house, there to resume the ordinary business of his life and station.”<sup>72</sup> Without shame, David turned to home as his top priority.

As “On Affliction” suggests, grief was an integral part of fatherhood just as it was of motherhood. While ideas about motherhood offered a script for grief that coincided with the script offered in consolation literature, though, cultural ideas about fatherhood left men at a loss for how to behave when children died. Society expected women to take a primary role in health care, and they watched for the first signs of sickness and hovered at the bedside of an ailing loved one. As a result of the perception that women were emotional but able to withstand suffering, advice authors commanded mothers to feign cheerfulness and submission to God’s will for the sake of their families. In short, consolation literature called for little from grieving mothers that was not already expected of mothers in general. Grieving fathers, conversely, faced very different expectations than fathers whose children were healthy.

Reading between the lines of advice literature intended for a male audience suggests that in southerners’ understanding, men neglected their families in the pursuit of wealth and status, hesitated to demonstrate affection, and generally left piety and child-rearing to their wives. Whether men actually fit this mold is a topic of historical debate and a significant component of my discussion of men’s grief. For the purposes of this

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<sup>72</sup> E.P. Rogers, *Earnest Words to Young Men, in a Series of Discourses* (Charleston, SC: Published by Walker and James, 1851), 184-185; “On Affliction,” *Charleston Gospel Messenger and Protestant Episcopal Register* 22, no. 261 (January 1846), 294; Charles Butler, *The American Gentleman* (Philadelphia: Hogan & Thompson, 1839), 280-281.



chapter, it is important to note that consolation literature presented a different understanding of fatherhood than other advice literature because southerners granted fathers license to mourn. “Lizzie,” writing in *The Ladies’ Repository*, for example, described a child’s funeral, during which “the brothers bowed in silent grief to touch those lips that were now closed for ever; and the strong men wept!” Southern writer John Thornton agreed that, “sorrow on such occasions, while kept within certain limits, is allowable and proper.”<sup>73</sup> Finally, epistolary manuals offered templates for men writing to their friends following a child’s death that differed little from the templates of letters between women. In “A Child’s Death—From a Father to his Friend,” the father expressed his sorrow, remarking that “the halcyon days of happiness and peace are past,” and assured his friend that he would struggle every day to resign himself to God’s will.<sup>74</sup> Consolation literature suggests that when their children grew ill or died, the same fathers who were consumed with business pursuits and who worked tirelessly to master their emotions and their dependents, became fathers who wept alongside their wives, asked for

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<sup>73</sup> Lizzie, “Death in Childhood,” *The Ladies’ Repository*, January 1846, 28; John Thornton, *Bereaved Parents Consoled. Carefully Revised: with an Introduction and Selection of Lyrics for the Bereaved by T.O. Summers* (Nashville: Published for Stevenson and Owen, for the M.E. Church, South, 1855), 76. See also Edward H. Chapin, *The Crown of Thorns: A Token for the Sorrowing* (Boston: Published by A. Tompkins, 1847), 67-69; Leigh Hunt, “Deaths of Little Children,” *The Home Circle*, December 1857, 732-733; Augustus Charles Thompson, *Gathered Lilies; or, Little Children in Heaven* (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1858), 44-45, 53.

<sup>74</sup> “A Child’s Death—From a Father to his Friend,” in *The American Letter-Writer, and Mirror of Polite Behavior: A Guide in the Art of Letter-Writing, with Rules of Conduct for Both Sexes* (Philadelphia: Fisher and Brother, 1851), 136-138. See also, *The New Universal Letter-Writer, or Complete Art of Polite Correspondence: Containing a Course of Interesting Letters on the Most Important, Instructive, and Entertaining Subjects: to which are Prefixed, an Essay on Letter-Writing, and a Set of Compliment Cards, Suited to Occasions on which an Extraordinary Degree of Politeness Should be Observed* (Philadelphia: Hogan & Thompson, 1836), 17-18. The editors of *The New Universal Letter-Writer* suggested that fathers were no less sensitive than their wives. For mothers and fathers alike, they argued, consolation letters should treat the subjects of death and grief “with a delicate hand; for, by exaggeration, we should aggravate rather than console.” Indeed, too much empathy about the depression that accompanied parental loss and too many sad, sympathizing anecdotes could serve to magnify the bereft’s pain which was “like striking the stricken deer.”

sympathy and support from friends, and sought God's solace and the ability to submit to His will.<sup>75</sup> Perhaps because of the conflicting expectations for fatherhood expressed in advice literature, men's responses to ideas about fatherhood were more varied than women's responses to ideas about motherhood.

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Paradox marked cultural expectations for mothers and fathers. Mothers were simultaneously exalted and chastised. Maternal affection was a mother's greatest strength and her greatest liability. Men, applauded for their rationality, were simultaneously chided for failing to offer displays of emotion and assistance at home. In many ways, advice literature held men to a standard at odds with other cultural assumptions about masculinity and did so largely without offering direct instruction. While depictions of motherhood offered in consolation literature matched those in general advice literature, the same was not true for depictions of fatherhood. Mourning fathers read descriptions of fatherhood in consolation literature, advice literature, and popular culture which did not necessarily overlap.<sup>76</sup> Though cultural expectations did not always dictate parents' responses to child death, they did offer a template against which

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<sup>75</sup> See, for example, Catherine "Cattie" Kennedy to Kate DeRosset Meares, 4 June 1855, DeRosset Family Papers, SHC; William A. Whitsitt Journal, August-October 1848, Duke; Sally G. McMillen, "Antebellum Southern Fathers and the Health Care of Children," *The Journal of American History* 55, no. 3 (August 1994): 513-532. See also Shawn Johansen, "Before the Waiting Room: Northern Middle-Class Men, Pregnancy and Birth in Antebellum America," *Gender and History* 7, no. 2 (1995), 184-187. Johansen challenges the notion of separate spheres in the Victorian North by studying the birthing chamber. Men were much more involved in this feminine space, Johansen argues, than previously believed because their love of wife and child outweighed their concerns about class and social expectations. Although Johansen attributes the change in part to the role fathers played in planning conception as birth control became available—an explanation which is less convincing in the southern context—her argument nevertheless reflects the distinction between social expectations for men and the reality of their lives.

<sup>76</sup> Harvey Green, *The Light of the Home: An Intimate View of the Lives of Women in Victorian America*, 1st ed., with assistance from Mary-Ellen Perry and illustrations from the Margaret Woodbury Strong Museum (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 57-58, 115.

parents compared themselves and against which their relations compared them.

Consequently, gender standards were an inescapable part of what it meant to mourn as an elite southern parent.

## Chapter 2

### “The Lord Gave and the Lord Hath Taken Away”: The Elements of Consolation and Southern Mourning Culture

On July 8, 1821, Virginia resident Julia Melford penned a letter to Sally Randolph describing her travels to New York. In the middle of a sentence chronicling her seasickness, the north-bound traveler ended her letter abruptly. When she resumed writing ten days later, Melford excused the tardiness of her correspondence by explaining that she had learned of Sally’s cousin, Harriet’s, death in the midst of writing, resulting in such a shock to her system that she could not carry on with her letter. More unsettling even than Harriet’s death was her mother’s reaction to it. “Her mother,” Melford explained, was so destroyed by her daughter’s passing that, “She screams out for her untill [*sic*] exhausted with convulsions & then becons [*sic*] her to come to her.”<sup>1</sup> Although this mother’s dramatic grief befits twenty-first-century understandings of the gut-wrenching emotions that accompany the loss of a child, it stood in stark contrast to antebellum southerners’ expectations.

Harriet’s mother failed to behave as her family in Virginia, Louisiana, and Mississippi believed a lady should; her grief was uncontrolled and disturbing to others, and her lack of decorum set a poor moral example for other family members.<sup>2</sup> More importantly, Mrs. Randolph’s agonized screams and pleas to have her daughter returned

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<sup>1</sup> Julia Melford to Sarah Ann “Sally” Yates Randolph, 8 and 18 July 1821, Randolph and Yates Family Papers, SHC.

<sup>2</sup> A discussion of southern mourning culture relies heavily on messages directed at women and on women’s responses to them. Although fathers were affected profoundly by the deaths of their children, society offered fewer prescriptions for their grief because “manliness” was assumed to prevent men from mourning and from reading advice literature. Widely accepted stereotypes about women’s emotional volatility meant women found themselves especially scrutinized as they grieved the death of a child. See Jeffrey Steele, “The Gender and Racial Politics of Mourning in Antebellum America,” in Jan Lewis and Peter N. Stearns, eds., *An Emotional History of the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 92-93.

from heaven suggested that her faith in God afforded little comfort. Randolph was exactly the type of parent whom author and minister A.C. Thompson had in mind when he admonished, “Strange that any should forget who is the great proprietor; that when he appears the cry should be, Not this one, not that one; oh spare *my* dear ones! If the Lord of the manor comes to gather a little early fruit before the general harvest home, shall the tenant object as if he owned all, or owned anything?”<sup>3</sup> By grieving so dramatically, Mrs. Randolph appeared to challenge God’s ultimate authority. As the stark contrast between Randolph’s actions and Thompson’s words suggests, the grief southerners expressed individually did not always mirror the cohesive cultural script for mourning outlined in sermons, bereavement manuals, prescriptive literature, and periodicals.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ellen S. Harvie to Margaret Dickins, 28 May 1856, Francis Asbury Dickins Papers, SHC; A.C. Thompson, *Gathered Lilies; or, Little Children in Heaven* (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1858), 9-10.

<sup>4</sup> See Peter N. Stearns and Jan Lewis, “Introduction,” in Peter N. Stearns and Jan Lewis, eds., *An Emotional History of the United States*, History of Emotions Series (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 2-5. Stearns and Lewis argue that historians must not conflate individuals’ emotions with the emotional expectations outlined by their culture, but should not overstate the line between rhetoric and reality either. Indeed, rhetoric and reality are “tested against the other, and each is understood only in the context of the other . . . men and women give shape to their own lives, sometimes attempting to conform to the prevailing standards, sometimes internalizing them, sometimes resisting, but always negotiating between experience and precept.” See also Catherine Lutz, *Unnatural Emotions: Everyday Sentiments on a Micronesian Atoll & their Challenge to Western Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 4-5, 8; William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), xi, 27-42; Peter N. Stearns and Carol Z. Stearns, “Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards,” *The American Historical Review* 90 (1985): 824-827; Jane Turner Censer, *North Carolina Planters and their Children, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 31; Nancy Scheper-Hughes, *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 272, 314, 341, 354. Although Lewis’ and Stearns’ examination of emotions is relatively rare among historians, their work is part of a lively debate among sociologists, anthropologists, and, to a much smaller extent, historians over the nature of emotions. Scholars debate whether emotions are rooted in biology or culture. It seems clear that even if emotions are psychobiological, as westerners have often treated them, social mores play a role in how such emotions are expressed. As Lutz has argued, culture and society at the very least “highlight or darken particular areas of the given psychobiological structure of emotions by, for example, repressing the expression of anger in women, calling for smiles to mask natural feelings of fear in certain situations, or emphasizing shame in one society and guilt in another.” In her estimation, then, a researchers’ task is not to determine what their subject is “feeling,” but to translate their emotional expressions from one context into another. In an honor culture like the one that existed in the antebellum South, cultural mores had great power. Even those who did not achieve the resignation lauded publicly expressed their desire to adhere to the standards.

As evangelical Christianity grew to include eighty-five percent of American church congregants during the nineteenth century, Americans became increasingly convinced that, in historian Carl Bode's words, "Behavior was important." Regardless of denominational differences, adherents to evangelicalism shared the core tenant that the Bible offered instruction on the correct way to behave. Just as one's behavior affected entrance into heaven, so too did it impact acceptance in society. Appropriate comportment reflected a person's piety, which in turn revealed his or her class status.<sup>5</sup> Americans in general, then, were primed for the messages offered in etiquette manuals and prescriptive literature on many topics, including grief, and white antebellum southerners were particularly receptive to such public influences. Historian Lorri Glover contends that beginning in the eighteenth century, southerners read advice literature more avidly than their northern counterparts even if the elements of honor, at least for men, also prompted greater acceptance of misbehavior. Consumed with concern for their public reputations and eager to shape others' actions, elite southerners perused prescriptive literature, worked to adhere to its tenants, and used the boundaries it established to police the behavior of others.<sup>6</sup> Because grief had such potential to

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<sup>5</sup> Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 170-174; Carl Bode, *The Anatomy of American Popular Culture, 1840-1861* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959), 127. See also John Corrigan, *Business of the Heart: Religion and Emotion in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 1-3. In his book analyzing Boston's 1858 Businessmen's Revival, John Corrigan argues that emotional expression became akin to ethnicity, religion, class, and even dress as a way of determining group belonging. By establishing "feeling rules" within the context of Victorian America—an era during which, Peter Stearns argues, emotions and interpersonal relationships became "equivalent to a religious experience"—Boston's middle-class Protestants set the boundary for determining who belonged and who did not.

<sup>6</sup> Steven M. Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South: Ritual in the Lives of the Planters* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 52-54; Lorri Glover, *Southern Sons: Becoming Men in the New Nation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 84.

undermine central tenets of the southern worldview, authors took particular care to define how their readers should behave in times of loss.

Modern grief theory rests on the idea that a wide spectrum of emotions is normal and acceptable while grieving.<sup>7</sup> For nineteenth-century southerners, wary of bourgeois individualism, however, this idea made little sense.<sup>8</sup> Throughout the antebellum South, a cohesive cultural script existed to direct southerners' grief following the all-too-prevalent occurrence of a child's death. The significance of parents' personal expressions of grief can only be understood against the backdrop of southern grief culture—that is, within the context of the “emotional standards,” or social expectations, to which southerners felt they must adhere.<sup>9</sup> As they did with gender expectations, sermons, consolation literature, periodicals, prescriptive literature, domestic medical manuals, and southerners' letters

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<sup>7</sup> See Ellen Mitchell, Carol Barkin, et al., *Beyond Tears: Living after Losing a Child* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2009), 3; Dennis Klass, *Parental Grief: Solace and Resolution*, Springer Series on Death and Suicide, 9 (New York: Springer Pub. Co., 1988), 13; Catherine M. Sanders, *Grief: The Mourning After: Dealing with Adult Bereavement*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1999), 177; Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss* (New York: Scribner, 2005), xi, 7, 14-17; Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Children and Death* (New York: Collier Books, 1985), 22-24. Mitchell, Klass, and Sanders understand grieving the death of a child as a life-long process for which there is “no clear road map.” Sanders contends that the process of grieving a child's death is longer than the timeline for any other type of grief, often intensifying by the one-and-a-half- to two-year mark, rather than diminishing. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross argues that the only helpful role for members of a bereaved parent's support network is that of listener. “An apparently friendly statement like ‘It was God's will’ or ‘At least you had him for a little while’ is not only tasteless but infuriating to most newly bereaved parents.” In *On Grief and Grieving*, Kübler-Ross also outlines the widely accepted modern understanding that grief occurs in stages, but that “there is no correct way or time to grieve.” Of the five stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—only one was an acceptable expression of grief within elite antebellum culture.

<sup>8</sup> See Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 128-129.

<sup>9</sup> Stearns and Lewis, “Introduction,” in Stearns and Lewis, *An Emotional History of the United States*, 2-5, 8. Lewis and Stearns offer a cogent example of the difference between public standards of emotion and individual feeling when they outline the different histories of formal ideas about sex, “sexual mentalities—that is, deeply held personal and group attitudes about sexual goals and methods,” and “actual sexual behavior.” See also Stearns and Stearns, “Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards,” 813, 824-827; Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South*, xiii. Steven Stowe also attempts “to describe a shared mentality that lies between observable behavior, on the one hand, and formal systems of thought, on the other” in order to demonstrate how planters saw the world.

played crucial roles in defining expectations for mourning. The ideals they expressed were remarkably cohesive. There was little, if any, distinction between formal and popular religious belief on the subjects of grief and bereavement, and religion stood at the core of every discussion of both topics.<sup>10</sup> Clergymen and advice authors bombarded bereft parents repeatedly with messages about God’s benevolence, the meanings of loss, and the appropriate ways to mourn. Although bereft parents rarely met the expectations outlined for them by such “experts,” southern planters and plantation mistresses nevertheless reinforced their expectations through public discourse and private correspondence, cementing the elements of consolation and southern mourning culture.

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When a child died, the first step for grieving southern parents—and the starting point for southern consolation and mourning culture—was to notify others of their loss. Some published obituaries in the local newspaper, including the child’s age, a brief description of his or her cause of death and many wonderful personality traits, and a reference to parents’ belief that death was a beginning, not an end. Annie DeRosset’s obituary, for example, reminded mourners that Annie was “not dead, but transplanted to another and a better world.” “Willie’s” obituary in a North Carolina newspaper described

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<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*, Gender & American Culture (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 44. See also Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), xv-xvii, 44; Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789-1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 4, 10-12, 33, 148. Donald Mathews echoes the importance of honor and planter culture in the evolution of southern evangelical Christianity. Candy Gunther Brown’s study of evangelical print culture suggests that the authors of bereavement manuals and consolation literature purposefully linked high and popular religious thought. Evangelicals reasoned that for maximum impact, their words must permeate every arena of culture—public and private. Consequently, religious literature, including periodicals, became crucial links between adherents. By participating in a “textual community,” rather than solely a family unit or individual congregation, Brown reasons, nineteenth-century Americans found a structured way of mediating between private experience and larger social experience.



him as, “a lovely, remarkably intelligent and interesting child.”<sup>11</sup> Many more elite southern parents used the post to alert those in their support networks to the death of a child. Letters connected friends and relatives when visits were impossible and played a crucial role in unifying the way that southerners’ understood grief connecting people as they did over state lines and family names.<sup>12</sup>

When a child died and parents found themselves forced to write letters and publish obituaries, thereby triggering the chain of condolences which would shape and constrict their grief, they were hardly blank slates. Rather, southerners’ understandings of grief, God, life, and death informed their perceptions of appropriate mourning for a child. Gender, we have already seen, affected the way parents understood their loss. The significance of family, too, played a crucial role. Even more pivotal in southern grief culture was southerners’ conviction that an omnipotent and merciful God controlled every element of their lives. Within the southern culture of evangelicalism, mastery, and

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<sup>11</sup> Gaston Meares to Kate DeRosset Meares, 6 February, 1855, DeRosset Family Papers, SHC; Juliana Paisley Gilmer Scrapbook, Obituaries for “Willie,” Addison Gorgas Brenizer Papers, SHC. See also 13 July 1816, Maria Ball Carter Tucker Commonplace Book, UVA; Janett Winfield Scott death notice, 3 September 1849, Young Family Papers, VHS. See also Rebecca Gilman Miller to Chandler Robbins Gilman, January, 1819 in Rebecca Ives Gilman Miller, *A Family History in Letters and Documents* (St. Paul, MN: Privately published, 1919), 361, and Rebecca Phillips Cohen to Zalegman Phillips, 19 September 1838, in Jacob R. Marcus, *The American Jewish Woman: A Documentary History* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1981), 145.

<sup>12</sup> Lewis O. Saum, “Death in the Popular Mind of Pre-Civil War America,” in David E. Stannard, ed., *Death in America*, with an intro by David E. Stannard (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), 34; William Decker, *Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America Before Telecommunications* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 9, 14, 21-26, 99; Stowe, *Intimacy and Power*, 2. See also Mary Louise Kete, *Sentimental Collaborations: Mourning and Middle-Class Identity in Nineteenth-Century America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), xiv, 3, 7, 16-17, 52-66. Kete argues that the formal language of sentimentality so prevalent in consolation letters acted “as a means of transforming . . . grief into restorative mourning.” Sharing a formal language in mourning connected the bereft to their loved ones at a time when they could potentially become adrift.

patriarchy, southerners understood God as “the ultimate patriarch.” Successes and failures, sickness and health, recovery and death—all rested in God’s hands.<sup>13</sup>

God’s centrality in planters’ understandings of life and death cannot be overstated, but their belief in God’s ultimate control was far from simple. Indeed, the increasing influence of evangelicalism and sentimentalism on nineteenth-century America led to an understanding of God rife with contradiction. Even as they sought to resign to the will of Providence, for example, southerners understood resignation and kissing the “chastening rod” as a way to gain a modicum of control. Suffering was not pointless; it was an opportunity to prove and strengthen one’s devotion to God.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, historian Gary Laderman contends, evangelicals perceived death as divine chastisement on the one hand and adopted “romantic, sentimental cultural tendencies geared toward soothing the emotions of the survivors” on the other.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, although child mortality rates remained steady, parents’ bonds with their children became more intense during the nineteenth century, encouraged by an increasingly private and sentimentalized family structure. At least in the South, historian V. Lynn Kennedy contends, advice authors also placed new emphasis on the notion that “good” parenting, particularly good mothering, could keep children healthy even as southerners continued

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<sup>13</sup> William Kauffman Scarborough, *Masters of the Big House: Elite Slaveholders of the Mid-Nineteenth-Century South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 53-60; James J. Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830-1920*, *American Civilization* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 35-39; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, “Religion in the Lives of Slaveholding Women in the Antebellum South,” in Lynda L. Coon, Katherine J. Haldane, and Elisabeth W. Sommer, eds., *That Gentle Strength: Historical Perspectives on Women in Christianity* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), 219-220.

<sup>14</sup> Jan Lewis, *The Pursuit of Happiness: Family and Values in Jefferson’s Virginia* (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 43-65.

<sup>15</sup> Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799-1883* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 54-55.

to idealize the belief that God was ultimately responsible for a child's survival.<sup>16</sup> When a child died, then, nineteenth-century understandings of death and parenthood presented a challenge to planter parents' belief in a benevolent, all-powerful God. Consequently, explanations for how parents could reconcile God's benevolence and their child's suffering filled sermons and advice literature intended to guide grieving parents.

Although perceptions of God were the most important element of southern grief culture, concern with a "Good Death" also influenced southerners living in the Old South states. Southerners' religious conviction that every child went to heaven mitigated the need to prove their children died peacefully and convinced of their salvation. Even so, parents regularly contended that their children struggled heroically and died resignedly.<sup>17</sup> Varina Davis, the future first lady of the Confederacy, explained to her mother and father, "My child suffered like a hero. A cry never escaped his lips."<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Ann Lewis Hardeman noted in her diary, "On Fri. late in the evening she grew worse but her countenance became radiant with smiles & looked heavenly . . . I never saw a child bear pain with more patience."<sup>19</sup> Finally, Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis, George and Martha

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<sup>16</sup> Nancy Schrom Dye and Daniel Blake Smith, "Mother Love and Infant Death, 1750-1920," *The Journal of American History* 73, no.2 (Sep., 1986): 345, 338; V. Lynn Kennedy, *Born Southern: Childbirth, Motherhood, and Social Networks in the Old South* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 15.

<sup>17</sup> See Philippe Ariés, *Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. From the French by Patricia M. Ranum, Johns Hopkins Symposia in Comparative History, 4<sup>th</sup> (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), esp. 55-82; Mark S. Schantz, *Awaiting the Heavenly Country: The Civil War and America's Culture of Death* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 18-19; Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 9-11. See also James J. Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830-1920*, American Civilization, ed. Allen F. Davis (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980); Mary E. Stovall, "'To Be, To Do, and To Suffer,': Responses to Illness and Death in the Nineteenth-Century South," *Journal of Mississippi History* 52, no. 2 (1990): 95-109.

<sup>18</sup> Varina Anne Banks Howell Davis to Margaret Louisa Kempe Howell, July, 1854, in Jefferson Davis, *Private Letters 1823-1889*, ed. by Hudson Strode (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966), 78.

<sup>19</sup> Ann Lewis Hardeman Diary, 25 July 1853, in Michael O'Brien, ed., *An Evening When Alone: Four Journals of Single Women in the South, 1827-1867* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 244-45.

Washington's beloved granddaughter, took comfort that her son patiently "submitted to the will of his Almighty Father" despite his pain and, "was enabled to say 'Thy will be done' & died as gently as an Infant seeks to rest."<sup>20</sup> For each of these parents, believing that their children had proven his or her salvation was an important part of seeing God's control and benevolence in the midst of tragic loss.

Ideas about the emotion of grief also played a role in how southerners expressed their sorrow. Belief in God's omnipotence was so pervasive in the South that grief was understood in religious terms. Physicians and domestic medical manual authors often referenced religion in their advice about melancholy. Some doctors recommended medical remedies for what they viewed as a medical problem, but many others cited religion as the best cure for a broken heart. Melancholy, in medical manual author William Buchan's estimation, was, "that state of alienation or weakness of mind" brought on by everything from solitude to narcotics to "intense thinking" and "violent passions." A vegetarian diet, not religion, was the solution for such sorrow. In fact, he argued, anger and the "gloomy and mistaken notions of religion" served only to "change melancholy into madness." Author Adam Goodlett agreed that grief was a mental affliction that weakened the nervous system, affected appetite and digestion, and even slowed the heartbeat, but contended that religion was part of its remedy. "Even whilst we are heavy with affliction," Goodlett wrote, "let us smile with our eyes turned upwards, and say, 'It is thy will: I submit. He is happy. I would not wish him back to a troublesome world'." Goodlett also recommended crying, suggesting that it aided the

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<sup>20</sup> Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis to Elizabeth Bordley Gibson, 3 October 1847, in Nelly Custis Lewis, *George Washington's Beautiful Nelly: The Letters of Eleanor Parke Lewis to Elizabeth Bordley Gibson, 1794-1851: With a New Guide to the Homes of Nelly Custis Lewis and Her Family*, expanded ed. Ed. by Patricia Brady (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2006), 249-250.

process of turning to God by calming the heart rate and lowering blood pressure, thereby allowing the bereaved to act rationally.<sup>21</sup>

John Gunn, perhaps the South's most popular domestic medical expert, also understood grief as a serious and potentially fatal medical problem which required both physical and spiritual treatments. Grief was a "depressing affection of the mind," liable to degenerate into "confirmed melancholy, despair and fatal insanity." In the presence of such distress, he continued, "the consolations of religion and philosophy are of great importance." By teaching people that mourning only made them less capable of handling the sins and sorrows of life, religion and philosophy lessened the effects of grief. Furthermore, Gunn contended, religious fortitude could slash the stress of life's sorrows and hardships in half. Tears and reliance on God were just what the physician ordered as a remedy for the human tendency "to mourn over losses which can never be retrieved!"<sup>22</sup>

Each time they faced a child's death, southerners wrestled with their understandings of God and his role in the world. God's prominence in the southern psyche, however, did not mean that southerners viewed themselves as powerless. In

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<sup>21</sup> William Buchan, *Domestic Medicine, or, A Treatise on the Prevention and Cure of Diseases, by Regimen and Simple Medicines: With an Appendix, Containing a Satory for the Use of Private Practitioners* (Edinburgh: Printed for Bell & Bradfute, Peter Hill, Doig & Stirling, J. Thomson, Jun. & Co. and Adam Black, by John Moir, 1812), 426; Adam G. Goodlett, *The Family Physician: Or Every Man's Companion, Being a Compilation from the Most Approved Medical Authors, Adapted to the Southern and Western Climates. To which is added an Account of Herbs, Roots, and Plants, used for Medical Purposes with Directions How They are to be Prepared so that Every Man Can be His Own Physician, Together with a Glossary of Medical Terms. With an Appendix, Containing a New and Successful Mode of Treating Asiatic Cholera* (Nashville, TN: Printed at Smith and Nesbit's Steam Press, 1838), 144-148.

<sup>22</sup> John C. Gunn, *Gunn's Domestic Medicine: A Facsimile of the First Edition*, Tennessee Editions (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1986), 49, 53-55. See also Elizabeth Barnaby Keeney, "Unless Powerful Sick: Domestic Medicine in the Old South," in Ronald L. Numbers and Todd L. Savitt, eds., *Science and Medicine in the Old South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 277-278. Elizabeth Keeney explains that eleven southern medical manuals appeared between 1807 and 1860. Of them, James Ewell's *The Planter's and Mariner's Medical Companion* went through thirteen editions. John Gunn's, meanwhile, went through more than one hundred.

addition to new ideas about parents' ability to control their children's health, the influence of the Second Great Awakening and its emphasis on human agency and emotional self-control prompted southerners to seek the moral meaning of their afflictions and to examine how their actions may have triggered their losses. God was the ultimate power, but southerners worked to fulfill their duties to Him by meditating on the meaning of His actions.<sup>23</sup> Periodicals, sermons, and other advice literature in concert with parents' letters to one another directed southerners' understanding of the meanings of child death and standards for appropriate grief.

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South Carolinian M.C. Sawyer expressed the belief of many when he wrote to a friend, "the greatest calamity to which parents are subject in this life is the loss of children." Juliana Paisley Gilmer, for example, was so moved by one writer's comment that for a parent to describe the anguish of seeing their "cold and lifeless" child, "would require a pen dipped in the very essence of the sublimest sorrow itself," that she transcribed his words into her commonplace album.<sup>24</sup> Even authors of bereavement literature, who relentlessly encouraged parents to see the benefits of their child's death, recognized parental grief as a uniquely painful affliction.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Scott Stephan, *Redeeming the Southern Family: Evangelical Women and Domestic Devotion in the Antebellum South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 220; Nancy Schrom Dye and Daniel Blake Smith, "Mother Love and Infant Death, 1750-1920," *The Journal of American History* 73, no.2 (Sep., 1986): 338; James J. Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830-1920*, American Civilization (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 38-39.

<sup>24</sup> M.C. Sawyer to Ebenezer Pettigrew Edenton, 13 August 1818, in Sarah McCulloh Lemmon, ed., *The Pettigrew Papers* (Raleigh, NC: State Department of Archives and History, 1971), 634-635; Juliana Paisley Gilmer Scrapbook, page 11 of 1858-1870 volume, Addison Gorgas Brenizer Papers, SHC.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, James Abercrombie, *The Mourner Comforted: A Selection of Extracts, Consolatory on the Death of Relatives and Friends, from the Writings of the Most Eminent Divines & Others, including Dr. Johnson's Celebrated Sermon on the Death of His Wife, Together with Prayers*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Philadelphia: S. Potter and Co., 1821), 1.

Within the context of God’s omnipotence, parents and authors assumed that a trial as significant as child death had to have a divine purpose.<sup>26</sup> Publicly and privately, then, southerners strived to reconcile the existence of a great deal of suffering—economic hardship, cultural upheaval, disease, death, and particularly child mortality—with their understanding of a benevolent, all-powerful Lord. South Carolinian Reverend Whitefoord Smith’s nuanced explanation for how to do this reflected the difficulty of the task. Suffering was neither accidental, he contended, nor dictated by God. Instead, it was “tough love”—a “universal law” of human nature, designed but not micromanaged by a loving Father who sympathized with humankind’s suffering. Like Smith, a friend writing to minister James Henley Thornwell reminded him, “*We do know*, James, that our heavenly Parent, whose love to us surpasses that of a woman to the child of her bosom, is the immediate Author of these bereavements.” Because God never “afflicts willingly,” W.H. Robins continued, the death of Thornwell’s child must have had a cause. Determining this cause, Robins believed, “is our privilege and our duty.”<sup>27</sup>

Other authors and religious figures agreed with Robins that to benefit from their afflictions, sufferers must work hard, reflecting on their lives as Christians and examining what God could be telling them. Understanding God’s intended message required an

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<sup>26</sup> See E. Brooks Holifield, *A History of Pastoral Care in America: From Salvation to Self-Realization* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), 138; Stephan, *Redeeming the Southern Family*, 185-188, 190-192. Scott Stephen suggests that in addition to seeing illness as “God’s most potent corrective for wayward pilgrims” and death as a tool for “renewing and reinvigorating piety,” southern evangelicals often imagined that their fate could have been worse if not for their faith. There was no context, then, within which to question God. Affliction was benevolent and always as mild as God could make it while still conveying His message.

<sup>27</sup> Whitefoord Smith, “Man Subjected to the Law of Suffering,” in William T. Smithson, ed., *The Methodist Pulpit South* (Washington, D.C.: Henry Polkinhorn Printer, 1848), 124-125, 131-132; W.H. Robbins to James Henley Thornwell, undated 1830s, in Benjamin Morgan Palmer, ed., *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell* (Richmond: Whittet & Shepperson, 1875), 138.

appropriately penitent Christian heart. In author Henry Bacon's estimation, grief had benevolent powers only when "mingled" with the "willingness to be consoled." Minister and author James Abercrombie argued against the popular belief that "we may be allowed to complain, and to chide a little." Humans, in fact, had no such right and their indignation when afflicted, though temporarily satisfying, would only harm them in the end. By forgetting God, bereft parents continued suffering, but did so without the consolations of religion and without the hope of recovering; their child was still dead, and their loss was meaningless.<sup>28</sup>

Thomas Walker went still further in his bereavement manual's explanations. "Afflictions," Walker wrote, "if they are received with humility, penitence, and submission, are blessings; but if they excite murmurings, impatience, and incorrigibleness, they become judgments, and the forerunners of still greater severity." By engaging in self-examination, "fervent prayer," "submission," and "a thankful spirit," and by guarding against resentment toward the Lord, Walker believed, the afflicted could find consolation and avoid further suffering. Time spent in the "house of mourning" was intended to provide space for religious reflection and growth, not brooding and pining for the deceased.<sup>29</sup> As both authors understood it, if a parent failed to understand their affliction's purpose, their own human weakness, not God, was to blame.

Despite cautioning them against feeling resentment toward God, clergy and prescriptive authors understood that many parents would be consumed by their sorrow

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<sup>28</sup> Henry Bacon, *The Sacred Flora: or, Flowers from the Grave of a Child* (Boston: A. Tomkins and B.B. Mussey, 1848), 94; Abercrombie, *The Mourner Comforted*, 191. Like many other consolation manuals, Bacon's book was pocket-sized, literally intended as a reference for how to grieve

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Harris Walker, *A Companion for the Afflicted: Designed for the benefit of all who are distressed, whether in mind, body, or estate*, ed. by George Peck (New York: Lane & Tippet, 1846), 48-69.



and unable to think clearly about the meaning of their losses. Consequently, consolation literature authors and correspondents guided parents toward four possible purposes a child's death could serve. A child's death could tie bereft parents more closely to heaven, could punish parents for their indiscretions, or could spare parents from heartbreak during their mortal lives. The fourth explanation authors offered for a child's death was the only one which actually involved the child. A child's death, authors explained, might also be intended to spare him from suffering on earth. In every case, a child's death was God's way of securing a family's reunion in heaven by encouraging or ensuring each member's salvation. The concept of heavenly reunion and the continuation of earthly affections in heaven held powerful sway over southern grief culture.<sup>30</sup>

In the first popular theme of consolation literature, authors explained that a child's death could be God's way of making parents more mindful of their piety, thereby strengthening their link to heaven. James Abercrombie and the ministers whose sermons he quoted urged parents to remember that "our Heavenly Father always sends his children the things they ask, or better things." While people asked for what would make their lives easiest, God "consults our *profit*—We are urgent about the *body*, He about the *soul*." Southerners who turned to Abercrombie's manual learned their trial might teach them a lesson about the "vanity of the world," remind them of their own mortality, or encourage them to finish their "spiritual business" before it was too late. Like Abercrombie, *Southern Rose* contributor Chandler Robbins assured southern parents their

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<sup>30</sup> Philippe Ariés, *The Hour of Our Death*, translated from the French by Helen Weaver (New York: Knopf, distributed by Random House, 1981), 460-462. See also Philippe Ariés, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, translated from the French by Robert Baldick (New York: Knopf, 1962), 368, for a discussion of how westerners began to view childhood as a unique phase of life and a discussion of how parents' attitudes toward their children began to change after the fifteenth century.

children had neither been born nor loved in vain simply because they had died young. In fact, believing so was an “unholy thought.” Instead, a child who died young imparted upon his parents the message to love one another and to live a life that reflected God’s presence in the world.<sup>31</sup> Anna Moffett echoed these ideas to her grieving daughter and son-in-law when she wrote, “let us not murmur. God has in mercy grieved you.” Moffett trusted, she wrote, that her children’s loss would be a “strong cord to draw you heaven words—that you may try to know the cause of this trying discipline and make a good improvement on it.”<sup>32</sup>

On New Year’s Day, 1853, Mary Jeffreys Bethell reflected in her diary about the previous year’s blessings and misfortunes and prayed that God would help her accept her three-year-old daughter, Phereba’s, death in a horrific burning accident. “I believe that the Lord afflicted me for my good,” she recorded, “I hope that it will work out for me a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth.”<sup>33</sup> Mary Bethell’s belief that “whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth” reflected a second possible meaning of child mortality. Though relatively rare, some southerners perceived a child’s death as her parents’ punishment. Clergymen and advice authors generally couched this idea in euphemistic terms, arguing that any method God used to redirect one of his children on the path to salvation was benevolent. Consolation author Thomas

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<sup>31</sup> James Abercrombie and Philip Doddridge, “Submission to Divine Providence, on the Death of Children,” in Abercrombie, *The Mourner Comforted*, 22, 185-192; Rev. Chandler Robbins, *Southern Rose*, 6, no. 7 (25 November 1837), 103-105. See also Henry Bacon, *The Christian Comforter: A Gift for the Afflicted and Bereaved* (Boston: Abel Tompkins, 1840), 127-128.

<sup>32</sup> Anna Reid Moffett to Margaret and William Adger, 4 September 1841, Margaret Hall Moffett Adger Papers, SCHS.

<sup>33</sup> 1 January 1853, Mary Jeffreys Bethell Diary, SHC. See also Lavinia “Venie” Florance Minis to Abram Minis, 17 September 1856, Minis Family Papers, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, GA (GHS).

Smyth coached, “God does nothing without a reason. That reason may have respect to you—it may have respect to your child, and not unlikely to both . . . you may have been in danger of loving the world too much, and he removed the cause in time.”<sup>34</sup> By chastising parents for idolatry, that is, God demonstrated His fatherly love.

Residents of the eastern seaboard writing to one another or contributing to periodicals discussed punishment more directly. Ann Hobson believed she had identified the four reasons that God had punished her with her children’s deaths. First, she had neglected to attend to the “suffering and needy” as a Christian lady should, preoccupied instead with caring for her home and children. Second, when ill, Hobson failed to “contend enough” with the spiritual meanings of her infirmity, seeking instead to recover and carry on with her worldly concerns. Third, Hobson had “not cultivated loving charity as God requires.” And finally, Hobson believed she fretted too much over worldly issues and “faithless fears”—likely the fear that her children would sicken and die— and failed to “lean on the Lord.” In Hobson’s estimation, her children’s deaths were the jolt necessary to prompt her renewed focus on the Lord. Without them, she had no “idols” to distract her. Eliza Jane DeRosset explained to her grieving daughter, “God has seen our wickedness and is punishing us for our sins.” Both DeRosset and her daughter Kate DeRosset Meares had recently suffered the death of a child, and DeRosset believed that God intended the chastisement to remind them to return their focus from “this world” to “a city without foundations whose builder and maker is God.” Kate had only to

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<sup>34</sup> Thomas Smyth, *Solace for Bereaved Parents: or, Infants Die to Live: With an historical account of the doctrine of infant salvation: also very full selections from various authors in prose and poetry* (New York: R. Carter, 1848), 12.

remember this lesson and seek comfort from her Heavenly Father, for it was “upon his bosom,” DeRosset reminded her, “you could tell your grief.”<sup>35</sup>

Ann Swann, too, worried that by loving her children too much she was challenging a jealous God to “bear a Rival.” Even parents who believed themselves faithful worried about exhibiting what Swann called “secret mental Idolatry” which was as offensive to the Lord “as the visible bowing of the knee in a Pagan Temple.” They consequently struggled to balance their preoccupation with a recently-deceased child with the “reverence and Resignation due to a loving God.” A fictional contribution to *The Home Circle* suggests the cultural trope connecting children’s deaths to their sinful parents’ indiscretions was molded by a dialectic between public and private voices. The mother in this story recognized God’s chastisement in her daughter’s death. Though her “poor, weak, wounded heart” could not let the child go, the mother believed “it is better for my child; and I believe in the end it will be better for me. God has taken my idol. My love for her was worship.” She could only hope God could “forgive the wild anguish of a mother’s heart, when bereft of the babe that had lain for long months in her arms, and drawn its sustenance from her bosom!” Like a loving parent—or self-described paternalistic slave master—God disciplined His children for their own good.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Eliza Jane DeRosset to Kate DeRosset Meares, 7 June 1855, DeRosset Family Papers, SHC.

<sup>36</sup> 30 September 1866, Anne Jennings Wise Hobson Diary, VHS; “From a Friend,” 27 October 1835, Ann Sophia Green Swann Commonplace Book, Swann Family Papers, SHC; Lizzie Clarendon, “The Shadow of Death,” *The Home Circle*, July 1857, 395-396. See also Heyrman, *Southern Cross*, 159. After 1830, Christine Heyrman argues, evangelical churches began deferring to the family as the primary site of moral reprimand. Agreement between public and private voices on the topic of grief, then, was essential to a cohesive culture. Religious calls for resignation would have had little power, no matter how many times they were printed and re-printed, if they had not also been reiterated time and again in letters exchanged between loved ones.

More often, southerners perceived the death of a child not as God's punishment to parents, but as a gift to them. This argument hinged upon acceptance that infant salvation was universal. Evangelical parents, especially mothers, valued salvation for their progeny above all else. As a child grew up and faced worldly sin and temptation, these parents believed, salvation became less likely. By taking a child in its infancy, then, a friend of James Henley Thornwell explained, God spared the child a fall from grace and spared her parents "the more acute suffering at beholding an unworthy life." A letter from R. Hall also encouraged parents to "rejoice" when their children "escaped from a world of sin and sorrow." If God permitted a child to live, Hall wrote, and "you had witnessed the loss of his virtue, you might have been reserved to suffer still severer pangs." To punctuate the argument, Hall related the story of parents who had witnessed their son's slow demise at the hands of many vices and had consequently "frequently regretted he did not die several years since, when his life was nearly despaired of in a severe fever."<sup>37</sup> For southern evangelical parents, perhaps the argument that children were better off dead than tempted by a sinful world resonated in the context of an honor culture within which teenage boys asserted their fledgling manhood by racing horses, gambling, drinking, and whoring—or worse still, were "tempted" by slave women.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> R. Hall, "On the Loss of a Child," in A Lady, *The Mourner's Book* (Philadelphia: W. Marshall, 1836), 110-111. Palmer, *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell*, 138. See also Smyth, *Solace for Bereaved Parents*, 36-37, 59, 62-63; Mary J. Pottrie to her cousin, 30 June 1849, Charles Family Papers, SCL. In his moral tale, Thomas Smyth described a mother given the opportunity to choose whether her infant son should live or die. Ultimately, she realized that she could not choose because unlike God, she could not foresee the child's future. Smyth implied that had the mother been able to foretell that her child would grow into an ungodly adult, she, like God, would have chosen his early death and assured salvation

<sup>38</sup> Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 165.

More prevalent even than arguments suggesting a child's death was intended to help his parents was the contention that God called a child to heaven as a service to the child.<sup>39</sup> On earth children faced hardships and sorrows and encountered temptation that might make them stray from the path of salvation. As such, "Eva" wrote in *The Southern Ladies' Companion*, "It was a beautiful saying of the ancients, that whom the gods love, die young." One Virginian woman questioned whether it was good fortune or bad that she had born a son. Although she felt blessed, this mother was keenly aware of life's uncertainty and the hardships her boy might face. Thomas Smyth reassured his readers that their children were "taken away in infancy not in anger, but in mercy, and not for our punishment merely, but much more for our good." For parent and child alike there was certainty in death which could never be attained in life. Death was "to them a kindness, to us a blessing."<sup>40</sup>

Clergy and writers reminded parents that the sorrow they felt was an integral part of the human experience, and one reason they should be thankful for their child's death. Although advice author John Abbott acknowledged every parent's certainty that mourning a child was "the bitterest cup of sorrow which you can drink," he contended that the alternative was worse. If parents died first, they left their children to "stand weeping" at their deathbeds. Another minister counseled a congregant to remember that by dying young, her child had "escaped those sorrows she would have suffered for you. – You have only to mourn for the loss of her; but she might have mourned for you, for

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<sup>39</sup> See also Rev. John F. Marlay, "Shall We Know Each Other in Heaven?" *The Home Circle*, March 1860, 154-157.

<sup>40</sup> Eva, "The Early Dead, *The Southern Lady's Companion* 22, no. 2 (May 1853), 45-46; Rachael to Anne T. Davis, 22 August 1842, Beale and Davis Family Papers, SHC; Smyth, *Solace for Bereaved Parents*, 12, 56. See also, "Pathetic Letter on the Death of an Only Child," in Abercrombie, *The Mourner Comforted*, 372.

herself, and for her offspring.” Living a long life meant facing many losses. It was for all these reasons that South Carolinian Anna Moffett, not an author or professional, but rather a mother who lived through the deaths of six of her babies, consoled her bereft daughter, “surely that dear babe is in our Saviours [*sic*] arms, much better provided for than his Earthly parents could do.” No matter his parent’s pain, a child in the presence of his heavenly Father was better off than he could ever be on earth.<sup>41</sup>

By describing children’s deaths as blessings, public figures in the South made parents hesitant to wish their child was still alive. Author A.C. Thompson questioned, “We pray for the early sanctification of children . . . Shall we then weep when God takes us at our word, and makes them perfectly holy at the very dawn of life?” In Thompson’s opinion, mourning a child’s death was hypocritical and selfish—“like objecting to immediate rescue from a wreck.” Lydia Howard Sigourney similarly questioned, “Can you not sometimes find it in your hearts to bless God that your loss is the gain of your children? While they were here below, it was your chief joy to see them happy. Yet you were not sure of the continuance of their happiness for a single hour. Now, you are assured both of the fullness of their felicity, and of its fearless continuance.” If a child’s

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<sup>41</sup> John S.C. Abbott, *The Mother at Home: or, The Principles of Maternal Duty Familiarly Illustrated* (New York, 1852), 34-35; “John Langhorne to Mrs. —On the Death of her Daughter,” in Abercrombie, *The Mourner Comforted*, 357; Anna Reid Moffett to Margaret and William Adger, 3 September 1841, Margaret Hall Moffett Adger Papers, SCHS. See also Letter, 27 August 1853, Margaret Hall Moffett Adger Papers, SCHS; Saum in Stannard, *Death in America*, 43-44. Southerners evidenced their conviction that every young child went to a better life after her death in subtle ways as well as in their written arguments. Margaret Adger reminisced about her child’s death while writing to a friend. Her beloved Agnes remarked upon her death bed that she was going to see her father and sister, and Adger felt sure that her three loved ones were “together singing the praises of the Lamb around the throne.” Within the same letter, Adger also described the excruciating details of a neighbor child’s death. The young girl “died in great agony” after suffering from scalding wounds for seventeen days. These details, however, and the blaring absence of the serene Good Death coveted by nineteenth-century Americans, were of little concern to Adger. Instead, the agonizing detail was that after Clara’s death, her only sister grew sick as well “slowly wasting away” from illness and loneliness. That her mother, Mrs. Smith, would suffer the deaths of two children was more tragic than the nature of either child’s death because the children’s joyful salvation was assured.

salvation and residence with God was the pinnacle of her happiness, then to object to a child's salvation was the ultimate selfish act for pious southern parents.<sup>42</sup> Because the same messages permeated southern culture—public and private, printed and aural, sacred and secular—grieving southerners had either to reject social standards and grieve despondently or submit to their loss.

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Children, southerners believed, were on temporary loan from God; they were gifts which God might rightfully recall at any time. God was merciful and omnipotent and knew much better than parents whether children would attain salvation if they reached adulthood. Given such beliefs, refusing to accept a child's death posed a challenge to a fundamental element of southern culture. God allowed grief, authors argued, only as a sympathetic recognition of mankind's weak, sinful attachment to earthly things and relations. Almost universally, southerners believed that ultimately grieving had to give way to submission and resignation to God's wisdom and will. Indeed, the ideal of resignation was the crux of southern grief culture and individual southerners' grief.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Thompson, *Gathered Lilies*, 20; Lydia Howard Sigourney, *Letters to Mothers* (Hartford: Hudson and Skinner, 1838), 211. See also "The Child is Dead," *The Ladies' Repository* 17, no. 11, November 1857, 682. This contributor compared the worry of the bereaved to the contentment of the deceased. In the eyes of the bereft, every bump along the road to a child's grave disturbed the "infant sleeper," and the dark, damp grave was terrifying. For the deceased child, however, "there is no pain, no fear, no weeping there." To wish a child back from heaven, then, was to project a parent's sorrow onto their blissfully happy child.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Jones, "Resignation," in A Lady, *The Mourner's Book*, 223; Reverend W. C. Hoyt, "The Graves of the Innocents," *The Ladies' Repository* (January 1849): 5. See also Mrs. Sophia L. Seat, "Our Helpless Child," *The Home Circle* 3 (April, 1857): 198; Mrs. Harlan, "The Child," *The Ladies' Repository*; *A Monthly Periodical, Devoted to Literature, Art, and Religion* (March 1849): 9; National Gazette, "A Mother's Grief: A Sketch from Life," *Christian Register*, (18 February 1826): 28; Rev. Charles F. Deems, D.D., "A Psalm to Death," *The Home Circle* 1 (January 1855): 2; and T.B. Aldrich, "Little Charlie," *The Home Circle* 2 (May, 1856): 360. See also Ann Douglas, "Heaven Our Home: Consolation Literature in the Northern United States, 1830-1880," in Stannard, ed., *Death in America*, 51-57. Ann Douglas' contention that clergymen and women clung to their status as society's moral compasses by writing sentimentally about death simply did not hold true in the South. By the 1830s, southern clergy—at least those who supported slavery—had lost little status, clergy reprimanded, rather than banding together with, southern women, and consolation literature aimed to alter the behavior of men and women alike.



Given these understandings of life, death, and grief, southern culture offered little comfort for those mourning the death of a child. As the dead went on to their heavenly reward, the bereaved could only pity themselves, left behind in a troubled world knowing that pining for lost loved ones was selfish and impious. The description Virginian Margaret Mercer offered of herself as she sat alone “writing a sad letter” exemplifies the way southerners juxtaposed life on earth with life in heaven. With a sick loved one in each bedroom, Margaret sat in solitude, quietly composing a consolation letters as she “clung to the hope of an eternal and happy inheritance in the skies.”<sup>44</sup> Historian Jan Lewis argues that antebellum Virginians’ worldview made happiness at once essential and unlikely. By the early nineteenth-century, Virginians believed happiness stemmed not from social stability and civic success, but from domestic bliss and love of family. Evangelicalism, in conjunction with a high mortality rate, created the paradoxical scenario in which Virginians relied on a stable family circle for their happiness but could rarely attain one. Because a loved one’s death might be meted out as punishment for idolatry, “to love, surely, was to court disaster.” Heaven, then, became “the world without death and without grief,” as well as a world without fear that maternal or paternal love could warrant punishment. By 1830, Virginians felt they must not only accept life’s sorrows, but give thanks for them. In Lewis’s words, in the evangelical South, “it was not sufficient to bend to the rod that chastened; one also must kiss it.” By resigning to

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<sup>44</sup> Margaret Mercer to Ann and Nanette Garnet, 26 September 18—, Hunter-Garnett Papers, UVA.

God's will, parent's made their suffering purposeful; their child was dead, but at least they had demonstrated their devotion to God.<sup>45</sup>

Other southerners shared the worldview Lewis describes. The message that mortal life was painful, or at best uncertain, while heaven was a domestic utopia, pervaded southern grief culture. Demands that southerners kiss the rod that chastened them were still more pervasive. In an honor culture that prized piety, resignation served as proof of one's adherence to Christianity. Etiquette manual author George Winfred Hervey must have appealed to southerners when he attributed "frantic and protracted wailing" to "Hebrews and the heathens" because, he said, they had "no clear views of the future state." Christians, by comparison, knowing of heaven, ought not to mourn inconsolably. Bereavement manual author Thomas Walker, too, insinuated that depression represented a Christian's failure to focus sufficiently on God when he remarked that grief and sorrow on earth were insignificant annoyances compared to an eternity of happiness with God.<sup>46</sup>

Authors focused on Christianity, but the ideals of piety and resignation resonated even with those who did not consider themselves Christians. As historian Robert Elder argues, the moral communities of honor and evangelicalism overlapped in southern society so extensively that they created a popular vernacular. One need not be an evangelical Christian to identify with its rhetoric and standards; devotion to honor,

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<sup>45</sup> Lewis, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, 58-61, 80-81, 96-97, 101-102, 170-171, 222; William T. Smithson, *The Methodist Pulpit South* (Washington, D.C.: Henry Polkinhorn, printer, 1858), 124-125. See also Mark S. Schantz, *Awaiting the Heavenly Country: The Civil War and America's Culture of Death* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 2-3, 9. Mark Schantz argues that by idealizing resignation and stoicism in the face of death and emphasizing the rewards of heavenly salvation, southerners created a culture within which it was easier to kill and be killed, resulting in the Civil War's "unprecedented carnage."

<sup>46</sup> George Winfred Hervey, *The Principles of Courtesy: with Hints and Observations on Manners and Habits* (New York: Harper, 1852), 149-150; Walker, *A Companion for the Afflicted*, 87-88, 131, 134.

particularly among those of the planter class, carried with it an evangelical vocabulary. Furthermore, as with the example of domestic medical manuals, even secular printed sources were informed by evangelical beliefs.<sup>47</sup> Devotion to resignation, then, was as much a southern ideal as a Christian one.

Those who called for resignation emphasized the importance of sincerity. Minister Henry Bascom, for example, reminded southerners in a published sermon that God never intended the life of a true Christian to be easy or free from suffering. While being a “nominal” Christian who feigned resignation while continuing to mourn privately might be easy, it was “difficult to be a real Christian. Easy to claim the character, but difficult to evince the validity of the claim.”<sup>48</sup> Another clergyman, Phillip Doddridge, explained that although doing so was challenging, true piety demanded more than the façade of submission. “It is comparatively an easy thing to behave with external decency, to refrain from bold censures and outrageous complaints, or to speak in the outward language of resignation,” he remarked. Still, Doddridge acknowledged the difficulty of “getting rid of every repining thought” and not feeling betrayed by God. Lest his audience decide that losing their reputation was a small price to pay for expressing their sorrow, John Matthews noted in his contribution to the *Southern Lady’s*

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<sup>47</sup> Robert Elder, “A Twice Sacred Circle: Women, Evangelicalism, and Honor in the Deep South, 1784-1860,” *The Journal of Southern History*, publication pending; Mark A. Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 170-174. Elder argues that women subjected themselves to discipline within the church despite the public shame that accompanied it because doing so allowed them to remain within the church, an important source of community consensus. If southern women fell out of favor with the church they essentially lost their social reputations as well. Mark Noll also provides an explanation for the cohesive nature of southern grief culture when he argues that eighty-five percent of American church congregants were identifiably evangelical. Despite denominational differences, these congregants shared a core of evangelical beliefs, including the belief that the Bible offered “direction for self and society.” While not every southerner was an evangelical Christian, their majority voice lent the backbone to southern culture.

<sup>48</sup> Bascom, *Sermons and Sketches of Sermons from the Pulpit*, 260.

*Companion* the dire consequences of failing to resign. Those who failed to substitute God's will for their own and who "repined against God," insulted Him. Essentially, these headstrong individuals told a perfect ruler that He was unjust, and doing so, Matthews believed, was "a fatal mistake." "There can be no doubt but such a conclusion will bring upon the heart the fearful displeasure of Him who can make no allowance for sin."<sup>49</sup>

Although they taught that resignation was essential, southern commentators on grief also believed it could be wrought only of struggle. A few even publicly recognized the difficulty of resigning and the likelihood that parents would feign submission while continuing to mourn. "What heart or mind was ever really satisfied with the reasons assigned by theologians for the death of children?" author William Holcombe asked. "Who can believe that the Lord takes some infants away to save them from the evil to come, when He leaves others to grow up and become wicked men and finally lost spirits?" By raising such subversive questions, Holcombe revealed his sympathy for those whose resignation was only a public act and acknowledged the reality of bewilderment behind the public rhetoric of resignation even as he contended that true submission was a requirement for happiness.<sup>50</sup> Edward Chapin, too, referenced humankind's inability to give over their loved ones without comment when he wrote of "the religious man," "His resignation will not be the cold assent of reason, or the mere

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<sup>49</sup> Doddridge in Abercrombie, *The Mourner Comforted*, 174; John Mathews, "Submission," *Southern Lady's Companion* 20, no. 5 (August 1851): 127. See also Francis de Sales, *The Southern Christian Advocate*, 1, no. 6 (5 August 1837). Like Doddridge and Mathews, de Sales outlined two levels of faithfulness. Simply acknowledging God's ability to afflict was insufficient. Instead, "we must acquiesce in his right to afflict us when he pleases. We must leave the choice to him, for to him it belongs." Understanding God's power and submitting to it were vastly different tasks.

<sup>50</sup> William H. Holcombe, *Our Children in Heaven* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1869), 261.

rote and repetition of the lips. No, it will be born in struggling and in sorrow. Religion is not a process that makes our nature callous to all fierce heats or drenching storms.”<sup>51</sup>

Despite the inevitable difficulty of doing so, these authors contended, parents must force themselves to submit. Minister John Thornton remarked that bereft parents must stifle their “peevish” refusal to be consoled by friends’ sympathy and genuinely endeavor to accept their calming remarks. “To dash away the precious cordial when just held to your lips—to refuse the balm designed to heal your wound, and rudely push from you the hand stretched out to minister seasonable relief,” was inexcusable.<sup>52</sup> Several periodical articles offered similar sentiments. While one contribution to *The Home Circle* called the decision to skip church in order to grieve at home a “sad and unreasonable practice,” another in *The Virginia Religious Magazine* applauded a bereft family for their resignation. They acknowledged God’s right to reclaim the child and believed he was waiting for them to arrive in heaven also. “What a happy source of comfort!” the letter concluded, and “How absurd the infidel who stupidly rejects it!”<sup>53</sup>

Resignation was the central tenant of southern consolation as it was expressed in published sources and private letters, but a number of other cultural tropes—the nineteenth-century versions of “I’m so sorry for your loss,” “I’ll keep you in my prayers,” and “Please let me know if you need anything”—also appeared in consolation letters that crossed the South. Consolation letters routinely expressed empathy and sorrow on behalf

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<sup>51</sup> Edward H. Chapin, *The Crown of Thorns: A Token for the Sorrowing* (Boston: Published by A. Tompkins, 1847), 62-63.

<sup>52</sup> John Thornton, *Bereaved Parents Consoled. Carefully Revised: with an introduction and selection of lyrics for the bereaved by T.O. Summers* (Nashville: Published for Stevenson and Owen, for the M.E. Church, South, 1855), 76, 84-85.

<sup>53</sup> “The Bereaved at Church,” *The Home Circle*, February 1859, 119; “Letter 6,” *The Virginia Religious Magazine*, 2, no. 3 (May 1806): 153-155.

of the bereft, offered reminders of God's benevolence and merciful desires for the faithful, and reiterated the idea that God allowed mourning but ultimately expected submission to His will. Within their sympathy letters to one another, members of the Old South's planter class demonstrated their knowledge and acceptance of the standards for grief expressed by clergy and by authors of prescriptive literature, and produced letters closely resembling the templates offered in epistolary manuals.<sup>54</sup> One of the few guidelines they failed to follow was the one instructing people to say nothing at all.

As in sermons and periodicals, consolation letters recognized the uniquely gut-wrenching sorrow caused by a child's death and the inevitability of grief in such a situation. Few followed the monastic example of "Mrs. Allyne," who spoke to her friend, "Mrs. Edward Raymond" only of the Lord and His will following the death of Raymond's young son. Allyne recognized she could not hurry her friend's recovery but believed that she must remind Raymond of her spiritual duties. Consequently, "not of the fresh sorrow did she speak now, nor of any desire to lift the mourner above her grief." Mrs. Raymond was, not surprisingly, "astonished at her friend's supposed want of sympathy, in introducing any topic but the sole one that could interest her."<sup>55</sup>

Most southerners, by comparison to Mrs. Raymond, found their friends quite willing to discuss loss. Southern elites like B.J. Baylor and Jas Ramsey, for example, wrote sympathetically that with the death of a child, "our fondest hopes, our most cherished anticipations, are blasted in a moment, the heart one hour, may be full of hope,

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<sup>54</sup> See, for example, "The Friend's Answer," in *The American Letter-Writer, and Mirror of Polite Behavior* (Philadelphia: Fisher and Brother, 1851), 138; *The Letter Writer, or, the Art of Polite Correspondence* (Richmond: J.W. Randolph, 1863), 59-60.

<sup>55</sup> "Driven To and Fro," *The Monthly Religious Magazine* 8, no. 5 (May 1851), 1-8.

the next, the wormwood & the gall, may be mingled in the cup of sorrow.” In such moments, “what perfect weakness is human strength! how utterly vain all human help!” They never recognized the sorrow of such loss without also expressing certainty in God’s comfort and benevolence. Baylor, for example, assured his “afflicted sister,” that though God had taken her husband and son, He pitied her and did not afflict her without purpose. Her job was to “be still and know that he is God.” Mary Finley similarly argued, “neither Reason nor religion forbids mourning the loss of dear departed friends.” Referring to the Bible, Finley noted Abraham mourned Sarah and even Jesus wept at a friend’s passing. Only mourning “as those who have no hope” was forbidden. Finally, Sabra Ramsey’s sister informed her that although it was “good to weep when the heart is sad,” she must never indulge in sadness too long. For both these women, God was not a “mere arbitrary tyrant” and should never be treated as such.<sup>56</sup>

As Ramsey’s words suggest, the topics of resignation and God’s mercy were as common in consolation letters as they were in southern print culture, and correspondents were quick to reprimand their bereft loved ones for failing to resign. Some, like B.M. Palmer and Lucy Gatewood, chastised the bereaved to push them back within accepted social boundaries. Palmer stated his surprise that Mary Fraser had “walked in darkness and seen no light” for so long following her baby’s death. Lucy Gatewood, moreover, worried that her daughter would not be able to say “Thy will be done” because she was so attached to her child and “possessed of very little fortitude in time of affliction.” In every case, southerners expressed conviction that resignation was essential. Thus, Ellen

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<sup>56</sup> B.J. Baylor to Lucy Dabney Gatewood, 25 November 1852, Gatewood Family Papers, VHS; Mary Finley to Mary DeSaussure Fraser, 31 October 1816, Mary DeSaussure Fraser Papers, Duke; Sue to her sister, Sabra S. Tracy Ramsey, 21 July 1849, George Junkin Ramsey Papers, Duke.

Carter wrote to bereft friend Tim Randolph, that although “it is one of the most difficult things to say Thy will be done, not mine . . . we must endeavour to submit with patience to God’s will, and decree, and feel assured that all is for the best.”<sup>57</sup>

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Southerners of Old South adhered closely to the tenets of acceptable mourning. By reiterating public ideas in a private medium, planter families’ letters effectively turned formal public ideas about grief into a cohesive southern culture and vernacular. Southerners—clergy and congregant, author and audience—understood child mortality as the most painful occurrence in a parents’ life, but which must be viewed as merciful and accepted as the infallible will of a loving Father. Ideas about public displays of mourning, particularly whether or not to wear mourning clothes, were significantly less unified in the South than religious expectations.

Northern authors offered a great deal of advice about mourning. George Hervey, for example, gave strict outlines for mourning attire, commented upon the social requirements to notify loved ones of a family member’s death, and described the proper order of a funeral procession (with female family members following behind male friends

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<sup>57</sup> *The New Universal Letter-Writer, or Complete Art of Polite Correspondence: Containing a Course of Interesting Letters on the Most Important, Instructive, and Entertaining Subjects: to which are Prefixed, an Essay on Letter-Writing, and a Set of Compliment Cards, Suited to Occasions on which an Extraordinary Degree of Politeness Should be Observed* (Philadelphia: Hogan and Thompson, 1836), 19; “Letter XV—From a Lady, to her Friend who had buried her husband,” in *The New Universal Letter-Writer*, 207-208; B.M. Palmer to Mary DeSaussure Fraser, 7 November 1816, Mary DeSaussure Fraser Papers, Duke; James B. Ramsey to “Father, Mother, Brothers & Sister” (his wife’s family), 15 August 1849, George Junkin Ramsey Papers, Duke; Lucy Gatewood to Ellen Gatewood, 25 October 1854, Gatewood Family Papers, VHS; Ann B. Hooe to Margaret Christian Peyton, 4 November 1855, Peyton Family Papers, VHS; Ellen M. Bankhead Carter to Septimia “Tim” Randolph, 2 March 1837, Septimia Randolph Meikleham Papers, UVA. See also Hugh Davis to Captain Nicholas Davis, 15 December 1819, Hugh Davis Letter, VHS; Margaret Lillard Witherspoon Curry to Mary Frances “Fannie” Gatewood Witherspoon, 25 November 1884, Gatewood Family Papers, VHS; Claudia H. Means to Eugenia M. Means, 10 January 1859, Mary Hart Means Papers, SCHS.



and family members) in *The Principles of Courtesy*.<sup>58</sup> Hervey contended that putting on mourning clothes served as a reminder to the bereaved “on those occasions, when we are liable to be gay and thoughtless” and cautioned others “not to converse on light or mirthful topics in our presence.” Paradoxically, visitors to the house of mourning should “speak of the cause of sorrow only when the bereaved is dwelling on it.” Those in mourning, then, could expect somber visits on every serious topic except the topic of their loss. For women, this meant at least six weeks of solitude and stoicism as Hervey instructed them not to leave the house for during that time unless attending church or “transacting important business.”<sup>59</sup> While southerners read books published both North and South and tended to heed their advice about grief and grieving, formal mourning was a northern preoccupation that had less sway in the southern states.

Few parents living in Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina or Georgia felt pressured to adhere to formal mourning standards; whether or not to wear mourning and seclude oneself at home seems to have been more a choice than a social obligation. Historian Karen Haltunnen contends that mourning, because it could offer evidence of respectability, became a source of anxiety for middle-class northerners concerned with sincerity and hypocrisy. Once formal mourning attire and etiquette became fashionable,

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<sup>58</sup> George Winfred Hervey, *The Principles of Courtesy: with Hints and Observations on Manners and Habits* (New York, 1852), 150-156. See also William A. Alcott, *The Young Husband; or, Duties of Man in the Marriage Relation*, *Family in America* (Boston, 1838. Reprinted New York: Arno Press, 1972), 379-380. Prescriptive literature author William Alcott dismissed the need for men to wear formal mourning attire, but argued that it was a young husband’s duty to use his grief to prepare spiritually to follow his spouse.

<sup>59</sup> Hervey, *The Principles of Courtesy*, 154-155. See also *New Universal Letter-Writer*, 17. The editors of *The New Universal Letter-Writer* cautioned that the style of a letter must always “correspond with the occasion” particularly because letters were simply written conversation. An “epistic [sic] of condolence,” they warned, must be devoid of pleasantries because “to exhibit the wit which we possess, at such a time, is like smiling at a funeral.” Instead, a correspondent must, without exacerbating it, “lament the full extent of the condoled party’s affliction.”

they lost status as genteel activities and aroused suspicion instead. If those of the working class could wear black, send their condolences appropriately, and maintain a somber demeanor, middle class Americans worried, then they could pass as middle-class without deserving the title.<sup>60</sup>

Because they were relatively unconcerned by the threat of a rising middle-class, elite southerners' struggled with whether or not to wear mourning for a different reason. Southerners' letters and diaries suggest they felt torn between the tradition of wearing mourning clothes and the need to demonstrate they had submitted to God and were carrying on with life. William Miller's sister evidenced this when she requested during her calm final moments that her family not wear mourning, conduct a funeral procession, or announce her death in the local paper. Why mourn her passage to eternal salvation? Hannah King similarly implored her mother, "Do not wear mourning for her who is now an angel," and emphasized her request by underlining it twice.<sup>61</sup>

Mentions of putting on mourning are rare in the letters and diaries of those in the Old South, and those that exist reflect the inconsistent cultural guidelines on the subject. Elizabeth Ridley's sister, for example, wrote to "consult" her about putting on mourning. She and her family did not want to wear colored fabric, she explained, but were "afraid it

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<sup>60</sup> See Karen Haltunnen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 124-152.

<sup>61</sup> William P. Miller to Mary Miller Davis, 4 July 1845, Mary Miller Davis Papers, Duke; Hannah Page King Couper to Anna Matilda Page King, 18 October 1852, William Audley Couper Papers, SHC. See also Nancy Gray Schoonmaker, "As Though It Were Unto the Lord: Sarah Morgan Dawson and Nineteenth-Century Southern Mourning" (MA Thesis: UNC-Chapel Hill, 2001), chapters 1-3. Nancy Gray Schoonmaker's dissertation demonstrates that for Sarah Dawson and her kin, family rituals took the place of formal mourning in the years before the Civil War. Mourning and household rituals performed the same functions of soothing the bereft and constraining their grief. Schoonmaker implies that some perceived Dawson's behavior as deviant. Sarah, at least, felt that, "Propriety required that I should not appear for several weeks; as though I cared for Propriety! I went to church because I needed the consolation I felt it would afford."

will appear strange if we put on black after wearing such light mourning this summer.” Meta Morris Grimball expressed similar confusion. Despite the fact that she was twenty-two years old, a mature adult woman by nineteenth-century standards and thus fully aware of southern cultural expectations, Grimball received a letter from her Aunt Harriet which read, “I am surprised at your asking if Ella has been obliged to put on mourning for Godmama; have not you done so?” For their part, the Manigault and Morris women residing in Philadelphia had donned black, though Harriet “thought it sufficient for the boys to have crape on their arms.” “Ella,” Harriet boasted, “had just taken off her sable garments, & was preparing to exhibit some of her Paris drepes [*sic*]; but she saw the propriety of acting according to custom, & therefore made no fuss about resuming the black.” Explaining away her niece’s impropriety, Harriet conjectured, “I don’t believe that in Carolina these things are so much considered as they are here.”<sup>62</sup>

Many recognized the disconnect that existed between external mourning and internal grief and subsequently prioritized appearing fashionable and remaining cool in the southern summer heat above going into mourning. One Virginian complained, “I don’t know why it is, pretty second mourning clothes are so hard to get.” North Carolina resident Mary Ferrand Henderson opted not to wear black for a different reason despite being wracked with grief and guilt after losing five of her seven children. Though she “was compelled to put on my black plaided [*sic*] gingham dress,” despite its being “oppressive,” she did so because her white dresses were “never ready,” not because she was grieving her children. Others felt black clothing was simply too hot for daily wear.

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<sup>62</sup> Unidentified to Elizabeth Ridley, 6 May 1859, Ridley Family Papers, VHS; Harriet Manigault Wilcocks to Margaret Ann “Meta” Morris Grimball, 6 May 1832, Manigault, Morris, and Grimball Family Papers, SHC.

Though we can safely assume Emily Sinkler found the death of her young daughter, Arabella, to be one of the most painful experiences of her life, Sinkler wrote just five months after the child's death, "How sick I am of mourning. It is the hottest dress in the world."<sup>63</sup>

Despite their reluctance to wear black exclusively, southerners did have a distinct mourning culture that extended beyond the printed word. Unlike wearing mourning, which emphasized the mourner's grief, southern mourning culture centered on memorializing the deceased. Most prominently, southerners grieving the death of a child sent locks of hair to friends and family. Emily Dupuy's cousin, Mary Parson, for example, expressed heartfelt thanks for the "precious relic"—"this little silken tress of the dear child's hair"—that she received in the mail. The girl's hair, Parson wrote, reminded her of the child's "sweet winning ways" and exceptionally pious nature. Rachael Mordecai Lazarus similarly thanked her sister, Caroline, for the "precious little lock" of her son Frank's hair. The lock of hair was a catalyst for Lazarus's grief as she "wept over it again & again, sorrowing to think that this little relick [*sic*] must be all that she can ever see of your blessed little darling." James Clough helped memorialize his son, George, and facilitate several relatives' grief when he sent locks of hair to his daughter, Annie and her Aunt Martha. He also debated getting a ring containing a lock of the boy's hair for the family's friend, Mrs. Wotherspoon.<sup>64</sup> For these southerners, receiving a bit of the deceased's hair was a tangible item with which to remember and mourn.

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<sup>63</sup> Mary Ferrand Henderson Diary, 12 July 1855, John Steele Henderson Papers, SHC; Emily Wharton Sinkler to her sister, Mary, 30 November 1848, in Emily Wharton Sinkler, *Between North and South: The Letters of Emily Wharton Sinkler, 1842-1865*, ed. by Anne Sinkler Whaley LeClercq (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), 95.

<sup>64</sup> Mary Boylston Parson to Emily Howe Dupuy, 27 December 1856, Emily Howe Dupuy Papers, VHS; Rachel Mordecai Lazarus to Caroline Mordecai Plunkett, 15 May 1823, Mordecai Family Papers, SHC;

Mourning rings, memorial portraits, and headstones also featured in southern mourning culture. Like South Carolinian James Clough, Lucy and Robert Randolph turned to rings as a means of memorializing their deceased son, offering a cherished ring to his college roommate, who had provided companionship during the boy's final days. More commonly, southerners incorporated portraits, photographs, and elaborate headstones into their culture of death. These artifacts served much the same purpose as locks of hair and the occasional mourning ring—remembrance and facilitation of grief. Southerners like Margaret Dickins and Nealy Lenoir's sister remarked upon the importance of portraits and photographs. While Dickins cherished the portrait of her dead son, Lenoir's sister regretted the absence of such a reminder of her niece, Anna. Having lived far from Anna and her sister, likely isolated on her plantation and preoccupied by tending to household duties, the woman had no idea what Anna looked like, a fact which only added to her grief. Mary Ann McCormick also regretted that a portrait had never been made of her nephew before his death, as she believed being able to gaze upon it would help her sister to recover. Without such an image, McCormick cherished the lock of hair her sister had sent even more.<sup>65</sup> Finally, in order to avoid the pain caused by failing to attain a memorial photo, Virginian David Dunlop enlisted a

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James B. Clough to Annie Jemima Clough, 1 December 1843, 18 December 1843, 19 February 1844, Anne Jemima Clough Letters, SCHS. The Anne Jemima Clough collection actually includes a lock of George's auburn brown hair. See also Mary Bobo to Mrs. L. Wilfong, 24 February 1845, John Wilfong Papers, Duke.

<sup>65</sup> Lucy N. Randolph and Robert C. Randolph to Lewis C. Randolph, 25 November 1857, Hubbard-Randolph-Carter Family Papers, UVA; Margaret Harvie Randolph Dickins to Francis Asbury Dickins, 29 August 1849, Francis Asbury Dickins Papers, SHC; Letter to Cornelia Isabella Christian Lenoir from her sister, 19 June 1858, Lenoir Family Papers, SHC; Mary Ann Grigsby McCormick to Martha T. Grigsby Herbert and George S. Herbert, 16 November 1858, Grigsby Family Papers, VHS.

friend's assistance in hurriedly finding someone to "take a likeness" of his six-year-old daughter before she began to decompose and had to be buried.<sup>66</sup>

Finally, cemeteries, gravestones, and funerals were central to southern mourning culture. Southern cemeteries reveal an adherence to gravestone iconography. Planter parents had their children's headstones adorned with statues of lambs, wreaths, flowers with broken as well as blooming buds, angels, and sleeping infants, and etched their final farewells in the forms of poetry and scripture. For mothers in particular a child's gravesite served as a location for communion with the dead and meditation on the meaning of their loss.<sup>67</sup> Southern women did not, as Ann Douglas argues of northerners, go to the cemetery "with the hopefulness attendant upon the prospect of borrowed emotions." Their own, very real emotions pulled them to a child's grave.<sup>68</sup> On a rainy October day, Virginian Sarah Fife lamented that the weather had allowed her to visit her "darling's grave only once," but vowed that she would "go again before night." "It is the sweetest place on earth to me," Fife wrote. "I go morning, noon, and evening, after the stars come out; put fresh flowers on him & pray fervently, that God will help Herndon & me to learn well the lesson he designed to teach." Although Kate DeRosset Meares lived in Philadelphia with her husband, their daughter, Maggie was buried at the family's plantation in Wilmington, North Carolina. Meares's family members regularly reported

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<sup>66</sup> Robert B. Bolling to James Westhall Ford, undated 1842, Papers of James Westhall Ford, UVA.

<sup>67</sup> Colonial Park Cemetery, Savannah, GA; Oakdale Cemetery, Wilmington, NC; Oakland Cemetery, Atlanta, GA; Presbyterian Church, Edisto Island, SC; St. Philip's Church Cemetery, Charleston, SC; Trinity Episcopal Church, Edisto Island, SC. I will cover gravestone iconography and mother's desire to spend time at the grave in greater detail in Chapter Three and Chapter Five. See also Judith (Gates) Winfree Memoir, *A Little Southern Girl's Memories Without Her Mother* [1856-1871], written in 1930, 10, VHS. Bounced from home to home after her mother's death, Judith Winfree went to her mother and younger sister's graves and contemplated "why I was left."

<sup>68</sup> Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Avon Books, 1977), 216.



**Figure 2- Annie DeRosset's Headstone. Photograph by Kimberly Sims.**

on the state of her child's grave in an effort to quell Kate's desire to be there herself. Cousin Cattie, for example, referred to Maggie's grave as "another little beacon" to heaven. Her sister, Alice, also visited the baby's burial site in Wilmington and wrote to Kate upon her return that the deceased child was sleeping peacefully "right under her own Aunt Annie's care." Finally, Kate's mother made sure that her own daughter and little Maggie remained "like twins" by laying the same flowers on their side-by-side gravesites each time she visited.<sup>69</sup>

As Eliza DeRosset's actions suggest, planter parents worried a great deal about ensuring their child's comfort in the grave. Situating them next to a young relative was a popular way of ensuring that a child would never be lonely. When her fourth child died in 1828, Millie Gray recorded, she was "burried [*sic*] by the side of her dear little

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<sup>69</sup> 3 October 1869, Sarah Ann Graves Strickler Fife Diary, UVA; Catherine "Cattie" Kennedy to Kate DeRosset Meares, 4 June 1855; Alice to Kate DeRosset Meares, 5 June 1855; Eliza Jane DeRosset to Kate DeRosset Meares, 7 June 1855, DeRosset Family Papers, SHC. See also 30 January 1860, Diaries of Fannie Page Hume, UVA.



**Figure 3-Maggie and Lida Meares's Headstone. Photograph by Kimberly Sims.**

sister & brothers.”<sup>70</sup> One father from North Carolina went even further to ensure his infant daughter would not be alone in death. E. Fuller feared that he might be blamed for his infant daughter’s death since he had guided his wife through the child’s delivery. To atone for this mistake in some small way, Fuller had his son’s body exhumed in order that the two children might be buried together. Placing “the two in one grave” was both heartbreaking and comforting to Fuller and his ailing wife.<sup>71</sup> Ensuring that a child’s corpse would never be lonely seems contradictory in a culture that contended that all children went to heaven and that heaven was a place for family reunion. The prevalence of such actions reveals southerners’ deep struggle to match their private grief to public expectations of resignation.

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<sup>70</sup> 9 August 1822, 7 August 1828, Diary of Millie Richards Stone Gray, UVA; 7 August 1828, Diary of Millie Richards Stone Gray, UVA; See also “JBC” to Margaret Harvie Randolph Dickins, 24 January 1838, Francis Asbury Dickins Papers, SHC; Mary Fraser Davie to Mary DeSaussure Fraser, 12 October 1833, Mary DeSaussure Fraser Papers, Duke.

<sup>71</sup> E. Fuller to Jones Fuller, 16 July 1851, Fuller-Thomas Papers, Duke.



In addition to worrying their children were comfortable in the grave, elite parents fretted about funeral services. Walter and Nealy Lenoir, for instance, delayed their daughter Annie's funeral in order to have the Reverend Mr. Rankin present. Apparently, it was worth the wait, as he offered an "impressive" service from John 13:7—"What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter." North Carolinian planter and devout Presbyterian James Hervey Greenlee also took great comfort from the sermon given at his young son's funeral. The pastor based his funeral sermon on Luke 1 and Luke 21, Greenlee wrote, and "told us of the comfort that Parents should have in believing they had a child in glory that they were in the providence of God taken from the evils of this wicked & sinful world." That Greenlee should prepare to follow his son was no surprise to the minister, even if the words were comforting. Julianna Paisley Gilmer described the consequences of offering a less inspiring funeral service for a child. Reverend J.J. Smith's lackluster funeral sermon "caused so much complaint" the elders and deacons of his church advised him to "withdraw from the Pastoral relation of the church." When Smith instead gathered his flock and asked them to explain their complaints, "no one was bold enough to specify." Privately, Gilmer implied that it had to do with his choice of verse at the young congregant's funeral.<sup>72</sup>

Even in the absence of an inspiring eulogy, funeral services remained an important ritual of grief. Dr. Charles Duncan Bobo expressed pleasant surprise when an unexpected cold front delayed his wife Caroline's decomposition, allowing him to organize a formal funeral for her. The gathering included six pall bearers, a sermon

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<sup>72</sup> Letter to Thomas J. Lenoir, 31 May 1858, Lenoir Family Papers, SHC; 5 June 1854, James Hervey Greenlee Diary, SHC; Julianna Paisley Gilmer Diary, February 1859, Addison Gorgas Brenizer Papers, SHC.

based on 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians, hymns, and a “touching scene” in which “Charles came forward trembling on the arm of his Mother & gave his Caroline the last kiss.” Reverend Andrew Cornish too, described the funeral he held for his wife and infant. His loved ones were laid to rest “by the faint twilight & light of the moon” side-by-side in the same coffin following a solemn funeral service.<sup>73</sup> For both men and for many other planters, funeral rituals served the same purpose as formal mourning—to, in Philippe Ariès’ words, “protect the sincerely grieving survivor from the excesses of his grief.”<sup>74</sup>

Print culture, church standards, letters, and rituals like sharing relics and holding funerals comprised the cohesive culture of mourning that existed in the antebellum South. Although many could not or would not adhere to the boundaries established by this culture, expectations were clear. Southerners must, by way of carefully controlled grief, accept death as a blessing for the departed and a gift to those who remained.

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<sup>73</sup> Charles Duncan Bobo to his mother- and father-in-law, John Wilfong, Jr. and Barbara Eva Lavinia Wilfong, 24 February 1845, and L.W. Curtis, “Pastor of Presbyterian Church,” to John Wilfong, Jr. and Barbara Eva Lavinia Wilfong, 24 February 1845, John Wilfong Papers, Duke; Andrew H. Cornish to John Hamilton Cornish, 19 September 1850, John Hamilton Cornish Papers, Duke.

<sup>74</sup> Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. from the French by Patricia M. Ranum, Johns Hopkins Symposia in Comparative History, 4<sup>th</sup> (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 66.

### **Chapter 3** **“How full the world is of sad Mothers!”: Maternal Grief**

After losing four of her children in just two years, Mary Ferrand Henderson berated herself for an endless list of “terrible and fatal errors.” She longed for her children, she wrote, and believed she had only herself to blame for their deaths because she had “erred erred erred terribly, fatally.” Henderson’s diary reveals a woman whose deep love for her children was matched only by her devotion to God and the wrenching grief and self-doubt she experienced in the aftermath of their deaths. Like so many other southern mothers, Henderson felt torn between her duty to protect her children and her duty to submit to God’s will, even when she could not.

For years, Henderson pored over the details of her children’s deaths, using her diary to relive every minute of their final days and uncover the causes and meanings of her losses. Henderson chastised herself for allowing her sons, John and Baldy, to attend school amidst reports of whooping cough, sure that the mistake had caused her to misdiagnose her young daughter as having pertussis. Henderson worried that she had called the doctor too soon when her daughter became ill and had failed the girl still further by following his prescriptions, which she knew caused her child to vomit so violently that it damaged her gastrointestinal tract. She marveled that her daughter had survived one month on the “poison” prescribed to her. Indeed, it “almost maddened” her that the doctor continued to follow a course of treatment that only made her daughter worse, and it sickened Henderson that she had stood by and watched her daughter’s agony, when she “ought to have thrown the medicine in the fire.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Henderson Diary, 21 December 1854, John Steele Henderson Papers, SHC.

When Edward and Baldy grew ill, Mary agonized for entirely different reasons. In her sons' cases, Henderson believed she had failed them by calling the doctor too late. Worse still, Mary was so "melancholy and miserable" after her daughter's death she missed the signs of Edward's impending illness. As she left her plantation to seek her sister's support, Henderson threatened to whip Edward because he was crying to come with her. Thinking he was misbehaving and feeling too bereft herself to comfort another, Mary asked her slave, Polly, to collect her young son and take him inside. Following his death, Henderson's actions in these few minutes haunted her. "My heart bleads [*sic*] afresh whenever I think of refusing my precious little boy," she chastised herself, "my whole life seems to have been an error, why why did I harm him it seems so strange to me now and unlike myself." Her list of mistakes also included turning Baldy out of her bed rather than recognizing his "hot feet" and thrashing as symptoms of illness, allowing slave nurses to care for her daughter, and failing to show each child enough affection.<sup>2</sup> Henderson spent every spare second ruminating on her own culpability in each child's death. There was no end to the list of "mistakes" she used to torture herself.

Above all else, Mary Henderson attributed the deaths of her children and her subsequent sorrow to her failures before God. Henderson believed that by idolizing her children in life and grieving for them too strenuously in death, she had tempted God to punish her. Following Baldy's death, Henderson confided, "I believe his death was a judgment from God upon me for my sinful, murmuring rebellious grief after the death of

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Henderson Diary, 21 December 1854, 3 July 1855, 8 July 1855, 7 September 1855, 13 September 1855, 13 October 1856, John Steele Henderson Papers, SHC. See also Steven M. Stowe, "Writing Sickness: A Southern Woman's Diary of Cares," in Susan V. Donaldson and Anne Goodwyn Jones, eds., *Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1997), 257-266.

my other little child—O my God! often have I shuddered for myself.” Henderson felt that by prioritizing motherly affections over her duties as a Christian, she had forced God’s hand into making her “sorely sorely punished.”<sup>3</sup> Rather than become angry or resentful, however, Henderson recognized God’s right to take her children and His benevolence in righting her on the path to salvation. Mary was better off corrected, she believed, and her “little angel band” was blessed to be in Heaven. Mary Henderson, like other elite southern mothers, then, attributed her children’s deaths to the benevolence of God and sought to resign to His will even as she fixated on her own blameworthiness.

In a sense, mothers like Henderson spent their lives embattled with God in a fight for their children. Although they fought desperately and loved fiercely, when God won, women sought evidence of His mercy in the outcome and challenged themselves to “kiss the rod” which afflicted them. These mothers contended that by calling for resignation, God asked nothing more of them than what he had once accomplished himself. Furthermore, Christian mothers accepted their own suffering as the result of Eve’s transgression in the Garden of Eden and God’s subsequent commandment, “In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children.”<sup>4</sup> While the goal of resignation was all but universal for

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<sup>3</sup> Mary Henderson Diary, 21 December 1854, 7 July 1855, 8 July 1855, 11 September 1855, John Steele Henderson Papers, SHC.

<sup>4</sup> See Nancy M. Theriot, *Mothers and Daughters in Nineteenth-Century America: The Biosocial Construction of Femininity* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky, 1996), 23, 28, 114; Sally G. McMillen, *Motherhood in the Old South: Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Infant Rearing* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 57; Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977) 115, 120; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 227, 233-235. Theriot contends that northern women understood suffering to be an inherent part of motherhood even after a mother left the birthing room. Sacrificing her own needs for those of her children was the price a woman paid to be recognized as the queen of her domestic space. Southern women, particularly evangelical women, though they were never recognized as rulers of the household, garnered a host of benefits from being a “lady” and quietly hiding their grief from society. As Donald Mathews describes, to be “useful” an evangelical woman had to lead the South by setting a personal, Christian example: “She was to be perpetually busy doing the Lord’s work, but never completed it; she was to be intensely devoted to serving the servants, but never rewarded

elite southern mothers, the process of submitting and the grief that accompanied it were complex, multifaceted, and rarely successful.

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Southern women embraced the notion espoused by clergy, prescriptive authors, and their peers that maternity was their divinely-ordained and most fulfilling role in life. Elizabeth Perry of South Carolina, for example, anticipated the birth of her first child, writing, “In a few months I may be a Mother. God grant it! My husband will love me so. Even more than he does now; though I should think that impossible.” Unlike the mothers presented by advice literature authors, however, real women struggled with the hardships of child-rearing. Perry, for instance, discovered that God did not “grant” her entry into motherhood when the child she had anticipated with such joy was stillborn. Looking back on her experiences as a mother a decade after this first loss, Perry wrote that she had had four living children, two stillborn children, and four miscarriages.<sup>5</sup> Even the most devoted mothers knew that parenthood was joyful yet fraught with sorrow.

Letters about stillbirths and miscarriages reveal southern women’s devotion to maternity.<sup>6</sup> Cornelia Lenoir’s sister wrote to her with shared anguish, “my poor

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with gratitude; she was to be supreme in her sphere, but bounded by it.” Bertram Wyatt-Brown contends a sense of honor pushed women toward a “stoical acceptance of fate” and southern society applauded “feminine grit.”

<sup>5</sup> 28 March 1838, 6 April 1843, 6 June 1848, Elizabeth Francis Perry Diary, SHC.

<sup>6</sup> Many of southern history’s most eminent scholars have debated the extent to which women accepted southern patriarchs’ ideas of womanhood and maternity. Sally McMillen and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese are among those who, like me, contend that women did not simply comply with, but also internalized the notion that motherhood was their greatest joy and their natural role. Others, like Bertram Wyatt-Brown and particularly Catherine Clinton, argue that southern women viewed motherhood more ambivalently, pushed toward it by the dictates of southern society as much as they were pulled to it by a desire to have children. See McMillen, *Motherhood in the Old South*, 6, and “Mothers’ Sacred Duty: Breast-feeding Patterns among Middle- and Upper-Class Women in the Antebellum South,” *Journal of Southern History* (August 1985), 342-345; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 44-47, 268-284, especially 280-281;

rebellious soul will almost cry out at times to have had her live one month one day—or one hour! . . . . At times a deep, deep gloom settles upon me—& I feel that God did all in judgment—there has been no mercy mingled.” Being robbed of a beloved baby and the opportunity for motherhood made this southern woman so distraught that she admitted to doubting God’s benevolence. After long months of anticipating motherhood, she explained, “when the treasure is almost within your grasp—to have it taken from you—cruelly it seems to you” made the future appear “black—hopeless—blank.” Elizabeth Perry too mourned over the stillbirth of her first child and the particularly sorrowful conditions of the infant girl’s death. Perry’s labor and delivery were so taxing that she was unconscious when her attendants realized her daughter was dead. Consequently, she did not get to see her child, waking instead to bad news delivered by her husband.

Anxious to become a mother and assume a woman’s most important role, Perry found her

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Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 228-229, 234; Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman’s World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 8-15, 87-109. See also Anya Jabour, *Scarlett’s Sisters: Young Women in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 217. Women also revealed their commitment to motherhood when they worked tirelessly to make sure their children would be cared for even if they died in childbirth. See, for example, Varina Anne Banks Howell Davis to Margaret Louise Kempe Howell, 2 June 1852, in Jefferson Davis, *Jefferson Davis: Private Letters, 1823-1889* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966), 66-67; 12 June 1831, page 12, Elizabeth Willis Gloster Anderson Memoranda, SHC. In reference to her son, Sam, Varina Howell Davis wrote, “Ma, do for Heaven’s sake send me a few little patterns—indeed I will not be well enough to sew by the time you get here, and I hate in case of my death to leave the poor little thing without common necessities.” Despite being “so generally unwell” that she could “do nothing,” she hoped to prepare for Sam’s future. North Carolinian, Elizabeth Anderson kept a journal intended to impart religious lessons in her absence. Although she lived to be 67 years old, Anderson worried a great deal that as a result of her “frail nature” she would not live to raise her children to adulthood. While reflecting on the topic of child mortality within her journal following the death of two-year-old George, Anderson instructed, “If we received no chastisement at his hands we should have reason to fear that he does not love nor count us his, for ‘he chastiseth every one whom he receiveth.’ We will then kiss the rod and try to improve its heavy blows to the good of our souls and strive still more to bring up those he has left us to love and fear him, that when it is his will we may all meet around his Throne and see our little George a bright seraph in Eternity.” Anderson was determined that even in her absence her family would conduct themselves in a manner sure to earn them a heavenly reunion.

loss all the more tragic. “I could scarcely realize what had taken place;” she remarked, “and my disappointment at my loss may be imagined.”<sup>7</sup>

Even husbands, for whom stillbirths were far less devastating, recognized the impact that such events had on their wives. Paul Cameron acknowledged his wife’s delivery of a stillborn child as a “sad catastrophe” in her life. He understood that “a mothers hopes have been grievously disappointed” and worried that the loss would produce “gloom and melancholy.” Indeed, Anne’s loss crushed her emotionally and physically, triggering an addiction to opiates.<sup>8</sup>

Because motherhood was so important to women, they accepted that with children came both love and potential for loss. In her letters to Eleanor Bordley, Nelly Lewis expressed this emotional dichotomy. “I have often told you,” she wrote her dearest friend, “that you were happier in being without those precious objects of devoted affection which bind our hearts to earth, & although sources of happiness, are also sources of the most heartrending anxiety & overwhelming affliction.” In Lewis’s estimation, mothers’ happiness waxed and waned with their children’s health. “When our children are sick we are miserable,” Lewis remarked, “and should they recover, we constantly fear that they may be again ill, and when we see them suffer without the power of relieving, and often

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<sup>7</sup> Letter to Cornelia Isabella “Nealy” Christian Lenoir from her sister, 2 June 1858, Lenoir Family Papers, SHC; 6 April 1843, 6 June 1848, Elizabeth Frances Perry Diary, SHC. Elizabeth Perry noted in her diary that she had been pregnant thirteen times but had born only seven living children. The other six pregnancies had ended in stillbirths or miscarriages.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Cameron to Thomas Ruffin, 4 January 1837, Cameron Family Papers, SHC. See also Thomas Ruffin to his mother, 16 May 1854, Thomas Ruffin Papers, Duke; John Tate to Jacob Van Lear, Jacob Van Lear Papers, UVA. Thomas Ruffin wrote with relief that though his “large fine boy” was born dead, his wife had survived. Of her four-day-long labor and delivery, Ruffin described, “it appears to me if suffering could make one die she would have sunk under it for certain I am that all the suffering I ever experienced or witness of every description hers far exceed I hope I may never witness such another case.”



unable to discover what it is which afflicts them, happiness seems out of the question.”<sup>9</sup> Like Lewis, Dolley Madison indicated that her mood rose and fell as her child recovered and relapsed from an illness. Still, both women would have agreed with Mary Parsons, who reminded her cousin following the death of her ten-year-old child that in spite of her grief, she was happier having known the child than she could have been “if her bright face had never beamed upon you.” Women like Lewis, Madison, and Parsons understood mothers’ love and adoration of their children made them vulnerable to the anxieties of ill-health and the devastation of loss.<sup>10</sup>

While these women expressed the emotional burdens of motherhood, others articulated the daily physical difficulties of bearing and raising children. Georgian Gertrude Thomas expressed her dislike of pregnancy and childbearing in an unusually candid fashion. Thomas voiced the frustrations of many when she wrote, “The noise of my own children annoys me at times and I feel as if I did not have energy to raise my head.” Furthermore, although she loved her children fiercely and grieved deeply at their deaths, Thomas’ difficult pregnancies squelched any excitement she felt when she conceived and blunted her pain after a miscarriage.<sup>11</sup> Laura Wirt expressed similarly candid complaints to long-time friend and confidante Louisa Carrington. Laura was

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<sup>9</sup> Nelly Custis Lewis to Elizabeth Bordley Gibson, 5 November 1839, 23 March 1806, 5 April 1825, in Nelly Custis Lewis, *George Washington’s Beautiful Nelly: the Letters of Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis to Elizabeth Bordley Gibson, 1794-1851*, ed. by Patricia Brady (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 231.

<sup>10</sup> Dolley Madison to Anna Payne Cutts, 16 July 1804, in Allen C. Clark, *Life and Letters of Dolley Madison* (Washington: Press of W.F. Roberts Co., 1914), 74; Mary Boylston Parsons to Emily Howe Dupuy, 27 December 1856, Emily Howe Dupuy Papers, VHS; Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 139.

<sup>11</sup> Diary of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, December 1862, in Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas., *The Secret Eye: The Journal of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, 1848-1889*, ed. by Virginia Ingraham Burr with an intro. by Nell Irvin Painter (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 211; Diary of Gertrude Thomas, January 1856, November 1857, 28 December 1857, 26 June 1855 and 18 August 1846, February 1865, in Thomas, 141, 157, 158, 130, 149, 254.

wearied of the “cares of maternity,” noting, “three babies in less than three years are enough to make one tired of babies.” Laura considered herself blessed, was thankful for her spouse and her three “poor little picanines [*sic*],” and felt ungrateful for complaining. “Tho’ they are so troublesome,” she confided it was really only the “rapid increase in their number” which caused her problems: “If I could only enjoy health and strength proportioned to the demands they make on me, I should have no right to complain even of that. But they decline, as is usually the case, in an inverse ratio to the increase of my family; and I am now, as my husband declares ‘the most miserable, poor, good-for-nothing woman he ever saw’.”<sup>12</sup> For both women, the ideal of maternal devotion and love for their children was matched within the household by the realities of exhaustion and bodies wearied by childbearing.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to the emotional and physical distress of motherhood, southern women felt that maternal affection could derail their spiritual journeys and challenge the Lord. Catherine Few, for example, noted the irony of spending a quiet day at home reflecting upon her spirituality, when it was within her home that she encountered the greatest challenges to her faith. “My Children are my greatest temptation,” she wrote her eldest

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<sup>12</sup> Laura H. Wirt to Louisa Elizabeth Carrington, 23 May 1831, Letters from Laura H. Wirt to Louisa Carrington, UVA.

<sup>13</sup> For more on the physical hardships of childbearing, see Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 139-143, 151-157; McMillen, *Motherhood in the Old South*, 24, 67-86; Jan Lewis and Kenneth A. Lockridge, “‘Sally Has Been Sick’: Pregnancy and Family Limitation among Virginia Gentry Women, 1780-1830,” in Rima D. Apple and Janet Golden, eds., *Mothers and Motherhood: Readings in American History* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1997), 198-206; Judith Walzer Leavitt, “‘Science Enters the Birthing Room’: Obstetrics in America since the Eighteenth Century,” *The Journal of American History* 70, no. 2 (September 1983): 282-285. In Judith Leavitt’s estimation, women “overturned millennia of all-female tradition” by inviting male physicians into the birthing room because giving birth was so frightening and dangerous that women were willing to try anything to improve the experience. Indeed, giving birth was treacherous for women. One of every twenty-five southern women who died in 1850, died in childbirth and even those women who survived childbirth suffered injuries—particularly prolapsed uteri and vesicovaginal fistulas—that resulted in chronic pain and increased risk during future deliveries.

daughter, “but I hope I sincerely give them up to my God—knowing that he alone is the soul satisfying portion, yet that I may not love you too well, pray for me.” Mary Jeffreys Bethell, too, worried about the effects of her love for daughter Phereba. After four-year-old Phereba sustained burns that ultimately killed her, Bethell reflected, “sometimes her remarks were so sweet and sensible, I was led to exclaim, we must not love her too much the Lord might take her.”<sup>14</sup> Jennie Lines anticipated that when her newborn grew sick for the first time, she and her husband would question, “Do we love her too well? Have we made her our household idol? Have we given her that place on our hearts which should be dedicated to our God?” Concerned each question could be answered “yes,” Lines continued, “If we have committed the sin of idolatry O Father forgive us, and not rebuke us in Thy hot displeasure. Spare O spare our darling!” If it was God’s pleasure to “bereave her,” despite her begging and prioritizing Him above her child, Lines could only hope that He would “teach us to say and *feel Thy will not ours* be done.”<sup>15</sup>

Of those hardships which challenged mothers’ faith, the greatest of all was coping with the death of a beloved child. Julia Kell was delighted to be a mother, calling her children her “constant companions,” but she also believed her maternal love must always be balanced appropriately with gratitude to God. “I cradled their infancy with my prayers,” she explained, “& when I sang to them even if it was a child’s song, in my heart I was singing praise & thanksgiving to God for the blessing of my children.”

Consequently, their deaths caused Kell to reflect upon God, “Oh, why should he have

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<sup>14</sup> Catherine Nicholson Few to her eldest daughter, Frances Few, 4 July 1811, William and Catherine Nicholson Few Papers, UVA; Undated, page 9, Mary Jeffreys Bethell Diary, SHC.

<sup>15</sup> Jennie Line’s Diary, 16 March 1863, in Amelia Akehurst Lines, *To Raise Myself a Little: The Diaries and Letters of Jennie, A Georgia Teacher, 1851-1886*, ed. by Thomas Dyer (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1982), 210-212.

taken them? Why have you bereft me?” Despite these questions and her wrenching grief, Kell found comfort in her surviving son and devoted herself to him, feeling that although her deceased children were safe in heaven, her surviving child still needed his mother. Kell and others like her saw themselves as God’s helpmeets on earth. Religion was a crucial component of motherhood, which was, in turn, a crucial component of womanhood. Yet, as Kell’s confusion in the aftermath of her children’s deaths reflects, the two most important aspects of an elite southern woman’s identity were often at odds.

Paradox marked cultural messages about child mortality and maternal grief as it did many other aspects of antebellum womanhood. On the one hand, “experts” on motherhood taught women that being good mothers entailed vigilant concern with their children’s physical, spiritual, and mental well-being.<sup>16</sup> On the other, clergy and consolation literature told them that being a good Christian required relinquishing this guardianship, trusting in God’s benevolence and their child’s resurrection, and saying “Thy will be done” in the event a child died. Furthermore, antebellum Americans viewed infant mortality as routine, if tragic. While their children lived, southern mothers gave themselves entirely to the tasks of motherhood and nursing; when their children died, mothers were asked to relinquish their children to God without question. A second paradox—women’s tendency to seek religious meaning, particularly chastisement for

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<sup>16</sup> Julia Blanche Munroe Kell Diary, November 1863, John McIntosh Kell Papers, GHS; Nancy Schrom Dye and Daniel Blake Smith, “Mother Love and Infant Death, 1750-1920,” *The Journal of American History* 73, no.2 (Sep., 1986): 345. See also Harvey Green, *The Light of the Home: An Intimate View of the Lives of Women in Victorian America*, with assistance from Mary-Ellen Perry and illustration from the Margaret Woodbury Strong Museum (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 173; Sylvia D. Hoffert, *Private Matters: American Attitudes toward Childbearing and Infant Nurture in the Urban North, 1800-1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 30; Vasantha Lynn Kennedy, “Partus Sequitur Ventrum: Narratives of Childbirth and Motherhood in the Antebellum South” (PhD Dissertation: West Ontario, 2004), 127. Both Green and Kennedy outline the discrepancy between social messages of women’s weakness and the reality of childbirth and child rearing.

their sins, in their children's deaths while accepting God's mysterious ways and submitting to His will —only added to the strain.<sup>17</sup> In grief, then, women undertook reconciling irreconcilable perceptions of child death. Christian dutiful acceptance stood at odds with motherly bereavement.

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Women employed the idea that “the Lord giveth and the Lord hath taken away” almost as a mantra in the aftermath of a child's death. Gertrude Thomas, for example, wrote of her son Joseph, “‘The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.’ But oh it is hard. Nature rebels and turns shudderingly away from the thought that tonight my poor little darling [Joseph] will sleep its first sleep in its grave.” Sarah Howe also described the pain of loss and the struggle for resignation when she noted to a friend, “I think I can say ‘Thy will be done’ in all sincerity; and yet the thought of my poor exiled boy embitters every enjoyment and keeps me in the dust.”<sup>18</sup> As Thomas's “But oh it is hard” and Howe's “and yet” demonstrate, it is a mistake to assume that Christianity did nothing but provide comfort and that women's grief was passive.

The sources of support available to antebellum plantation mistresses—clergymen, bereavement manuals, religious periodicals, letters, and visits from friends and family—uniformly encouraged a level of resignation to God's will which few mothers could

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<sup>17</sup> Scott Stephan, *Redeeming the Southern Family: Evangelical Women and Domestic Devotion in the Antebellum South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 187-188, 202-203.

<sup>18</sup> Diary of Gertrude Thomas, 1 January 1856, in Thomas, 141; Sarah Ann Walthour Howe to Mary Jones Jones, 10 April 1857, in Robert Manson Myers, ed., *The Children of Pride: A True Story of Georgia and the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 314. See also Martha Lenoir Pickens to Ann Ballard Lenoir, 14 June 1820, in Thomas Felix Hickerson, *Echoes of Happy Valley: Letters and Diaries, Family Life in the South, Civil War History* (Chapel Hill: Bull's Head Bookshop, 1962), 14.

achieve. For women used to analyzing carefully their own sinfulness and spiritual state, as well as that of their children, messages about resignation only added to their list of spiritual shortcomings.<sup>19</sup> Given the importance of religion and motherhood in women's lives, grieving the loss of a child thrust women into a contentious intersection between their feelings of loss and their stoic understanding of what it meant to be a good Christian mother.

Friends and family reminded women of their duty to resign, and bereft mothers responded in turn with assurances that they were attempting to do so. Following the death of Dolly Lunt Lewis's daughter, Susan, her sister urged her not to mourn the loss, questioning rhetorically, "Would you recall her back to this world? Would you my dear Sister again tear her away from that holy region of bliss to this world of sin and sorrow and pain?" Dolly could not desire her child's return, her sister assumed, and though it was difficult, she must "be reconciled" and remember God's benevolence.<sup>20</sup> Kate DeRosset Meares's cousin reminded her that despite the comfort of friends' condolences, only God could fully heal her. She further admonished, "You my dear Kate, being a Christian must strive to bear your trouble with Christian resignation . . . I know it was a hard struggle to part with darling little Maggie, your own precious one, but God knows

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<sup>19</sup> See Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 69-70; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "Religion in the Lives of Slaveholding Women of the Antebellum South," in Lynda L. Coon, Katherine J. Haldane, and Elisabeth W. Sommer, eds., *That Gentle Strength: Historical Perspectives on Women in Christianity* (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 1990), 207-209 and 219; Dolly Sumner Lunt, *The Diary of Dolly Lunt Burge, 1848-1879*, ed. by Christine Jacobson Carter (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), xxvii.

<sup>20</sup> Letter to Dolly Lunt Lewis from her sister, 23 April 1844, Burge Family Papers, Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA (MARBL).

best.”<sup>21</sup> If Kate failed to resign herself, the letter implied, she failed her duties as a Christian by implying that she knew better than God what was best for her child.

Presenting the ideal did not keep women from understanding reality, and many acknowledged the difficulty of resigning themselves to accept the outcome. Esther Cox wrote to Mary Chesnut on the death of a friend’s disabled child, “You can well imagine what the mother’s feeling must be—fifteen months she watched it with unremitting attention, & her spirits were raised, or fell, as the Child changed for the better or otherwise.” Cox believed the child’s death was a blessing because it was a “cripple,” but also acknowledged the void left in its mother’s life. South Carolinian Margaret Adger’s cousin sympathized with a fellow mother after her child’s tragic death by scalding. Her heart broke for the woman because she appeared “completely crushed” despite being known to be “of a very strong mind, and a devoted Christian.” Rather than criticizing the woman’s devastation, Adger’s cousin acknowledged it was not her weakness as a Christian, but her devotion as a mother that caused such sorrow.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Cattie DeRosset to Kate DeRosset Meares, 4 June 1855, DeRosset Family Papers, SHC. See also H.S.P. King to his brother-in-law and sister, William Audley Couper and Hannah Page King Couper, 17 October 1852, William Audley Couper Papers, SHC. Although he did not ask for resignation, one of Hannah King’s brothers wrote asking her to stifle her grief for the sake of their mother, who was already distressed by their father’s business troubles: “When you have the courage Sister dear please write to our dearest Mother, and tho’ I cannot ask you to be cheerful I can ask you not to express all of your sorrow, unless dear it relieves you to do so. I would not make this request did I not know that you feel ever more if possible for our beloved Mother than the rest of us do.”

<sup>22</sup> Esther Cox to Mary Chesnut, 11 September 1810, 19 April 1811, Papers of the Cox and Chesnut Families, SCL; Letter to Margaret Hall Moffett Adger from her cousin, 27 August 1853, Margaret Hall Moffett Adger Papers, SCHS; Undated 1854 poem, Mary Davis Brown Collection, SCL. See also Mary E. Baxter Gresham to Susan, 26 November 1836 and undated, Mary E. Baxter Gresham Commonplace Book, Duke; James Henley Thornwell to “Mr. Holmes,” 20 November 1856, in Palmer, *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell*, 406. South Carolinian minister James Henley Thornwell held himself up as one such paragon of virtue and articulated the sentiments many women hoped to attain when he wrote following the death of his young son, “I had no heart for my everyday work. But although I have suffered, and suffered keenly, and suffered, as I hope, never to suffer again, yet I can truly say that I was not conscious of the first emotion of rebellion against the Providence of God. I could trust Him in the deepest darkness which surrounded me.”

While some women reflected upon other mothers' sorrow, others wrote of their own struggles.<sup>23</sup> Following the death of her daughter at age twenty-two, for example, Elizabeth Anderson wailed, "Oh, my God, help me to see and feel why! it was that this severe bereavement was necessary to thy poor afflicted servant; for Thou dost never willfully grieve or afflict thy children." Although Anderson dutifully sought a lesson in her daughter's death, her distress was obvious.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Sarah Screven wrote her nephew following the death of her week-old son, "dear little fellow he is gone to a better world and I am now content for god gives & takes and it is our duty to resign our darlings without murmuring." But, she continued, "tho I cant [*sic*] say I do God has endowed me with such passions or feelings that I can't easily control them sometimes."<sup>25</sup> In the same sentence, then, Screven recognized and accepted her duty to resign and admitted her failure to do so.

Though historians once argued that high child mortality rates caused maternal indifference, they now agree that mothers grieved deeply for their children no matter how many they lost.<sup>26</sup> All southern mothers mourned the passing of a child. Many who

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<sup>23</sup> Writing poetry was a common way for women to express that they understood society's expectations even if they could not meet them. See, for example, "To Mrs. Jane Sullivan on the death of her son James," 13 March 184-, Sullivan Family Commonplace Books, Duke; Amelia M. Howard, "On Death," undated, and "To the memory of my infant daughter," 15 November 1837, Louisa Adeline Muldrow Album, SCL.

<sup>24</sup> 19 September 1845, page 26, Elizabeth Willis Gloster Anderson Memoranda, SHC.

<sup>25</sup> Sarah Screven, "Old Foolish Aunt," to James Screven, 16 March 1820, Arnold and Screven Family Papers, SHC.

<sup>26</sup> See Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England 1500-1800*, 651, 667; Hoffert, *Private Matters*, 195; Jane Turner Censer, *North Carolina Planters and their Children, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 29-31; Carl N. Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 72-85; McMillen, *Motherhood in the Old South*, 171; Paul C. Rosenblatt, *Bitter, Bitter Tears: Nineteenth-Century Diarists and Twentieth-Century Grief Theories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 53-54, 59. Family historian Lawrence Stone argued that the "omnipresence of death" kept parents from investing in their children as loving an infant made little sense if you were likely to lose it. A bevy of historians,



struggled to resign themselves to the sad loss, like Elizabeth Anderson and Sarah Screven, compensated for their maternal weakness by emphasizing their continued efforts at submission. Those who found their losses so crushing they felt hopeless about ever attaining resignation closeted the depth of their struggles in diaries or in letters to their most intimate relations.<sup>27</sup> Despite her deep piety and continuous spiritual self-examination, Ann Turner was prone to bouts of melancholy following the deaths of her son, sister, and niece. “Sad gloomy & disperited [*sic*],” Turner could think only of the hardships that had befallen her in the past and might befall her in the future. On her twenty-fourth birthday and the first anniversary of her baby boy’s death, Sarah Fife remembered that she had once believed she would be able to give her son to God “without murmuring.” Instead, with her child’s death, she discovered, “it was like

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however, have overturned Stone’s understanding. Even those, like Sylvia Hoffert, who argue that women’s grief was passive, rarely contend that women loved their children less because they might die. Indeed, throughout the nineteenth-century, historians argue, Americans grew increasingly attached to their children even as a high child mortality rate continued. In the North, the declining birth rate may have caused parents to become more attached to each child. In the South, however, parents’ attachment to their children increased even as both birth rates and child mortality rates stayed the same. In Jane Turner Censer’s words, “Whether ritual incantation against death or simply *memento mori*, planters’ fatalism could not remove their sorrow.” Expecting a child’s death did little to lessen a southern parent’s grief. Even if relieved on behalf of their suffering child, or relieved that their child would never suffer the temptations of the world, southern mothers nevertheless mourned the loss of one of their little companions.

<sup>27</sup> See Elizabeth R. Baer, “Ambivalence, Anger, and Silence: The Civil War Diary of Lucy Buck,” in Suzanne L. Bunkers and Cynthia A. Huff, *Inscribing the Daily: Critical Essays on Women’s Diaries* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 207-218; Peter N. Stearns and Carol Z. Stearns, “Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards,” *The American Historical Review* 90 (1985): 820, 824. Baer’s argument about women’s Civil War diaries also applies to their diary entries in the weeks, months, and years after a child’s death. Women wrote in their journals as a means of “privately testing the boundaries and limitations of their circumspect society.” When women felt they could no longer express their grief publicly—when the reality of their emotions no longer matched what Stearns and Stearns refer to as society’s formal “emotional standards”—or on the rare occasions that grief led them to socially unacceptable questions about God and religion, bereft mothers’ diaries allowed a space for discussion. See also Rosenblatt, *Bitter, Bitter Tears*, 104, 107, 111; Stowe, “Writing Sickness,” in Donaldson and Jones, 257-266. Stowe argues that Mary Henderson’s used her diary to grapple with child death and to evaluate her role in it. By writing of their sicknesses and deaths, Henderson ensured that she would never let her children go and that she would never finish serving at their bedside. Rosenblatt analyzes methods other than journaling that grieving women employed to control their emotions, including “acting inconsistently with feelings,” “self-instruction to behave in a controlled fashion,” “avoiding reminders of the loss,” and “cognitive minimizing of the loss.”

rending my life to resign him . . . . My heart longs & yearns so for him—and I feel so desolate when I think of a lifetime.”<sup>28</sup> Though she prayed for Jesus’ support, a year after her child’s death she felt no closer to resignation. Margaret Dickins similarly confided to her husband, “I am very very miserable, every day I miss & mourn for my Mary. It is dreadful to think I shall never see her on earth again, at times I can scarcely bear up under the agonizing thought.” Dickins tried to “bear up,” but everything in her life seemed so “changed and gloomy” that all she could do was continue to grieve and pray that God would forgive her for doing so. For each of these women, Mary Bartlett’s emotions would have resonated. Bartlett lamented the “indescribable” grief of “feeling all the time like she was looking for something and could not find it.”<sup>29</sup>

Mothers appealed earnestly to God to comfort them and help them to accept his mandates, and the few exceptions to this rule make women’s near-universal compliance with the ideal of resignation that much more striking.<sup>30</sup> Varina Davis did little to conform to social boundaries of grief after her son’s 1854 death from a gruesome illness that caused his face to blister and bleed. In a letter which suggested she was too sick with grief to write earlier, Davis reported to her mother and father, “We have had great sympathy shown us, and I am tortured with letters of condolence and it gives me nothing

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<sup>28</sup> 28 December 1821, 30 April 1826, 10 December 1830, Ann A. Turner Diary, Duke; 19 December 1869, Diary of Sarah Ann Graves Strickler Fife, UVA.

<sup>29</sup> Margaret Harvie Randolph Dickins to Francis Asbury Dickins, 29 August 1849, Francis Asbury Dickins Papers, SHC; Mary Bartlett to William Blanks, 4 August 1841, Elizabeth J. Holmes Blanks Papers, Duke. See also Jane Kennedy to Mary Chesnut, 20 October 1801, Papers of the Cox and Chesnut Families, SCL. Following the death of his daughter, Kitty, Jane Kennedy’s husband insisted that Jane leave town to renew her spirits by enjoying the company of friends. Instead, however, “every object awakened my recollection to scenes of past happiness, never to be recalled.”

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, 30 September 1825, Diary of Millie Richards Stone Gray, UVA. Millie Gray tried to stifle her grief after her son’s death following a year-long bronchial infection, writing, “we try not to be so selfish as to regret his release but self mingles with all our feelings and we cannot but weep at his loss.”

but unmitigated pain to see people, and hear the set forms of consolations.” For Davis, clichéd letters written to comply with social mores only added to her pain. Mary Jane Armistead rejected social standards for grief still more forcefully. Entirely dejected, she told her sister she intended to seclude herself with her grief, never setting foot into a friend’s house or into a church again. Anticipating her sister’s response to such melancholy, Armistead countered, “Don’t tell me about what others will think. I shall never intrude my grief on any one, and as to what they think, I wonder if you think for a moment that I regard the thoughts of any earthly human being in connection with my sacred sacred grief for my own dear children.” In light of her pain, criticism meant little.<sup>31</sup>

Openly expressing irritation and refusing to conform to society’s demands for Christian resignation were quite subversive reactions for elite mothers. Mary Jane Armistead and Theodosia Burr went one step further by challenging God. After the deaths of two of her children, Armistead leveled her anger at her husband for refusing to leave their “horrid” location before the sick season and at her sister for failing to visit as she grieved. Of God, Mary Jane wrote, “I feel as if the heavy hand of God was upon me, and that I don’t know why he should punish me so much when I have been trying to do my duties faithfully.” Like Armistead, Burr approached her relationship with God as if it were a contract; she had upheld her end of the bargain and expected God to do the same. When “Theo” wrote to tell her closest confidant, her father Aaron Burr, of her son’s

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<sup>31</sup> Varina Anne Banks Howell Davis to Margaret Louisa Kempe Howell, July, 1854, in Davis, 78-79; Mary Jane Walthall Armistead to Sarah Catherine “Kate” Walthall Rosier, 14 February 1879, Rosier Family Papers, VHS. See also Nathalie deLage Sumter, *Fifteen Letters of Nathalie Sumter*, ed. by Mary Virginia Saunders White (Columbia, SC: Printed for Gittman’s Book Shop by the R. L. Bryan Company, 1942), 82.

death she stated, “there is no more joy for me; the world is a blank. I have lost my boy.” “May Heaven, by other blessings,” she continued, “make you some amends for the noble grandson you have lost.” Calling on heaven to “make amends” for a child’s death was quite bold. Theodosia went so far as to write, “You talk of consolation. Ah! you know not what you have lost. I think Omnipotence could give me no equivalent for my boy; no, none.”<sup>32</sup> Within just a few sentences, Theodosia challenged her father, a master, and God, the ultimate patriarch.

For most grieving mothers, rejecting God was not an option. Instead, mothers found in God a sympathetic Father who had suffered the death of His only son, and they used the deaths of their children as a corrective measure only when they left him no choice. While women sought submission to the Lord’s will, however, their Christian convictions rarely overcame the devastation they felt as mothers robbed of their most beloved treasures. In the absence of submission, elite southern mothers struggled to cope with and make sense of their loss, continuously striving to believe the rhetoric that children were better off in heaven.

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Modern grief theorists contend that the purpose of grief is neither resignation nor complete recovery. Rather, they argue that parental bereavement is permanent and bereft mothers must find a path between “relentless grief” and the “shadow grief” which will haunt them forever but will allow them to carry on with life. Twenty-first century mothers find this path to shadow grief characterized by rage, guilt, “what ifs,” and

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<sup>32</sup> Mary Jane Walthall Armistead to Sarah Catherine “Kate” Walthall Rosier, 7 January 1879, Rosier Family Papers, VHS; Theodosia Burr Alston to Aaron Burr, 12 July 1812, and Theodosia Burr Alston to Aaron Burr, 12 August 1812, in Theodosia Burr Alston, *Correspondence of Aaron Burr and His Daughter Theodosia*, ed. by Mark Van Doren (New York: Convici-Friede, 1929), 339-340.

overwhelming sadness as a result of the cultural belief that no parent should bury their child. Although women seek support from friends and relatives, they report feeling a “chasm” between themselves and those who have never suffered the death of a child. Because American child mortality rates today are relatively low, such a chasm separates bereft women from almost everyone.

Surviving the death of a child also forces modern women to grapple with God and religion. Today, parents seem universally to believe that their child has gone to heaven but perceive their own relationship with God and Christianity as much more tenuous. Authors and bereft mothers Anne McCracken and Mary Semel contend that when the question “why?” arises, mothers inevitably end up at God’s door, “where some will open it and cry out for help. Others will furiously kick it and shout obscenities. And others still, citing God’s powerlessness to avert suffering, will bypass it.” Ruminating on God’s role in their children’s deaths, then, causes crises of faith and departures from the church at least as often as it draws women closer to God.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, even modern religious consolation literature considers all the common clichés—“God works in mysterious ways,” and “your child is better off in heaven,”—to be counterproductive, inciting rage rather than resignation. Author and bereft father John Munday, for example, writes, “You have probably heard someone say, ‘God wanted your child more than you did.’

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<sup>33</sup> Ellen Mitchell, Carol Barkin, et al., *Beyond Tears: Living after Losing a Child* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2009), 3, 9, 159, 181; Dennis Klass, *Parental Grief: Solace and Resolution*, Springer Series on Death and Suicide, 9 (New York: Springer Pub. Co., 1988), 13, 25, 62-64; Paul C. Rosenblatt, *Parent Grief: Narratives of Loss and Relationship* (Philadelphia: Brunner/Mazel, 2000), 57-58, 93, 117, 207-222; Anne McCracken and Mary Semel, ed., *A Broken Heart Still Beats: After Your Child Dies* (Center City, MN: Hazelden, 1998), 30-31, 199.

Are they kidding? . . . Bereaved parents know that God has eternity to have their child.”<sup>34</sup>

Nineteenth-century southern mothers experienced child death far more frequently than their twenty-first century counterparts but were no less convinced that burying one’s child was an aberration of life’s natural order. Women like Susan Capehart also implied, as modern Americans do, that the loss of a child was the greatest blow one could experience. “I thought that the loss of my Sister was the greatest trial I ever met with,” she wrote, “but it was a small one in comparison with the loss of my child.”<sup>35</sup> Unlike modern mothers, though, antebellum mothers rarely expressed anger at their losses or arrived at God’s door “furious and shouting obscenities” as faith and devotion to God colored every aspect of plantation mistresses’ grief.

For plantation mistresses more than others, God was a crucial source of support.<sup>36</sup> Believing themselves forsaken by God would have left these mothers entirely alone. Furthermore, within the South’s patriarchal and hierarchical society, challenging God—the ultimate patriarch—was unfathomable for most mothers. Even if their worldview allowed it, women’s fear of public censure would have stopped it. Southerners expected women to display piety and humble themselves before the Lord, and they attributed great power to women’s words. As historian Robert Elder writes, “one of the few real powers a women possessed in the traditional culture of the South lay in her tongue, which could

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<sup>34</sup> John S. Munday, with Frances Wohlenhaus-Munday, *Surviving the Death of a Child* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 7, 21, 36-40, 65.

<sup>35</sup> Susan Brynne Martin Capehart to Peter Martin, 24 August 1836, Capehart Family Papers, SHC.

<sup>36</sup> Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 170. See also Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 164-179 for a detailed discussion of the effects of geographic isolation on elite southern women.

give lie to men's claims about themselves."<sup>37</sup> The daily realities of living with grief even as they sought submission to God's will and adhered to society's demands for their words made grieving a complex and taxing process. In trying to abide by Christian and social standards, elite southern mothers forged a distinct culture of grief founded on the support of God and on other women that was marked by self-reflection, wrenching guilt, and sometimes drug abuse and forays into the occult.

Religion shaded melancholy and its solutions, but some of women's coping mechanisms employed their faith more directly than others. In the final days before a child's death, for example, mothers pleaded boldly with God to spare the child's life, hoping that their carefully forged personal relationships with Him might sway His will. Sarah Fife bargained directly when she wrote, "Oh! God! spare my child to comfort my life!" Although she threw in a "but thy Holy Will be done" for good measure, Fife's demands would have struck others as rather brazen.<sup>38</sup> Georgia resident Jennie Lines remarked that with the death of her child, she drained the "cup of sorrow . . . to the dregs." Describing her inability to attain resignation, Lines wrote, "I prayed every day that she might be spared to me hoping God would grant my petition when He knew how much my child was to me." If only her prayers could convey her devotion to her daughter, Lines hoped, God might let the child live. Mary Davis Brown hoped to achieve the same effect by dedicating her child to God. After thanking Him for seeing her safely

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<sup>37</sup> Robert Elder, "A Twice Sacred Circle: Women, Evangelicalism, and Honor in the Deep South, 1784-1860," *Journal of Southern History*, forthcoming.

<sup>38</sup> Diary of Sarah Ann Graves Strickler Fife, UVA. See also 5 August 1869, 9 September 1869, Diary of Sarah Ann Graves Strickler Fife, UVA. Fife's many acknowledgements of the blessings in her life and her seemingly sincere love of God could not outweigh her desire to be reunited with her dead child. "I lay by his grave," Fife wrote, "& pray God to let me die & go to him, to let me go even to the littlest corner in heaven." When Fife's surviving child began teething, she remarked that "no one, but a mother knows a mother's anxiety, & her depth of love."

through labor and delivery, she dedicated her infant to God, asked assistance in nurturing a pious child, and prayed both that its life might be spared and that she could experience resignation if it was not.<sup>39</sup> Virginian Mary Early Brown more subtly hoped that by acknowledging her own sinfulness and praying that God would enable her to “say with sincerity not my will but thine Oh God be done,” she might not have to. When she did experience the loss of her child, Brown prayed that God would assist her in raising her remaining children for a life of Christian service and would train her “above all to feel that they are his—not mine.”<sup>40</sup>

Despite their deep conviction in God’s omnipotence and their tendency to turn to God first when their children sickened or died, southerners did not consider church membership an essential component of their faith. Many of the South’s most pious women never joined a congregation. At least one woman, Anne Turner, worried that her participation in a female prayer circle would lessen her prayers’ sincerity and make it appear that she doubted God’s ability to ease her pain unless aided by members of a church. In times of loss, however, some women noted the comfort that organized religion offered them, while others wrote of their failure to attend church as a means of describing the depths of their melancholy. Millie Gray’s grief following the death of her daughter brought her to the doors of Presbyterian, Episcopalian, and Methodist churches, suggesting that she sought the experience of church rather than any specific

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<sup>39</sup> Undated “Death of Lillie” entry, in Lines, *To Raise Myself a Little*, 205-207; 28 October 1857, Mary Davis Brown Commonplace Album, SCL.

<sup>40</sup> Diary of Mary Virginia Early Brown, 27 February 1854, Early Family Papers, VHS; 31 March 1869, 10 October 1869.



denomination's rituals.<sup>41</sup> Mary Williams Taylor, too, used church attendance as a way of helping to waylay her daughter's grief. She and Fannie "attended church both morning & night," in addition to visiting and decorating the deceased girl's grave and seeking comfort from female friends.

Though women seem to have relied more on their personal relationship with God and their private dedications of children to Him, the ritual of baptism comforted women following their loss. "I joyfully mention the baptism of my children," Julia Kell wrote. Dedicating her children's lives to God, she offered, "softened the blow" when it pleased God to recall them to heaven. Like Kell, Anna Maria Henkel wrote fondly of each of her children's baptisms, faithfully recording them amidst her regular accounts of church attendance.<sup>42</sup>

Some southern women noted their absence from church to indicate the depth of their grief. Mahala Roach failed to attend church or participate in communion for six months after her daughter's death because doing so made her miss the little girl. Her daughter, Roach wrote, "loved the Church and Sunday school and never missed going when she could." Consequently, "the seat seemed vacant without her!" Like Roach, Ann Swann mourned her "departed Idol . . . every returning Sabbath (at the ringing of the Church Bell)" because it was at that time that her beloved child died. Mary Henderson stayed home from church as a means of communing with her child. Though her husband

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<sup>41</sup> Fox-Genovese, "Religion in the Lives of Slaveholding Women of the Antebellum South," in Coon, Haldane, and Sommer, *That Gentle Strength*, 213, 218-219; September 1822, Anne A. Turner Diary, Duke; 9 August 1822, 29 September 1822, 5 January 1823, Diary of Millie Richards Stone Gray, UVA; Mary Williams Taylor to Charles Elisha "Charlie" Taylor, undated 1860, Charles Elisha Taylor Papers, UVA. See also 1841, Valeria G. Burroughs Album and Commonplace Book, Duke.

<sup>42</sup> Julia Blanche Munroe Kell Diary, November 1863, John McIntosh Kell Papers, GHS; 13 June 1852, 31 July 1853, 27 September 1857, 1 May 1859, Papers and Diaries of Anna Maria Henkel, UVA. See also Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 277-278.

and sons went to church, Henderson could not tear herself away from memories of Baldy for long enough to accompany them. "I remain alone at home very unwell, did not dress myself until evening," she recorded, and used the time she would have spent in church reviewing her journal "to recall the different dates of dear precious little Baldy's failing health."<sup>43</sup>

Although God was the "great comforter," grieving women relied heavily on the support of female friends and relatives.<sup>44</sup> Certainly, husbands, fathers, brothers, and uncles offered more support to mothers in times of loss than some historians have suggested.<sup>45</sup> Susan Capehart, for example, counted on her father's ability to empathize with her when she wrote, "You have felt the loss of a dear child and can imagine my feelings better than I can describe them. It appears to me that I shall never be able to give her up, I can think of nothing else day or night scarcely but my little darling child." William Nicholson's sister, too, begged him to write or visit her in the aftermath of her child's death, confiding, "I never in my life felt so loanly [*sic*] and so much desired the company of my relatives."<sup>46</sup> More often, it was other women who dominated southern mothers' support systems.

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<sup>43</sup> Diary of Mahala Roach, 1 November 1857, Roach and Eggleston Family Papers, SHC; Ann Sophia Green Swann's Commonplace Book, 18 October 1835, Swann Family Papers, SHC; Mary Ferrand Henderson Diary, 1 July 1855, John Steele Henderson Papers, SHC.

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, Frances Webster to Lucien Bonaparte Webster, 17 August 1847, and Lucien Bonaparte Webster to Frances Webster, 26 September 1847, in Frances Marvin Smith Webster, *The Websters: Letters of an American Army Family in Peace and War, 1836-1853*, ed. by Van R. Baker (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2000), 187, 190-191; and, Rev. D.L. Buttolph to Rev. Charles Colcocke Jones, 17 May 1858, in Myers, 415.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 224-227, 275-277.

<sup>46</sup> Susan Brynne Martin Capehart to Peter Martin, 24 August 1836, Capehart Family Papers, SHC; Letter to William Nicholson, 2 August 1852, William S. Nicholson Papers, Duke.

A rich historical literature exists on the friendships American women formed with one another.<sup>47</sup> Much of it, however, suggests that southern women, because they identified themselves as extensions of a family rather than as individuals and had fewer opportunities for communion with other females than northerners, accepted the culture slaveholding men created rather than forging a culture of their own.<sup>48</sup> Studying women's grief elucidates the strong bonds that southern women formed with another via written correspondence and occasional visits, and reveals that southerners' grief had gender-specific nuances. Women may have been isolated from one another by geographic space, but they shared an understanding of the depths of maternal love, the perimeters of southern culture, and the difficulty of resigning to God's will.<sup>49</sup>

Grieving plantation mistresses regularly expressed gratitude for and dependence upon the help they received from other women. Ann Swann, for instance, questioned in her diary, "Oh! had it not been for the support, and attentions, & Sympathy of united

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<sup>47</sup> See Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: A.A. Knopf), 60-71; Theriot, *Mothers and Daughters*, 16-18, 114; Green, *The Light of the Home*, 166-167; Leavitt, "Science Enters the Birthing Room," 282. On southern women in particular, see Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 42-45; Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 53; McMillen, *Motherhood in the Old South*, 62, 73-74; Joan E. Cashin, "The Structure of Antebellum Planter Families: 'The Ties that Bound Us Was Strong'," *The Journal of Southern History* 56, no. 1 (February 1990): 56-64.

<sup>48</sup> Joan E. Cashin, *Our Common Affairs: Texts from Women in the Old South* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Fox-Genovese in Koon, Haldane, and Summer, 207-209; Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 47, 96-97; Anya Jabour, "Male Friendship and Masculinity in the Early National South: William Wirt and His Friends," *Journal of the Early Republic* 20, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 93. See also Jean E. Friedman, *The Enclosed Garden: Women and Community in the Evangelical South, 1830-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), xi-xii, 11, 22, 37.

<sup>49</sup> Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "Family and Female Identity in the Antebellum South: Sarah Gayle and her Family," in Carol Bleser, ed., *In Joy and in Sorrow: Women, Family, and Marriage in the Victorian South, 1830-1900*, Papers of the Fort Hill Conference on Southern Culture, held at Clemson University in the Spring of 1989 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 24. Fox-Genovese contends that southern mothers and daughters were especially close. Because southern women married so young, mothers and daughters often bore children at the same time and were relatively close in age.

Friends?, how could we have borne up under such an affliction.”<sup>50</sup> Millie Gray, too, turned to friends for support as she suffered the deaths of three children in just six years. She believed she would always be thankful for the women who sat with her through daughter Jane’s final night. Gray listed no fewer than twenty-six women who offered support in the weeks after Jane’s death.<sup>51</sup> Ellen Mordecai wrote that her sister, Caroline, was “cheerful in appearance to all but her most intimate friends,” but to those few women who meant the most to her, Caroline revealed her “heart of sorrow” after losing her husband and three sons. When the two were alone together, Ellen remarked, Caroline told her sister that their friendship was her greatest remaining happiness. Another Mordecai sister, Rachel Mordecai Lazarus, named her child after two women “to whose kind attentions during this trying period I feel particularly indebted.” The women had comforted and nursed her through a near-fatal delivery.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ann Sophia Green Swann’s Commonplace Book, 18 October 1835, Swann Family Papers, SHC. See also Ann Sophia Green Swann’s Commonplace Book, 27 October 1835, 19 August 1855, Swann Family Papers, SHC; Ann Lewis Hardeman Diary, 26 July 1853, in Michael O’Brien, *An Evening When Alone: Four Journals of Single Women in the South, 1827-1867* (Charlottesville: Published for the Southern Texts Society by the University Press of Virginia, 1993), 244-245.

<sup>51</sup> 9 August 1822, 7 August 1828, Diary of Millie Richards Stone Gray, UVA. See also Mary Williams Taylor to Charles Elisha “Charlie” Taylor, 20 August 1860 and undated, Charles Elisha Taylor Papers, UVA. Charles Taylor’s sister, Fannie, received support from her mother, Mary, and many friends in the aftermath of her young daughter’s death. Sarah Freeman, in particular, spent nights with Fannie to aid and comfort her during her baby’s final days. It was not women alone, however, who offered comfort during this time. Mary noted, “Quite a number of our friends have called, but none whose visit I enjoyed as much as that of Mr. Willis. Thursday evening he came up, he was so tender and sympathizing, talking very pleasantly, and praying with us all when he left.”

<sup>52</sup> Ellen Mordecai to Sam Mordecai, 18 May 1828, Jacob Mordecai Papers, Duke; Rachel Mordecai Lazarus to Maria Edgeworth, 3 November 1828, in Rachel Mordecai Lazarus, *The Education of the Heart: The Correspondence of Rachel Mordecai Lazarus and Maria Edgeworth*, ed. by Edgar E. MacDonald (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 176-177. For more about women’s tendency to name children after important women in their lives, see Rebecca Phillips Cohen to her father, 19 September 1838, in Jacob R. Marcus, *The American Jewish Woman: A Documentary History* (New York: Ktav Pub. House, 1981), 144; Censer, 33.

Only other women, grieving mothers believed, could adequately comprehend and alleviate their melancholy. Lydia Howard Sigourney expressed the beliefs of many when she penned, “When she sees a little coffin pass, no matter whether the mother who mourns, be a stranger, or a mendicant, or burnt dark beneath the African sun, is she not to her, in the pitying thrill of that moment, as a sister?”<sup>53</sup> Sigourney overstated the sympathy white women—particularly slaveholding women—felt for black women, but she accurately reflected the way elite white women felt about one another. Sarah Blackburn sympathized with Margaret Peyton on the death of her fifteen-year-old adopted son, “If in so short a time Richard had wound himself around our hearts what must he have been to you who have been to him a mother and no doubt feel his loss now as a Mother only can.”<sup>54</sup> Martha Tyler echoed similar sentiments about mothers’ grief when she wrote to Bettie Ridley, “Your dear grief stricken, but sweet sympathizing letter, did soothe & comfort me, in my heartrending, my crushing sorrow—Yes! dearest Bettie, You have felt the same . . . & you can understand my sufferings.” “No one, but a Mother, can feel the anguish of a Mothers heart,” she concluded.<sup>55</sup>

Because they shared the experiences of motherhood and often of maternal bereavement, women regularly expressed compassion for one another. Millie Gray, for example, paid special attention to a friend who seemed “almost deranged” since losing

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<sup>53</sup> Lydia Howard Sigourney, *Letters to Mothers* (Hartford: Hudson and Skinner, 1838), 206. See also Esther Cox to Mary Chesnut, 9 May 1801, Papers of the Cox and Chesnut Families, SCL. On the death of Mary Chesnut’s daughter, Esther Cox tried to console her with religious reassurances, but also recognized, “the little creatures are no sooner born than they entwine themselves round our hears, & the separation by Death, is like tearing Soul from Body—tho’ she had lived so short a time—it was long enough for your to presage her sweet temper, & many amiable qualities—none but a Parent, can know the sweet Sensations, that beholding a beautiful infant occasions.”

<sup>54</sup> Sarah Ann Eleanor Thomas Blackburn to Margaret Peyton, undated, Peyton Family Papers, VHS.

<sup>55</sup> Martha Frances Blow (Rochelle) Tyler to Elizabeth “Bettie” Ridley, 22 March 1843, Ridley Family Papers, VHS. See also Ann Hooe to Margaret Peyton, 4 November 1855, Peyton Family Papers, VHS.

her baby boy because she worried the woman had few other friends.<sup>56</sup> Maria Wightman could read her sister's thoughts just by glancing at her face as the two women sat together on a cold, dreary night ruminating on the death of Wightman's niece. "She too was thinking how cold & dark it was for her baby to be in that lonely place," Wightman explained.<sup>57</sup> This mother understood all too well that her sister could not rejoice in her child's death. The women of the Bailey family also forgave one another's indiscretions. When North Carolinian Priscilla Bailey discovered "Sallie's" mistake had almost resulted in her baby's death, she called on other Bailey women to guard the secret. After mistakenly administering thirty drops of a cordial she was unaware contained laudanum, Sallie's child "lay in a perfect stupor for 15 or 20 hours." Relating the story to daughter Sarah, Bailey instructed, "say nothing about this out of the family."

Although they appreciated any form empathy by whatever means it arrived, grieving mothers particularly prized in-person visits with female friends and relatives. Eliza DeRosset was so certain her daughter Kate would travel to be with her as she grieved, that despite her "first impulse" to race to be by Kate's side, she waited,

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<sup>56</sup> 18 June 1828, Diary of Millie Richards Stone Gray, UVA; 25 April 1825, 6 December 1826, Diary of Millie Richards Stone Gray, UVA. On other occasions, Gray remarked that she was "much grieved" to learn of the death of a friend's youngest child, attended the child's funeral, and described feeling melancholic on behalf of her bereft sister. See also Letter to Cornelia Christian Lenoir from her sister, 2 June 1858, Lenoir Family Papers, SHC; Priscilla Bailey to Sarah Jane Bailey Cane, 20 October 1857, John Lancaster Bailey Papers, SHC; Letter to Cornelia Christian Lenoir from her sister, 8 June 1858, Lenoir Family Papers, SHC.

<sup>57</sup> 3 March 1853, Maria Dyer Davies Wightman Diary, Duke. See also 19 November 1858, 20 November 1858, 25 November 1858, Diaries of Fannie Page Hume, UVA; Diary of Mahala Roach, 21 August 1857, Roach and Eggleston Family Papers, SHC. Fannie Hume's diary is a continuous list of the deaths and illnesses in her family, friends and acquaintances. Several entries focus on Mrs. Fry, whom Hume visited and noted was "quiet though seemed deeply distressed." Hume's family attended little Murray Fry's funeral and Fannie paid special attention to Mrs. Fry's demeanor. "Poor woman!" Hume noted, "she grieves so for her child." Mahala Roach's experiences also made her particularly sympathetic toward friend, Virginia Thomas. "Virginia Thomas lost her baby today," Roach wrote, "a child the age of John! I am so sorry for her."

concerned they would pass one another in transit. However it happened, Eliza longed to be with her daughter so that she could “throw my arms around you and assure you how my very heart bleeds for you.”<sup>58</sup> Also recognizing the “infinite grief” produced by a child’s death, a friend of Ebenezer Pettigrew lamented that Ebenezer could not take his wife, Nancy, to be with her mother in Newbern, North Carolina. Nancy’s presence could comfort her mother in the aftermath of her darling Hannah’s death, this friend believed, “because in her present situation of mind to see & behold her Nancy would be much calculated to fix her attention to the remaining objects of her affections & to recall them from the dead.” Nancy, he believed, would be soothed “by a free discharge of tears on the Bosom of an affectionate Mother.”<sup>59</sup> The women of the Mordecai family bemoaned their inability to offer sisterly support to Caroline following the deaths of her two young sons in 1823. They were especially sorry that Ellen Mordecai had left Caroline’s home just before the children’s deaths because, Julia Mordecai explained, Ellen knew “so well how to render those kind as well as useful offices, to pour into your wounded bosom the

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<sup>58</sup> Eliza Jane DeRosset to Kate DeRosset Meares, 3 June 1855, 4 June 1855, DeRosset Family Papers, SHC. See also Agnes Gamble Cabell to Louisa Carrington Cabell, 27 May 1821, Letters of the Cabell and Carrington Families, UVA; Elizabeth J. Holmes Blanks to Catherine K. Holmes, 13 October 1834, Elizabeth J. Holmes Blanks Papers, Duke. Agnes Cabell planned her visit with step-daughter, Louisa, with great care. Cabell felt “quite disturbed at the thoughts of your situation, so lonely, so unwell, & no friend nor Housekeeper to aid you” as Louisa suffered from “melancholia.” Consequently, she determined to send a domestic slave, Hannah, if she could not travel.

<sup>59</sup> MC Sawyer to Ebenezer Pettigrew Edenton, 13 August 1818, in Sarah McCulloh Lemmon, ed., *The Pettigrew Papers* (Raleigh, NC: State Department of Archives and History, 1971), vol.1, 634-35. See also Diary of Mahala Roach, 31 August 1857, 2 September 1857, Roach and Eggleston Family Papers, SHC; Mary Williams Taylor to Charles Elisha “Charlie” Taylor, 15 August 1860; Mary Taylor to Charlie Taylor, 20 August 1860 Charles Elisha Taylor Papers, UVA. Mahala Roach recorded, “My Dear good Mother here with us all day her presence is a real comfort, and soothes me so much.” Charlie Taylor’s mother and sister expressed their wish that he too could be at home during their time of loss. Though they suspected that he would quickly be sad and lonely, longing to busy himself back at school, both felt his presence at home would be a comfort.

balm of comfort.” Caroline, for her part, asked her husband to tell Ellen, “I wish to God she was here. it would be such a relief to me.”<sup>60</sup>

Although some planter husbands viewed it as their duty to unite their wives with female companions in times of loss, many more counted on their wives’ continued management of domestic activities. These duties and patriarchal wishes, as well as southern propriety that required women be chaperoned while traveling, hindered plantation mistresses visiting one another.<sup>61</sup> Consequently, letters typically supplied the crucial link between bereft mothers and the women they relied upon for support.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, the importance of letters in elite women’s lives cannot be overstated. In the rural South letters allowed women to create a distinct network and culture.<sup>63</sup> Women, Catherine Clinton argues, were “the couriers of death as well as of glad tidings,” and they took letter-writing duties seriously. Furthermore, plantation mistresses viewed letters as a reasonable, albeit imperfect, substitute for face-to-face visits. The agreements wrought between correspondents about how to write, how often to write, and what to discuss brought southern women together in the same sort of intimacy that social visits did.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Ellen Mordecai to Sam Mordecai, 18 May 1823, and Julia Mordecai to Caroline Mordecai Plunkett, 18 May 1823, Mordecai Family Papers, SHC; John D. Plunkett to Ellen Mordecai, 16 May 1823, and Rachel Mordecai Lazarus to Ellen Mordecai, 18 May 1823, Jacob Mordecai Papers, Duke.

<sup>61</sup> Joan E. Cashin, *A Family Venture: Men and Women on the Southern Frontier* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 15.

<sup>62</sup> See, for example, Diary of Mahala Roach, 29 August 1857 through 4 September 1857, Roach and Eggleston Family Papers, SHC; A.J. Pride to Mary DeSaussure Fraser, 13 July 1833, Mary (DeSaussure) Fraser Papers, Duke.

<sup>63</sup> Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 44-47, 80-81. See also Jean E. Friedman, *The Enclosed Garden: Women and Community in the Evangelical South, 1830-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), xi-xii, 11, 37.

<sup>64</sup> Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 10-11, 139, 157-158, 165-174; William Merrill Decker, *Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America before Telecommunications* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 39, 44, 47; Steven M. Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South: Ritual in the Lives of the Planters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 2-4; Stephan, *Redeeming the*



Because women counted on the post as a source of news, companionship, and entertainment—one southern woman listed letters among her “greatest earthly comforts”—women grew anxious or angry when their correspondents failed to write. Mary Thomas, for example, frantically questioned her sister, “It has been so long since I heard from you I have become very uneasy for fear something is the matter with some of yours . . . . What is the reason none of you will wright? [*sic*]” Jane Kennedy, too, became agitated when no letters arrived from her friend, Mary Chesnut. Kennedy explained, “I . . . stood in need of one of your affectionate letters to console.” After learning bereavement had caused Chesnut’s delay, Kennedy changed her tune, writing that she would forget her own sorrows and work to quell Mary’s instead. Rebecca Worrell evoked pity when she told her sister-in-law, “sometimes I think you all have forgotten us for we have not received one letter for every 3 we have wrote.”<sup>65</sup> Even in happier circumstances, Hester Kell Davis ribbed her sister Blanche, “I tried being on my dignity by waiting for an answer to my last letter, but as you seem to have no notion of doing as a younger sister should, I must lay aside my pretentions and submit with a good grace. I love you too

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*Southern Family*, 184. See also Catharine Kenan Holmes Price to Elizabeth J. Holmes Blanks, December 1839 [date smudged], Elizabeth J. Holmes Blanks Papers, Duke; Mary Louise Kete, *Sentimental Collaborations: Mourning and Middle-Class Identity in Nineteenth-Century America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 52-55. In an otherwise light-hearted letter between sisters, Catharine Price wrote, “I often look at my child and think of you and wonder to myself will my Darling Sister ever see him or will I ever see here Dear little children.” For Catharine and her sister, letters had to suffice in lieu of visits because reunion was too uncertain. In Kete’s estimation, it makes sense that women bonded with one another through whatever means possible in times of loss. The very purpose of mourning, Kete contends, was to reintegrate the bereft into their community by building social obligations to others.

<sup>65</sup> Catherine Kenan Holmes Price to Elizabeth Blanks, 12 May 1838, December 1839, Elizabeth J. Holmes Blanks Papers, Duke; Rebecca W. Cooley Worrell to Nancy Caroline Higgins Cooley, 30 March 1858, Cooley Family Papers, VHS; Mary Thomas to her sister, Lucy Stuart, 8 November 1851, Letters of the Bradford Family, UVA.

much you little witch to quarrel with you about it.”<sup>66</sup> These women had a personal stake in whether or not other mothers upheld their duty to write.

Although they could evoke fear—Amelia Akehurst Lines, for example, wrote of her terror upon receiving a letter “sealed with dark green,” which she mistook for the black trim of mourning stationary—letters were also a welcome and expected source of support and community in mourning.<sup>67</sup> Evidencing the importance letters held for bereft mothers, the DeRosset women timed their letters carefully in order to maximize the support they offered. Lossie DeRosset followed her mother’s advice to “wait a few days” before writing sister Kate, “so as not to let too many letters come together.”<sup>68</sup> Eliza DeRosset herself told Kate that she had “put off writing for several days hearing of some of your numerous friends writing each day and knowing it is pleasanter to have one letter a day than two or three at a time.”<sup>69</sup> In good times and in bad, women hoped for the kind note of a beloved friend.

Despite the crucial importance of female companionship, the relationships among women in times of loss were, like religion, often a double-edged sword. With every word of support and sympathy came reminders to resign, to uphold one’s duties to family, and

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<sup>66</sup> Hester Estelle Kell Davis to Julie Munroe Blanche Kell, 10 July 1858, John McIntosh Kell Papers, Duke; Jane Kennedy to Mary Chesnut, 20 October 1801, Papers of the Cox and Chesnut Families, SCL.

<sup>67</sup> Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 174 and Sue Lynn Stone, “ ‘Blessed Are They That Mourn’: Expressions of Grief in South Central Kentucky, 1870-1920,” *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 85, no.3 (1987): 222. See also Lewis O. Saum, “Death in the Popular Mind of Pre-Civil War America,” *American Quarterly* 26, no.5, Special Issue: *Death in America* (Dec., 1974): 481; Amelia Akehurst Lines, *To Raise Myself a Little: The Diaries and Letters of Jennie, a Georgia Teacher, 1851-1886*, edited by Thomas Dyer (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1982), 135.

<sup>68</sup> Eliza Hill “Lossie” DeRosset to Kate DeRosset Meares, 10 June 1855, DeRosset Family Papers, SHC. See also Ann E. Meares to Kate DeRosset Meares, 12 June 1855 who held off on writing after “hearing there were many letters written to you by those who were more competent to bestow comfort to your bruised heart.”

<sup>69</sup> Eliza Jane DeRosset to Kate DeRosset Meares, 12 June 1855, DeRosset Family Papers, SHC.

to carry on feigning recovery to the outside world. However disheartening, women internalized these lessons and reinforced southern emotional standards in their letters to one another. Rarely did women worry, like Margaret Peyton's cousin, that "the poor consolation I could utter would be almost presumptuous when offered to one possessed of your strong unwaivering [*sic*] faith in Gods wisdom and goodness." Instead, they repeatedly advised bereft loved ones of their duty to resign, convinced few women were so pious they would not benefit from the reminder. Within their carefully timed letters, Kate Meares' friends and relatives cautioned, "though it is pleasant to have the condolence of friends, it cannot heal the wound inflicted by a Fatherly hand." Rather, Kate must "strive to bear [her] trouble with Christian resignation." Ann Hooe, too, reminded Margaret Peyton that although submission and affliction were "hard to learn," they were a "wholesome discipline." Hooe acknowledged that Margaret would consider her comments obvious and uncomfoting, but she also knew from experience that even the most pious women needed a friend to remind them to relinquish their own will for God's.<sup>70</sup> Agnes Cabell more forcefully instructed her daughter that she alone was responsible for recovering from her melancholy: "I shall see if you are sincere in your

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<sup>70</sup> Letter to Margaret Christian Peyton from a cousin, 8 November undated, Peyton Family Papers, VHS; Ann E. Meares to Kate DeRosset Meares, 12 June 1855, DeRosset Family Papers, SHC; Ann Hooe to Margaret Peyton, 4 November 1855, Peyton Family Papers, VHS. In rare instances, women's attempts to help one another only caused irritation. Georgian Martha Screven squabbled with her friend Mrs. Bagland over the care of young Richard. Mrs. Bagland's indecision about whether to follow the physician's advice and frantic micromanagement of Richard's care caused Richardson to write, "I have gained her displeasure for no other cause than my staying with the child and following the Doctors directions—her rudeness was so great to both of us that I was almost induced to leave the house not to enter it until the Boy was either dead or better." She stayed only at the doctor's urging. Martha Richardson to son James Screven, 18 November 1818, Arnold and Screven Family Papers, SHC; Martha Screven to James Screven, 22 November 1821, Arnold and Screven Family Papers, SHC.

wishes to fulfill all your duties by observing the pains you take to restore to yourself your wanted spirits and health. This, no physician can do for you.”<sup>71</sup>

Hearing such messages from even their closest confidantes compelled some women to hide their emotions. For all the franticness and tearing-of-hair in her diary entries, Mary Henderson’s letters from the same period were calm and collected.

Although she instructed son, Len, on how to stay healthy while away at school and expressed keen awareness of all the potential health threats to her family, Mary’s letters successfully presented a socially-acceptable façade.<sup>72</sup>

Women’s tendency to hold one another to unattainable standards of resignation only added to another integral thread of their grief—guilt. Guilt was perhaps the only component of southern women’s grief as prevalent as sorrow and the desire for resignation. Concern with their own culpability, particularly the belief that their mistakes had forced God’s hand in taking their children, left southern women wracked with guilt in the months after a child’s death.<sup>73</sup> Margaret Dickins’s cousin, Emma, expressed the doctrine of resignation when she wrote, “you are too willing to accuse yourself, when it was the hand of Him who does all things for the best . . . your part is to bow to His sovereign will.” Dickins, however, continued to chastise herself for being impatient with her child and for failing to “make her brief life as happy as it ought to have done.” A

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<sup>71</sup> Agnes Gamble Cabell to Louisa Cabell Carrington, 6 February 1819, Letters of the Cabell and Carrington Families, UVA.

<sup>72</sup> Diary of Mary Ferrand Henderson, 5 September 1856, 1 March 1857, 3 August 1857, John Steele Henderson Papers, SHC; Mary Henderson to Len Henderson, 1 March 1857, 3 August 1857, and Mary Henderson to John Henderson, 12 August 1856, John Steele Henderson Papers, SHC.

<sup>73</sup> Hoffert, *Private Matters*, 170, 177; Emma to Margaret Dickins, 12 October 1849, and Margaret Harvie Randolph Dickins to Francis Asbury Dickins, 29 August 1849, Francis Asbury Dickins Papers, SHC.

cousin of Margaret Peyton similarly fretted, “In losing one near and dear to me, my saddest feeling has been the remembering of duties unperformed, and affection that might have been rendered.” She prodded Margaret to take solace in the fact that her grief was “without the sting this regret bears,” because she had fulfilled her duties toward her son, Richard, simply by adopting him. Without her daughter, Agnes, Nelly Lewis’s life was “blank,” she told Elizabeth Bordley. Although she endeavored to resign as befit a dutiful Episcopalian like herself, Lewis also engaged in self-reproach. Lewis “persecuted” her daughter and caused her to suffer, she believed, by refusing to allow Agnes to leave school and return home. “I fear that I injured her in some way although I cannot tell how,” Lewis confided, “& I cannot forbear thinking that if she had been permitted to come home she would now have been with me.”<sup>74</sup>

Mary Jane Armistead voiced the opinion of many bereft southern mothers when she wrote, “Bitter self reproach is the worst pain on Earth to bear.” Rather than chastising herself over the details of her children’s lives, Armistead worried about her part in their deaths. Above all, Mary Jane felt remorse for failing to convince her husband to leave their new home in West Point, believing had she succeeded, she could have avoided the season during which two of her children died of typhoid fever. Armistead also felt she had failed by not realizing she needed to quarantine her infected children to protect the others. Their deaths and her guilt were crushing. “I think I have

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<sup>74</sup> Letter to Margaret Christian Peyton from a cousin, 8 November undated, Peyton Family Papers, VHS; Nelly Custis Lewis to Elizabeth Bordley Gibson, 20 November 1820, in Lewis, *George Washington’s Beautiful Nelly*, 90-91.

had trouble enough to keep me from ever smiling again,” Armistead remarked. “It is just as much as I can possibly do to drag thro’ the day & do what I am obliged to do.”<sup>75</sup>

While Armistead regretted her behavior at the bedside, Nelly Lewis and Lucy Randolph each regretted their absence from the bedside. Lewis questioned the medical care given her daughter Agnes while away at Madame Grelaud’s school in Philadelphia and “regretted most bitterly” that her child was so far away “when timely & proper attention & medical advice might perhaps have saved her.” Lewis did not blame Madame Grelaud. Instead, she blamed herself for failing to recognize Grelaud’s inability to care for Agnes. Both Lucy and Robert Randolph similarly lamented their absence from their son’s deathbed. Robert’s “heart ached” to think that he left his son to die alone, mistakenly believing he was better. Lucy suffered similar remorse, which she described to the boy’s roommate: “I feel that I neglected my child when he was languishing on the bed of death, and left him to the care of strangers upon whom he had no claim but who proved themselves to be friends whose kindness could not be surpassed.” In this instance, both parents believed their failure to comfort and nurse their son was an inexcusable offense.<sup>76</sup>

A few mothers even felt remorse over the details of their children’s burials. These women tormented themselves with the belief that they had accidentally buried their children alive, a widespread fear in nineteenth-century America. A friend responded to South Carolinian Caddy Kaigler’s fears by stating, “as for the child being buried alive it

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<sup>75</sup> Mary Jane Walthall Armistead to Sarah Catherine “Kate” Walthall Rosier, 14 February 1879, Rosier Family Papers, VHS.

<sup>76</sup> Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis to Elizabeth Bordley, 22 November 1820, in Lewis, *George Washington’s Beautiful Nelly*, 91; Lucy N. and Robert C. Randolph to Lewis C. Randolph, 25 November 1857, Hubbard-Randolph-Carter Family Papers, UVA.

is out of the question he is dead and was dead before he was buried so reconcile your selfe [*sic*] for the child is happy.” The letter curtly dismissed the possibility of burying a loved one alive as an absurdity, but a letter from Nelly Lewis on the same subject suggests Kaigler was not alone in her fear. Lewis refused to allow daughter, Agnes, to be buried until the child’s body had started to decompose. Before she could lay the child rest, Lewis wrote Elizabeth Bordley, she needed “certain proofs of her being past recovery.”<sup>77</sup> In addition to the melancholy of bereavement, then, women tortured themselves with remorse over everything—from disciplining their children too harshly, to allowing caustic medical treatments to be applied, to idolizing their children and warranting God’s punishment.

The guilt women experienced when grieving for a child often changed the way they parented their surviving children. Mary Henderson worried that her grief after Edward’s death caused her to withdraw from Baldy in the weeks and months before he too passed away. To avoid the same regret should her younger children die, Henderson was so vigilante and anxious about her remaining sons’ health that she worried that her misery and obsessive concern for the surviving children would make her unfit to carry out her maternal duties. “I am so tremulous,” Henderson explained, “I cannot trust at all to my own judgment in anything.” By contrast, Mary Jane Armistead felt that her grief and guilt left her without “energy & interest in doing anything for them.” Though she was thankful for her surviving children and knew her sister would think her sentiment

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<sup>77</sup> “Your Sister Mary” to Catherine “Caddy” Kaigler, May 1851, Papers of the Kaigler and Davis Families, SCL; Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis to Elizabeth Bordley, October 1820, in Lewis, *George Washington’s Beautiful Nelly*, 90. See also Circle Congregational Church Cemetery, Charleston, SC. Several of the mausoleum-style graves in this cemetery included bells to ensure their inhabitants could not be buried alive.

strange, Armistead believed all mothers found that losing one child “paralizes [*sic*] all energy for the others.”<sup>78</sup>

Because they anticipated remorse should their children die, many other mothers carefully monitored their behavior toward their living children. Mothering patiently proved a constant struggle for Mahala Roach and the regret caused by her temper is a continuous thread throughout her diary. Repeatedly, Roach was “heartily sorry” for her use of corporal punishment. Though pleased that she had lost her temper only once during the first three weeks of her newborn’s life, Roach was “heartily ashamed” of her one slip. She was similarly remorseful after whipping son John to get him to go to bed, “for he is too young to punish so much.” Like Mahala, “Mrs. Turner” worried about her behavior toward one-year-old son, Jesse. After disciplining him for his “passions,” Turner worried that her punishments were undeserved, concerned because his drooling and fussing indicated “excessive pain” from teething, not poor behavior. This mistake caused her to parent much more cautiously. When Jesse’s bedtime digressed into constant temper tantrums, Turner wrote, “His papa said he was a completely spoiled boy; but I could not agree . . . certainly Jesse did act very naughtily, yet we cannot at all times tell what ails a child—they may be actually suffering—when we regard it as only an outburst of passion.” Little Jesse helped his cause by promptly snuggling up to his mother, kissing her, and going to sleep as soon as she got into bed. Like Turner, Agnes Hairson hoped that leniency would prevent remorse. “I hope you will take pleasure in

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<sup>78</sup> Mary Ferrand Henderson Diary, 13 October 1856, 17 July 1855, John Steele Henderson Papers, SHC; Mary Jane Walthall Armistead to Sarah Catherine “Kate” Walthall Rosier, 25 February 1879, Rosier Family Papers, VHS. See also Mary Ferrand Henderson Diary, 2 July 1855, John Steele Henderson Papers, SHC. Henderson regretted that she had longed for quiet rather than relishing the “noisy and uproarious” household created by seven children. With only two of them left, the house was not only “painfully quiet,” she lived in fear that God might call the remaining two to him as well.



whatever way is most agreeable to you,” she told son George. The “severe lesson” wrought by her eldest son’s death, Hairson remarked, had taught her to overcome her temper and train her daughters to govern theirs as well. To avoid feeling such regret again, she told George, “anything that I can do for your pleasure or happiness I am willing to do, consistent with what I believe to be my duty to my Maker, and your Father.”<sup>79</sup>

Bertram Wyatt-Brown contends that southern mothering revolved in fits and starts, oscillating between passive indulgence and violent outbursts of temper and swift discipline. Women’s writing during times of loss indicates that while Wyatt-Brown is correct about the character of mothering, he is wrong about the reason. Southern mothers were rarely ambivalent toward their children. Rather, they alternated between “smothering and emotional withdrawal” as a result of the grief brought on by the loss of a beloved child and their desire to avoid remorse.<sup>80</sup> By striving to be amiable, control their tempers, and act kindly in order to waylay at least some of the inevitable regret following a child’s death, women like Roach, Turner, and Hairson duplicated southern society’s patriarchal expectations for mothers. They did so, however, not necessarily because they accepted what society expected of them but because it served them well, lessening their pain in times of loss.

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<sup>79</sup> Diary of Mahala Roach, 4 January 1853, 3 July 1856, 13 December 1857, Roach and Eggleston Family Papers, SHC; Little Jesse Turner Diary, 15 November 1857, 21 December 1857, Jesse Turner, Sr. Papers, Duke; Agnes Hairston to George Hairston, 28 February 1846, George Hairston Papers, SHC. See also 9 May 1851, 1 August 1851, 12 October 1851, 24 May 1852, Mahala Perkins Harding Eggleston Roach Diary, VHS. For a much longer discussion of the parenting changes caused by a child’s death, see Chapter Five.

<sup>80</sup> Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 125-127, 143.

Religious faith, the support of other women, and guilt were the most prominent elements of mothers' grief, but the occult and occasionally drug addiction also played important, albeit smaller, roles in women's journeys toward "shadow grief." Women sought solace in the occult much more frequently than their spouses. A few mothers took comfort from the use of spiritualism to convene with their dead children, and many more expressed thanks for the dreams that brought them temporarily closer to children they would never see again on earth. Anna King, for instance, detailed her use of "table tipping" in her letters to her husband despite his skepticism. During this ritual, King wrote, she had been able to commune with her "sainted mother" who, after twelve years of occupying the "7<sup>th</sup> sphere," was finally happy in heaven. Most importantly, King's mother spent her days in Heaven with Jesus and the family's angel children. The same process that allowed Anna to communicate with her mother also offered the opportunity to hear from her deceased son, Willie, who "spelt [*sic*] out 'My mother love your God' It certainly is very wonderful!" Gertrude Thomas also discovered spiritualism, but warmed to it much more slowly than King had. Rather than table-tipping, Thomas tried to commune with her deceased children by writing. Thomas hoped that by putting pen to paper while focusing on conversing with her children they would write messages via her hand.<sup>81</sup> These women hoped that learning of the deceased's happiness in heaven could relieve their sorrow on earth.

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<sup>81</sup> Anna Matilda King to Thomas Butler King, 2 June 1856, Thomas Butler King Family Papers, SHC; Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 28; Diary of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, 27 August 1864, 12 April 1871, 21 February 1880, in Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 231, 368-369, 398. The spiritualist movement gained popularity in the 1850s. Consequently, use of the occult to relieve grief may have become more central after the antebellum period. See also Drew Gilpin Faust's discussion of Mary Todd Lincoln's foray into spiritualism in Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 180-181; Catherine Clinton, *Mrs. Lincoln: A Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 167-170, 211-212, 296-297.

Many more women relied on dreams as a way of working through their grief. Alice Hemans, for example, sought to soothe her bereaved friend Louisa DeBerniere Lane by describing a bizarre dream that her eldest son had about his deceased siblings and father. Alice hoped her descriptions would demonstrate to Louisa that her children were not really gone, but had simply taken a new form. In his dream, Hemens's son entered an empty room containing only a long, narrow box from which "the finest melody proceeded—sounds of Rapture & Celestial Harmony that had never met his ear before, but totally unlike all he had ever heard." When he lifted the box's lid to discover the source of the music, Hemens described, he found the box "lined with cotton and ten small Human Heads (only) about the size of a watch—all perfectly alive, and from whose lips these heavenly sounds proceeded." The boy was dismayed to discover that the ten tiny heads were those of his father and nine dead siblings. Though this scene startled her son enough to wake him, Alice Hemens took comfort in the idea that her husband and children were together in heaven and happy enough to commune with her living son. Nevertheless, the final lines of Hemens' letter to her friend suggested the extent to which such supernatural comforts were confined to grieving mother's sphere. "If you ever mention this," she wrote, "don't say it was my son dreamt it."<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Alice Hemans to Louisa DeBerniere Lane, 3 July 1805, DeBerniere Family Papers, SCHS. See also Diary of Mahala Roach, 4 September 1857, Roach and Eggleston Family Papers, SHC; volume 5, page 14 and volume 6, pages 18-25, Caroline Eliza Burgwin Clitherall Diaries, SHC; Anonymous Diary, August and September 1854, David Bullock Harris Papers, Duke. Mahala Roach also wrote that after a vivid dream of her deceased Sophy, she "could almost hear her voice saying 'Mother are you there'." Caroline Clitherall's dreams were less comforting. Emily, one of the abused and orphaned children adopted by Caroline and George Clitherall, died while Caroline was deliriously ill. Caroline emerged from her disease with no idea that the child had died. While ill, however, she had hallucinated that Emily was asking Eliza, Caroline's unborn child, to come to heaven too. Fortunately, Eliza survived and became Caroline's "pet," her favorite child.

A few women found that no amount of female companionship, prayer, rationalization about God's will, or dreaming could quell their pain, and they turned to drugs. Historian Catherine Clinton argues that laudanum addicts were "disproportionately upper-class, southern, white, and female." Doctors prescribed the opiate laudanum for a number of "female complaints" which stemmed from menstruation and delivering and raising babies. They also recommended narcotics to ease the pain of loss. More often, women used the drugs prescribed for other complaints to ease their emotional pain. For some, full-fledged addiction resulted.<sup>83</sup> Martha Screven, for example, commented on the decline of her friend Mrs. Bagland, who began taking black drops—a form of opium—at the suggestion of her physician following the death of her son. She soon found herself dependent. "When she first commenced the use of it—to relieve her mind after the loss of her son," Screven described, "little did she think future existence and tolerable comfort would render its use absolutely necessary." Ostensibly, Fannie Hume took morphine to treat her excruciating head and back aches. That she did so following her young child's death suggests that she may have treated her emotional pain with the remedy prescribed for her physical ailments. Regardless, the morphine had its desired effect. Under its influence, Hume experienced "the most delightful feelings," talking and repeating poetry all night which "alarmed as well as amused the girls." In the morning, the positive effects wore off, leaving Hume nauseous, unable to lift her head,

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<sup>83</sup> Mary Ferrand Henderson Diary, 13 September 1855, John Steele Henderson Papers, SHC; David T. Courtwright, "The Hidden Epidemic: Opiate Addiction and Cocaine Use in the South, 1860-1920," *The Journal of Southern History* 49, no. 1 (February 1983): 57-72. See also McMillen, *Motherhood in the Old South*, 176-179 for a detailed description of Anne Cameron's dependence on morphine, opium, and laudanum, and Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 172 for a detailed description of Susan Hutchinson's addiction to laudanum.

and in need of more medical treatments. That she “suffered the entire day—perfectly helpless” suggests she certainly was not tending to her surviving children.<sup>84</sup>

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Historian Jan Lewis contends that women felt “called by God to be mothers; their work was nothing less than His own.” Consequently, the “doctrine of maternal influences was bound to take away with the same hand that which it gave. Mothers could be powerful only if they renounced power, loved only if they renounced self, immortal only if they were willing to die.”<sup>85</sup> When grieving the loss of a child, southern mothers expressed the effect of this conflict in their daily lives. Bereavement following the death of a child, consequently, included a host of emotions for elite southern women. As they described it in letters and diaries, when faced with the death of a child, mothers felt exhausted, lonely, anxious, guilty, and above all, deeply saddened. They also felt torn between maternal bereavement and Christian faith and navigated carefully between social and religious expectations and the realities of motherhood and its attendant joys and sorrows. Despite frequent references to their knowledge that a good Christian should accept and even celebrate God’s decision to call their children to Him, southern mothers regularly noted their struggle to achieve this emotion in letters and discussed it openly in their diaries. A few, like Varina Davis and Theodosia Burr Alston, even suggested that it was wrong of God and clergymen to ask them to do so. Nelly Custis Lewis spoke for all southern mothers who fought to reconcile sadness, guilt, and religious standards, often at

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<sup>84</sup> Martha Screven to James Screven, 22 July 1821, Arnold and Screven Family Papers, SHC; 3 February 1860, Diaries of Fannie Page Hume, UVA.

<sup>85</sup> Jan Lewis, “Mother’s Love: The Construction of an Emotion in Nineteenth-Century America,” in Apple and Golden, 211, 217.

the expense of their own happiness, when she wrote, “The life of a *Mother* my dear friend is always anxious.”<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis to Elizabeth Bordley Gibson, 23 January 1829, in Lewis, *George Washington's Beautiful Nelly*, 194.

**Chapter 4**  
**“I have been bowed down to the earth”:**  
**Paternal Grief**

On September 3, 1848, William Whitsitt’s daughter, Martha Jane, died “without a struggle, without a groan, without a sigh. She died, as if it did her good to die. She died as though it were not death.” The days leading up to Martha Jane’s death had hardly been so peaceful. Initially sick with whooping cough, the eight-year-old girl—who weighed just thirty-two pounds when healthy—died from mercury poisoning after being treated with too much calomel. After a small black spot appeared on Martha Jane’s cheek, the mercury slowly ate away the flesh on her face. In her father’s words, despite his attempts to treat her, “still the mortification spread until it reached the corner of her mouth . . . . It took hold of her sweet little lips and day after day I saw them gradually giving way, blackening, putrefying.” Whitsitt and his wife watched with horror as the putrefaction spread from her lips to her nose, eyes, and chin, causing her such intense pain “that she often wished to die.”<sup>1</sup>

In the weeks and months before his daughter’s death, Whitsitt devoted himself to her. This southern planter worked alongside his wife to manage Martha Jane’s complicated list of medications and dosages, relieved his wife to allow her to sleep when Martha Jane’s care became too exhausting, and took the lead in hiring and firing the physicians who attended to his child.<sup>2</sup> Following Martha Jane’s death, Whitsitt expressed many of the same sentiments that his wife would have. He acknowledged the helpful assistance of Martha Jane’s grandparents during her illness and wrote with

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<sup>1</sup> August-October 1848, William A. Whitsitt Journal, Duke.

<sup>2</sup> 7 August 1848, 29 August 1848, William A. Whitsitt Journal, Duke.

gratitude of the sympathy of many “kind friends.” He also reflected on his “extraordinary” child’s life with pride. And, of course, he noted the “unutterable anguish” of living without her.<sup>3</sup>

In describing Martha Jane’s death and his torment in the wake of his loss, however, Whitsitt said nothing of God, resignation, or heaven except to reassure himself that his daughter had died peacefully. Instead, he lashed out with anger at the physicians he held responsible for his little girl’s demise and expressed sorrow at her death with honesty uncurbed by concern about religion or his reputation.

Like William Whitsitt, southern fathers expressed deep devotion to their children in life and mourned intensely at their deaths. Beyond that, the elements of fathers’ grief varied widely. Whitsitt expressed sadness and anger; other fathers wrote of their guilt, sought God’s comfort and resignation to His will, or fell apart completely. Still others threw themselves into work or distracted themselves from their grief by focusing on funeral details. Because southerners’ strict, cohesive set of standards for mothers’ behavior had no masculine counterpart, and men’s power in society allowed them greater leeway, fathers’ reactions to child death were complex and diverse. Social ideas about masculinity and concern with honor constrained men’s behavior, but ultimately, men grieved as they saw fit. Even grief that involved tears, withdrawing from society, and indecorous melancholy did little to challenge men’s patriarchal control of the household.

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Although nineteenth-century Americans viewed mothers as primarily responsible for child rearing, fathers remained prominent in parenting, particularly in the South.

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<sup>3</sup> 7 August 1848, William A. Whitsitt Diary, Duke.



Throughout the plantation South, bourgeois domesticity failed to displace men from the household as it had in the urban North. Nevertheless, historians disagree about the relationship between fatherhood and patriarchy—particularly about whether the need to be “stern patriarchs” hindered planter fathers’ ability to be “indulgent papas.”<sup>4</sup>

Few historians believe that antebellum southern fathers were cold, uninvolved patriarchs. Rather, historians like Bertram Wyatt-Brown contend that planter fathers expressed emotion toward their children “by whim more than by design,” leaving day-to-day parenting concerns for their wives to handle. In a society that valued “lordship” far more than any gentleness or restraint a man might display, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese argues, fathers preferred not to interfere with their wives’ duties. Rather, mothers were most likely to be found in the nursery. Wyatt-Brown suggests that fathers exerted control in parenting only after the age of four, the “clothing stage,” but even then took more responsibility for children’s inculcation into the honor system than for their general well-being.<sup>5</sup> Even fathers who prioritized their duties at home might be absent from their

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<sup>4</sup> Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman’s World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 41.

<sup>5</sup> See Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 126, 135; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*, Gender and American Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 194-199. See also Sally G. McMillen, “Antebellum Southern Fathers and the Health Care of Children,” *The Journal of Southern History* 55, no. 3 (August 1994): 513-532; Robert L. Griswold, *Fatherhood in America: A History* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 2, 17, 19; Carl Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 73; Elisabeth Badinter, *Mother Love: Myth and Reality: Motherhood in Modern History*, with a foreword by Francine du Plessix Gray (New York: Macmillan, 1981), 114; Claudia Nelson, *Invisible Men: Fatherhood in Victorian Periodicals, 1850-1910* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 4, 42-43. Griswold concurs with Wyatt-Brown that while southern fathers “openly expressed affection for their children and grieved deeply at their deaths,” they remained somewhat peripheral to parenting until children were old enough to be inculcated with honor, “a task entrusted in large part to fathers.” For men throughout the nation, the breadwinning role assumed by fathers alienated them from their children. Degler contends that such alienation was a nineteenth-century phenomenon. During the eighteenth century, child-rearing literature depicted fathers as the central parent and addressed them exclusively. Southern fathers, then, had plenty of precedent for being involved in their children’s lives. Badinter and Nelson, meanwhile, examine the origins of fathers’ nineteenth-century alienation from the family in the French and British

children's lives as they sought to earn money and secure their family's honor, two tasks increasingly equated to "good" fathering in the antebellum South.<sup>6</sup>

Historians like Steven Stowe and Drew Gilpin Faust contend fathers rarely lavished their children with unconditional love. Instead, they meted out affection based on a child's adherence to filial duties and often burdened their children, particularly sons, with rigid and unattainable standards. Stowe argues that planter fathers, though most took parenthood seriously and expressed love for their children, did so not necessarily for the good of the children, but rather as a way of demonstrating their sense of paternalism. Wyatt-Brown, too, suggests that a father's expression of love for his child could be a means of demonstrating his honor. Loving one's children despite the high probability of their death reflected "a willingness to gamble with Providence." Like betting on cards or on horse races, loving one's children reflected independent thinking and the willingness to take risks.<sup>7</sup> As Drew Gilpin Faust describes it, planters' "drive for domination" provided a wedge between them and their children. James Henry Hammond, although his "utter misery" at the deaths of sons Kit and Willie suggest his deep paternal devotion, was continually at odds with his sons, thanks to his need to master them.<sup>8</sup> In this portrait

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contexts. In France, because fathers' love was never viewed as a "universal law of nature" fathers were allowed a much broader range of acceptable response to their children. In Britain, public ideas about fatherhood were so "fractured" and incoherent that all kinds of behavior was commonplace. Both scholars' arguments offer insight into the state of fatherhood in the US South.

<sup>6</sup> Anya Jabour, *Marriage in the Early Republic: Elizabeth and William Wirt and the Companionate Ideal*, Gender Relations in the American Experience (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 39-46, 85, 118.

<sup>7</sup> Steven M. Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South: Ritual in the Lives of the Planters* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 137.

<sup>8</sup> Drew Gilpin Faust, *James Henry Hammond and the Old South: A Design for Mastery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 7-9, 29, 241-254, 308, 321-327. According to Faust, Elisha Hammond taught his son, James, that man's "greatest contest" was with his own passion. In James' mind, then, "the alternative to effective self-discipline was ignominious failure." Hammond's obsession with

of southern fatherhood, mothers and children alike viewed fathers as a shadowy figure at best and a tyrants worst.<sup>9</sup>

Another understanding of southern fatherhood, argued by historians Sally McMillen, Jane Turner Censer, and others, contends that the family patriarch expressed genuine interest in and continuous love for his children. This southern father's devotion overcame the psychological barriers placed on active fatherhood by standards of masculinity and honor as well as the physical barriers established by planters' frequent travel. In this view, planters were as influenced by the sentimentalization of family life as by the South's honor culture. Perhaps more importantly, fathers' position at the head of the family was unyielding enough that displaying love and devotion had little impact on their perceived masculinity or ability to master their households. These fathers either allowed themselves to loosen the bonds of self-control in order to express their emotions and intimacy toward offspring, or did not consider emotion to be at odds with the self-mastery deemed so necessary to social success and masculinity. Often they lavished love upon their children as a means of compensating for the region's high mortality rate. If love was the family's currency but death of parent or child—or both—was likely, these planters reasoned, then they must love fiercely with whatever time they had.<sup>10</sup>

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mastery—of himself and his world—caused great household strife, as it rendered him nearly incapable of expressing emotion to any but his youngest daughter. Nevertheless, Faust contends, “the emotions of love and desire exerted their own mastery” over Hammond in the sense that he was either unable or unwilling to control his lustful sexual appetite. See also Lorri Glover, *Southern Sons: Becoming Men in the New Nation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 15

<sup>9</sup> McMillen, “Antebellum Southern Fathers,” 518-519. See also Jabour, *Marriage in the Early Republic*, 41-42.

<sup>10</sup> Jane Turner Censer, *North Carolina Planters and their Children, 1800-1860*, xv, 20-21, 34-37; McMillen, “Antebellum Southern Fathers,” 514, 516, 520. See also James Marten, “Fatherhood in the Confederacy: Southern Soldiers and Their Children,” *The Journal of Southern History* 63, no. 2 (May 1997): 269-292; Shawn Johansen, “Before the Waiting Room: Northern Middle-Class Men, Pregnancy and Birth in Antebellum America,” *Gender and History* 7, no. 2 (1995), 184. Turner in particular challenges

Examining men's experiences with child illness and loss creates a complex portrait of elite southern fathers that brings together aspects of both understandings of fatherhood. Evidence exists that fathers played a peripheral role in their children's lives. Fatherhood was important in theory, and slaveholders' paternalism required that they take some interest in their families, but being a father and reaping the benefits of the title did not require southern men to be actively involved in their children's lives. In historian V. Lynn Kennedy's words, "while the role of doting father offered many rewards for southern men it represented a personal choice."<sup>11</sup> Consequently, there is little doubt that southerners associated women, not men, with love of children. Margaret Howell, for instance, wrote of her son-in-law, Jefferson Davis, "Jeff is the proudest, fondest father I ever saw—and the best husband. He is more like a woman about his 'lil' man,' as he calls him, than any one I ever saw."<sup>12</sup>

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the ideas of Eugene Genovese and Philip Greven, who contended that black mammies and white wet nurses raised children, allowing parents to become awe-inspiring figureheads. Marten argues against the idea that antebellum fathers "retained their roles as enforcers of discipline and arbiters of family morals but left 'child-nurture' to their wives." Instead, Confederate soldiers' wartime reminiscing about their home lives suggests they had something to reminisce about—playing with their children, tucking them in at night, teaching them, talking to them, anticipating their births with excitement, etc. Johansen, meanwhile, asks of northern fathers questions similar to those posed by McMillen in "Antebellum Southern Fathers and the Healthcare of Children." She surmises that husbands likely challenged social expectations of their behavior in the same way that many historians argue women did: "Historians have shown how women stretched their sphere and even crossed into the public realm. Should we simply assume that men left the line unchallenged in the opposite direction?" In the North, the answer to this question was "no" in the context of childbearing. In the South, the answer was "no" in the context of devotion to children.

<sup>11</sup> Anya Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters: Young Women in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Joan E. Cashin, *A Family Venture: Men and Women on the Southern Frontier* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 23; V. Lynn Kennedy, *Born Southern: Childbirth, Motherhood, and Social Networks in the Old South* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 124-125, 131. See also Janet Moore Lindman, "Acting the Manly Christian: White Evangelical Masculinity in Revolutionary Virginia," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series 57, no. 2 (April 2000): 395; Michael P. Johnson, "Planters and Patriarchy: Charleston, 1800-1860," *The Journal of Southern History* 46, no. 1 (February 1980): 48.

<sup>12</sup> Margaret Kempe Howell to William Burr Howell, 20 August 1852, in Jefferson Davis, *Private Letters 1823-1889*, ed. by Hudson Strode (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966), 67.

Fear of being considered womanly for being a nurturing father caused other southern men to express embarrassment when caught demonstrating affection. Sabna Ramsey's father, for example, tried to hide his tears of sorrow after learning of his grandson's death, but his weeping was bitter enough that it "could be heard in another room." The man Jean Syme caught "nursing" his child, moreover, was so "much ashamed . . . of being caught so effeminately employed, he instantly put it down and leaved himself."<sup>13</sup>

Notwithstanding society's association of involved parenting with women and these men's embarrassment with their emotions, many others planters expressed their affection openly.<sup>14</sup> North Carolinian Ebenezer Pettigrew wrote lovingly to his wife and unborn baby and asked that he be informed the first time the "little baby" kicked. John Rutherford spent the days before his child's birth and immediate death garnering "unalloyed joy" from sitting with his wife and imagining their child's future. Adam Dandridge, finally, called his daughter an "infant phenomenon." He was thrilled that his girl, "the prettiest little baby," looked like him and seemed to recognize his voice and delight in his attention.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> "Sue" to Sabna S. Ramsey, 21 July 1849, George Junkin Ramsey Papers, Duke; Jean Syme to Duncan Cameron, 16 December 1804, Cameron Family Papers, Duke.

<sup>14</sup> See also Daniel Blake Smith, *Inside the Great House: Planter Family Life in Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 69-70 for a discussion of southern society's beliefs about male and female emotional expression.

<sup>15</sup> Ebenezer Pettigrew to Ann "Nancy" Blount Shepard Pettigrew, January 1816, in Sarah McCulloh Lemmon, ed., *The Pettigrew Papers* vol. 1 (Raleigh: State Dept. of Archives and History, 1971), 503; John Coles Rutherford, 15 August 1857, Rutherford Family Papers, VHS; Adam Stephen Dandridge to Mary Hunter, 25 August 1844, Hunter Family Papers, VHS. See also 22 February 1869, Diary of Sarah Ann Graves Strickler Fife, UVA. Sarah Fife noted her husband Herndon was so devoted to his wife and child that he had difficulty "tearing himself" away to leave on business. In fact, Herndon's devotion was intense enough that Fife worried God might consider it idolatry.

The paternal affection expressed by these men and others was quite common in times of relative health and still more common when children faced illness. Overcome with relief that his child had recovered from a grave illness, John Warfield Johnston told his wife, "I am sure no man living has such a tenderness & love for his family as I have & I really believe that the loss of any of them would kill me."<sup>16</sup> Even the least involved fathers were likely to take an active role in the care of a sick child, exhausting themselves at the crib-side along with their wives.<sup>17</sup> Because children's illnesses threatened the stability of the family, men felt it their duty to take the helm and direct their medical care. Ebenezer Pettigrew outlined the detailed regiment of treatments and medications that he and physicians had managed for his ailing child.<sup>18</sup> Planter and a devout Presbyterian James Hervey Greenlee kept vigil at his youngest child's bedside from the moment the child sickened until the moment he died. "Sitting up all night with our dear babe," Greenlee recorded, "appears no better oh Lord have mercy on us all." Although he was slow to relinquish his public duties and return home, George Campbell Clitherall also embraced the task of nursing his sick family. After his sister-in-law died and his wife became too sick with bilious fever to care for herself, her children, and the servants all suffering from the same disease, Clitherall knew he would have to return from traveling and, "exhausted as he was . . . perform the Physician & the Father." While serving these

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<sup>16</sup> John Johnston to Nicketti Buchanan Floyd Johnston, 4 February 1847, John Warfield Johnston Papers, Duke.

<sup>17</sup> Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 135. See also McMillen, "Antebellum Southern Fathers," 528. McMillen contends that the wide-spread availability of domestic medical manuals as well as the relative simplicity of popular southern medical procedures, both folk and "scientific," aided planter fathers' ability to take control of the sick room.

<sup>18</sup> Ebenezer Pettigrew to William Shepard Belgrade, 28 July 1817, in Lemmon, *The Pettigrew Papers* vol. 1, 576. See also Ebenezer Pettigrew to Nancy Pettigrew, 22 March 1817, Nancy Pettigrew to Ebenezer Pettigrew, 1 February 1818, Nancy Pettigrew to Ebenezer Pettigrew, 13 June 1822, in Lemmon, *The Pettigrew Papers*, vol.1, 555 and vol. 2, 30. When Pettigrew was away from home he continued to request detailed information about his children's health from afar.

roles, Clitherall went virtually without sleep for nineteen consecutive nights.<sup>19</sup> If, as southerners understood it, children were too precious to be bottled fed or wet nursed and too delicate for the care of slaves, then they were certainly too valuable to be cared for by slave nurses (or exclusively by mothers) when in danger of death.<sup>20</sup>

These men's expressions of emotion reflect the fact that in North as well as South, "male passions" were given freer rein in the nineteenth-century than they had been previously, even as emotional control became a stated component of masculinity. For northern fathers, the development of what historian Anthony Rotundo calls "assertive individualism" and "self-made manhood" made public displays of aggression and ambition much more acceptable if channeled appropriately. Southerners, impacted by the emotionalism of evangelical Christianity, began to view love and affection as the crucial currency of familial relationships. Within the context of evangelicalism, southerners advised men to embrace self-control and expression of emotion in place of patriarchal rule and violent defense of their manhood.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Stephen M. Frank, *Life with Father: Parenthood and Masculinity in the Nineteenth-Century North* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 24-32; 2 June 1854, James Hervey Greenlee Diary, SHC; Volume 5, page 2, Caroline Eliza Burgwin Clitherall Diaries, SHC. See also George Frederick Holmes to Mrs. Latitia Preston Floyd, 1 January 1846, John Warfield Johnston Papers, Duke. In a letter to his mother-in-law, George Frederick Holmes offered meticulous instructions about his wife's medical care during his time away from home. Holmes detailed how long his wife should remain in bed if she survived childbirth (exactly 9—underlined twice—days), the need for dry bedding, and the care they should take in keeping her out of cold weather, because, he wrote, "You all are so careless & so adventurous about sick people that I tremble at the idea of Betts falling into the hands of the Phillistines [sic] considering how very obstinate she is herself."

<sup>20</sup> William Buchan, *Advice to Mothers, on the Subject of their Own Health, and on the Means of Promoting the Health, Strength, and Beauty of their Offspring* (Philadelphia: John Bioreu, 1804), 3, 53, 77; V. Lynn Kennedy, *Born Southern: Childbirth, Motherhood, and Social Networks in the Old South* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 32, 90-111; Sally G. McMillen, "Mothers Sacred Duty: Breastfeeding Patterns among Middle-and Upper-Class Women in the Antebellum South," *The Journal of Southern History* 51, no. 3 (August 1985), 333-356.

<sup>21</sup> E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: BasicBooks, 1993), 3, 10-20; Jabour, *Marriage in the Early Republic*, 10; Lindman, "Acting the Manly Christian," 401-406.

While southern elites believed that an honorable man would master his emotions, they did not expect him to be devoid of them. Margaret Izard Manigault, for example, complained not because her friend Mr. Cuthbert expressed his sadness but because he was “too gloomy—too melancholy—& there is not enough tenderness in his sadness to render it touching.”<sup>22</sup> The problem was not Cuthbert’s emotion, but his inability to control the emotion and express it correctly. According to historian Michael Barton, southerners believed that they actually *felt* more strongly than other Americans and consequently accepted that men would vacillate between cool control of their emotional impulses and passionate outbursts. Even as southern fathers’ emotional control was idealized and honored, breaks in men’s decorum were expected. As their understanding of the domestic space grew increasingly sentimental, moreover, southerners also viewed a family’s happiness as a reflection of the patriarch’s success at his roll, suggesting that planters had to strike a balance between regulating their public passions and fostering loving relationships privately. In both regions, then, passion did not interfere with masculinity as long as it was channeled in a way that allowed a man to provide for his family, society, or God.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Margaret Izard Manigault to Elizabeth Manigault Morris, 14 January 1815, Manigault, Morris, and Grimball Family Papers, SHC.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Barton, “Painful Duties: Art, Character, and Culture in Confederate Letters of Condolence,” *Southern Quarterly* 17 (Winter 1979), 123, 133; Lewis, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, xiv, 176, 206; Faust, *A Design for Mastery*, 303. See also Julie-Marie Strange, “‘Speechless with Grief’: Bereavement and the Working-Class Father, c. 1880-1914,” in Trev Lynn Broughton and Helen Rogers, eds., *Gender and Fatherhood in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 145; and, Dana Luciano, *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 25-26. Strange contends that in Victorian Britain home became a space where the definition of masculinity broadened to include affection and tears. In her study of grief Luciano discusses a letter from John Adams to Thomas Jefferson in 1816 in which Adams argued that grief was useful if controlled because it taught men to balance emotion and reason.



This thread of southerners' understanding of honor allowed a space even within planters' "design for mastery" for expressions of grief. By limiting expressions of grief to the relative privacy of the household and letters, men were able to express their anguish at the death of a child without risking their reputations. Those who mourned publicly, historian Craig Friend describes, risked ridicule since "achieving and maintaining manliness required displays of composure in the homosocial public realm in which men moved."<sup>24</sup> At least within the household and in front of those whom they had already "mastered," however, planters did not hesitate to demonstrate their love or sorrow at their losses.

Fathers of the Old South regularly referenced their tears and expressed overwhelming grief when a child died. Virginian Jeb Stuart, for instance, told a female friend that remembering his daughter, Flora, caused him to "weep like a child." Calling himself "the fondest of fathers," Daniel Huger similarly wrote of his love for his children and described his anguish at the death of his "fine," "uncommon," and "endearing" child. Finally, watching his only child, eighteen-month-old daughter Anna, "sicken and weaken and wear away" as a result of convulsions caused Walter Lenoir to exclaim, "Oh! Mother! How can I say thy will be done."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Craig Thompson Friend, "Little Eva's Last Breath: Childhood Death and Parental Mourning in 'Our Family, White and Black,'" in Craig Thompson Friend and Anya Jabour, eds., *Family Values in the Old South* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2010), 64.

<sup>25</sup> Jeb Stuart to Lily Lee, 16 November 1862, Jeb Stuart Papers, Duke; Daniel Huger to Maurice Harvey Lance, 17 July 1817, Lance Lamber Papers, SCHS. It seems that during this time, Stuart and his wife could do little to comfort one another. Though Mrs. Stuart was near him even as he resided in camp "No Rest" she was "not herself since the loss of her little companion." Walter Lenoir to Selina Louisa Avery Lenoir, 22 May 1858, and Letter to Thomas J. Lenoir, 31 May 1858, Lenoir Family Papers, SHC. See also George Frederick Holmes to Mrs. L. Floyd, 1 January 1846, John Warfield Johnston Papers, Duke.

The relationship between fathers and children in the Old South undoubtedly intensified the grief men like Stuart, Huger, and Lenoir experienced. Modern grief theorists argue that parental bereavement is especially devastating because parents mourn the loss of a piece of themselves in addition to mourning the loss of the child. Theorists and bereft parents alike describe living after the death of a child as akin to living after the amputation of a limb.<sup>26</sup> Southern fathers, who viewed their children, especially sons, as extensions of their honor and as evidence of their proper breeding and superior blood, must also have experienced such multi-layered sorrow. For men who valued self-mastery in other aspects of life, planters expressed surprisingly little embarrassment with their own emotions and surprisingly little desire to limit their grief.

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Like mothers, grieving fathers viewed the loss of a child as “the lowest depths of misery,” felt and expressed their agony, relied on the consolation of friends and Christianity while also being stifled by it, and took comfort from their active participation in a child’s death-bed rituals and burial.<sup>27</sup> The characters of paternal and maternal grief overlapped in important ways. Because of the specialized and distinct gender roles articulated by southern society, men’s grief and their expressions of it also diverged from women’s.<sup>28</sup> As men described their religious doubts, experienced anger more and guilt

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<sup>26</sup> Barbara D. Rosof, *The Worst Loss: How Families Heal From the Death of a Child* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1994), 3, 8, 11-12. See also Catherine M. Sanders, *Grief: The Mourning After: Dealing with Adult Bereavement*, 2d ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 1999), 11, 163.

<sup>27</sup> For examples of this belief see L.W. Curtis to John Wilfong and Barbara Eva Lavinia Wilfong, 24 February 1845, John Wilfong Papers, Duke; M.C. Sawyer to Ebenezer Pettigrew, 13 August 1818, in Lemmon, *The Pettigrew Papers*, vol. 1, 634-635.

<sup>28</sup> Harvey Green, with the assistance of Mary-Ellen Perry, *The Light of the Home: An Intimate View of the Lives of Women in Victorian America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 173. Green argues that a

less, and engaged in more self-pity and melancholia than their wives, they demonstrated the freedom of emotional expression that being masters allowed.

The network of letters that crossed the South was crucial to fathers as well as mothers because letters provided a space within which men could express emotional vulnerability.<sup>29</sup> Though women, isolated on plantations, undoubtedly relied more heavily on consolation letters than their spouses, men drew comfort from sharing their pain and from the sympathy notes that arrived with the post. Daniel Huger called it “pleasing & mournful to my Soul” to communicate his feelings to a friend.<sup>30</sup> As their spouses did, southern men expressed the belief that the words of another bereft parent offered particular comfort. “I have tasted the bitter cup, again, and again, and can therefore more fully feel and sympathize with the afflicted,” R. Stewart reassured Benjamin Perry.<sup>31</sup>

Despite these similarities, men’s tendency to express taboo emotions in their letters, particularly on the subject of religion, was unique. Advice authors found their peers “inclined to skepticism” and notoriously difficult to corral into religion, distracted as they were by the desire to tend to their occupations rather than their souls.<sup>32</sup> Some

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similar phenomenon existed in the North but attributes men’s freedom in mourning to the “demands of the middle-class commercial world.”

<sup>29</sup> Anya Jabour, “Male Friendship and Masculinity in the Early National South: William Wirt and His Friends,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 20, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 86, 90. Jabour studies William Wirt’s exchanges with his male friends and determines that within their “supportive male subculture,” these men were able to experiment with “feminine characteristics.”

<sup>30</sup> Daniel Huger to Rev. Maurice Harvey Lance, 17 July 1817, Lance Lambert Papers in the Bacot-Huger Collection, SCHS. See also George T. Murrell’s Journal, 2 June 1892 and 13 June 1892, Murrell Family Papers, UGA. Despite trying to hide his emotions from his family by being outwardly “cheerful,” Murrell wrote that he had “a heart that is fatally wounded. Yes, wounded with death.”

<sup>31</sup> R. Stewart to Benjamin Franklin Perry, 27 January 1859, Benjamin Franklin Perry Papers, SHC.

<sup>32</sup> John Angell James, *The Young Man’s Friend and Guide through Life to Immortality*, 16<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: Hamilton Adams and Co., 1883), 312-313. See also 18 November 1866, Anne Jennings Wise Hobson Diary, VHS; Ellen Stanley to Mourcellis Stanley, 27 August 1845, Stanley Family Papers, UGA; Diary of Harry St. John Dixon, 16 March 1860, 27 March 1860, 29 March 1860, 12 April 1860 in Stephen

historians have also argued that the South's elite men refused to be "mastered" by a set religious doctrine, uncomfortable with the dichotomy between managing slaves' bodies and, historian Janet Moore Lindman writes, subjecting "their own bodies to a religion that demanded corporeal evidence of spiritual transformation and adherence to strict code of personal conduct."<sup>33</sup> Grieving fathers showed much greater concern with their piety than advice literature and some historians suggest. Some planters were skeptics, but many others tried to meet the standards of their evangelical faith. When their children died, however, men were quicker and less reluctant than women to admit the insufficient comfort offered them by religion.<sup>34</sup>

The magnitude of their heartache regularly overwhelmed southern fathers' faith and ability to resign, and being men allowed them to express their disillusionment with

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Berry, *Princes of Cotton: Four Diaries of Young Men in the South, 1848-1860* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 7, 50, 64-65, 85. Southern men's irreligion exasperated women as well as advice authors. Anne Hobson, for example, prayed on behalf of her son, "I cry out for his soul—his soul My God!—Why is he so indifferent to thy ordinances—so wavering on faith! I have spoken to him so often about this, that I doubt whether it is well to say more to him." Ellen Stanley reminded her son, Mourcellis, that since the day of his birth she and his father believed he would become a preacher. "Could I see you among the ministers of the sanctuary," she wrote, "how it would rejoice my heart."

<sup>33</sup> Christine Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 208-210, 250; Janet Moore Lindman, "Acting the Manly Christian: White Evangelical Masculinity in Revolutionary Virginia." *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series 57, no. 2 (April 2000): 401-406. See also Edward R. Crowther, "Holy Honor: Sacred and Secular in the Old South," *The Journal of Southern History* 58, no. 4 (Nov. 1994): 620-625; Glover, *Southern Sons*, 3, 18. Crowther contends that while "powerful men placed little stock in religion," particularly that which required sitting in church with women and slaves, all southerners shared a theological understanding of the world. Similarly, Glover contends that southern sons deemed evangelical Christianity antithetical to their manhood because they believed that submitting to God undermined their independence, a crucial component of masculinity.

<sup>34</sup> Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "Religion in the Lives of Slaveholding Women of the Antebellum South," in Lynda L. Coon, Katherine J. Haldane, and Elisabeth W. Sommer, eds., *That Gentle Strength: Historical Perspectives on Women in Christianity* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), 207-209. Fox-Genovese argues that Christianity defined southern women's lives in a way that it did not define southern men's. Religion and vigilant attendance to the state of their soul provided the foundation of many women's identities. See also William N. Peers to Judith F. Peers, 6 March 1852, William N. Peers Letter, VHS. Though a Methodist himself, William Peers believed "good people of all orders are true Christians"

God.<sup>35</sup> From the moment James Hervey Greenlee's son grew ill, Greenlee asked for God's help in submitting to his affliction and accepting that the child might die. When his son's "Liberated spirit took its flight," Greenlee prayed that God would grant him and his wife "submissive resignation to the divine will."<sup>36</sup> In continuing to plead with God for the ability to resign, Greenlee was an exception among men.

Other fathers referenced their knowledge of religious expectations for their grief but asserted their grief made resignation impossible. Charleston resident Daniel Huger knew that God afflicted parents with the deaths of their beloved children for benevolent purposes, but wrote he was "bowed down to the earth with grief & agonised [*sic*] with sorrow" at the death of his son. He had, he said, "groaned in the spirit," "shed bitter tears," and been "broke down by grief & sorrow & deprived of all earthly happiness."<sup>37</sup> Virginian Hugh Davis, too, admitted to his brother that though "the Balm of Gilliad" provided some consolation, his sorrow had yet to abate. "I am so much the Creature of feeling and give way so much to the natural man," he wrote, "that I cannot help saying I

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<sup>35</sup> See Glover, *Southern Sons*, 3, 104, and 182 as an example of historians who argue that southern parents encouraged young men to control their emotions as a crucial component of masculinity and honor. Traits and emotions deemed effeminate had to be stifled. According to Glover, southerners found displays of anger and sadness particularly offensive. Nevertheless, southern boys "saw few advantages to exerting this sort of emotional restraint." Characteristics such as independence, "boldness," and hard work were simply more important in convincing others of one's honor.

<sup>36</sup> 4 June 1854, James Hervey Greenlee Diary, SHC.

<sup>37</sup> Daniel Huger to Rev. Maurice Harvey Lance, 17 July 1817, Lance Lambert Papers in the Bacot-Huger Collection, SCHS. See also George T. Murrell's Journal, 2 June 1892 and 13 June 1892, Murrell Family Papers, UGA. Despite trying to hide his emotions from his family by being outwardly "cheerful," Murrell wrote that he had "a heart that is fatally wounded. Yes, wounded with death."

had rather retained him with me and would have willingly ransomed him with any Treasure or Jewel I possessed.”<sup>38</sup>

Davis demonstrated his freedom as a master when he openly expressed his wish for his child’s return and the opportunity to bargain with God. Few women would have risked the public censure likely to accompany any hint that they questioned God’s will and wished their child returned. Planter fathers, conversely, seem to have felt entitled to express religious doubts. After all, if honorable southern men believed themselves second to anyone, it was only to God.<sup>39</sup>

When men wrote that they had achieved resignation, they usually did so to assert that however much they grieved, they still exhibited more self-control than their wives. In the same letter that he revealed he had been “bow’d down to the earth,” Daniel Huger also expressed his hope that God would strengthen his wife and “enable her to bear as well as myself with Christian fortitude & resignation this heavy affliction of Divine appointment.” Frail though his own acceptance of his son’s death might be, Huger believed it more exemplary than his wife’s. Isaac Avery called his daughter’s death from inflammation of the brain an “afflicting dispensation,” but told his brother, “I endeavour to bear it as becomes me but am sorry to say that Harriet appears to sink more under it than any former trial.” In this depiction, Avery acknowledged that the child’s death affected him while also suggesting that he could bear the pain better than his wife.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Hugh Davis to Capt. Nicholas Davis, 15 December 1819, Hugh Davis Letter, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, VA. See also S.J. Cabell to his sister, Carrie, 14 August 1862, Yonce Family Papers, Duke.

<sup>39</sup> Craig Thompson Friend, “Little Eva’s Last Breath: Childhood Death and Parental Mourning in ‘Our Family, White and Black’,” in Friend and Jabour, *Family Values in the Old South*, 74-75.

<sup>40</sup> Daniel Huger to Maurice Harvey Lance, 17 July 1817, Lance Lambert Papers, Bacot-Huger Collection, SCHS; Isaac Avery to Thomas Lenoir, 8 July 1852, Lenoir Family Papers, SHC. \

Frederick Blount, finally, represented himself as a pillar of strength, reassured Ebenezer Pettigrew that he was doing everything in his power to quell the family's grief following news of Hannah Pettigrew's death.<sup>41</sup>

Although fathers generally appeared less beholden to the ideal of resignation, their male correspondents still reminded them of their duties to submit to God's will.<sup>42</sup> Edward Neufville was a minister in Savannah and was no doubt well-versed in the religious components of southern grief culture. Nevertheless, when Neufville's wife and infant child died, he received letters from several relatives and friends that reminded him of God's benevolent intentions to spare the deceased from pain and encourage Neufville's piety. Neufville's brother recognized that he was "no stranger to all those sources of consolation opened to us in the word of God," and reminded the minister that it was his vocational obligation to adhere to religious expectations for his grief.<sup>43</sup>

Duncan Cameron and Benjamin Perry also received religious reminders during their tragedies. After four of Cameron's eight children succumbed to tuberculosis, J.G. Landon wrote to express his sympathy. Landon noted that he knew from experience how "intensely painful" such an affliction could be, but he also reminded Cameron of his religious obligations. "When I reflect that your own Christian principles teach you

<sup>41</sup> Frederick Blount to Ebenezer Pettigrew, 5 August 1818, in Lemmon, *The Pettigrew Papers*, vol. 1, 630.

<sup>42</sup> See Charles Fraser to James H. Ladson, 12 September 1817, Charles Fraser Family Papers, SCHS. Charles Fraser's consolation letter to James Ladson is a rare example of men's disregard of their correspondents' grief and religious struggles. Although Fraser recognized that "to his afflicted mother many prospects of earthly happiness are forever terminated," Fraser said nothing of James' grief at the death of his son.

<sup>43</sup> Lot Jones to Rev. Edward Neufville, 15 July 1833, Bulloch Family Papers, SHC. See also B.C. Cutler to Rev. Edward Neufville, 15 July 1833 and L.G. Bragg to Rev. Edward Neufville, 17 July 1833, 22 July 1833, and 24 July 1833, Bulloch Family Papers, SHC.

resignation to the Divine will under every dispensation,” Landon wrote, “I feel that it is almost presumptuous in me to venture even a momentary interruption of feelings which I know must choose the retirement of the heart.”<sup>44</sup> Landon’s stated certainty that Cameron would do what was expected of a Christian father avoided insulting Cameron or challenging his honor even as it subtly reminded him of others’ expectations for his behavior.

Concerned that his bereavement would cause his already weak faith to falter, Benjamin Perry’s correspondents wrote more overtly of religion. R. Stewart offered Perry heartfelt condolences, but reminded his friend that God could offer the best consolation. E. Dowse wrote that he had begun to fear Perry was “giving sway to a spirit of despondency induced by the death of your beloved daughter.” “There is a strong tendency to this in the Perry family,” he continued, because the Perrys were “generally people of keen sensibilities & when wounded they suffer intensely.” Dowse prayed that Perry would be “obedient” to his daughter’s dying wish that her father prepare to meet her in Heaven and recommended that Perry use his daughter’s death as a reason to find religion and become a church member.<sup>45</sup> “A man of your intelligence & habits of life,” Dowse wrote, “must be aware that in order to accomplish any thing of a moral & religious nature--the work must be entered upon with decision & earnestness.” “If you enter into a religious life--as you seem to have prosecuted your worldly business,” he continued, “you will be sure of success. And now seems to be the most favourable time

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<sup>44</sup> J.G. Landon to Duncan Cameron, 15 June 1840, Cameron Family Papers, SHC.

<sup>45</sup> R. Stewart to Benjamin Franklin Perry, 27 January 1859 and E. Dowse to Benjamin Perry, 24 February, 1859, Benjamin Franklin Perry Papers, SHC. See also Edward F. Stokes to Benjamin Franklin Perry, 8 March 1859 and F. Y. Porcher to Benjamin Franklin Perry, 1859, Benjamin Franklin Perry Papers, SHC.



for action--Your mind is turned to the subject--your heart is tender."<sup>46</sup> For men as well as women, then, religious consolation was a double-edged sword. Although meant to comfort, it was also intended to shape the recipient's behavior.

When they were not expressing their sadness in letters, fathers worked through their grief by planning their children's funerals. Mothers informed loved ones of a child's death, but the public arrangements required for funerals and the preparation of headstones made the task much better suited for fathers. Finding the local graveyard full, Francis Asbury Dickins chose "a very pretty and retired spot" on his father-in-law's plantation where his child and a young relative were buried. Richmond resident Charles Palmer provided greater detail about his family's burial site even though doing so "choked" him with emotion. Like other southern men, Palmer intended his wife and children's grave to be a "last superficial tribute." Writing that their bodies' resting place was not nearly as important as their souls, Palmer nevertheless described a lavish, four-foot-tall, pure white Italian marble headstone containing an epitaph for his wife, Mary Jane, and two of their children.<sup>47</sup>

Another father, Charleston resident James Clough, accepted the tasks of planning his son George's burial, disposing of the teen's belongings and sending out mourning mementos—particularly locks of hair—to friends and family. James took painstaking care while designing George's headstone, even going so far as to send a sketch of his

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<sup>46</sup> E. Dowse to Benjamin Perry, 24 February, 1859, Benjamin Franklin Perry Papers, SHC.

<sup>47</sup> JBC to his sister, Margaret Harvey Randolph Dickins, 24 January 1838, Francis Asbury Dickins Papers, SHC; Charles Palmer to Susan Harrison (Lewis) Douthat, 11 August 1829, Charles Palmer Letter, VHS.

plans and a copy of the epitaph to his daughter and wife for their approval.<sup>48</sup> Clough may have begun to regret the location he ultimately chose when he found himself agitated while in church. In a letter to his daughter and primary confidante, Clough noted the effect of a sermon given at church: “It was touching a tender chord with me, as I co’d. [sic] not but recollect that poor George was sitting beside me in that very place on that day twelve short months previous, when neither he nor I co’d. have reconciled the thought to ourselves, that one of us sho’d. ere [sic] the close of the year be mouldering in the grave only a few yards distant from me.”<sup>49</sup>

Writing letters, struggling with religious doubts, and planning burials were means by which grieving fathers tried to quell their grief and carry on with their lives.

Southerners expected bereaved women to be cheerful and to prioritize their family’s well-being over their own emotional expression. Men also understood that society expected them to carry on with daily duties, but a letter from Eliza Jane DeRosset to her daughter indicates how differently this was interpreted by men than women. Urging her daughter, Kate Meares, to leave her home in New York to travel to her parents’ plantation in North Carolina, DeRosset wrote, “I know it will be terrible for you to be away from your

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<sup>48</sup> James Clough to “Annie” Jemima Clough, 1 December 1843, 18 December 1843, 31 December 1843, 19 February 1844, and 1 May 1844, Anne Jemima Clough Letters, SCHS. Like Christian mothers, James Clough was greatly comforted by his son, George’s, apparent salvation and by the “knowledge of his character & thoroughly Christian conduct.” Clough prided himself that all in Charleston seemed to mourn the twenty-two-year-old’s death. After discovering that he could not “walk a hundred steps in any direction without meeting a sympathetic expression, or shake of the hand in solemn silence,” this proud father surmised that his son’s death had “created a more universal sensation of regret in the City than anything of the kind that has occurred for many years.” Though knowing of his son’s positive reputation in the city pleased Clough, he expressed surprise at the depths of his despair following the boy’s death.

<sup>49</sup> James Clough to Annie Jemima Clough, 1 December 1843, 18 December 1843, 31 December 1843, 19 February 1844, and 1 May 1844, Anne Jemima Clough Letters, SCHS. See also Diary of Ella Gertrude Thomas, January 1856, in Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas., *The Secret Eye: The Journal of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, 1848-1889*, ed. by Virginia Ingraham Burr with an intro. by Nell Irvin Painter (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 141.

Husband but he will be so much engrossed by business all day that you will see very little of him.” With Kate’s daughter dead and her husband distracted by business, DeRosset reasoned, it made sense for her to reside with female relations who could comfort her in her “utter desolation.”<sup>50</sup> DeRosset’s argument demonstrates that adhering to their prescribed duties did not require men to wear a mask of resignation within the home or to put comforting their family ahead of other priorities as it did for women. Rather, it meant compartmentalizing their grief so that they could continue conducting business in public.

Whatever pressure they received at home from wives desiring comfort from their spouses, men were also pressured by peers and business associates to carry forth with their normal lives. The majority of condolence letters that arrived for John Young Mason, secretary of the Navy under James K. Polk, came from male friends and business associates in Washington, D.C. Although each expressed their sympathy for the death of Mason’s “little cherub” and apologized for their need to engage him in business matters in the midst of his mourning, they promptly returned to the business at hand after two or three sentences of sympathy.<sup>51</sup> James C. Johnston was more direct in his letter to Ebenezer Pettigrew. After a page-long discussion of building plans for a canal and Pettigrew’s plantation, Johnston noted, “This Levity my dear friend may not suit with your state of mind & melancholy reflections.” But, he continued, “that state of mind & those reflections ought not to be indulged nay they should be driven from you.”<sup>52</sup>

Perhaps affected by similar remarks, E. Fuller intended to leave his home “as early as

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<sup>50</sup> Eliza Jane DeRosset to Kate DeRosset Meares, 3 June 1855, DeRosset Family Papers, SHC.

<sup>51</sup> Emile La Sere to John Young Mason, 17 August 1848; RM Boykin to John Mason, 18 August 1848; Paul to John Mason, 28 August 1848, Mason Family Papers, VHS.

<sup>52</sup> James C. Johnston to Ebenezer Pettigrew, 15 November 1818, in Lemmon, *The Pettigrew Papers*, vol. 1, 649.

circumstances will permit” to travel to New York despite his continued grief at his daughter’s death.<sup>53</sup>

Planter fathers did their best to set aside their sorrow and focus on their public duties. Carter Henry Harrison’s infant son died just hours after his birth, unable to recover from having the cord wrapped around his neck during delivery. Harrison’s wife, Ianetta, barely survived the trauma of their son’s deliver and the shock of his death. In the aftermath of the ordeal, Harrison apologized to his sister for failing to write her sooner with news of the tragedy, telling her, “I have seldom strength enough of mind or body now to undertake a letter, and those of business require all I have to spare.”<sup>54</sup> For this Virginian, life in the wake of loss necessitated balancing between melancholy and masculine duty. Charles Hentz, too, prioritized writing about business rather than emotions. Hentz lost five children, including Mary Caroline and Josephine during their infancies in 1857 and 1858, and also watched his wife suffer through the births of several stillborn children. His diary says next to nothing about how he or his wife, Bettie, coped with these losses. Even so, a diary entry from 1860 following the birth of son, William Booth, which noted “the little fellow is ugly, but promising—I am very thankful—very light hearted,” suggests he took joy in his children and likely agonized over their deaths. In his daily journal, however, he chose to note business endeavors over his emotions.

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<sup>53</sup> E. Fuller to Jones Fuller, 16 July 1851, Fuller-Thomas Papers, Duke.

<sup>54</sup> Carter Henry Harrison to Susan Isham Harrison Blain, 11 October 1842, Harrison Family Papers, UVA.

Only the account of Mollie's death—his favorite child—warranted a comment on his emotions. “It was a bitter trial to give her up,” Hentz wrote.<sup>55</sup>

Like Harrison, most elite antebellum fathers struck a delicate balance between indulging their grief at home and masking it in public. Absorbed in his child to a “fearful extent,” Jefferson Davis was laid low by his son's death. Davis tried to remain stoic, but his wife Varina was well aware that her husband was “weak and low.” “He walked half the night and worked fiercely all the day,” she noted, and hearing child cry in the street would cause him great distress.<sup>56</sup> Georgian physician Robert Battey also tried to use work as a means of distracting himself and hiding his pain. After learning of his son's death, Battey allowed himself a “sorrowful” night of praying and tears—“hot scalding tears from a heart-stricken with deep affliction”—as he described them. Because he had “no relish for the contact of the cold selfish world” following such news, he wrote, he spent the day confined to his room grieving. Quite quickly, though, Battey steeled himself to present a stoical façade by day. Battey's letters to his wife Martha express heartfelt concern for her happiness and worry that maternal grief was causing her physical harm. Indeed, Robert wrote Martha from Paris informing her of his wish that she would put aside her household duties and take care of herself, noting, “You have lead a life of ceaseless toil . . . it is high time you were beginning to favor yourself a little now.” Even so, Battey wrote home to share his grief and offer Martha support only once or twice each week. During the work week Battey focused on the masculine public

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<sup>55</sup> See also Diary of Charles A. Hentz, MD, 12 September 1860, in Steven M. Stowe, ed., *A Southern Practice: The Diary and Autobiography of Charles A. Hentz, M.D.* (Charlottesville: Published for the Southern Texts Society by the University Press of Virginia, 2000), 337.

<sup>56</sup> Varina Howell Davis to Margaret Howell, 29 April 1854, July 1854, in Davis, *Private Letters*, 77-78, 88-89; Strode in Davis, *Private Letters*, 78.

sphere; on the weekends he allowed himself to retire to his tears, his fatherly bereavement, and his letters to Martha.<sup>57</sup>

Navy serviceman George Blow balanced his public obligations and his grief in a different way. Writing to friend, George Blacknall, Blow expressed shock that his young daughter had died just three weeks after his departure from home. “Even now,” he stated, “I can scarcely realize the idea that she is no more in this world,” particularly because after surviving scarlet fever, it was a common cold that ended her life. After mentioning God’s mysterious ways and asking for His help in bearing the loss, Blow moved quickly to more practical matters. Most importantly, he requested that his friend take a fatherly role in his surviving daughter’s life. In the wake of her sibling’s death, Blow felt it was better for his daughter to temporarily forget he existed and to focus on Blacknall as a father instead, lest she experience “the sad & melancholy [feelings] consequent upon the desire to see an absent father.”<sup>58</sup> Although Blow’s understanding of how to care for his family in times of loss did not include abandoning his professional obligations and returning home, he strove to do what he could from afar.

While many men used their occupations as a distraction from their grief, at least one southerner, “Hamilton,” found himself unable to do so. After losing his wife, Hamilton threw himself into his work, hoping that cultivating his profession would also cultivate his honor and a future for his sons. Instead, he found that “scenes of former days & past happiness . . . crowd thick & heavy,” distracting him from the task at hand. In describing this grief and his unsettling fear that he would lose his children too,

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<sup>57</sup> Robert Battey to Martha Battey, 26 October 1859, 16 November 1859, 11 December 1859, Robert Battey Papers, MARBL.

<sup>58</sup> George Blow to George Blacknall, 13 November 1862, Pegram Family Papers, VHS.

Hamilton asked his sister, “Do pardon this weakness, I cannot think of all these things without the deepest gloom & saddest reflections.” Hamilton understood society’s expectation that a grieving planter would continue to function in public, but he failed to meet it—the pain of his loss was simply too overwhelming to be deterred by any threat to his public reputation.<sup>59</sup>

Unlike their wives, husbands were not socialized to blame themselves following a child’s death. In fact, being required to carry forth with business endeavors seems to have encouraged men to place blame for a child’s death on others much more readily than women did. The extent to which fathers censured physicians is a particularly striking indicator of this tendency. Mothers expressed great ambivalence about calling physicians to their children’s bedside due to conflicting social messages and doctors’ poor track record. On the one hand, women allegedly were imbued with the ability to prevent illness through their nurture and were taught in advice literature and periodicals how to administer treatments and medication when necessary. On the other, child-rearing experts told them to recognize “defeat” and call in a trained physician when a child grew gravely ill. Following his instructions in great detail, these experts wrote gravely, was imperative. When mothers doubted the physicians’ treatments, they often fretted quietly, prevented by their deference from voicing their concerns.

Fathers had a drastically different relationship with physicians. Though they might be willing to be temporarily “ruled” by love of their children, these men often refused to defer to doctors. On their own plantations, many planters firmly believed, they knew best. Although some planters chose to hire physicians, others chose to follow popular domestic medical manuals, which taught planters they could diagnose illness and

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<sup>59</sup> Hamilton to May, 4 April 1845, Mrs. E.A. Pearson Papers, Duke.

treat it as effectively as physicians. The very nature of southern medicine placed plantation physicians beneath their elite patrons on the social hierarchy. Doctors were not esteemed and were beholden to a planters' patronage for work—their financial security and social status stemmed from their professional relationship with society's elite men. Given the low success rates of many southern medical practitioners and the intrusive nature of their techniques, southern fathers can hardly be blamed for their doubts.<sup>60</sup>

Anger and blame resulted from planters' relationships with physicians. Unlike their wives, elite southern fathers did not hesitate to challenge doctors or hold them accountable for a child's death. Paul Cameron wrote to his father, Duncan, to lament that his son was “but a shadow of himself.” If only he had been home to treat the child and waylay his wife's tendency to consult the doctor, Paul claimed, little Duncan would be in much better health.<sup>61</sup> Unlike most mothers, who would have chided themselves for “allowing” a child to sicken or for being away from home during a child's illness, Cameron viewed his son's sickness as the result of his wife's and doctor's incompetence.

William Whitsitt expressed his fury less subtly. Following his daughter Martha Jane's death, Whitsitt wrote that although they tried to resign themselves, the girl's

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<sup>60</sup> See Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Birthing a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), especially 1-7 and 53-57; McMillen, “Antebellum Southern Fathers.” See also Steven M. Stowe, *Doctoring the South: Southern Physicians and Everyday Medicine in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, Studies in Social Medicine (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Faust, *A Design for Mastery*, 76-78. Hammond's slaves, particularly the children, experienced an appallingly high mortality rate. In his first decade as the patriarch of his Silver Bluff plantation, 72 percent of slave children died before the age of five. Initially, Faust contends, this rate was “a distressing challenge to Hammond's cherished conception of himself as an effective and benevolent master.” Gradually, however, anger with himself evolved instead into great skepticism toward his plantation physicians. After 1834, Hammond intermittently abandoned the use of physicians and their heroic medicine and instead turned toward Thomsonianism.

<sup>61</sup> Paul Cameron to Duncan Cameron, 3 July 1848, Cameron Family Papers, SHC.



“unnatural” death tormented him. “To die is natural,” he explained, “But to be eaten up by calomel is not natural. He continued, “Poor Martha Jane was killed by degrees, eaten, destroyed, murdered, butchered by calomel and that too, administered by a regular bred physician.” This degree of anger—to suggest that a physician had “butchered” his child—was noteworthy among fathers and rare among mothers, who would have been much more likely to blame themselves for not catching the physician’s mistake before he made it.<sup>62</sup>

North Carolina resident Albert Hall spared his child’s physician but lashed out furiously at his wife, Rebecca. Hall’s daughter, Alice, died after falling into the family’s fireplace. The accident left Alice blind in one eye, without one arm, and bald as a result of her burns. Eventually, these massive wounds caused her to bleed to death. Rebecca Hall witnessed the accident and lost the use of her right hand trying to pull her daughter from the fire, encumbering her ability to carry out daily duties. Instead of the concern expressed by many southern husbands for their wives’ grief and physical ailments, Albert expressed little but hostility. “Mr. Hall,” Rebecca informed her sister, told her she had “burnt up the child” through her own carelessness, and suggested that if he or anyone else had been caring for Alice, her accident would never have occurred. Albert also taunted Rebecca, telling her that her hand was not worth what he had spent trying to restore it.”<sup>63</sup>

Not every father escaped the burden of guilt or placed blame elsewhere. E. Fuller worried that he was responsible for his infant daughter’s death. Home alone with his wife

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<sup>62</sup> William A. Whitsitt Journal, August-October 1848, Duke.

<sup>63</sup> Rebecca Jane Hall to Eliza Haywood, May 1841, 30 September 1842, and Albert J. Hall to Eliza Haywood, 31 December 1842, Ernest Haywood Family Papers, SHC. See also Edwin Fay to Sarah Shields Fay, 5 August 1862, in Bell Irvin Wiley, ed., *This Infernal War: The Confederate Letters of Sgt. Edwin H. Fay* (Austin, 1958), 130-131, quoted in Marten, “Fatherhood in the Confederacy,” 275. Following his five-year-old son’s death, Edwin Fay pleaded with his wife, “take care of our last one, do not let it die.”

when she went into labor and unable to bring a doctor or female relative in time, Fuller delivered the baby and feared he was the cause of her death. Although, he wrote, “the doctor believed nothing could have made a difference,” his guilt was a “source of deep grief.”<sup>64</sup> Virginian William Cabell reassured his friend Peter Carr in the aftermath of a child’s drowning that he should not blame himself. Cabell contended, “The loss of a child, in any manner, brings with it sufficient distress to a parents heart; but it is doubly distressing when it comes out of the usual way.” The child’s “distressing” death by drowning was particularly troubling to Carr because the child who drowned was a young visitor under his care. Carr was saddened at the loss and ashamed that the incident had taken place under his watch. Still, Cabell consoled, “I wish you may not permit yourself to feel more on this occasion than you ought.” Although Carr should express his grief, Cabell wrote, guilt should not be allowed to “aggravate” him as “everybody knows that it is impossible to restrain boys from bathing when water courses are near them.”<sup>65</sup> As it did the vast majority of southern mothers, death forced Carr and Fuller to face their perceived failures as parents and as men, and the resulting grief intensified their loss.

Though generally less likely to express guilt, fathers seem to have been more likely than women to express self pity untempered by religion and unfettered by domestic expectations for selflessness. Virginians Richard Eppes and Charles Palmer, for example, indulged their grief with relative abandon. Eppes confided in his diary in the wake of his wife’s and daughter’s deaths, which occurred within just three days of one another that he was in a state of “abject misery.” At least within the privacy of his diary,

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<sup>64</sup> E. Fuller to Jones Fuller, 16 July 1851, Fuller-Thomas Papers, Duke.

<sup>65</sup> William H. Cabell to Peter Carr, 22 May 1812, Letter from Peter Carr to William H. Cabell, UVA.

Eppes also had few qualms about wishing his wife might be “restored” to him—a rare remark for southern mothers—and although he believed he would rejoin his family in heaven, Eppes confessed that his life was a “perfect blank” and that his losses had made him “recless [*sic*] & miserable.”<sup>66</sup> Palmer called himself “unfit for anything except to walk in solitude and muse on my past misfortunes and afflictions,” and expressed his conviction that he “surely” had cause for his continued unhappiness. “At the age of 33 and married 8 years,” he explained, “I have a Wife and three children in one grave besides other trials.”<sup>67</sup> Even recognizing that God had blessed him with continued business success as well as two of his five children did little to quell Palmer’s distress.

A letter from Walter Lenoir to his wife, Nealy, expressed tenderness between the two, but also demonstrated Lenoir’s self-focus in his grief. “I have received no other letter from you yet,” Lenoir wailed, “and, oh! if they were come, they would not remove the heaviness of being without you. I have never felt so lonely as I feel this week, and oh! I think so often of little Annie. I pray that our Heavenly Father may save us from ever being separated so far and so long again.” Several months later, Walter wrote his wife expressing his fears that she too might die, leaving him miserable and alone.

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<sup>66</sup> 12 March 1852, 26 April 1852, and 23 July 1852, Richard Eppes Diary, VHS. See also Diary of Henry Craft, 23 April 1848, 26 June 1848, in Berry, *Princes of Cotton*, 19-20, 435, 453. Georgian Henry Craft’s reaction to his fiancé’s death was unusual. Craft’s filled his diary with guilt-ridden, anguished recollections of his fiancée, Lucy’s, death just before their marriage. Disgusted by his inability to maintain a happy facade for others, Craft wrote, “my worst enemy could not despise me more than I do myself.” In Craft’s mind, standards of masculinity dictated that he discard his melancholy and march forward to make a name for himself. But, historian Stephen Berry notes of the young man, “Henry could not get over his loss, and he hated himself for it.”

<sup>67</sup> Charles Palmer to Susan Harrison (Lewis) Douthat, 11 August 1829, Charles Palmer Letter, VHS.

Lenoir's devotion to his wife is touching, but his letters offered little indication that he recognized she might be suffering too.<sup>68</sup>

Perhaps because they did not have to rely upon God as friend and companion and because submitting to God might undermine their patriarchal status, southern fathers felt free to dismiss their faith. Like Eppes and Palmer, Ebenezer Pettigrew spurned religious consolation, writing, "consolation is not for me, my cup is filled to the brim." Pettigrew suffered the deaths of three of his children in the winter of 1829. When he became a widower a year later, causing him to entrust his four remaining children to the care of relatives, he lamented, "the sun has set forever upon all my comfort in this world . . . and my house is left desolate, nothing remains but the silence of deaths."<sup>69</sup> Few women expressed such conviction that they had cause for continued misery, reminding themselves instead of their remaining blessings and the blessing that death held for deceased children.

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Perhaps the most important difference between maternal and paternal bereavement was its meaning within the household and within society. The southern household, far from being a "separate sphere," was an important public institution. For men of all classes, the ability to master wife, children, and emotions demonstrated the extent to which they might also master slaves and claim their place as leaders in society.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Walter Lenoir to Cornelia "Nealy" Isabella Christian Lenoir, 18 August 1858, 20 September 1858, Lenoir Family Papers, SHC.

<sup>69</sup> Ebenezer Pettigrew to John Herritage and Mary Williams Bryan, 12 January 1830, in Lemmon, *The Pettigrew Papers*, vol. 2, 143.

<sup>70</sup> See Stephanie McCurry, *Master of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

Unlike northern men, southern men retained an omnipotent role in the “private sphere,” often using it to demonstrate their ability to perform in public. In times of loss, though, southern fathers counted on the household as a truly private space where their “break” from masculinity was acceptable, or at least hidden.<sup>71</sup>

Studying fathers’ grief also indicates just how firmly entrenched patriarchy was in the southern household. Ironically, given society’s ideas about male and female emotionality and rationality, families viewed men as emotionally frail in times of child death. Despite mothers’ central role in daily childcare and in nursing ailing children, it was fathers who became the central focus in the aftermath of a child’s death. The family’s greatest concern was whether or not the patriarch could handle his grief. Following the death of her toddler daughter, Eliza Wilkins Bruce wrote to her husband of her melancholy and extreme loneliness. Though she revealed that the loss was her “severest trial,” Bruce withheld the extent of her sorrow for her husband’s sake. Wary of his reaction to her grief, she commented, “I must not write any more on that subject. I fear you will not be able to read this letter.” Her husband’s need to avoid his own grief apparently trumped Eliza’s need to express hers. According to a friend, Kate Meares similarly “acted very wisely in not leaving her husband to bear alone this deep trouble.”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> In his study of insanity in Alabama, John Starrett Hughes notes that the most common causes listed for men’s “lunacy” were “hard work,” “business trouble,” and grief. Laypeople, not physicians, diagnosed the cause of their friends’ and family members’ madness before committing them, suggesting that many in southern society believed that by doing what was asked of them to be masculine, men might actually harm their mental health. Furthermore, treating such mental illness required not masculine, heroic medicine, but the creation of a home, and family-like environment within the asylum. John Starrett Hughes, “The Madness of Separate Spheres: Insanity and Masculinity in Victorian Alabama,” in Mark C. Carnes and Clyde Griffen, eds., *Meanings for Manhood: Constructions of Masculinity in Victorian America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 55-56, 60-63.

<sup>72</sup> Elizabeth Douglas “Eliza” Wilkins Bruce to James Coles Bruce, undated 1854, Bruce Family Papers, VHS; Alice H. Dickinson to Eliza Jane DeRosset, 7 June 1855, DeRosset Family Papers, SHC. See also Martha Sarah Howell Means to Claudia Hart Means, 3 May 1847, Mary Hart Means Papers, SCHS.

Varina Howell Davis, finally, expressed her grief to her mother because she worried that her husband could not handle the additional strain. As the family's physician blistered their son's chest and cupped his back in the child's final days, Jefferson Davis became "frantic seeing the blood run down." Given his emotions while the child was still alive, Varina worried that Jeff could handle no one's grief but his own. Mothers' great concern with hiding their own grief for their husbands' sake was quite common, and it was a central aspect of child mortality's impact on the antebellum southern family.<sup>73</sup>

Wives, sisters, and mothers encouraged bereaved fathers to do what they must to recover—crying, praying, seeking their spouses' comfort, and sometimes even leaving the family to engage in recuperative travel. They also applauded fathers' attempts at resignation. Most of all, women responded to men's grief by discussing their concern with other women. Within the privacy of their households, wives may have reprimanded their husbands for failing to exhibit Christian fortitude, but in writing, women confided their concern for grieving men more readily to one another than they did to the men in question. Cattie Kennedy wrote to her step-daughter, Kate Meares, of Gaston Meares' grief, "my heart feels deeply for him. Maggie was his idol. God grant that this heavy affliction may lead Him to his Savior's side. Give him my love and my heartfelt

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Following the death of her brother-in-law, Martha Means wrote, she had never seen her husband "so deeply distressed." "God grant, that he may be brought to know & feel that this world is not our abiding place & may we all be ready to follow our children & friends who have gone before us."

<sup>73</sup> Varina Howell Davis to Margaret Howell, May 1857, in Davis, *Private Letters*, 88-89; Letter to Cornelia "Nealy" Isabella Christian Lenoir, 19 June 1858, Lenoir Family Papers, SHC. See also Letter to Nealy Lenoir, 8 June 1858, Lenoir Family Papers, SHC. Husbands occasionally strove to restrain their emotions for their wives' sake. While doing so was a southern expectation for women, however, it was applauded in men. Walter Lenoir's female relatives wrote to one another that he was "unselfish even in his sorrow." In the early days after his daughter's death, at least, Lenoir hid his deep grief and feigned cheerfulness for the sake of his wife. In this letter, one of Nealy's sisters told Nealy and Walter that she well understood and sympathized with "the bleeding, wounded, crushed heart beneath that calm exterior [sic]," indicating that she understood the father's "calm exterior" was as much a façade as his wife's.

sympathy.”<sup>74</sup> Kennedy did not ask Meares to inform her husband of his mother-in-law’s hopes that the child’s death might make him a more pious man. Fannie Page Hume, too, remarked upon her sympathy without recommending resignation. “Poor man!” she wrote, “His grief was terrible! The little thing was his pet child.”<sup>75</sup>

Louisa McAllister and Martha Means also commented upon men’s grief to other women, rather than to the men in question. Comparing her uncle’s grief to that of her aunt’s following the death of their young child, McAllister told her mother, “My poor Uncle . . . was very much overcome but it is astonishing to witness the resignation of Aunt Mary who is so truly grateful to God for sparing her husband and two elder children that not a murmur escapes her lips.” Martha Means similarly wrote to her sister-in-law of her husband’s great distress following the death of a beloved relative and shared her hope, “that he may be brought to know & feel that this world is not our abiding place & may we all be ready to follow our children & friends who have gone before us” as a result of his bereavement.<sup>76</sup> Offering love and consolation to men was acceptable; offering instruction—at least in writing—it seems, was not.

In part, plantation mistresses assessed men’s pain to determine how best to quell it. Aside from wanting to make their spouses feel better—or at least to keep them from feeling worse—southern women knew that their continued honor hinged upon society’s opinions of “their” men. Consequently, getting a father back on his feet was important to

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<sup>74</sup> Catherine “Cattie” Kennedy to Kate DeRosset Meares, 4 June 1855, DeRosset Family Papers, SHC. See also Unidentified to “My Dear Mother,” 12 June 1851, Papers of the Kaigler and Davis Families, SCL.

<sup>75</sup> 8 January 1861, Diaries of Fannie Page Hume, UVA.

<sup>76</sup> Louisa McAllister to Sarah Cutler, 27 December 1822, Bulloch Family Papers, SHC; Martha Sarah Howell Means to Claudia Hart Means, 3 May 1847, Mary Hart Means Papers, SCHS.

the whole family.<sup>77</sup> For women who assessed their religious weaknesses and tip-toed around their feelings, fathers were hardly stoic, awe-inspiring patriarchs in times of bereavement. Even if women, children, and slaves saw the discrepancy between patriarchal rhetoric and fathers' reality, the rest of society could not as it was other men, not women, children, and slaves, who determined a father's reputation.<sup>78</sup>

Even within the household, fathers' grief did little to challenge his role. During times of loss and mourning, fathers could break from the usual standards of masculinity and honor, suggesting southern currents of masculinity included sentimentalization of the family and understandings of what it meant to be "masculine" fluctuated. Expressions of emotion and parental devotion which may not have been acceptable in the marketplace flourished in the household, the church, and in correspondence. That men were allowed to fall apart in the wake of a child's death evidences the strength of southern patriarchy as well as its impotence. Men could break social standards, lose emotional control, cry, neglect business dealings, and rely on the support of their dependents without challenge to or loss of stature. Yet, even with the patriarch impaired by sorrow, the household carried on with daily life.

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<sup>77</sup> Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 174.

<sup>78</sup> Friend and Glover, *Southern Manhood*, vii; Lindman, "Acting the Manly Christian," 395.



## Chapter 5

### “Our little circle is broken”: The Plantation Household and Grief

Following the death of her child, Charlestonian Louisa DeBerniere Lane received a consolation letter from her dear friend Alice Hemens. Having suffered the deaths of nine of her eleven children as well as the death of her husband, Hemens expressed confidence that she could empathize with Lane. After assuring Lane that time and “the great Creator” would ultimately heal her wounds, Hemens reminded the bereaved mother of her responsibilities to the Lane family. First and foremost, she wrote, “Remember it is one of your duties, to soothe as much as possible the father of your child” as “the cares & attention of Commerce may be too much for his health if he sees the wife he loves, refuses to be comforted.”<sup>1</sup> Lane should make it her duty to console her husband so that he could continue his business pursuits.

Alice Hemens did not expect Lane to comfort her husband without consolation of her own. Rather, Hemens prayed that her friend would conceive again. For some southern women, a new pregnancy in the aftermath of loss offered reassurance of their status as mothers. For others, a new baby restored the joy of an infant in their homes. Still others saw a tiny piece of their “angel child” in the face of a newborn sibling. Alice’s hope for her friend to conceive was for a fourth and quite different reason. Hemens intended that a new pregnancy and fear of corrupting the unborn child’s personality would cause Lane to stifle her grief, benefitting her and her husband. Hemens had resigned to God’s will, she told Lane, due to her “dread” that continued grief would make her baby nervous and troubled. Alienated from her husband by the desire to shield him from her grief, Hemens focused on her unborn child, hoping that her joy in

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<sup>1</sup> Alice Hemans to Louisa DeBerniere Lane, March 1803, DeBerniere Family Papers, SCHS.

pregnancy and desire to do right by her surviving child could stifle her grief at prior losses. Losing a child, then, complicated the nature of Alice Hemens' relationships with each of her remaining loved ones, and Louisa Lane's relationships, her friend knew, would change as well.<sup>2</sup>

As the letter between these women makes clear, the impact of even a young child's death on surviving family members was profound. The death of a loved one made home a sorrowful place. A friend writing about Caroline Smelt's parents in the weeks after her death mentioned that although they relied upon Christian comforts, "Their house is, as it were, 'left unto them desolate;' for they no longer see their chief earthly joy." Similarly, the recently widowed Elizabeth Webb Strudwick told her son, "Home is to me now the most sad and desolate place on the earth, I know not how I can endure to remain here."<sup>3</sup> Although Christian southerners' understanding of heaven ordained that death did not break family bonds, a child's death and the bereavement that followed fractured the domestic space, changing dynamics among living family members even as they looked forward to a heavenly reunion with the dead.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Alice Hemans to Louisa DeBerniere Lane, March 1803, DeBerniere Family Papers, SCHS.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Webb "Bettie" Strudwick to James, 11 October 1851, Elizabeth Webb Strudwick Papers, SHC. Many bereft parents chose not to endure, leaving home after the death of a child to seek comfort in recuperative springs, friends and family, or a new city. See, for example, A.M. to Elizabeth Jones, 23 September 1817, in Moses Waddel, *Memoirs of the Life of Miss Caroline Elizabeth Smelt, Who Died on the 21<sup>st</sup> September 1817, in the 17<sup>th</sup> Year of her age* (New York: Printed by Daniel Fanshaw, 1818), appendix. See also Letter to Cornelia "Nealy" Isabella Christian Lenoir from her sister, 8 June 1858, Lenoir Family Papers, SHC; Alice Hemans to Louisa DeBernier Lane, March 1803, DeBerniere Family Papers, SCHS; Betty Namson to Virginia Myers McBlair, February 1845, Virginia Myers McBlair Papers, Emory; Mary to Charles Elisha "Charlie" Taylor, 20 August 1860, Charle Elisha Taylor Papers, UVA.

<sup>4</sup> Jean E. Friedman, *The Enclosed Garden: Women and Community in the Evangelical South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 5. See also Elisabeth Donaghy Garrett, *At Home: The American Family, 1750-1870* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1990), 244-245; William Merrill Decker, *Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America before Telecommunications* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 23, 47, 76, 238; Ann Thomas to Ann Fuller, 27 May 1846, Fuller-Thomas Papers, Duke. See also Letter to Sarah Gwyn "Sallie" Lenoir from her husband, 12 September 1858, Lenoir Family Papers, SHC; Sallie Carter Randolph to Isaetta Randolph Hubard, 10 December 1860,

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Grief changed the lives of each member of the plantation household, influencing the relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, and surviving brothers and sisters. Modern grief and bereavement experts agree that the death of a child impacts family dynamics profoundly and irreversibly. Within modern marriages, the death of a child often results in divorce.<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, a child's death creates a new bond between husband and wife that few others can understand. On the other, men and women grieve differently, and, consequently, often grieve separately, creating a rift between them. Fathers commonly withdraw from social interactions just as mothers seek solace in the company of others. Learning how to interact as husband and wife rather

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Hubard-Randolph-Carter Family Papers, UVA. Henrietta Manigault to Elizabeth Manigault Morris, 13 September 1808, Manigault, Morris, and Grimball Family Papers, SHC. Southerners spoke about geographic separation from loved ones, particularly grown children, with only slightly less melancholy than they discussed deaths, indicating the importance they attributed to family dynamics. At first glance, Ann Thomas's letter to her newly married daughter, Anna Fuller, is difficult to distinguish from a condolence letter. Noting that Anna had "changed her condition in life," Thomas bemoaned the loss of her daughter's companionship and described the pain of giving her daughter to another—in this case a man rather than God. "Some have said that we love our children less when there is several," Thomas wrote. "Not so For if you were the only one my feelings would not be more exquisitely sensitive on the occasion." Charlie Taylor's mother, too, wrote of her daughter Jane's departure, that she "doubted whether many felt worse at the death of an infant that I did at her leaving home." "Why should they?" she continued, when a deceased child "entered into rest, perfect enjoyment," while the departing child left her loving family to "enter upon a new, untried life." Few southerners had doubts that death was more painful than a healthy child's departure, but they nevertheless grieved at the loss of any child from the household.

Fathers too struggled at the loss of their daughters. Just as he would have had Isaetta Randolph Hubard actually died, Mr. Randolph was "completely overcome" by the sight of his daughter's room following her departure for her husband's plantation. A night of prayer allowed Randolph to "reason himself into perfect calmness," and allowed Randolph and his wife alike to remind themselves that they "ought to bless & thank God that our little circle is broken by marriage & not by death." It did little, however, to stifle their feelings of loss. Henrietta Manigault, too, remarked on her sadness following her sister and young niece's departure from home. It was "dismal," Manigault remarked, to walk past her sister's room, where "instead of seeing that dear little fatty asleep or laughing & kicking, we see the room locked up." Even the family's domestic "could not help crying" when she entered Henrietta's room. Particularly because grown daughters might die in childbirth, parents had to come to terms with the fact that geographic separation might, indeed, signal a final farewell.

<sup>5</sup> Dennis Klass, *Parental Grief: Solace and Resolution*, Springer Series on Death and Suicide, 9 (New York: Springer Pub. Co., 1988), 41-42. Researchers have estimated the rate of divorce after loss at anywhere from 24 percent to 70 percent.

than as mother and father of a particular child proves too difficult for grieving parents.<sup>6</sup> Whether because of their unique responses to child mortality, the distinct nature of gender dynamics within the family, or simply because divorce was difficult to attain, members of the Old South's planter class rarely divorced their spouses. Instead, losing a child impacted these southerners' marriages in subtle ways, accentuating the social expectations and commitments that worked to keep them apart, yet also highlighting a couple's intimate bond and sometimes drawing husband and wife closer.

Historians of the South suggest that southern culture strained planter marriages even before sorrow tested them. According to historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown "the misogyny which arose from male fear of female power" in the South resulted in marriages marked by antagonism and emotional distance. Steven Stowe agrees. Men and women perceived one another as "removed and mysterious," regarding their courtship letters and intimate interactions as performances.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, while nineteenth-century womanhood idealized suffering and applauded women's selfless

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<sup>6</sup> Ellen Mitchell, Carol Barkin, et al., *Beyond Tears: Living after Losing a Child* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2009), 173; Catherine M. Sanders, *Grief: The Mourning After: Dealing with Adult Bereavement*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1999), 171-175. See also Klass, *Parental Grief*, 41-42.

<sup>7</sup> Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 224-227, 247-250, 275-277; Steven M. Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South: Ritual in the Lives of the Planters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 52-55; Steven M. Stowe, "The Thing Not It's Vision': A Woman's Courtship and Her Sphere in the Southern Planter Class," *Feminist Studies* 9, no. 1 (Spring 1983): 119-122, 124. See also Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 60-71; Daniel Blake Smith, *Inside the Great House: Planter Life in Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 69-73; Catherine Clinton "Caught in the Web of the Big House: Women and Slavery," in Walter J. Fraser, Jr., R. Frank Saunders Jr., and Jon L. Wakelyn, eds., *The Web of Southern Social Relations: Women, Family, and Education* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1985), 28-32; Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 164-179. Clinton argues that the sexual dynamics of slavery, which granted sexual power to white males over white and black women made plantation mistresses vigilant about preserving their own honor and that of their family. Constantly guarding against husbands' sexual transgressions strained the marital relationship.

devotion to others, nineteenth-century masculinity and patriarchy came with expectations of their own. Anne Firor Scott contends that women's awareness of the "gap between the cavalier of the image and the husband of the reality" exacerbated the alienation caused by gender expectations. Death, too, intensified the distinct lives of men and women.<sup>8</sup>

As these historians imply, bereft parents' support networks were often gender-specific. Nevertheless, in times of grief, spouses seem not to have experienced antagonism within their marriages as Wyatt-Brown, Stowe, and others have contended.<sup>9</sup> Partners who were separated from one another wrote of their great loneliness and desire to be together, and their unions were often quite loving and mutually supportive. Joseph Alston, for example, wrote proudly to his father-in-law Aaron Burr that he and his wife both grieved "if not with dignity, at least with decency and firmness." Of his wife, he continued, "Theodosia has endured all that a human being could endure; but her admirable mind will triumph. She supports herself in a manner worthy of your daughter."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Nancy M. Theriot, *Mothers and Daughters in Nineteenth-Century America: The Biosocial Function of Femininity* (Lexington, Ky: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 65-67; Anne Firor Scott, "Women's Perspective on the Patriarchy," *Journal of American History*, 58; Scott Stephan, *Redeeming the Southern Family: Evangelical Women and Domestic Devotion in the Antebellum South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 193; Steven M. Stowe, "Writing Sickness: A Southern Woman's Diary of Cares," in Susan V. Donaldson and Anne Goodwyn Jones, eds., *Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1997), 258. Both Stephan and Stowe contend that "working the deathbed" had different meanings for women than it did for men. A child's sickness threatened a woman's home and family by making home a dangerous place. Nursing and ministering to the ill offered women the opportunity to waylay this threat and potentially save a soul, if not a life.

<sup>9</sup> See also Joan E. Cashin, "The Structure of Antebellum Planter Families: 'The Ties that Bound Us Was Strong'," *The Journal of Southern History* 56, no. 1 (February 1990): 56. Cashin writes of the plantation household, its "borders were permeable and its structure was elastic." She also contends that southern elites sought emotional support outside the household, little expecting that nuclear family members alone should fulfill their emotional needs. In the context of grief, southerners certainly sought support and emotional fulfillment outside the home, most often with relatives of the same sex. They turned to their spouses as equally important, if parallel, sources of comfort.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Alston to Aaron Burr, 26 July 1812, in Theodosia Burr Alston, *Correspondence of Aaron Burr and His Daughter Theodosia*, ed. by Mark Van Doren (New York: Convici-Friede, 1929), 343-344.

At the same time spouses sought comfort from one another, their increased need for companionship highlighted the pressure placed on relationships by southern understandings of gender.<sup>11</sup> Most prominently, planter husbands rarely canceled travel required for business in order to be home with their grieving wives or ailing children, and southern wives' words reveal that they wished for more emotional intimacy than they received. According to Anya Jabour, new standards of romantic love competed against old understandings of southern patriarchy in such a way that miscommunications abounded between husband and wife. In Jabour's estimation, "male domesticity," which developed as a result of the companionate ideal, drove husbands from home. While men relished an idealized vision of home, they believed that providing for their families reflected their love. The more they loved, then, the harder they worked, often conducting business far from home.<sup>12</sup> For bereft fathers, loving, supportive letters from home fulfilled their understanding of a companionate marriage; for grieving mothers, isolated on their plantations, only a spouses' physical presence would do.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See Friedman, *The Enclosed Garden*, 35-37. Contrary to what Friedman argues, at least in diaries and correspondence, southern wives rarely revealed that they believed "overweening dependency" on their husbands to be a dangerous display of idolatry. Though grief-stricken mothers regularly worried that "idolizing" their child had resulted in the child's death, at least in times of bereavement, they did not have the same concern with their husbands.

<sup>12</sup> Anya Jabour, *Marriage in the Early Republic: Elizabeth and William Wirt and the Companionate Idea*, *Gender Relations in the American Experience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 3-7, 39-55. See, for example, Julia Blanche Munroe Kell Diary, 16 October 1864, John McIntosh Kell Papers, GHS. Julia and John Kell spent just two of their first eight years of marriage together due to Kell's military duties and the Civil War.

<sup>13</sup> See also Garrett, *At Home*, 244-245. Using the example of William Wirt, Garrett argues that at times, southern spouses were simply too overcome by their own grief to offer comfort to anyone else. Wirt supported his wife after the death of their nineteen-year-old son. When their sixteen-year-old daughter died seven years later, however, Wirt was too distraught to comfort his wife or handle daily duties, and he consequently "turned increasingly away from the mundane, seeking solace in religion."

Historian Steven Stowe cautions against accepting the emotions expressed in parents' letters as a reflection of reality. Because true intimacy "must be seen as rather subversive in its southern context"—since it signaled a man's engagement with the feminine sphere of emotions—Stowe argues that letters between southern spouses rarely reflect actual intimacy rather than its ideal. Stowe is correct that written correspondence described emotions in self-conscious, formulaic prose. An examination of paternal grief, however, demonstrates that expectations for masculinity and honor were flexible, at least in times of grief. As long as men continued their public duties, emotion and intimacy did little to undermine their mastery of home. For women, asking for consolation from their spouses violated a number of southern maxims, particularly that they must not burden their spouses with their grief. It seems likely, then, that couples' correspondence about grief reflects genuine emotion rather than emotional ideals. Yes, southerners wrote to their spouses about grief using set conventions, but that was not the same as writing formulaically. Emotionally devastated, southerners fell back on conventions when their own words failed them; they did not use conventions to create a façade.<sup>14</sup>

Relying on a spouses' emotional support required the slaveholders of the seaboard states to disregard the social mores dictating that they stifle their grief.<sup>15</sup> In reality, such

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<sup>14</sup> Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South*, 2-4, 58, 121, 215. See also Stowe, " 'The Thing Not It's Vision' ," 128; Jan Lewis, *The Pursuit of Happiness: Family and Values in Jefferson's Virginia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), xv; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*, Gender & American Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 111; Decker, *Epistolary Practices*, 9-14; Stephen M. Frank, *Life with Father: Parenthood and Masculinity in the Nineteenth-Century North* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 91-92;. In his study of the nineteenth-century North, Frank also argues that affection cannot be taken at face value. Rather, he refers to "marital manliness" and suggests that northern men viewed romantic love and the companionate ideal as the "modern means of exercising domestic authority." Expressions of love, then, were only covert coercion. Fox-Genovese and Decker concur that letter-writing was intended to reflect status and was known to be both public and private.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Marjorie Spalding Kell to Julie Blanche "Bannie" Munroe Kell, 26 January 1864, John McIntosh Kell Papers, Duke; Fanny McBlair to Virginia Myers McBlair, 19 February 1845, and

expectations did little to keep planter husbands and wives from being empathetic with one another's emotions following the death of a child. In some instances, spouses were intuitive enough to recognize even carefully hidden sorrow. Virginian James Ramsey was one such spouse. Following the death of his young son, Ramsey wrote to his wife's family that his wife's washing the baby's clothing was "a mournful task for her," which he deduced when she quietly slipped away to sew for the rest of the day.<sup>16</sup>

In other cases, a parent's emotions simply overcame them, causing an unexpected outpouring of grief. Caroline Smelt's father, overcome with grief at his daughter's rapid decline while he was away, threw himself down at the child's bedside and "manifested great emotion," causing his wife to "feel greatly agitated." Grieving the death of her stillborn child, and struggling with doubts about God's benevolence, Nealy Lenoir's sister wrote, "I have tried to hide it down in my own heart & do my duty by at least seeming cheerfully submissive when with my good, forbearing husband . . . but at times

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Louisa Myers to Virginia Myers McBlair, 24 September 1845, Virginia Myers McBlair Papers, MARBL. Relatives warned both Bannie Kell and Virginia McBlair to mask their melancholy and spare their husbands. One relative urged Kell that performing her daily duties despite her "dark & gloomy" mood would force sad thoughts out of her head "to give place to more cheerful ones." McBlair's sister-in-law asked her to shore up for the sake of her mother and husband. Her mother much more forcefully warned Virginia of the "consequences" of her glum demeanor, which, she believed, was "calculated to mortify your excellent Husband." See also Elizabeth "Eliza" Douglas Wilkins Bruce to James Coles Bruce, undated 1854, Bruce Family Papers, VHS.

<sup>16</sup> James B. Ramsey to "Father, Mother, Brother & Sister"—his wife's family—15 August 1849, George Junkin Ramsey Papers, Duke; Waddel, *Memoirs of the Life of Miss Caroline Elizabeth Smelt*, 70. By the time Ramsey wrote his in-laws about his wife's bereavement, she had died. Consequently, the main subject of Ramsey's letter was his own struggle coming to terms with what he called the loss of "all my dearest earthly joys." In the days following his wife's death, Ramsey wrote, "I felt myself completely shut out from that peace of God that passeth [sic] all understanding, from the enjoyment of that hope that maketh [sic] not ashamed. Whether I looked upward or downward, forward or backward, all was impenetrable gloom, the world appeared in its true worthlessness—a vanity of vanities—and heaven frowned."



it all comes over me—so vividly—so painfully—that my unsubdued will is ready to rebel again.”<sup>17</sup> Smelt and Lenoir’s agony was too great to be restrained by social expectations.

In addition to those who unintentionally revealed their feelings, some southerners disregarded the advice to hide their grief and called on their spouse for support. Women in particular relied on their husbands for consolation. Sarah Fife referenced the comfort she drew from her husband when she recorded, “I should have sunk under it if my darling husband had not met me . . . God sent him I know, in answer to my prayers.” Fife’s “dear sweet husband” had shared his wife’s nursing duties as well as her love and anxiety for their child, and Fife clung to him “as the vine does to its supporting tree.”<sup>18</sup> Emma Bryant also wrote of her longing to “cling” to her absent husband as their “little baby,” their “little darling,” their “first born, perhaps only child” languished. Venue Florence, moreover, explained to her fiancé, Abram Minis, that because it was wrong to inflict the “sad forebodings” of her heart on others, she expressed them only to him.<sup>19</sup> Like those fathers who used the household as a safe, private space for the open expression of their melancholy, some mothers used their husbands as safe havens for expressions of grief.

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<sup>17</sup> Waddel, *Memoirs of the Life of Miss Caroline Elizabeth Smelt*, 70; Letter to Cornelia “Nealy” Isabella Christian Lenoir, 2 June 1858, Lenoir Family Papers, SHC. See also Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis to Elizabeth Bordley, November 20, 1820, in Lewis, *George Washington’s Beautiful Nelly*, 90. Nelly Lewis found her home “blank” without her daughter, but despite her pain, she noted, “I have not told Mr L anything that would affect him. He never witnessed her sufferings, & is perfectly reconciled. She is ever before me, in health & in her last illness, but I do not wish to forget her ever.”

<sup>18</sup> 9 September 1869, 3 October 1869, Diary of Sarah Ann Graves Strickler Fife, UVA; Lavinia “Venie” Florance to Abram Minis, 28 December 1850, Minis Family Papers, GHS. Within this letter, Venie, wrote that although she did not “wish to distress” Abram, “still I feel I might in justice to your affection, make you the sharer of my sorrows, as of my joys.” See also Nancy Gray Schoonmaker, “As Though it Were Unto the Lord: Sarah Morgan Dawson and Nineteenth-Century Mourning” (MA Thesis: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2001). Schoonmaker’s thesis demonstrates the significance of family members for comfort, particularly in times of loss.

<sup>19</sup> Emma Bryant to John Emory Bryant, 23 March 1869, John Emory Bryant Papers, Duke.

Even couples with estranged relationships could grow closer during times of grief. Georgian Gertrude Thomas struggled to maintain her proper role as a dutiful wife when her husband, Jefferson, wrecked the family finances, drank heavily, and generally failed to behave as she believed a loving husband should. Early in their marriage, Gertrude sought a partnership that reflected her expectations for a companionate marriage. She hoped that accepting her husband's faults would strengthen the "calm trusting happiness" of their marriage even as he wounded her pride by rebuffing her requests for kisses and ignoring her loving words. Eventually, Jefferson's faults simply irritated Gertrude.<sup>20</sup>

Even so, in times of bereavement, Jefferson was a primary source of comfort to her. Following the death of the couple's premature son, Gertrude anxiously awaited Mr. Thomas's return. As she did so, Thomas noted in her diary how much "nearer and dearer" she and Jefferson felt since their affliction. When Gertrude's mother left following the child's death, Jefferson took her place at his wife's side. The effort was not lost on her: "The last few days have been sad yet this sadness has been in a very great degree alleviated by the truest, the kindest sympathy from my husband," she wrote. "Oh what a precious blessing it is in our hours of such deep affliction to have the strong heart of a loving and loved one upon whose manly and strong heart to lean for sympathy and

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<sup>20</sup> Diary of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, 10 March 1856, 20 February 1857, 30 November 1858, in Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, *The Secret Eye: The Journal of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, 1848-1889*, ed. by Virginia Ingraham Burr with an intro. by Nell Irvin Painter (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 143, 154. See also Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 14, 20, 24, 30; Lewis, *George Washington's Beautiful Nelly*, 9, 11. Like Gertrude's love for her spouse, Nelly's affection for her husband, Lawrence, cooled as he failed to fulfill her idea of a loving husband. Editor Patricia Brady also suspects that the deaths of six of the couple's eight children contributed to their estranged relationship.

support.”<sup>21</sup> Jefferson worked tirelessly to console his wife and she warmed to him correspondingly.

John Emory Bryant, unlike Jefferson Thomas, remained absent from his home despite his loving letters and stated desire to return.<sup>22</sup> Social and business commitments regularly kept planters away from their plantations, creating geographic distance between grieving parents. Often, fathers’ unwillingness or inability to return home was a profound source of sorrow for both parents that strained their marriages even as they turned to one another for support. Hannah Florance tried to spare her husband the pain of being away during their child’s death by withholding news of a daughter’s illness. Mr. Florance was already ill when he left their Savannah home, Hannah reasoned, and he had business obligations that could not be neglected. To save him the “pain and suffering” inherent to choosing between home and business, Mrs. Florance kept news of their daughter’s illness to herself.<sup>23</sup> Had daughter Rosy died during her father’s trip, Hannah’s approach might have increased his melancholy. Another southern child asked for her

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<sup>21</sup> Diary of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, January 1856 in Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 141; 5 January 1856, volume 6, pages 99-100, Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas Diaries, Duke; Virginia I. Burr, “A Woman made to Suffer and Be Strong: Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, 1834-1907,” in Carol Bleser, ed., *In Joy and in Sorrow: Women, Family, and Marriage in the Victorian South, 1830-1900*, Papers of the Fort Hill Conference on Southern Culture, held at Clemson University in the Spring of 1989 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 215-219. See also William Nugent to Eleanor Smith Nugent, 6 July 1864, in William M. Cash and Lucy Somerville Howorth, eds., *My Dear Nellie: The Civil War Letters of William L. Nugent to Eleanor Smith Nugent* (Jackson, Miss., 1977), 187, cited in James Marten, “Fatherhood in the Confederacy: Southern Soldiers and Their Children,” *The Journal of Southern History* 63, no. 2 (May 1997): 291. William Nugent explained the bond that parenting created between husbands and wives when he wrote that children were a daily example of parent’s “spiritual unity.” In fact, Nugent wrote, “It is only when the innocent child is prattling around their knees that they feel that oneness so indeterminate before.”

<sup>22</sup> See Marla R.S. Ebenhart to Emma Bryant, 13 May 1867, John Emory Bryant Papers, Duke. Like many other women, Emma relied upon female companionship. One friend commanded, “I shall expect a reply to this letter telling me that you are coming very soon. We will have such a nice time . . . . We can console each other upon the absence of our dear husbands.”

<sup>23</sup> Venie Florance to Abram Minis, 10 November 1850, Minis Family Papers, GHS. See also Diary of Mahala Roach, 21 August 1857, Roach and Eggleston Family Papers, SHC.

father as she lay on her death bed, and “when ever she heard a step on the stair she would look up in expectation of seeing him.” In fact, “her last effort was to raise up & look towards the door when she thought she heard his voice.” Her fathers’ travels ensured that the child’s efforts would be fruitless; he did not reach the child’s side until some time after her death, causing him agony “as he looked upon the idol of his affections . . . cold, lifeless & unable to return the fond caresses which he bestowed upon her.”<sup>24</sup>

The letters exchanged between Frances Webster and her husband, Lucien Webster, an officer in the United States military, offer a poignant demonstration of the effects of geographic isolation on grieving spouses. Wives wished for a partner to aid their wearied nursing efforts and to comfort them after a child’s death, while husbands experienced regret when children died in their absence. As their young son Santa sickened in June 1846, Frances Webster wrote her husband, “if you were only here what a comfort and relief it would be, but now I am fairly worn out with watching, weariness, and discomfort.” Webster had no relief from her nursing duties. Even as her daughter Fanny slowly recovered from an illness during which she cried for her father nightly, her brother, “Santa,” grew sicker. By September, Santa was “hovering between life and death,” emaciated as a result of his illness. Although the eight-month-old seemed much healthier by November, he sickened again in May 1847, becoming “mere skin and bone” and “hollow eyed.” In each letter, Frances remarked that her husband’s presence would relieve her greatly. Although she suspected he would find her “sadly changed . . . grown

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<sup>24</sup> Nannie to Mollie Granberry, 13 February 1844, John Lancaster Bailey Papers, SHC. See also Nancy C. Walton to Jane Gurley, 16 January 1836, Jane Gurley Papers, SHC. Nancy Walton worried about her husband’s grief even in the midst of her own, particularly because he had been away during the time of his child’s death. “She died on Thursday the 24<sup>th</sup> of Sept. & her Father did not get home till saturday evening,” Walton wrote, “Oh what sorrow fill’d [sic] my husband’s heart I never saw him grieve so much before.”

*old* with care and anxiety,” Frances all but begged Lucien to return. Frances sometimes felt as if his absence would kill her.

Letters expressing her desire for Lucien’s consolation also referenced an additional source of sadness for Frances. Because he was away so often, Lucien was a stranger to his son, rendering him incapable of comprehending the full weight of his wife’s grief. Frances was keenly aware that her husband hardly knew their child. “If we must lose him,” she wrote him in one letter, “you will not feel his loss so deeply as you would if you had been constantly with him.” In another, she explained her sorrow “in the thought that we may lose this precious child, without your knowing him, or having the thousand little recollections which are such sweet sorrow to cherish after the loved one is taken from us.”<sup>25</sup>

When Frances’ fears became a reality and Santa died in August 1847 while his father was still away, it was Lucien’s turn to worry. Lucien mentioned his own sadness at their loss, but quickly turned to his wife, whose melancholy he knew would be heightened by her separation from husband and friends. Lucien’s heart “bled” for his wife, he told her, and he toyed with the idea of “sacrificing everything” in order to return home and comfort her. In the end, however, like so many southern fathers, Lucien reminded Frances, “it is to God alone we must look for consolation,” and left her to mourn alone.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Frances Marvin Smith Webster to Lucien Bonaparte Webster, 26 June 1846 and 28 September 1846, in Frances Marvin Smith Webster, *The Websters: Letters of an Army Family in Peace and War, 1836-1853*, ed. Van R. Baker (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2000), 83, 114-115; Frances Webster to Lucien Webster, 15 November 1846, 18 May 1847, 4 July 1847, 18 July 1847, 5 August 1847, 17 August 1847, in Webster, *The Websters*, 124, 181-187.

<sup>26</sup> Lucien Webster to Frances Webster, 26 September 1847, in Webster, *The Websters*, 190-191.

Even those spouses who shared the same domestic space could experience emotional distance. Margaret Dickins, for example, implored her husband to “come home soon,” but her words to him demonstrate an understanding that even once he returned he might not offer support. “I long to see you and talk to you for comfort if you will only let me,” she wrote, “but sometimes you will not & then I suffer more than you can know.” Paul and Anne Cameron experienced similar estrangement. According to historian Sally McMillen, the hardships of Anne Cameron’s life, including the stillbirth of her first child, plunged her into despair and drug addiction. Her addiction made Paul Cameron fearful to leave his wife and attend to his business needs. Anne, for her part, expected his support even in her darkest hours, but worried about the effect of her melancholy on her spouse. Although it was generally uncommon for her to reveal her emotions, Anne once wrote, “last year was one of so much *mental* suffering, to say nothing of bodily ailments, that I have determined to find composure by opening my heart at last to you *you* know what it is to feel as I now do.” Paul was the only person who understood what it meant to lose their child, and Anne consequently turned to him for empathy even though she felt it necessary to “beg” him not to reprimand her for revealing her grief. Her grief was “altogether uncontrollable,” Anne explained to Paul, “and even in your most *unreasonable* times *I* never forsook *you* or turned a deaf ear to your complaints.” Still, if her husband expressed his desire for her to stifle her feelings, Ann assured him she would.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Margaret Dickins to Francis Asbury Dickins, 29 August 1829, Francis Asbury Dickins Papers, SHC. See also Sally G. McMillen, *Motherhood in the Old South: Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Infant Rearing* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 177-178; Anne Cameron to Paul Cameron, 18 May 1850, Cameron Family Papers, SHC.

Although outright antagonism was rare, spousal tension abounded for couples grieving the death of a child, particularly when public ambition and obligation kept grieving parents apart. Still, grief rarely turned nineteenth-century southern spouses against one another. Keenly aware of one another's grief and apt to look for solace within the marital relationship, southerners nevertheless found that gender expectations and social obligations limited the support they could offer. Letters and words had to suffice in situations where women in particular needed assistance and companionship. The death of a child, then, signaled a transition in the lives of his parents.

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Surviving children were a recognized source of comfort for their grieving parents. After the death of a child, friends and relatives hoping to console regularly pointed to a couple's remaining little ones. Such children were one source of joy and comfort in devastated households. A relative writing to Lewis Whittle from Norfolk, Virginia described his "delight" that his kinsman had "a son to supply in some measure the loss of our dear little Norcisco." Robert E. Lee shared his daughter-in-law's his deep sorrow at the death of his granddaughter, particularly because he had hoped the child would "fill so full the void still aching in your hearts."<sup>28</sup> One regional periodical, *The Magnolia*, even suggested that a surviving child was like a flower—something "lovely...to gaze upon" and a reminder of God in the midst of grief.<sup>29</sup> For faithful southern elites, surviving children represented a blessing from God that required gratitude. At the very least,

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<sup>28</sup> I.J. Whittle to Lewis Neale Whittle, 25 October 1847, Lewis Neale Whittle Papers, SHC; Robert E. Lee to Charlotte Georgiana Wickham Lee, 10 December 1862, George Bolling Lee Papers, VHS. See also Diary of Mahala Roach, 31 August 1857, Roach and Eggleston Family Papers, SHC.

<sup>29</sup> "The Happy Effects of a Well Regulated Mind," *The Magnolia; or, Southern Appalachian* (December 1841), 567-570.

friends and relatives wrote, surviving children were cause to feign resignation and cheerfulness, set a good example, and carry on with one's duties.<sup>30</sup>

Southern parents of both genders gravely feared being "left childless." For women, maternity was the central element of womanhood; for men, children strengthened their fathers' status as master, patriarch, and honorable southerner. Being spared the fate of childlessness regularly elicited gratitude from bereft parents and those who supported them. In a letter to her son, Nathan, Bannie Kell compared his relative blessings to the misfortunes of others, writing, "I have thanked God that you were not left childless. I have very recently been with a friend who in the present year has been left twice childless, three were first taken from her by the ravages of scarlet fever & the fourth one, an infant of four months, she laid by its little companions in the cold grave." Bannie expressed gratitude that she had lost just one grandbaby among several, allowing her son and daughter-in-law to continue on as parents even in the midst of loss. Fear of becoming parents without children was widespread enough to warrant mention in an epistolary manual. In the template for "A Child's Death—From a Father to his Friend"

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<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Thomas Butler King to Hannah Couper, 30 November 1852, William Audley Couper Papers, SHC; Rachel Mordecai Lazarus to Caroline Mordecai Plunkett, 15 May 1823, Mordecai Family Papers, SHC. According to her father, Hannah Couper must not allow her grief to keep her from recognizing the blessings in her life. Her "duty" to spouse and child, he hoped, would remind her that "cheerfulness is necessary to your and their happiness." Furthermore, her cheerfulness was a crucial example to her children of resignation to God's will. Not realizing he, too, had died, Rachael Mordecai Lazarus similarly reminded her sister that her surviving son's health depended upon her state of mind. "This will be at once the most powerful & the sweetest incentive to resignation & composure," she wrote. See also Anna Matilda Page King to Hannah Couper, 17 October 1852, William Audley Couper Papers, SHC; Carter Henry Harrison to Susan Isham Harrison Blain, 11 October 1842, Harrison Family Papers, UVA. Hannah's mother also urged her daughter, nicknamed "Tootee," and son-in-law to resign for the sake of their children. To Tootee she wrote, "Remember my child there are yet 3 precious children left. Oh! may they be spared to you." She instructed William, meanwhile, "For poor Tootees [sic] sake & for your other dear children do you my William look to God for consolation." Carter Henry Harrison also insinuated that children gave a bereft woman purpose. Harrison reassured his sister that she need not come help care for his bereft wife, Ianetta, as she had "three dear little pledges of your own to divide at least the endearing attentions of a mother." Instead, Fanny, a family friend, would care for Ianetta since she did not have children "on which to lavish the affections of a bereaved heart."



the correspondent begged his friend's compassion and understanding as a father. "I *have* been one," he wrote, "but *now* am childless."<sup>31</sup>

Childlessness was a particularly devastating blow for mothers.<sup>32</sup> John Plunkett and Ellen Mordecai each wrote letters exclaiming with horror that the death of young Charles just on the heels of Alfred's death rendered Caroline "Childless!" Rachel Mordecai Lazarus's words perhaps best demonstrate southern parents' reactions to the prospect of being left without children. In a letter to her sister, Ellen, Rachel wrote that reflecting upon Caroline's loss changed the way she viewed her own child: "I pressed my poor sick darling to my heart, & prayed to God, that unworthy tho' we were, such sorrow might not be our portion."<sup>33</sup>

In many cases, the bereft acknowledged that in addition to relieving parents from childlessness, surviving children did bring them comfort in the midst of loss. Mary Henderson's skepticism that the birth of her eighth child could rouse her from feeling "sad and sorrowful all the time" was rare. Instead, parents followed the example of Mary Lenoir Davenport, who told her sister-in-law that despite her "dejected" spirits, she

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<sup>31</sup> Julie Blanche "Bannie" Munroe Kell to Nathan Munroe, 24 December 1863, John McIntosh Kell Papers, Duke; "A Child's Death.—From a Father to his Friend," in *The American Letter-Writer, and Mirror of Polite Behavior* (Philadelphia: Fisher and Brother, 1851), 136-138. See also Esther Cox to Mary Chesnut, 9 May 1801, Papers of the Cox and Chesnut Families, SCL.

<sup>32</sup> Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 236-240. Though children contributed to men's honor more directly than women's, barrenness and spinsterhood were still causes of shame and pity. See also Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 353-354. Fox-Genovese cites the example of Mary Chesnut when discussing the role of children in women's lives. In an effort to spare her childless friend public scorn, Chesnut lied telling friends and acquaintances that the woman had once had three children.

<sup>33</sup> John D. Plunkett to Ellen Mordecai, 16 May 1823, Jacob Mordecai Papers, Duke; Ellen Mordecai to Jacob Mordecai, 22 May 1823, Jacob Mordecai Papers, Duke; Rachel Mordecai Lazarus to Ellen Mordecai, 25 May 1823, Jacob Mordecai Papers, Duke. See also Martha Hunter Hitchcock, quoted in Anya Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters: Young Women in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 216-217. Virginian Martha Hitchcock believed there was "no *slave* in the world, as the woman, who has but one child." After many miscarriages, Hitchcock obsessed herself with her daughter's health, constantly aware that she was but one child away from childlessness.

recognized God's continued blessings in her life, particularly "another sweet little daughter which seems in some degree to fill the place of the one that is no more."<sup>34</sup> Following the birth of her ninth child in 1833, Elizabeth Anderson expressed her gratitude to God, "for in the birth of this beloved child has my heart been cheered by the possession of another little object to rest its affections upon after being stricken and sorely oppressed by the loss of three dear ones in close succession [*sic*]." Lucy Cocke similarly noted that she saw her surviving children as evidence of God's benevolence. In Cocke's estimation, Nannie's death rather than one of her older siblings' demonstrated God's wisdom. She was especially pleased that the son on whom she relied when Mr. Cocke was travelling had been spared. Cocke saw God's "tender indulgence" in the birth of "a precious Little Girl . . . given us it seems, just to fill the vacuum occasioned in our life."<sup>35</sup>

As Cocke's stated thankfulness that Nannie died rather than another child suggests, the relationship between parents and their surviving children was complex. Despite recognizing their surviving children as blessings—or at least as reasons to curb their public expressions of grief—elite southern parents did not stop mourning one child simply because they had others. However thankful parents might be that they had not been "left childless," and no matter the comfort they drew from their surviving children, no one child could ever replace another. In the words of one Virginian, "we sympathize most deeply with you in the loss of one of your precious dear little children, whose

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<sup>34</sup> Mary Ferrand Henderson Diary, 31 October 1855, John Steele Henderson Papers, SHC; Mary Lenoir Davenport to Selina "Louisa" Lenoir, 29 September 1807, Lenoir Family Papers, SHC.

<sup>35</sup> Page 17, Elizabeth Willis Gloster Anderson Memoranda, SHC; 15 April 1855, Lucy C. Cocke Diaries, UVA. See also 15 January 1851, Lucy C. Cocke Diaries, UVA; Julia Blanche Munroe Kell Diary, November 1863, John McIntosh Kell Paper, GHS.

vacancy cannot be filled by any other.”<sup>36</sup> For both parent and child, death left a void within which new family dynamics had to be forged.

Like Lucy Cocke, Margaret Dickins chose favorites amidst her living and deceased children. During her bereavement, Dickins reminisced with her husband about their angel Mary’s sensitive nature, quite different from daughter Fanny who could “maintain her own.” Both Margaret and Francis Dickins cherished Mary’s sensitive personality especially because it could not be replaced by Fanny’s more head-strong character.<sup>37</sup> Another southerner named Hamilton feared the death of each of his sons, but worried especially about losing his youngest son because the boy reminded him of his late wife.<sup>38</sup> Southerners believed that the good of the family subsumed the rights of individual members, and women and children defined themselves in reference to the family, forging their identity from their domestic roles. Nevertheless, southern parents recognized the irreplaceable nature of their children.<sup>39</sup> Like Dickins and Cocke, southern parents recognized their children as individuals and, in many cases, felt quite comfortable choosing favorites among them.

Although there were many reasons for a parents’ particular fondness for one child, age and gender most frequently impacted a child’s position in their parents’

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<sup>36</sup> Mary Ann Grigsby McCormick to Martha T. Grigsby Herbert and George S. Herbert, 16 November 1858, Grigsby Family Papers, VHS.

<sup>37</sup> October 1869, especially 10 October 1869, Sarah Ann Graves Strickler Fife Diary, UVA; Margaret Harvie Randolph Dickins to Francis Asbury Dickins, 9 August 1849, Francis Asbury Dickins Papers, SHC.

<sup>38</sup> Hamilton to May, 4 April 1845, Mrs. E.A. Pearson Papers, Duke.

<sup>39</sup> Eugene Genovese, “‘Our Family, White and Black’: Family and Household in the Southern Slaveholders’ World View,” in Bleser, *In Joy and In Sorrow*, 71, 74-75; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, “Family and Female Identity in the Antebellum South: Sarah Gayle and Her Family,” in Bleser, *In Joy and In Sorrow*, 19-21.

hearts.<sup>40</sup> Often, parents favored eldest children and children of their same gender.<sup>41</sup>

Adrian Campbell, for example, grieved the illness of his only surviving son, James. The child's impending death caused Campbell to think that "death is leveling his darts at the very objects that above all others are most dear to me." Although he considered himself blessed, as his daughters were quite interesting and intelligent, he bemoaned the fact that it was his sons and not his daughters who had died in childhood. The girls, he explained, despite their worthy characteristics, would do little to increase his honor: "Their names will all be lost or go to increase the importance perhaps of some other family."<sup>42</sup> George Wythe Randolph and Benjamin Perry, too, lauded the benefits of sons. Randolph noted

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<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Charles Hentz's Diary, 9 July 1864, in Steven M. Stowe, ed., *A Southern Practice: The Diary and Autobiography of Charles A. Hentz, M.D.* (Charlottesville: Published for the Southern Texts Society by the University Press of Virginia, 2000), 599; Laura H. Wirt to Louisa Elizabeth Carrington, 23 May 1831, Letters from Laura H. Wirt to Louisa Carrington, UVA; A.T. Preston to Laetitia Floyd, 22 January 1847, John Warfield Johnston Papers, Duke. Though physician Charles Hentz said little in his diary of the deaths of four other children, he made special exception for his daughter Mollie, whom he called "the handsomest of our children." Mollie was "a splendid child...well grown and developed for her age.... she was an independent, outspoken little darling." Laura Wirt was too tired from having babies and attending to them to have a favorite child. Regardless, her own indifference did not keep her from noticing that like Hentz, her husband had one. Of their daughters, little Agnes was "her father's favourite [sic]." Finally, it is not clear whether Laetitia Floyd's sister was experiencing bereavement or the similar grief of geographical separation. Nevertheless, she referenced the distinctions she made between her children when she wrote, "my poor old heart is sad—one of my idols has been taken from me, the only child to whom I thought I had an exclusive right, the Son that my beloved Husband called upon when on his death bed to protect me has been torn from me by the unholy policy of an weak and ambitious Ruler." This "weak and ambitious Ruler" was not God, but James K. Polk.

<sup>41</sup> See Catherine M. Sanders, *Grief: The Mourning After: Dealing with Adult Bereavement*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 1999), 15, 137, 164. Contemporary grief theorists believe that the nature of a child's death changes the grief response. That does not appear to have been the case in the nineteenth-century. Today, the sudden death of a child and the shock associated with it create a greater number of somatic problems in grieving parents. The child's gender and age, however, have little effect. In the nineteenth-century plantation South, age and gender of the deceased affected grief, while the circumstances of their death did not.

<sup>42</sup> Adrian James Campbell to his brother, 31 March 1840, Campbell Family Papers, Duke. See also Daniel Huger to Maurice Harvey Lance, 17 July 1817, Lance Lambert Papers in the Bacot-Huger Collection, SCHS. See also Anna Matilda King to Hannah Page "Tootee" King Couper, 26 June 1852, William Audley Couper Papers, SHC. In describing an omnibus accident in which two "poor little boys" were killed instantly and several more severely injured, Anna King implied that one of the children's deaths was particularly tragic because he was the youngest child of a widow who had buried her eldest son just three weeks before.

his “heartfelt joy and gratitude” that his brother and sister-in-law had had a son.

Although he knew his sister-in-law “would have liked a daughter better,” Randolph continued, “the awful fear of eight daughters all in a row makes us glad not to see them succeed each other.”<sup>43</sup> Perry demonstrated his preference for sons when he promised wife Elizabeth the rocking chair she so desired only if she gave birth to a baby boy.<sup>44</sup>

Despite inheritance concerns and the belief in male superiority, women’s desire for companionship in their children meant that they often favored grown daughters or young children.<sup>45</sup> Expressing the feelings of many mothers, Agnes Cabell wrote to her stepdaughter, Louisa, following the birth of Louisa’s first daughter predicting that, though her affection for her sons would not disappear, “you will perceive a difference in the kind of affection you will feel for your little girl though not in the degree. You will love them all equally, but she will have more of your tenderness.”<sup>46</sup> Gertrude Thomas, too, considered herself doubly blessed by God when she gave birth to a little girl several years after her firstborn’s death. Members of the Henry Harrison Cocke family especially loved their youngest children. Two children died, the family believed, after

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<sup>43</sup> George Wythe Randolph to his sister-in-law, 1838 [?], Correspondence of the Randolph and Hubard Families, UVA.

<sup>44</sup> 13 February 1838, Elizabeth Frances Perry Diary, SHC.

<sup>45</sup> V. Lynn Kennedy, *Born Southern: Childbirth, Motherhood, and Social Networks in the Old South* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 114-117. Kennedy argues that southerners’ traditional desire for male children clashed with their new ideas that all babies were precious and that God controlled everything, even the sex of a couple’s child. Consequently, mothers often couched their preference for male children in new terms. Baby boys were not superior, these women argued, but life was easier for them.

<sup>46</sup> Agnes Gamble Cabell to Louisa Cabell Carrington, 2 November 1825, Letters of the Cabell and Carrington Families, UVA. See also Margaret Izard Manigault to Elizabeth Manigault Morris, 16 November 1807, Manigault, Morris, and Grimball Family Papers, SHC. When her eldest daughter married, Margaret Manigault told her, “you know not yet what a mother feels for all her children-much less her sensations when separated seriously for the first time from her first born, from one who has been for twenty years the object of her tenderest solicitude.”

their aunt Elizabeth gave them unripe peaches. Elizabeth suggested the surviving sibling was just too old to fill the home with the same “joyful tones” that her twin siblings had. For Richmond native Maria Tucker, on the other hand, the loss of her “eldest and most dearly beloved daughter,” Rosalie, in December 1815 was “the severest blow which Human nature is doomed to undergo.” The death of a younger daughter two years before had been a “heartrending stroke,” but the child was only three years old and Tucker felt it necessary to resign herself for the sake of her five remaining children. “But now to lose my first born daughter, my friend, my companion,” she wrote, “oh hard and bitter is the blow.” Though she grieved deeply for each child, Rosalie’s death touched her in a new and particularly intense way.<sup>47</sup>

Southern gravestones also reflect the importance of age and gender to a parent’s affection and subsequent grief. Elite southerners memorialized all of their children with carefully chosen headstones, but infants’ headstones and eldest children’s headstones were especially elaborate. Often bearing the inscription “our little baby,” young children’s stones included statues of lambs, angels, wreaths, flowers, and reclined, “sleeping” children.<sup>48</sup> Eldest children’s stones noted their status as the oldest verbally or visually. In Wilmington, North Carolina’s Oakdale Cemetery, for example, the wreath and ribbon iconography on “Eliza’s” headstone denotes her as “Our First Born.” Five-year-old William Stuart’s particularly intricate headstone—which noted he was the eldest

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<sup>47</sup> Letter from Gertrude Thomas, 14 November 1858, in Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 164-165; Elizabeth Ruffin to Mary C. Ruffin, 25 July [1830-1849], Henry Harrison Cocke Family Papers, SHC; Maria Ball Carter Tucker Commonplace Book, UVA. See also 17 March 1850, 15 January 1851, 26 March 1851, Lucy C. Cocke Diaries, UVA. Cocke’s friends accused her of favoring one of her children over the other. Although she admitted to feeling “more compassion for female orphans, than males,” her diary entries reflect great affection for both her son and her daughter, evidencing her denial of the accusation.

<sup>48</sup> See “Our Little Julia,” St. Phillips Church Cemetery, Charleston, SC; “George,” Robert Dawson’s headstone, John Edward Lippit’s headstone, Sarah Ellis Van Amring’s headstone and Annie DeRosset’s headstone, Oakdale Cemetery, Wilmington, NC; “Our Little Charlie,” Oakland Cemetery, Atlanta, GA.



**Figure 4- Sarah Ellis's Headstone with a Sleeping Angel. Photograph by Kimberly Sims.**



**Figure 5- "Infant Son" Carried to Heaven by an Angel**

child—including a lamb statue at his feet and a detailed carving above his head. The artwork on his headstone depicts William sleeping while an angel bearing his face looks down at him from heaven.<sup>49</sup>

In a family plot with more than one child, eldest children received a bigger headstone than their siblings, visually depicting their importance in the family. Twenty one-year-old Chesley Bellamy's five-foot tall, cross-shaped headstone, for example, sits next to eight-week-old Kate's decorated, but much smaller stone. Eveline Louise

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<sup>49</sup> Eliza's headstone, Oakdale Cemetery, Wilmington, NC; William Stuart's headstone, Trinity Episcopal Church, Edisto Island, SC.



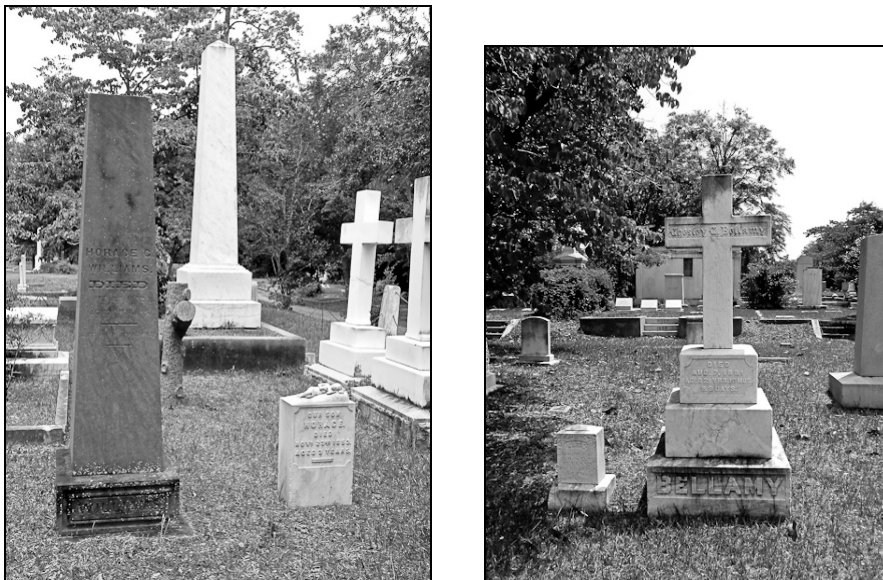
**Figure 6- "Our First Born." Photograph by Kimberly Sims.**



**Figure 7- William Stuart's Headstone**

Seabrooke's tombstone is the largest in a series of three otherwise matching stones. Although she and brother Thomas died within the same week, Eveline's stone is largest because of her age. Horace Williams' obelisk-shaped gravestone not only reveals his status as the eldest, but reflects another way in which parents venerated their oldest children. Horace's stone sits next to a much smaller stone bearing the statue of a





**Figure 8- Big and Little Horace and Kate and Chesley Bellamy. Photographs by Kimberly Sims.**

reclining child and the same name. Less than a year after Horace’s death at age twenty-seven, his parents gave his infant sibling the same name. Mr. and Mrs. Williams buried “Little Horace” next to his older brother after his death at age three.<sup>50</sup> Only families who lost many children gave them simple, identical stones. Southerners’ letters reveal that families grieved the loss of a child no matter how many siblings he had, so this arrangement must reflect either financial practicality or the family’s grief. A line of tiny, identical headstones arranged one next to the other beside their parents is a striking visual depiction of many southerners’ continuous heartache.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Kate and Chesley Bellamy headstones, Oakdale Cemetery, Wilmington, NC; George W. Seabrook plot, Presbyterian Church, Edisto Island, SC; William E. Seabrook plot, Presbyterian Church, Edisto Island, SC; Horace C. Williams’ headstone, Oakdale Cemetery, Wilmington, NC. See also Worth Family Burial Plot, Oakdale Cemetery, Wilmington, NC.

<sup>51</sup> See Benjamin Bailey plot, Bailey Family plot, Presbyterian Church, Edisto Island, SC; Gause Family plot, Oakdale Cemetery, Wilmington, NC.



**Figure 9- Family Burial Plots in Presbyterian Church Cemetery, Edisto Island, SC**

Southern parents venerated their favorite children openly as well as in their diaries and following their deaths. An appendix to the memoirs of the Bolling family offered “A Hint to Parents” that “partiality” was one of the greatest of parental improprieties. For a child to “behold his Parent lavishing his bounty upon a brother or a sister” could only “alianate [*sic*] the respect and affection of the child.” The author questioned how a “partial parent” could expect impartiality from God. Southern parents readily noted who their favorite child was—most often in the aftermath of that child’s death—in spite of these admonishments.<sup>52</sup> Methodist William Peers, for example, wrote his sister to inform her of the death of his youngest child, daughter Nancy Ann. Her death, he wrote, was especially painful because, “she appeared to me as the one I would have chose to remain

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<sup>52</sup> “A Hint to Parents,” in *Memoirs of the Bolling Family by Robert Bolling of Buckingham Continued by Blair Bolling of Richmond, VA. 1838*, Bolling Family Papers, VHS.

on earth, and give up the older ones but gods will be done not mine.”<sup>53</sup> Peers had not only to resign to the loss of a child, but to resign to the loss of his very favorite child.

In addition to being open with friends and relatives about how each child compared to his or her siblings, southern parents also told their children of their preferences. Anna King, for example, commiserated with her daughter and son-in-law on the death of their young son by writing, “I know how you feel toward those beloved ones. When my Willie died I looked on the rest of you as mere shadows.” Mary Ann Whittle wrote to her adult children following the death of her daughter, Jenny, that their surviving sibling, Mary Ann, though “a sweet good girl,” would never be to her mother what Jenny was. Still more egregiously, a father in Charleston addressed letters to his surviving children informing them of his wish to die as a result of the death of his favorite son. Among the siblings, H.R. Palmer, wrote of his father’s grief, “poor Papa he said he did not care to survive it we told him he ought not to say so for he had other children left. Oh my God sanctify this deep affliction to us all, especially poor dear Papa.”<sup>54</sup> Although Palmer expressed sympathy for his bereaved father, such comparisons undoubtedly affected him and his siblings.

Subtler favoritism also had an impact as children easily saw through unstated biases. Hannah Couper’s sister wrote that her daughters believed their deceased cousin to be her aunt’s favorite. “They did not wonder at it,” however, because, “she was so interesting & loveable a little creature.”<sup>55</sup> If their cousins perceived such preferences, the

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<sup>53</sup> William N. Peers to Judith F. Peers, 6 March 1852, William N. Peers Letter, VHS.

<sup>54</sup> Anna Matilda Page King to Hannah and William Couper, 18 October 1852, William Audley Couper Papers, SHC; Mary Ann Whittle to her children, 28 February 1840, Lewis Neale Whittle Papers, SHC; Undated fragment of letter from H.R. Palmer, Porcher Family Papers, SCHS.

<sup>55</sup> A.J. Fraser to William and Hannah Couper, 14 October 1852, William Audley Couper Papers, SHC.

Couper children likely saw it too. Within the culture of the southern household—where children learned they mattered as much as testaments to their father than as individuals—the Couper siblings, like other children, may have accepted their parents’ preferences without question. It seems likely, though, that parental preferences offended children, just as “A Hint to Parents” suggested it could.<sup>56</sup>

In addition to the emotional effects of parental partiality, explicit or not, a child’s death altered the relationship between his parents and surviving siblings in much more direct ways. Child mortality caused an upheaval in the way southern men and women behaved as parents. Parents, particularly mothers, relied upon their children for comfort, guarded their spiritual state, and tried desperately to preserve their health. Wary that God might punish them for idolizing their living offspring, pained by the way a surviving child reminded them of the deceased, and determined but unable to hide their pain for the sake of the survivors, parents also withdrew from the family. Through the lens of bereavement, surviving children appeared at once more precious and more troubling.<sup>57</sup> Mary Henderson lamented that she had neglected her recently deceased son because grieving the deaths of his siblings had made her “fretful at times and impatient,” and noted her “great and constant anxiety and watchfulness” over her surviving children all within the month of October 1856. Her baby’s cold, Henderson wrote, made her feel

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<sup>56</sup> See Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South*, 165, 177. See also See Sarah Woolfolk Wiggins, “A Victorian Father: Josiah Gorgas and His Family,” in Bleser, *In Joy and in Sorrow*, 235. Wiggins’ article suggests that Josiah Gorgas favored his eldest son, Willie. Though Amelia Gorgas enjoyed her four daughters’ company, she, too, lavished attention on Willie. Although this situation, Wiggins notes, “could not have been painless for the other children,” the family’s letters never reveal sibling jealousy.

<sup>57</sup> See Dana Luciano, *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 61. See also Jane Turner Censer, *North Carolina Planters and their Children, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 20-30. Censer argues that families did not have to experience loss for the household dynamic to be affected by it. Just the assumption that deaths were likely caused elites to express affection openly and often.

“wretchedly—so unhappy and fearful—my many sore trials keep me uneasy and nervous.”<sup>58</sup>

Mothers doted on their surviving children. Though cautious to refrain from idolizing them, women like Mary Henderson fretted daily, wary of any sign that might suggest illness and tormented with concerns for their children’s spiritual well-being. Surviving the loss of one child made women fearful of losing others and keenly aware of how easily it could happen. Anne Hobson recognized how her children’s deaths would change her as a parent. “I have lost two darlings,” she wrote, “and my heart will tremble over this one every time sickness touches her.”<sup>59</sup> But, loss must have strengthened women’s resolve to monitor how successfully they and their families adhered to the dictates of scripture, causing them to scrutinize the behavior of their surviving children as a means of ensuring the family’s heavenly reunion. Virginian Mary Brown discussed the fear women had for their surviving children when she wrote, “While I believe they are in no immediate danger, I feel they are like those around me liable to be taken.” To waylay that possibility, Brown prayed that God would forgive her for loving them too much and help her to train them for His service.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Mary Ferrand Henderson Diary, 13 October 1856, 20 October 1856, 27 October 1856, John Steele Henderson Papers, SHC.

<sup>59</sup> 2 June 1866, Anne Jennings Wise Hobson Diary, VHS. See also 24 June 1866, 30 September 1866, 8 October 1866, Anne Jennings Wise Hobson Diary, VHS. Within her diary, Hobson spent a great deal of time contemplating the possibility that her daughter Marian could die, and she became “nervous when there [was] the least thing the matter with her.” Hobson’s fears came to fruition when Marian died in September 1866 at the age of five months. At the time of Marian’s death, Hobson was torn between duty to her husband and duty to her child. Though Marian had just gotten over an attack of cholera, Hobson left her at home with a nurse in order to travel with her husband. “I was too sick to do her any good,” Hobson wrote, “and my husband required me with him; duty demanded I should leave her; duty to my husband and children.” Like many southern parents, Marian’s death fractured the comfort of home for Anne. Upon their return home, she “felt as if the house belonged more to the dead than the living.”

<sup>60</sup> Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, “Religion in the Lives of Slaveholding Women in the Antebellum South,” in Lynda L. Coon, Katherine J. Haldane, and Elisabeth W. Sommer, eds., *That Gentle Strength: Historical*

Just as mothers' devotion caused them to agonize over their children's physical and spiritual health, attachment to the deceased regularly caused them pain when interacting with those who remained. In spite of Ann Hobson's stated resignation to the death of her son, there were times her daughter's presence rekindled "the soreness of the bereavement of [her] last precious baby-boy." Hobson called the tendency to mourn and worry over her children "the infirmity of a Mother's love" and prayed God would forgive such human weakness. Gertrude Thomas wrote that she sobbed when she heard her daughter, Mary Belle, playing songs that son Clanton had liked. The renewed wellspring of grief that Mary Belle's songs triggered prompted Thomas to go into Clanton's room, kneel by the side of his bed, and cry. Thomas confided in her diary, "I reached out my arms in impotent, yearning wish to take him in, to clasp him to me. I laid my head down where his dying head had rested—all, all in vain was the effort to bring myself into communion with him."<sup>61</sup> These women interacted with Marian and Mary Belle differently as a result of another child's death.

Georgia resident Valeria Burroughs, like Hobson and Thomas, struggled with the emotions that a child's death provoked. In several unsettling diary entries, Burroughs wrote of her flashbacks to the final days of her son's life. Like many southern parents, Burroughs wondered if she could ever love another child as much as she had loved her son and brooded on the misery of her home in the wake of his death. Her emotions, however, veered from the standard course when she wrote of her surviving daughter, "my

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*Perspectives on Women in Christianity* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), 207-208, 219-220; Diary of Mary Virginia Early Brown, 27 February 1854, Early Family Papers, VHS. See also Scott Stephan, *Redeeming the Southern Family: Evangelical Women and Domestic Devotion in the Antebellum South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 185-188, 194.

<sup>61</sup> 10 June 1866, Anne Jennings Wise Hobson Diary, VHS; Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas Diary, 21 February 1880, in Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 398.

dear little girl at times when her eye and cheek are brightest, and when her hair is thrown back from her forehead then he is brought before me, as he lay on the couch, and could not hear or see or speak to his Mother. Oh! my child, my child, why could I not die then.” Although Burroughs’ daughter was dear to her, it was only when the girl looked her best—with shining eyes and rosy cheeks—and when her long hair was back from her face, that she resembled her brother. In those moments, looking at her surviving daughter reminded Burroughs of her son’s gruesome death, renewing her heartbreak and her wish to die rather than live without him.<sup>62</sup> The complexity of the relationship between mother and daughter in this plantation household cannot be overstated. Polarization marked Burroughs’ feelings toward her child. On the one hand, this daughter kept Burroughs from being childless and was a reason for her to bear her misery with cheerful submission. On the other, the girl was a constant reminder of the sickness and death of Burroughs’ son, the “bright trophy” whom she did not want to live without.

Widowers’ relationships with their children were complicated in similar ways. Charles Palmer, despite his misery following the deaths of his wife and infant son, carefully noted God’s blessings in his life. The first of these was continued success at his business pursuits. The second more important blessing was that he still had two children left of five on whom to lavish his attention. Of these two, Palmer wrote, “one is endeared to me redoubly [*sic*] by the disposition & nature of his Mother.” Another widower, Hamilton, expressed similar devotion to the child who reminded him of his spouse.

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<sup>62</sup> 12 March 1837, 25 August 1838, Valeria G. Burroughs Album and Commonplace Book, Duke. See also 25 February 1837, 26 June 1837, 25 August 1838, Valeria G. Burroughs Album and Commonplace Book, Duke. Burroughs called her commonplace book her “own peculiar spot . . . which belongs to me exclusively.” The privacy of her diary offered Burroughs a place to divulge her longing for death following her son’s and to record her years of struggle to resign and submit to God’s will. It was simultaneously a place to express socially unacceptable feelings and the site of her continuous Christian self-examination.

Unlike many southern widowers, Hamilton insisted to his sister that he be allowed to continue as the children's primary guardian. His mother could join them, he told her, but he refused to send his children away. "George & Burwill are very fine boys indeed I could not but feel proud of them when contemplating their open & noble countenances," he boasted, but Hamilton reserved particular affection for "dear little Paul." "I cannot write his name without a tear," Hamilton told his sister, because "he is the image of his mother, the face, the forehead, the smile &...the little lock that crosses the temple are all revived in him. I am eternally haunted with the gloomy presentiment of loving that sweet boy but I hope heaven will spare me such a blow."<sup>63</sup> Being haunted by a deceased loved one each time they looked at a living child undoubtedly changed the way fathers like Hamilton and mothers like Valeria Burroughs interacted with their children.

For a few parents, grief alone was enough to cause them to withdraw from surviving family members. Sarah Fife, for example, celebrated each week that passed following her son's death because it put her one week closer to her own death and to the opportunity to rejoin him in heaven. "I know not how I get through the days," she admitted in her diary, "my baby's grave is the only sweet place to me—we have sodded it & I could sit there always." Her husband tried to coax her from despair for his sake and for the sake of their unborn child, but Fife could not be cheered—"everything is swallowed up in the thought of my baby, my Howell. At times I feel perfectly listless & dead to every interest in life." Margaret Dickins wandered forlornly through her home "feeling so desolate & yearning to hear the voice of our child." Like Fife, she felt too broken to spare others her grief. Finally, when Mary Bethell's seven-month-old son,

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<sup>63</sup> Charles Palmer to Susan Harrison (Lewis) Douthat, 11 August 1829, Charles Palmer Letter, VHS; Hamilton to May, 4 April 1845, Mrs. E.A. Pearson Papers, Duke.



John Hinton, died, she expressed relatively little sorrow at least in her diary, seemingly too worn down from her daughter's death a year prior and a recent miscarriage to mourn her son as well. In historian Craig Thompson's words, "She had loved Phereba too much and angered her god, and it appears she limited her love for future children out of fear of losing them."<sup>64</sup> The surviving children in each of these families were left with only the shell of a parent.

The death of a child necessitated a revision of the relationships between each parent and each of the household's remaining children. Just as men and women forged a new marital partnership—for better or worse—when a child's death changed the household, they also had to forge new parental relations. Preferences for one child over another came to light, new fears for surviving children formed, and children and parents alike fell into a new dynamic based on love, loss, and change.

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The effect child mortality had on surviving children within the plantation household was perhaps more complex than the effect of death on any other family members. Modern bereavement experts call surviving children the "forgotten mourners." Although they are often overlooked, modern American children experience intense and complex emotions following the death of a sibling. Some feel pressured to maintain their composure and hide their emotions for the sake of their parents. Others experience confusion as the result of the "protective" emotional distance their parents create, or feel smothered by a parent's obsession with keeping them healthy and safe. The nature of

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<sup>64</sup> 10 October 1869, Sarah Ann Graves Strickler Fife Diary, UVA; Margaret Harvie Randolph Dickins to Francis Asbury Dickins, 9 August 1849, Francis Asbury Dickins Papers, SHC; 10 October 1854, 11 April 1854, Mary Jeffrey Bethell Diary, SHC; Craig Thompson Friend, "Little Eva's Last Breath: Childhood Death and Parental Mourning in 'Our Family, White and Black,'" in Craig Thompson Friend and Anya Jabour, eds., *Family Values in the Old South* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2010), 68, 72-73.

sibling relationships makes such losses still more difficult. One expert contends that while sibling relationships in modern America are “the longest and most enduring” within the family, they are also “characteristically intense” and “universally ambivalent.” Bickering and rivalry translate to regret in times of loss. Research about grief indicates that many children react to loss with remorse for the squabbles they had or with concern that “the wrong child died,” as evidenced by their parents deep sorrow and emotional withdrawal. In every case, mothers’ and fathers’ grief overshadows their parenting at least temporarily, impacting the children still dependent upon their love and support.<sup>65</sup>

Nineteenth-century southern children understood their relationship to the family differently than their twentieth and twenty-first century counterparts do, but their sibling relationships were neither less intimate nor less complicated. Southern sisters relied on one another for companionship, friendship, and support even after marriage separated them. In Wyatt-Brown’s estimation of the plantation household, mothers’ vacillation between smothering love and bewildering rage toward their children and fathers’ frequent absences also caused brothers and sister to be quite close.<sup>66</sup> Brothers were both companions and competitors. Parents’ tendency to express their favorites openly and the power dynamics within the household meant that tension existed within even the closest sibling relationships as well as between parents and their children. Mothers lost sway

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<sup>65</sup> Paul C. Rosenblatt, *Parent Grief: Narratives of Loss and Relationship* (Philadelphia: Brunner/Mazel, 2000), 20, 157-160; John E. Baker and Mary Anne Sedney, “How Bereaved Children Cope with Loss: An Overview,” 127-128, and S.D. Stahlman, “Children and the Death of a Sibling,” 149-153, in Charles A. Corr and Donna M. Corr, eds., *Handbook of Childhood Death and Bereavement* (New York: Springer Pub. Co, 1996); Ann K. Finkbeiner, *After the Death of a Child: Living with Loss through the Years* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998) 72-73. See also Finkbeiner, 67-68. One study of the effects of grief on surviving children suggests that fifty to ninety-five percent of them had symptoms of PTSD of which their parents were unaware.

<sup>66</sup> Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 251.

over their adolescent sons just as sons' relationships with their fathers became more fraught, alienating sons from both parents. Daughters, typically, remained close to both parents. Parents encouraged male mastery and female submission. In short, the South's honor culture complicated relationships between parents and children and between brothers and sisters even before deaths occurred.<sup>67</sup>

When Caroline Smelt was twelve-years-old, she became a sister. A neighbor expressed surprise that the sister's birth so delighted Caroline, arguing that a boy would not have diminished her importance in the family. Caroline was appalled by this logic and grieved deeply when the sister died. Even her steadfast faith in God's benevolence could not suppress Caroline's "great sensibility whenever this child was mentioned." References to the infant sibling inevitably resulted in tears.<sup>68</sup> Though Caroline's biographer likely exaggerated her many virtues, this commentary reflects the expectation of sibling rivalry and jockeying for position within the family hierarchy. As siblings' grieving reflects, such jockeying did little to deter close sibling bonds.

Death changed the tenor of the plantation household, and recognizing the sadness that had settled upon their home made many children try to quell their parent's grief. Although Caroline Smelt was quite upset following her little sister's death, she "displayed much resignation to the will of God; and directed her sympathy and

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<sup>67</sup> See Lorri Glover, *Southern Sons: Becoming Men in the New Nation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 15; Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South*, 165-177; Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 118-120, 173-174, 251; Stephen Berry, ed., *Princes of Cotton: Four Diaries of Young Men in the South, 1848-1860* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 2-3; Michael P. Johnson, "Planters and Patriarchy: Charleston, 1800-1860," *The Journal of Southern History* 46, no. 1 (February 1980): 57, 65; Drew Gilpin Faust, *James Henry Hammond and the Old South: A Design for Mastery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 320-328; Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*, 53. See also Donald Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, Chicago History of American Religion Series ed. by Martin F. Marty (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), 114-120.

<sup>68</sup> Waddel, *Memoirs of the Life of Miss Caroline Elizabeth Smelt*, 29-31.

affectionate condolence, to the consolation of her afflicted mother.” Already ill, bereavement made Caroline’s mother still sicker.<sup>69</sup> In her “Meditations on the sorrows of Life March 1819,” Maria Tucker also noted the effects of losing a sibling. Her childhood, she recorded, “passed without any remarkable incident save my sensibility being early and painfully roused by the frequent scenes of sickness and death which occurred in the family.” In addition to the melancholy of her household in the aftermath of loss, losing an infant brother at the age of eight, and watching her “afflicted parents” grieve caused her to experience “a degree of deep and bitter feeling not often seen at that age.” She recalled that she was regularly overwhelmed by her latent grief in the midst of normal childhood activities. Both Smelt and Tucker saw it as their duty to restore their parents’ cheerfulness and change the tone of household life.<sup>70</sup>

Authors of prescriptive literature implied that surviving children’s desire to comfort their parents reflected poor parenting. Such literature encouraged parents to exemplify the attitude that death was a gift, not something to fear. Children should be familiar with—and unsaddened by—the deaths of loved ones. Author Lydia Maria Childs scolded Christian mothers for treating death “inconsistently,” then urged that children must only hear death spoken of as a “blessed change.” Death should be used as an opportunity to teach children of heaven’s blessings, God’s benevolence and omnipotence, and of their own responsibility to “be good” so that they too might go to heaven. Lydia Sigourney argued that Christian mothers “erred” in not speaking candidly

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<sup>69</sup> Waddel, *Memoirs of the Life of Miss Caroline Elizabeth Smelt*, 22.

<sup>70</sup> “Meditations on the sorrows of Life March 1819,” Maria Ball Carter Tucker *Commonplace Book*, UVA.

of death. They should mention it often to their children, “And when they do so, they should divest their brow of gloom, and their tone, of sadness.”<sup>71</sup>

Many in the Old South disregarded this advice. The adults in South Carolina’s Witherspoon family, for example, hid one daughter’s death from the other for three full weeks. Though the surviving sister, Elisabeth, often questioned when her sister Mary would be well enough to play, her parents and relatives thought it better to hide Mary’s death. This was better for Elisabeth, they contended, until she had recovered from her own illness.<sup>72</sup> Others took Child’s and Sigourney’s advice to heart. After learning of her godmother’s death, Meta Morris Grimball deemed it “an excellent opportunity to accustom the children to look at that which excites so much horror in some young people.” Consequently, she sent her children, including the very reluctant Charlotte—dismissed by her mother as “the fearful kind”—to look at the woman’s corpse. “In about a quarter of an hour they returnd [*sic*],” Meta described, “& told me that it was just as Marianne had said, that she really looked beautiful, every wrinkle had disappeared, & there was such a placid, happy expression of countenance, that it was agreeable to look at.” Young Charlotte, however, “stopped at the door, & would not be prevailed upon to go in.”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Lydia Maria Francis Child and the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, *On the Management and Education of Children: Being Mrs. Child's "Mother's Book" rev., and adapted to the Use of English Parents and Teachers* (London: J.W. Parker, 1835), 76; Lydia Howard Sigourney, *Letters to Mothers* (Hartford: Hudson and Skinner, 1838), 229.

<sup>72</sup> John Witherspoon to Susan Witherspoon McDowall, 14 January 1836, and Letter to Susan Witherspoon McDowall from her brother, 24 January 1836, Witherspoon and McDowall Family Papers, SHC.

<sup>73</sup> Margaret Ann “Meta” Morris Grimball to Harriet Manigault Wilcocks, 17 April 1832, Manigault, Morris, and Grimball Family Papers, SHC. See also Julia Amanda Huger’s *Commonplace Book*, Box 11/65, Folder 6, Huger Family Papers, SCHS. In a poem about a sibling’s death, Julia Huger wrote of looking into the dead child’s crib.

As Charlotte's behavior demonstrates, exposing children to death often failed to make the phenomenon any more comprehensible or any less frightening. Southern parents succeeded at making their children understand the expectation that they should witness death. Caroline Smelt rushed to the death bed of a dying orphan because she had "never seen *any person die*." What she found there surprised and horrified her as it did many others. "Bathed in tears, and overwhelmed with sorrow," Smelt could not bring herself to stay at the bedside until her fellow child's final moments.<sup>74</sup> Like children today, nineteenth-century southern children could not fully comprehend the permanent nature of death. Virginian Mary Ann McCormick explained her children's reactions to death while writing to console her sister and brother-in-law. "The boys are very sad & grieved to hear that their dear little cousin is dead," she explained, and, "little Emma cannot understand how it is about any one dying & being buried. She often asks me why I don't go & bring sister May home out of the dark & cold? 'Poor tousin [*sic*] Fauty will be so cold, will his Mama leave him there'." While the boys longed for their playmate, younger sister Emma wondered why her aunt and uncle failed to rescue their child from her cold, dark sleep.<sup>75</sup>

Judith Winfree's exposure to a siblings' death was something she looked back upon with disdain later in her life, revealing the reality behind the ideal that exposure to death should make it less frightening. When Judith was five years old, her mother died, and she and her siblings were sent to live with relatives. While staying with her aunt, Judith's sister also died. The way her relatives presented the young girl's death, she

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<sup>74</sup> Waddel, *Memoirs of the Life of Miss Caroline Elizabeth Smelt*, 51.

<sup>75</sup> Mary Ann Grigsby to Martha T. Grigsby Herbert and George S. Herbert, 16 November 1858, Grigsby Family Papers, VHS.

conjectured, was so shocking that it became her earliest memory. After waking Judith to tell her about her sister's death, she recorded, a relative "took me to her tall crib in which she was lying, and held me so I could see her. I noticed her little wrist was purple and asked the cause, they told me it was caused by mustard plaster. I do not think it was right to show me my little dead Sister in the night. I have never forgotten it."<sup>76</sup> For Judith, far from quelling her fears about death and making it seem agreeable, her sibling's corpse shadowed in darkness and bearing the trauma of failed medical remedies only traumatized her.

Whether exposed to it directly or not, the death of a sibling had life-long repercussions. North Carolinian Charles Pettigrew believed his son Ebenezer's weak constitution was due as much to the lasting shock and melancholy incited by his older brother's death as to his rapid growth spurts. A bereft friend of Emma Mordecai, moreover, believed that her daughter Marianne's grief over her sister's death had "greatly accelerated" her own. Nelly Lewis, too, wrote her friend and long-time confidante, Elizabeth Bordley, that her son looked "thin & low spirited" as the result of a combination of influenza and feeling "the loss of his Angel sister severely."<sup>77</sup> For these siblings, bereavement had physical repercussions.

A friend of Bannie Kell recognized another effect of child mortality on the survivors. "In thinking of you," she wrote, "my thoughts naturally turn to dear little Johnny—poor little fellow! how he must miss his little playmates, particularly his

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<sup>76</sup> Judith (Gates) Winfree Memoir, *A Little Southern Girl's Memories Without Her Mother* [1856-1871], written in 1930, 1-2, VHS.

<sup>77</sup> Charles Pettigrew to Mary Verner, 26 May 1800, in Sarah McCulloh Lemmon, ed., *The Pettigrew Papers, Volume I* (Raleigh, NC: State Department of Archives and History, 1971), 255; Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis to Elizabeth Bordley, 20 November 1820, in Lewis, *George Washington's Beautiful Nelly*, 90.

brother to whom he seemed to look up with such love and admiration.” In addition to the loneliness Johnny suffered, this friend noted with certainty that he must also have been sent away from the “infected air” of his home. Though exile may have preserved his health, it also distanced him from the people best able to understand his loss.<sup>78</sup>

Even as adults, surviving siblings demonstrated the emotional impact of a sibling’s death. C.D. Whittle described himself as a “madman” following his young sister’s death. Sarah Dayton’s diary focused intensively on the death of her brother when she was thirty-three-years-old. Her grief following the loss was profound; Drayton wished for her death, contemplated the inability for humans to love without suffering, and noted the loneliness and melancholy of home without her sibling.<sup>79</sup> Thirty years after his death, Drayton still mourned for her brother. Elizabeth Frances Perry, too, noted the life-long significance of her siblings’ death to her life. Her sister’s death from scarlet fever was her family’s “first real affliction,” and her brother’s death was just as painful. Perry vowed never to forget either sibling nor fail to live a pious life that would enable her to join them in heaven.<sup>80</sup>

A sibling’s death challenged the stability of a southern child’s life, particularly because southern children defined themselves in relation to the family and its hierarchies. Sadness over lost playmates and companions, awareness that death should be perceived as a gift, and the desire to comfort their bereft parents and restore a cheerful home

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<sup>78</sup> Elizabeth P. Fahs to Julie Blanche Munroe “Bannie” Kell, 22 October 1863, John McIntosh Kell Papers, Duke. See also Catherine Diamond Crow to her brother and sister, 1 April 1867, James Diamond Family Papers, UGA. After “Bud” was killed when his school building collapsed, his mother noted, “Willy is so lonely without his Bud who he thought the smartest Boy in the world.”

<sup>79</sup> 14 April 1807 to 31 December 1807 and 12 August 1836, Sarah Motte Drayton Diary, SCHS. See also 29 May 1807, Sarah Motte Drayton Diary, SCHS.

<sup>80</sup> 21 July 1837, 8 February 1838, Elizabeth Frances Perry Diary, SHC.



represent a few of the many facets of sibling grief. In addition to their own emotions, southern siblings had also to adjust to parents changed by their own grief. Though life eventually moved on, the loss of a sibling never ceased to change a southerner's life.

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The effects of grief and child mortality on the dynamics of white families' lives are clear, albeit complicated. Conversely, the impact of such loss on relationships between whites and blacks within the plantation household remains opaque. Planters wrote regularly of their family, black and white, and prided themselves on the supposedly warm and loving bonds between free and enslaved family members. Like the slaves who lived under these paternalists' rule, however, historians have noted the reality behind planters' paternalistic depictions of their domestic bliss. Ambivalence, and at times, hostility, marked the relationships between black and white inhabitants of the plantation household much more frequently than loving devotion. Within the home, intimacy and violence went hand-in-hand.<sup>81</sup>

Although grief and child death complicated patriarchal household relationships by rendering planter fathers tearful, melancholic, and dependent, they did little to change the hierarchy which existed between slaves and their white masters and mistresses. In times of grief, a stark contrast existed between the relationships whites formed with one another as they mourned, and the relationships forged between free family members and their slaves, particularly their slave women. In spite of the intimacy shared by slaves and masters within the household, elite parents mentioned their slaves during times of

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<sup>81</sup> Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 308-309; Genovese, "'Our Family, White and Black,'" in Bleser, *In Joy and In Sorrow*, 70-72, 78-79, 87.

bereavement surprisingly little.<sup>82</sup> Those comments they did make reveal the one aspect of southern grief culture with little cohesion. Individuals, not society, it seems, dictated the myriad responses to slaves' deaths and slaves' ability to grieve. In this moment of crisis, the shallowness of "our family black and white" became clear.

White elites had little doubt that they were capable of grieving for their slaves. Rachael Haywood, for example, wrote to a friend of her mother's "severe loss"—the death of her cook. Haywood described her mother as crushed by the loss and believed the slave would be "more missed than any other negro." North Carolina resident Virginia Campbell described similarly intense sorrow following the death of her slave, Lethe Jackson, writing to her mother, "O! how lonely did I then feel . . . . It seemed that my head was a fountain of tears & I gave myself up to weeping."<sup>83</sup>

Although Virginia and her adoptive parents, David and Mary Hamilton Campbell, were unusually close to their slaves, expressions of grief following the death of a beloved slave were quite common even among those slaveholders who were not. A letter to Elizabeth Blanks, in fact, implied that one southern family's sadness over the loss of a household slave necessitated the same attention to resignation that losing a white loved

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<sup>82</sup> Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South*, xvi-xvii. Stowe aptly points out that demonstrating "the proximity of certain black individuals to the white elite should not in the least imply intimacy." Planters letters, he notes, rarely made mention of even the most important slaves in their lives.

<sup>83</sup> Rachael Haywood to Jane Gurley, 2 June 1839, Jane Gurley Papers, UNC; Virginia Tabitha Jane Campbell to her mother, 22 July 1843, Campbell Family Papers, Duke. David, Mary, and Virginia Campbell evidenced their unique relationship with plantation slaves by teaching them to read and write. Many of their slaves were literate, and both Mary Hamilton Campbell and Virginia, the couple's niece and adopted daughter, composed letters directly to slaves. It is possible that David and Mary were especially attentive to their slaves because they did not have biological children and felt, like many paternalistic slaveholders, that slaves were like children. Interestingly, despite her participation in sewing the nightgown in which Lethe would be laid out, Virginia remained at arm's length from Lethe's funeral, looking "after them from the porch & portico until she was deposited in the earth." See also 17 April 1851, Lucy C. Cocke Diaries, UVA. Upon the death of her favorite "faithful servant," Cocke wrote, "I cannot express my feelings" a common expression in grieving mothers' diaries.

one did. “We lost one of the best Negro fellows that we had almost two months since,” this correspondent remarked, “but we are obliged to surrender when the Almighty says so, and I have done so generally with perfect resignation.”<sup>84</sup> That Blanks succeeded at resigning to God’s will is the only hint from her words that a slave had died, rather than a child.<sup>85</sup>

Slaveholders in Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia believed that devoted slave mammies grieved for their white charges just as white masters grieved for their domestic slaves, and they expected that bereft slaves might count on God’s comfort as readily as their white masters did. In a letter to his niece, Joseph Norwood relayed news about several of his children. Nat, he wrote, was well behaved and beloved by his mammy, who described the child as the “prettiest thing in the shape of human flesh she has ever beheld!!!” As Norwood described it, although the slave suspected Nat would die in childhood, losing him would break her heart. This slave, who was “wonderfully . . . wrapped up in the Child,” would be bereft but resigned should her

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<sup>84</sup> Letter to Elizabeth J. Blanks, 4 July 1834, Elizabeth J. Holmes Blanks Papers, Duke.

<sup>85</sup> See also Joseph Pickens’ will, 8 August 1842, Greene County Courthouse, Eutaw, AL; Jamie Warren, “A Good Southern Death: Deathbeds, Dying, and Paternalism in the Slaveholding Household,” Paper presented at the “*Death! ‘Tis a Melancholy Day*”: *Dying, Mourning, and Memory in the American South*” Conference, North Carolina State University, 2 April 2011; Friend, “Little Eva’s Last Breath,” in Friend and Jabour, *Family Values in the Old South*, 77-82. I am grateful to Alfred L. Brophy for generously sharing this example of planters’ grief with me. Joseph Pickens’ will stated that his “much beloved little boy Alfred,” a slave, was to be exhumed and buried at Pickens’ feet. Although “this request may seem singular,” Pickens noted, “. . . if I thought it would be neglected I would die miserable.” The slave boy had slept at the end of Pickens’ bed in life as a means of warming his masters’ feet, and Pickens worked to ensure that their relationship would continue in death. It is easy to imagine, of course, that Pickens’ sadness over Alfred’s death was that of a father mourning his son as well as master mourning his slave. According to historian Jamie Warren, other slaveholders expressed deep grief at the death of a slave when composing a beloved slave’s deathbed narrative. Although their grief was hardly a façade, Warren argues, planters used their descriptions of a slaves’ final moments to assert their paternalism. Their descriptions of the roles they played at a dying slave’s bedside were an exploitation of the safest space within which planters might assert their righteousness. After all, a dead slave could hardly denounce his master or run away. Slaveholders’ grief for their slaves, then, was as much about the master as it was about the slave, and writing about slaves’ deaths, Warren argues, was an effective, if unintentional, way of stealing slaves’ deaths as well as their lives.

white charge die in childhood. Like Norwood's, Louisa Minor's descriptions of slave grief reveal an expectation for Christian comfort and resignation. When recording her brother's death in her diary, Louisa Minor described the child's black caregiver: "Poor Mammy Eliza it is a bitter trial for her for Jim was such a darling with her, but I trust she is resigned—And 'the comforter has not left her comfortless'—He has been with us all, for it is in the dark hours of life that his soothing power is felt."<sup>86</sup>

Because slaves did not record their own grief, written descriptions of their mourning and struggle to resign may reflect masters' desire to be loved rather than a reality. Historian V. Lynn Kennedy contends, southerners used the mammy stereotype to rationalize the irony that "white women, who were idealized for their mothering, shared the care of their infants with women whom white social commentators frequently condemned as promiscuous, animalistic in their emotions, and—most importantly—unnatural mothers." Even the most involved mothers called on their slaves' assistance in the nursery, and idealizing mammies' love of their white children while simultaneously complaining about how mammies performed their duties allowed mothers the help they needed without denying their own maternal superiority.<sup>87</sup> Still, given the cohesion and prominence of messages about grief and resignation in southern culture, it is possible that slave domestics who nursed the master's children may have grieved their deaths and called on their faith in God in times of sorrow.

Despite their awareness of slaves' deaths and their recognition of slaves' grief in the context of the master's family, planters and mistresses regularly ignored slaves' grief

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<sup>86</sup> Joseph Norwood to Sarah Lenoir, 24 November 1854, Lenoir FP, SHC; 5 November 1859, Diary of Louisa H.A. Minor, UVA.

<sup>87</sup> Kennedy, *Born Southern*, 104-111.

after the deaths of children in the slave community. Occasionally, slaveholders who already expressed doubts about their slaveholding recognized their slaves' capacity for love and grief, and sympathized with it. Writing of a beloved household slave, for example, Lucy C. Cocke recorded her "true sympathy" for the woman's husband and children. Eliza DeRosset, moreover, noted of a bereft slave mother, "Poor thing is terribly distressed—she will have but one left."<sup>88</sup> Mahaha Roach remarked that her slave Henrietta seemed "much distressed" by her baby's death. Roach also took over for her children's nurse, Ailsie, so that Ailsie could attend the "quiet decent funeral for the little thing."<sup>89</sup> In these instances, elite southern women implied their understanding that slaves, like their masters, grieved for deceased loved ones.

Just as frequently, however, elite whites documented deaths among their slaves from a purely economic standpoint, analyzing the financial loss without acknowledging the emotional cost of death to the enslaved.<sup>90</sup> Deaths within the slave community often

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<sup>88</sup> 17 April 1851, Lucy C. Cocke Diaries, UVA; Eliza Jane DeRosset to Kate DeRosset Meares, undated 1860, DeRosset Family Papers, SHC. The child's illness with "broken bone fever" must have been especially traumatic. This may be one reason that DeRosset expressed sympathy for his mother. See also 3 July 1850, page 88, Lucy C. Cocke Diaries, UVA; Kennedy, *Born Southern*, 98-99. Though the Cockes held slaves like their planter neighbors, their letters reveal noteworthy doubts about slavery and an apparent emotional connection with several of their domestics. Lucy, in particular, became quite attached. Indeed, she noted on one occasion, "My chief trouble is having such a quantity of milk, I am forced to have one of the Servants' children to nurse I fear I shall become too much attached to the little fellow! He is a sprightly little fellow of 3 months old perfectly black. . . My children seem much astonished to see me with the little Ebony fellow, but they are becoming very fond of him." Although breastfeeding her slave's child might suggest that Lucy was closer to her slaves than other plantation mistresses, particularly considering her fear that she was growing too attached to the boy, her letter fails to address what the slave child's mother felt about Lucy's use of her son to relieve her engorgement. At the core, the child's nursing was a service to Lucy, not to the child.

<sup>89</sup> Diary of Mahala Roach, 9 November 1857, 13 December 1857, Roach and Eggleston Family Papers, SHC. See also 6 June 1848, Elizabeth Frances Perry Diary, SHC. In this June 1848 diary entry, Elizabeth Perry outlined the births and deaths that had occurred within the slave community and remarked with certainty that "Mary's" five-week-old child had "gone from a world where it would have known sorrow & trouble, to a better home . . . it might have found a hard struggle to reach."

<sup>90</sup> See, for example, James Legare to James Grimball, 12 December 1857, Grimball Family Papers, SHC; Plantation records and journal entries of Jacob Ford, 1809-1843, Ford Family Papers, SCL; 22 August

highlighted slaveholders' callous disregard for their slaves' humanity. Although Gertrude Thomas expressed sadness over the death of a slave child, "poor little George," whom she had nursed and grown quite fond of, she also remarked that she did not want to tell Mr. Thomas of George's death because they had already lost three horses. Everard Green Baker held the hand of a slave child during her moment of death (possibly denying the child's parents the opportunity to be with her at her deathbed) and then wrote without emotion that he had had her "opened" several hours later and discovered the "large wad of worms" that had killed her. Immediately after noting these had "caused her death," Baker concluded, "weather very warm."<sup>91</sup>

Plantation mistresses, too, regularly demonstrated their inability to empathize. Some, like Mary Henderson, were oblivious. When five-year-old Fanny appeared to be on her death bed, Henderson noted her dismay and applauded the slave mother's valiant attempts to save her child but totally overlooked her grief. Instead, Henderson remarked that Fanny's sickness caused her renewed pain because watching Fanny suffer reminded Mary of her own children's suffering. "What unfortunate people we are," she wrote. "How often death visits this family either the black or white—if Fanny dies it will be the third little servant this year and our darling little Baldy in one house."<sup>92</sup>

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1850, Everard Green Baker Diaries, SHC; Moorehead Wright to Isaac Wright, 10 August 1850, Gillespie and Wright Family Papers, SHC. See also Martha Richardson to James Screven, 10 August 1821, Arnold and Screven Family Papers, SHC.

<sup>91</sup> Diary of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, 18 September 1861, in Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 193; 22 August 1850, Everard Green Baker Diaries, SHC; William Gilkeson to Jacob Van Lear, 2 February 1824, Jacob Van Lear Papers, UVA. William Gilkeson warned Jacob Van Lear not to believe Nancy, the slave woman Gilkeson was lending to him, if she suggested that she was too depressed by the separation from her husband and daughter to work.

<sup>92</sup> Mary Ferrand Henderson Diary, 18 August 1855, John Steele Henderson Papers, SHC. See also Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 131. Fox-Genovese contends that women mourned for their slaves only because they "invested their slaves with their personal feelings for others."

Other mistresses' disregard of their slave's ability to grieve was more malicious. While traveling, Elizabeth Pinckney wrote home to her family and included a short note for each family member, including messages for her son to communicate to each of the family's slaves. In addition to telling each slave "houdy," she asked that he tell Leah "not to kill her child before I return." This offhand remark reflects the vast difference plantation mistresses' perceived between themselves and their slaves. Pinckney would never have made such an insensitive remark to a fellow white woman, knowing all too well mothers' proclivity for paralyzing guilt and self-castigation following a child's death. Tryphena Holder Fox robbed one of her slave women of the chance to nurse her ailing child. Born in Massachusetts, Tryphena Fox acted as a tutor for a southern planter family, married a southerner, became a slaveholder, and never looked back. Like other southern mistresses, Fox found her role trying. One domestic named Susan was particularly troublesome. While Fox was away traveling, Susan gave birth to "a fine mulatto boy," freeing her from household duties and irritating her mistress. Of the week-old child, Fox observed indifferently, "Susan neglected the child & it took cold & died from the effect of it the day after my return in my arms—I feel badly about its death for it was a pretty baby & I took a fancy to it on account of its being so near the age mine would have been, but for its premature birth." Despite her own experience with child death, Tryphena thought nothing of robbing the slave mother of her nursing and nurturing duties as well as her place at the deathbed.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Elizabeth Pinckney to Charles Pinckney, 9 October 1854, Pinckney Family Papers, SCL; Tryphena Blanche Holder Fox to Anna Rose Holder, 17 March 1860, in Tryphena Blanche Holder Fox, *A Northern Woman in the Plantation South: Letters of Tryphena Blanche Holder Fox*, ed. by Wilma King, *Women's Diaries and Letters in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 99-100. See also 11 March 1844, 6 June 1848, Elizabeth Frances Perry Diary, SHC for her comment, "Servants have given me grat [sic] trouble, & have been my only trials in my married life."

Fox's words also reveal the doubts elite southerners had about slaves' competence as caregivers, one reason for their inability to see slaves' grief. Though slaves provided assistance when a child sickened, many elite southern parents had so little faith in slave women's abilities to nurture that their involvement worried mothers more than it comforted them. Harriet Manigault Wilcocks contended that slaves could barely take care of themselves, let alone others. In the midst of a cholera epidemic, Wilcocks commanded her slave women to notify her immediately should they begin experiencing symptoms. Instead, Wilcocks described to her niece, "Yesterday evening I observed the cook crawling along the yard, looking most deplorably; on asking what was the matter with her, I learnt [*sic*] that she had been suffering the whole day with violent pain in her stomach, & other etceteras." The plantation mistress responded by scolding her slave "as hard as [she] could" and sending for the doctor, who bled her "profusely," gave her pills, and directed Wilcocks to treat her with laudanum. Given Wilcocks' response and chosen medical treatments, it is hardly surprising that the slave woman "never liked to complain."<sup>94</sup>

The image of child-like slave women "crawling along the yard" when left to care for themselves would have made other slaveholders shake their heads and cluck with disgusted recognition. Although Wilcocks' sentiment was extreme, similar opinions about slave women abounded in the plantation South. According to slaveholders, motherhood came naturally only to white women. While white women became mothers

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<sup>94</sup> Harriet Manigault Wilcocks to Margaret Ann "Meta" Morris Grimball, Manigault, Morris, and Grimball Family Papers, SHC; See Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Birth of a Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006), 207-226. See also Michael P. Johnson, "Smothered Slave Infants: Were Slave Mothers at Fault?," *The Journal of Southern History* 47, no. 4 (Nov. 1981): 493-520.



because of a natural, God-given inclination to nurture children, southerners contended, slave women became mothers as a byproduct of their sexual promiscuity.<sup>95</sup>

Consequently, white southerners often attributed slave children's deaths to parental neglect, and were quick to point to slave nurses' culpability when white children died.<sup>96</sup> Rebecca Cameron wrote to her husband of a slave child who was burned to death. After the girl's clothes caught fire, she described, "the poor frightened mother ran out of the house and left the poor little thing to perish in the flames."<sup>97</sup> While Cameron's words reflect at least a hint of sympathy, other plantation mistresses expressed disdain. Tryphena Fox told her mother that after the departure of her midwife and doctor she had to depend on two slave nurses. "They handled the baby so roughly for such a little delicate thing," she contended that she "could not bear to have them touch him." Only one slave woman escaped Fox's censure. Fox would have healed faster, she argued, had "this old Creole mulatress" nursed her from the start. Because she trusted the slave

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<sup>95</sup> Kennedy, *Born Southern*, 29-30.

<sup>96</sup> See also 19 May 1858, Diaries of Fannie Page Hume, UVA.

<sup>97</sup> Rebecca Cameron to Duncan Cameron, 4 December 1835, Cameron Family Papers, SHC. Plantation women also hurried to point out their frustration with directing slaves' daily activities. See, for example, Diary of Amelia Akehurst Lines, 24 January 1863, in Amelia Akehurst Lines, *To Raise Myself a Little: The Diaries and Letters of Jennie, A Georgia Teacher, 1851-1886*, edited by Thomas Dyer (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1982), 195; Tryphena Blanche Holder Fox to Anna Rose Holder, 1 November 1857, in Fox, *A Northern Woman in the Plantation South*, 64. Amelia Akehurst Lines for example, wrote, "I have a younger servant than I did last year, consequently I have more to do myself, and am obliged to watch her all the time; like all negro help she is a perfect eye servant. So long as I stand looking at her she can do very well but if I leave her she has her own way of doing things." When her daughter sickened and ultimately died, Lines likely relied little upon her domestic servant. Similarly, during an influenza outbreak, Tryphena Fox complained to her mother, "One would think I ought to have an easy time with only *us two* & the babe, & three servants—but I can tell you mother with the sick boy Osborne making four negroes here, it is just as if they were so many children to look after! It requires more watching & telling & running after them to get the work done, than to do it oneself."

woman's abilities to care for her child, Fox would have rested and healed rather than overseeing his care and lifting him up herself.<sup>98</sup>

Anne Hobson and Dr. Charles Hentz were similarly ambivalent. During a trip to Richmond, Hobson received word from home that her daughter, Annie, was dead. The family's servant, Anne Jones, had mistakenly killed the child by confusing tartar emetic—a poisonous compound used in medicines—with cream of tartar. Though God, Anne wrote, had as much right to take her child by poisoning as in any other way, she found the incident particularly tragic, as she had “several times Warned Anne against that very bottle of Tartar Emetic telling her never to touch it.” Dr. Charles Hentz discovered that his “servants” had been feeding his ailing daughter starch instead of corn starch, a mistake to which he attributed her progressing ailment. Hentz never recorded his response to the slaves he blamed for his child's eventual demise, but Hobson wrote of Anne Jones that although her actions were “criminal,” Jones was “only to be pitied.” Still, Hobson cast Jones and her mother out, too disgusted to let them stay.<sup>99</sup>

Gertrude Thomas provides another telling example of women's relationships with their slave nurses in times of childbearing and in death. Early in her marriage, Thomas spent a great deal of time contemplating issues of race and gender in her diary. Though it did not stop her from using slaves, Thomas questioned the way slaveholders treated women and noted solidarity between white women and black, particularly within the realm of motherhood. Of two pregnant slave women she wrote, “Judy and Maria Jones

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<sup>98</sup> Tryphena Fox to Anna Rose Holder, 1 February 1860, in Fox, *A Northern Woman in the Plantation South*, 97-98.

<sup>99</sup> 16 October 1868 and 1 November 1868, Anne Jennings Wise Hobson Diary, VHS; Hentz, 1 September 1860, in Stowe, *A Southern Practice*, 334. See also C.D. Whittle to Lewis Whittle, 13 February 1840, Lewis Neale Whittle Papers, SHC.

are expecting to be confined in a month or two and in that condition I think all women ought to [be] favoured. I know that had I the sole management of a plantation, pregnant women would be highly favoured. A woman myself, I can sympathise [*sic*] with my sex whether white or black.” Thomas felt strongly enough about this point to argue it with her husband. Perhaps due to the similarities she perceived between white mothers and enslaved mothers, Thomas relied heavily upon black nurses when her children grew gravely ill—an unusual action among plantation mistresses.<sup>100</sup>

By 1863, Thomas had evidently changed her mind about the bond between black and white mothers, and she wrote as disparagingly of black nurses as her peers. She painted a rather unflattering portrait of a friend’s domestic, writing, “After the death of her baby Mrs H found Lydia dressed in black sitting in the room by the baby—Speaking of the funeral which was to take place in the afternoon, ‘If they all come’ said she, ‘I think we shall have a right nice little *performance*’.” If the implication that Lydia viewed funerals as performances was not damning enough to nineteenth-century southerners, Thomas continued by noting that Lydia, “was telling me of the baby’s death afterwards and said ‘I hadn’t no idea it was going to die. I found its feet was cold and I got up and warmed them but after a while its nose got cold and you know’ she said (with a laugh), ‘there was no way of warming its nose and then I knew it was going to die’.”<sup>101</sup> Lydia was both incompetent and unfeeling. War-related bitterness alone cannot account for Thomas’ remarks. Rather, her changed sentiment reflects convictions of the antebellum

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<sup>100</sup> Diary of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, 18 August 1856, January 1856, 28 December 1857, in Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 149, 141, 154. See also 18 August 1856, volume 7, pages 13-14, in Diaries of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, Duke. See also McMillen, *Southern Women*, 72, 78. McMillen contends that children were the locus for what little intimacy black and white women might share, particularly because they were often together in childbirth.

<sup>101</sup> Diary of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, 31 July 1863, in Thomas, *The Secret Eye*, 216.

South held over into the war years. Given such doubts about slaves' parenting abilities, it is hardly surprising that free and enslaved household members grieved in parallel rather than relying on one another for support.

Children's preference for a slave nurse instead of their mothers was a final wedge that distanced slaves from white parents in times of grief. One of the many things Mary Henderson berated herself for following son Edward's death was failing to recognize the signs of his impending illness. Rather, it was the slave nurse, Polly, who noticed her mistresses' mistake and remarked to the child, "I know you are going to be sick babe for it aint [*sic*] natural for you to be so fretful."<sup>102</sup> When Mahala Roach's son, John, grew ill, she wrote, "I have nursed him a great deal today having to send Ailsie away several times. He does not care for my nursing, he is so fond of Ailsie," the little boy's slave. Given women's great devotion to their children and the emphasis society placed on mothers' nurturing, this preference must have challenged Roach's sense of self and perhaps created animosity between the scorned mother and the beloved black nanny. Roach, however, mentions the child's favoritism in passing, never stopping to record her own response. Though it is possible that Roach thought nothing of her son's desire for comfort from another maternal figure, probably the blow to her pride was too great even to voice.<sup>103</sup> Eliza Middleton Fisher suggested as much when she wrote of her daughter, "the little monkey is beginning to love her Nurse so much better than me that I am quite

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<sup>102</sup> Mary Ferrand Henderson Diary, 21 December 1854, John Steele Henderson Papers; Kennedy, *Born Southern*, 416

<sup>103</sup> Diary of Mahala Roach, 22-23 July 1857, Roach and Eggleston Family Papers, SHC. See also Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 136-137. Despite their qualms, slaveholding women delegated motherhood's mundane tasks to their household slaves. The decision to do so often became a source of guilt following a child's death.

mortified.” Only her rationalization that the child’s preferences would change as her moral sensibilities developed reassured Fisher.<sup>104</sup>

Craig Thompson Friend is one of the few historians to comment on slaves’ grief in the event of a child’s death. Friend notes the dramatic ways that being enslaved changed the texture of mourning. While white women, he writes, “were expected to assume the *task* of mourning . . . the rigor of plantation work did not allow black women the *luxury* of mourning.” Enslaved parents imbued their children’s deaths with a very different kind of divine lesson than did white parents. Where white parents saw God’s disfavor, black parents saw redemption for their children. As Harriet Jacobs recalled, “I had prayed for his death, but never so earnestly as I now prayed for his life; and my prayer was heard. Alas, what mockery it is for a slave mother to try to pray back her dying child to life! Death is better than slavery.” That whites discounted slaves’ need to grieve left black southerners to, in Friend’s words, “blend their grief with their prolonged desires for freedom,” particularly in the form of spirituals sung long after white parents would have found it socially acceptable to express their grief.<sup>105</sup>

Although household slaves—particularly female slaves who served as nannies and nurses—were intimately connected to ailing children and their bereft parents, slaveholders usually spurned slaves as sources of emotional support. Verbal exchanges of commiseration may have taken place within the household that do not appear in

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<sup>104</sup> Eliza Middleton Fisher to Mary Herring Middleton, 19 December 1854, in Eliza Middleton Fisher, *Best Companions: Letters of Eliza Middleton Fisher and Her Mother, Mary Hering Middleton, from Charleston, Philadelphia, and Newport, 1839-1846*, ed. by Eliza Cope Harrison, *Women’s Diaries and Letters of the South* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), 416.

<sup>105</sup> Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, ed. L. Maria Child (Boston: privately published, 1861), 96, quoted in Friend, “Little Eva’s Last Breath,” in Friend and Jabour, *Family Values in the Old South*, 78; Friend, “Little Eva’s Last Breath,” in Friend and Jabour, *Family Values in the Old South*, 77-82.

writing, but it appears more likely that whites' doubts about their slaves' ability to nurture and parent kept free and enslaved from relying on one another in times of loss. The death of a child disturbed and altered the relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, and brothers and sisters, pushing the boundaries of patriarchal relationships and gender dictates. Child loss did little, however, to change the ambivalent nature of the master-slave relationship.

**Epilogue:  
The Civil War and Parental Grief**

While her husband James fought for the Confederacy, Elizabeth Hill bore daughter Lizzie alone. Not long after, Elizabeth noted forlornly, “My poor little precious is so sick,” and resigned herself, “I know she won’t live long.” Lizzie died days later. Like so many antebellum women, in the days and weeks after Lizzie’s death, Elizabeth’s diary reflects her futile attempts to accept her loss and the rhetoric that the child’s death was “Gods [*sic*] will & he knows best.” Elizabeth nevertheless admitted that she missed Lizzie so much that she sometimes felt she would “go crazy” and her diary evidences a gripping preoccupation with her angel child. Elizabeth repeatedly transcribed her daughter’s name, pet names, birth date, and death date on the front and back covers of her diary, noting time and again “Little Lizzie was 9 months & 17 days old when she died.”<sup>1</sup>

Hill was not alone in continuing to mourn the death of her child in a characteristically antebellum fashion. Georgian Jennie Lines also demonstrated the tenacity of the ideal of resignation when she opined in her diary, “I never knew what great agony the soul can endure until I saw my idol fading away from earth.” Unable to “snatch [her] darling from the cold arms of death” as she longed to, Lines sought resignation: “I could not then and cannot yet say ‘The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away blessed be the name of the Lord . . . The grace and love of God alone can make me submissive.’”<sup>2</sup> A Virginian father similarly wrote that since his son’s death he had

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Hill Diary, 4 October 1864 and July 1865 entries, James Mobley Hill Diary, 1863-1865 volume, SCL.

<sup>2</sup> Diary of Amelia “Jennie” Akehurst Lines, entry between 29 July 1863 and 17 December 1863 entitled “Death of Lillie,” in Amelia Akehurst Lines, *To Raise Myself a Little: The Diaries and Letters of Jennie, A Georgia Teacher, 1851-1886*, edited by Thomas Dyer (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1982), 205-207. See also 21 January 1861, Diaries of Fannie Page Hume, UVA.

“wandered through life . . . head cast to the ground and longing to be free from this troublesome world.” “O that the Lord would give me grace,” he prayed, “that I might say the lord gives and the lord hath taken away blessed be the name of the lord.”<sup>3</sup> Even in the midst of hundreds of thousands of grown men’s deaths on the battlefield, children’s deaths unhinged their parents and prompted a characteristically antebellum search for submission to the Father’s will.

In historian James Marten’s estimation, war-time separation fueled the flames of southerners’ devotion to their families. Women longed for their absent sons and husbands and cherished their young children who kept them company at home. Confederate men longed for home, describing vivid dreams about their wives, reminiscing about good times spent with their children, and begging for details about their family members’ daily lives.<sup>4</sup> The severing of one of these family relations in the event of a child’s death impacted mothers and fathers alike. Even Confederate General Jeb Stuart wrote from camp of his sorrow following the death of his daughter. He could “weep like a child,” Stuart wrote, thinking that his beloved daughter had become “lifeless clay.” That the general sent his letter from Camp “No Rest” is an ironic testament to the fact that parents got no rest from the child mortality of antebellum years—and the grief that accompanied it—even as they struggled to contend with the unprecedented destruction and death induced by the Civil War.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> 8 January 1861, Diaries of Fannie Page Hume, UVA; S.J. Cabell to his sister, Carrie, August 14, 1862, Yonce Family Papers, Duke.

<sup>4</sup> James Marten, “Fatherhood in the Confederacy: Southern Soldiers and Their Children,” *The Journal of Southern History* 63, no. 2 (May 1997): 269-292.

<sup>5</sup> Jeb Stuart to Lily Lee, 16 November 1862, James Ewell Brown Stuart Papers, Duke.



In many ways, the Civil War was a continuation of those elements of southern culture and plantation life that shaped parental grief in the antebellum years. Most importantly, the South's high infant and child mortality rates continued—and even increased—during the war. In addition to the usual childhood illnesses and accidents which killed southern children, food shortages and the diseases carried by Union and Confederate soldiers as they moved between battles and within the southern population had a devastating impact on children too young to enlist. Catastrophic numbers of war deaths, especially in the South where eighteen percent of white men died of war-related causes (the northern death rate of military-aged men was one-third that in the South) added to parents' pain. Each son or husband who enlisted only to die in battle or of disease was, of course, somebody's child.<sup>6</sup>

Southern parents also carried their grief from antebellum losses into their new, war-time reality. For those parents already grieving the death of a child, the Civil War was not a break from their pain. Writing in 1863, Georgian Julia Kell reminisced about the births and deaths of her children and demonstrated that even her preoccupation with the war and concern for her husband, who served in the Confederate Navy, did little to distract from her grief. "I felt that I would gladly die that they might live!" she wrote, "and yet I brokenly live on! I sometimes long to die—and yet I cannot bear to think of leaving my little living one—he needs me, the others do not—they are safe—they are redeemed." Julia believed her deceased children were safe in heaven, and the war had not yet done anything to change that belief.<sup>7</sup> For Tryphena Fox, the "horrors of war" and

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<sup>6</sup> Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 138-141, 149.

<sup>7</sup> Julia Blanche Munroe Kell Diary, 1863, John McIntosh Kell Papers, GHS.

the grief she felt after her daughter's death from scarlet fever served to reinforce one another. "You northern people know nothing of the horrors of war & may you be spared what I have suffered during the last year," she told her mother. "I have tried to say & to feel—'*Thy will be done*'—but the many trials have been severe notwithstanding my resignation." Fox believed that while she might be able to cope with the destruction of the South, or the loss of her home, or the departure of her slaves, or the death of her young child, dealing with all four afflictions at once was too much to bear.<sup>8</sup>

As Fox's words demonstrate, even as Civil War deaths began to change the way southerners grieved, they also reinforced the gender norms that had shaped antebellum grief culture. Most importantly, the Civil War South called on its women to "resign" and "submit" as emphatically as the antebellum South had. LeeAnn Whites' study of gender and the Civil War is revealing. In a discussion of Gertrude and Jefferson Thomas, Whites points out that grief gendered them. Jefferson supported his wife in her grief; they did not support one another. The realities of women's lives in the antebellum South made Gertrude's resignation to God's will essential. Jefferson, however, "did not need to learn how to accept the unacceptable or how to recognize his own essential dependence upon forces outside of his control. In fact, in order to act in a 'manly way', he could not do so."<sup>9</sup> Many men, we have seen, did seek resignation to God's will as the result of their religious convictions, but fathers' decision to resign was a choice, not a social

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<sup>8</sup> Tryphena Blanche Holder Fox to Anna Rose Holder, 3 July 1863, in Tryphena Blanche Holder Fox, *A Northern Woman in the Plantation South: Letters of Tryphena Blanche Holder Fox, 1856-1876*, ed. by Wilma King, *Women's Diaries and Letters of the Nineteenth-century South* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 135.

<sup>9</sup> LeeAnn Whites, *The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender: Augusta, Georgia, 1860-1890* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1995), 35-36.

requirement, and their identity was not as entangled with their children's survival as their wives'.

With the advent of war and wartime suffering, southern society continued to require submission from its women. As men "rode off to defend their independence," their departure, Whites contends, "had the immediate impact of intensifying [women's] sense of domestic dependence." As in antebellum days, southern fathers' devotion to their families required their absence from the household, forcing women to strike a delicate balance between taking charge and submissively accepting their husbands' departure. Thanks to antebellum southern grief culture, Confederate women were well-practiced at feigning submission even if they did not feel it. Putting on a brave face and sending their husbands and grown sons off to war on behalf of the Confederacy, however, caused southern women to cling to their young children at just the moment their survival became most tenuous. In addition to the physical and emotional burdens of running a household in their husbands' absences, then, "the ever-present war against childhood maladies loomed even larger" for mothers worried that the men in their family might die in battle. As they turned to God in the depths of their grief, too burdened to bear their loss alone, women became more attached to the concept of resignation.<sup>10</sup>

Others, conversely, have demonstrated that by 1865, women were no longer willing to suffer on behalf of the Cause. War-weary and struggling to provide for their families' survival, these women demanded that their husbands make domestic needs a

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<sup>10</sup> Whites, *The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender*, 30-38. See also Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 138-141.

priority over those of the Confederacy.<sup>11</sup> Some southerners faced with the deaths of their young children at home and their grown male children in battle similarly—if very slowly and subtly—began to question God’s benevolence and the ideal of resignation.

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Previously unheard of levels of death—620,000 American soldiers lost their lives at one another’s hands—caused southerners’ understandings of death and mourning to change markedly. Moreover, the changes that took place during these wartime years set in motion shifts in Americans’ understandings of death and grief that persist today. War particularly affected the ideal of “Good Death.” The concept of *ars moriendi*—of dying a Good Death—originated in two fifteenth-century Latin texts and has shaped western ideas about death ever since. The iteration of *ars moriendi* that gripped nineteenth-century southerners required that witnesses be present at the deathbed to see that their loved one died calmly and without fear. For many antebellum southerners this ideal was difficult to attain, but as men died alone on distant battlefields or in crowded field hospitals in chaotic and often terrifying surroundings, meeting it became impossible.<sup>12</sup> Those who were able to confirm that their loved one was, in fact, dead could not observe whether the deceased had died confident in their salvation. Nor could they recite prayers

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<sup>11</sup> See Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), especially 234-247; Drew Gilpin Faust, “Altars of Sacrifice: Confederate Women and the Narratives of War,” *Journal of American History* 76 (March 1990): 1228; Whites, *The Civil War as a Crisis in Gender*, 15-40, 96-131.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Mary Bobo to Mrs. L. Wilfong, 24 February 1845, John Wilfong Papers, Duke. Mary Bobo described her sister Caroline’s agonizing death, which included “groans,” “spasms,” “convulsions,” and Caroline’s repeated statements that she “never, never, had in all her life suffered such misery, said she never had experienced one half, one fourth, such pain before.” Nevertheless, Mary reassured Mrs. Wilfong, “What a great consolation Mrs Wilfong to believe that you have a child in Heaven—and I have a sister there.”

to the dying or observe the deceased's final brave moments.<sup>13</sup> Soldiers, embalmers, and railroads, moreover, could not keep pace with the demands of war, causing many soldiers to be buried far from home in unmarked, mass graves, a dehumanizing and horrifying prospect for antebellum southerners. Finally, those families who did recover the deceased could not comfort themselves with the satisfaction of having carefully prepared the body for burial.<sup>14</sup> In short, the conditions of wartime America made adhering to traditional death ideals difficult, if not impossible. Americans had either to accept that no soldier would die a Good Death or to adjust their ideals.

Historian Mark Schantz contends that initially Americans held tightly to antebellum expectations for dying because those understandings were crucial to their ability to fight. The beliefs that death could be beautiful and that heaven was a tangible world of resurrected loved ones, in particular, made wartime loss easier to accept.<sup>15</sup> Southerners also tried to replicate traditional Good Death despite a new, unfavorable environment. Dead and dying soldiers were found clutching photographs of their loved ones or speaking deliriously in their final moments to nurses they mistook for sisters, eager to surround their deathbeds with family by whatever means possible. Those who were able wrote letters home assuring their families that they accepted death as a transition to everlasting life. Those who cared for dying soldiers—nurses, chaplains,

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<sup>13</sup> See Philippe Ariés, *Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. from the French by Patricia M. Ranum, Johns Hopkins Symposia in Comparative History, 4<sup>th</sup> (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), esp. 55-82; Mark S. Schantz, *Awaiting the Heavenly Country: The Civil War and America's Culture of Death* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 18-19; Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 9-11.

<sup>14</sup> Schantz, *Awaiting the Heavenly Country*, 209; Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 61-101. Each of the four "burial trenches" at Shiloh, for example, contains the remains of up to seven hundred men.

<sup>15</sup> Schantz, *Awaiting the Heavenly Country*, 3, 38-40, 106-125.

officers, and comrades—willingly took on the role of surrogate kin and did what they could to reassure the dying and those they left behind that Good Death had been achieved. Finally, letters written to inform family members of a loved one’s death emphasized their dedication to the cause, their resignation in death, and their calm final moments. Even battlefield photographers staged their photos in such a way as to make their subjects appear calm in their actions and convinced of their own salvation.<sup>16</sup>

Southern grief culture necessarily changed to accommodate the shifting context for deaths. Among the amendments to southern grief culture engendered by the Civil War was a reinvigorated adherence to “putting on mourning.” Something that few antebellum southerners found significant enough to mention became gravely important to them when the war blocked their ability to carry out more familiar rituals. Unable to take comfort in traditional family mourning rituals such as gathering at the deathbed side, preparing the body for burial, and holding a funeral, historian Nancy Gray Schoonmaker suggests, southerners turned to wearing mourning as a way of publicly expressing their grief and of coming to terms with their loss.<sup>17</sup>

Women in particular went to great lengths to wear formal mourning despite the difficulty of attaining black clothing during war-related shortages. When Jennie Lines was unable to attain the black fabric necessary for mourning, she wrote, “I grieve to say I do not dress in *black*. I shall never cease to regret it.” “Advised not to attempt to get black as it was impossible to buy anything but calico,” Lines reluctantly continued to

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Barton, “Painful Duties: Art, Character, and Culture in Confederate Letters of Condolence,” *Southern Quarterly* 17 (Winter 1979), 126-128; Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 11-31 and 171-210; Schantz, *Awaiting the Heavenly Country*, 196.

<sup>17</sup> Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, xi-xviii, 145-149, 153-157; Nancy Gray Schoonmaker, “As Though It Were Unto the Lord: Sarah Morgan Dawson and Nineteenth-Century Southern Mourning” (MA Thesis: University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill, 2001).

wear her colored dresses. Once the delirium caused by her grief began to ebb and her “mind and reason were fully restored, the very sight of my collered [*sic*] clothing made my grief still more poignant.” Lines refused to wear any but the few black dresses she owned, and planned to sell her blue formal dress, sure she would never wear it again. Jennie Lines was not alone. As the southern death toll mounted between 1861 and 1865, so did the number of women (and men) on the home front clothed in black. For the first time, the “sorority of grief” which had always existed amidst antebellum parents became publicly highlighted.<sup>18</sup>

New mourning techniques often did as little to quell bereft parents’ pain as antebellum standards of grief had. The struggle to maintain a frayed semblance of Good Death and attempts to wear mourning were not enough to overcome the harsh reality on every battlefield of destroyed, decomposing bodies. This reality—and the dehumanization that it represented—overwhelmed southerners’ ability to cope and, what historian Drew Gilpin Faust calls the “venerable problem of theodicy—of how and why God permits evil,” engulfed Americans.<sup>19</sup>

In part, Americans’ difficulty coming to terms with the meaning of wartime carnage resulted from evangelical ideas. Throughout the nineteenth century, James Farrell argues, evangelical concepts of death created a “delicate balance of fear and hope.” Evangelicals emphasized individuals’ self-control and responsibility to prepare for death, but ultimately viewed death as God’s mandate and a moral message. The

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<sup>18</sup> Jennie Akehurst Lines to her sister, Maria, 11 February 1864, in Lines, *To Raise Myself a Little*, 211; Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 149-151 cites several examples of women’s fervent desire to wear mourning; Schoonmaker.

<sup>19</sup> Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, xi-xvii, 188-189, 61-101. See also Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 102-136 for her discussion of Americans’ struggle to name the dead and notify their family members.

religious meaning of their affliction grew increasingly troubling for southerners steeped in the influence of evangelicalism as the war grew bloodier, deaths increased at home, and the hope of Confederate victory faded. Did He have a benevolent purpose in such harsh chastisement?<sup>20</sup> As in pre-war years, some tried to answer creeping doubts about God's benevolence by arguing that death was a gift. Others imbued war deaths with transcendent purpose.<sup>21</sup> Both arguments staggered under the weight of the Confederacy's demise. The God southerners had always assumed was supportive of their slaveholding lifestyle suddenly seemed angry.

The nature of wartime death also shook the foundations of southerners' understanding of mortality. Ironically, historian Drew Gilpin Faust points out, Civil War deaths were shocking because they were not of children. Antebellum southerners viewed child death as an inversion of nature; people were not supposed to die in the bloom of youth. Even so, each year a child survived made his parents feel slightly more optimistic about his future. Though parents knew their daughters would face the travail of childbirth, boys who survived childhood would likely survive into middle age. Like "Little Jesse Turner's" mother, who gave "thanks, and Praise, weeks have lapsed into months," allowing her "little pilgrim" to turn one, southerners breathed a small sigh of relief with each year past infancy their children attained.<sup>22</sup> The war, Faust suggests,

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<sup>20</sup> James J. Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830-1920*, American Civilization (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 35-42. See also Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799-1883* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 54-57.

<sup>21</sup> Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, xii, 6-31, 61-101, 148-150, 149-151, 188-210. See also Diane Miller Sommerville, "'Will they ever be able to forget?': Confederate Soldiers and Mental Illness in the Defeated South," publication pending, 316-326.

<sup>22</sup> Little Jesse's Diary, 2 April 1857, Jesse Turner, Sr. Papers, Duke. See also Schantz, *Awaiting the Heavenly Country*, 4. Schantz contends that "it is difficult to overestimate the significance of this ideal—that the young might well be expected to die before their parents—in the midst of a culture headed for



“took young, healthy men and rapidly, often instantly, destroyed them with disease and injury.” Painful in isolation, these deaths stung still worse for parents who had grown to feel cautiously optimistic about their children’s survival.<sup>23</sup>

Despite these wartime tribulations, most southerners maintained their faith, stifling their doubt that a well-meaning Providence could allow the sacrifice of southern boys at the altar of a lost cause.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, the seeds of change had been sown, which literature and letters alike demonstrate. Writers like Ambrose Bierce and Herman Melville attacked the notion of sentimental Good Death in their writings. Poets Emily Dickinson and particularly Sarah Piatt (who lived through the deaths of six of her children), moreover, used their post-1860 poetry to reject the ideal of resignation and question a God who did bad things to good people. “Like Sigourney and Stowe,” literary scholar Mary McCartin Wearn argues, “Piatt recognized child death as the ultimate test of womanly submissiveness.” Unlike her predecessors, however, Piatt resisted the cultural dictate to “sanitize” her grief and rejected the idea that child death was an empowering event for a Christian woman, suggesting instead that grief weakened women’s faith. In “Her Blindness to Grief,” Piatt ended poignantly, “God has His will. I have not mine.”<sup>25</sup> With increasing frequency, writers expressed the skepticism that many

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war.” As we have seen, however, nineteenth-century southerners’ understanding that a child’s death was likely did not make them any more accepting of child death.

<sup>23</sup> Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, xii.

<sup>24</sup> Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 149-151, 188-210.

<sup>25</sup> Mary McCartin Wearn, *Negotiating Motherhood in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, Studies in American Popular History and Culture (New York: Routledge, 2008), 116-124; Paula Bernat Bennet, “God’s Will, Not Mine: Child Death as a Theodicean Problem in Poetry by Nineteenth-Century American Women,” in Lucy E. Frank, ed., *Representations of Death in Nineteenth-Century United States Writing and Culture*, Warwick Studies in the Humanities (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub, 2007), 126-136; Sarah Piatt, “Her Blindness to Grief,” in Paula Bernat Bennet, ed., *Palace-Burner: The Selected Poetry of Sarah Piatt*,

bereft antebellum southerners had felt. Though child death might be His will, these authors contended, parents need not accept it as their own.<sup>26</sup>

Southerners' postbellum letters and diary entries about child death also reflect the beginnings of change. Most notably, some letters lack the emotional restraint and intentional mentions of resignation which predominated in antebellum letters. Of her "precious jewel's" final hours, Sarah Fife wrote, "Oh! God! no one could realize the intensity of my agony I thought he would certainly die before I could get relief. I almost fainted, and felt like shrieking and screaming and dying." Although she also noted her attempts to allay her grief with prayer and hymns, such unchristian dismay—even expressed within the relative privacy of a diary entry—would have served to embarrass in previous years. Catherine Diamond Crow wrote angrily to her brother and sister-in-law, chastising them for failing to visit her as she mourned her son's death after a building collapsed on him. "My precious John is gone from me," she lamented, "& my poor heart is crushed my pride is now lying beneath the sod of a lonely graveyard & I am left to weep & mourn without a kind Sister or Brother to offer words of comfort near me." Not only did Crow express her displeasure with a male family member, she failed to mention God as a source of support.<sup>27</sup> Still others flatly rejected the possibility of resignation.

South Carolinian Grace Elmore, for instance, wrote in response not to a child's death, but

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with an intro by Paula Bernatt Bennet (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 49. See also Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 196-209.

<sup>26</sup> Mary Louise Kete, *Sentimental Collaborations: Mourning and Middle Class Identity in Nineteenth-Century America*, New Americanists (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 55.

<sup>27</sup> Diary of Sarah Ann Graves Strickler Fife, 5 August 1869, 9 September 1869, UVA; Catherine Diamond Crow to her brother and sister, 1 April 1867, James Diamond Family Papers, UGA. Catherine's letter also indicates the impact of her child's death on his siblings. "Sometimes it seemes [sic] that I cannot live," she wrote. It was in these times that she tried to "cheer up a little look around at my other children & think I will try to teach them to follow their Brothers steps & meet him in Heaven for his is surely there." See also George T. Murrell's Journal, 13 June 1892-11 March 1893, Murrell Family Papers, UGA.

to the death of the Confederacy at Appomattox, “I know not how to bear it. I cannot be resigned.” After losing her city, her house, and her loved ones for the Confederacy, losing the war was too much for her submission to bear. “Hard thoughts against my God,” she predicted, “will arise.”<sup>28</sup>

Victorian parents did not reject God’s existence in the wake of loss, but neither did they hesitate to express their bewilderment with His actions. Though these changes were subtle, they marked the turning away from a grief culture which seems entirely foreign to modern Americans. The South’s defeat, the end of slavery, and the dismantling of southern patriarchy that accompanied each of these changes weakened the foundations of a grief culture based on submission to a Heavenly Father and public performance of stoicism.

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In 2009, minister and best-selling author, Max Lucado, wrote of the biblical figure Jairus, “Some of you find the story of Jairus difficult to hear. You prayed the same prayer he did, yet you found yourself in a cemetery facing every parent’s darkest night: the death of your child . . . . Jesus resurrected Jairus’s child. Why didn’t he save yours?” To answer this question, Lucado continues, “God understand your question. He buried a child too. He hates death more than you do. That’s why he killed it . . . . For those who trust God, death is nothing more than a transition to heaven. Your child may not be in your arms, but your child is safely in his.”<sup>29</sup> Just as antebellum southerners did, Lucado

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<sup>28</sup> Grace Brown Elmore, *A Heritage of Woe: The Civil War Diary of Grace Brown Elmore, 1861-1868*, ed. Marli F. Weiner (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), 119, 199, quoted in Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 192.

<sup>29</sup> Max Lucado, *Fearless: Imagine Your Life Without Fear* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009), 63. See also Lucado, 132-133. Later, Lucado continues, writing about change as “not only a part of life; change is a necessary part of God’s strategy . . . . But, someone might ask, what about the tragic changes God

calls on modern American parents to recover their faith in God's benevolence even amidst the despair instigated by their child's death. In doing so, he also implies that parents unwilling to resign their children to God's arms must not be faithful, trusting Christians.

In the antebellum and Civil War South, Lucado's sentiment was a widely-accepted standard for the bereft and their supporters alike. Despite the changes that began to appear in letter and diary entries written about child death and parental grief between 1860 and 1865, child death was no less crushing by the end of this period than it had been in the beginning. Adherence to southern emotional standards for grief, moreover, continued to limit parents to several widely-accepted clichés, obscuring from the sources any changes that did take place. Today, the doubt which began to accompany death and grief during the Civil War has only increased. Some grieving parents draw closer to God, but many others turn away from him in anger, crushed by their losses and unwilling to believe that any child is better off away from his loving parents. One contributor to the grief support website *Baby Steps*, for example, states without qualm in her testimony about the death of her child, "We are not religious and to some people that is uncomfortable. However, we are comforted in each other and the love we have for our family and friends."<sup>30</sup> This admission alone reflects the significant changes in grief culture which have taken place since 1865.

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permits? Some seasons make no sense." Lucado responds by referencing a baby in the womb; her eyes are formed but don't see, his nostrils develop but don't breathe, but once the baby is born all of its features make perfect sense. "Suffering. Loneliness. Disease. Holocausts. Martyrdom. Monsoons. If we assume this world exists just for pre-grave happiness, these atrocities disqualify it from doing so. But what if this earth is the womb? Might these challenges, severe as they may be, serve to prepare us, equip us for the world to come?"

<sup>30</sup> Meredith Greer, "Baby Devon's Accidental Death," in "Stories of Lost Children," *Baby Steps*, [www.babysteps.com/index.html](http://www.babysteps.com/index.html) (Accessed 24 January 2011)

Death continues to be an inevitable and universal experience which requires explanation and coping strategies. A child's death especially elicits demands for justification. Like nineteenth-century southerners, bereft parents today take comfort in their children's ascent into heaven—often regardless of their own beliefs about God—seek the support of other bereft parents, cherish remembrance photos and other memorial items, and feel despondent and lost in the wake of a child's death.<sup>31</sup> Good Death, too, remains an American ideal.<sup>32</sup> Philippe Ariés has argued that grief has grown increasingly taboo in modern years, and, indeed, Americans silence bereft parents' grief based on a timetable which psychologist and bereavement expert Barbara Rosof calls “unrealistically short.”<sup>33</sup> Drew Faust notes aptly, however, that death and grief were no less silenced by antebellum Americans than Ariés says they are today. Although nineteenth-century Americans had an intimate knowledge of death, they worked just as hard to avoid confronting mortality and to mitigate their fear of death by redefining death as the gift of eternal life and celebrating it in sentimental culture.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Dennis Klass, *Parental Grief: Solace and Resolution*, Springer Series on Death and Suicide, 9 (New York: Springer Pub. Co, 1988), 64.

<sup>32</sup> Robin Martz Henig, “Will We Ever Arrive at the Good Death?” *The New York Times*, 7 August 2005.; M.I.S.S. Foundation, <https://www.misschildren.org> (Accessed 24 January 2011); Now I Lay Me Down To Sleep, <https://www.nowilaymedowntosleep.org>, (Accessed 1 December 2011).

<sup>33</sup> Ariés, *Western Attitudes toward Death*, esp. 55-66, 85; Klass, *Parental Grief*, 13; Barbara D. Rosof, *The Worst Loss: How Families Heal from the Death of a Child* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1994), 3, 261; Catherine M. Sanders, *Grief: The Mourning After: Dealing with Adult Bereavement*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 1999), 20-21, 33-37, 165-171, 177; Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief through the Five Stages of Loss* (New York: Scribner, 2005), 7, 14-17. See also Philippe Ariés, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. from the French by Helen Weaver (New York: Knopf, 1981), 460-471, 559-604; Laderman, *The Sacred Remains*; John S. Munday and Frances Wohlenhaus-Munday, *Surviving the Death of a Child* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995) 1.

<sup>34</sup> Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 4, 176-179.

Many elements of nineteenth-century southerners' approach to grief stand in stark opposition to our own, but they fit well within a culture where child death was pervasive, religion was central, and hierarchy and submission were ingrained parts of society.<sup>35</sup> Elite southern parents' grief laid bare their priorities in life. Examining parental grief demonstrates that family, religion, social hierarchy, and honor were southerners' most cherished ideals. Mothers and fathers alike were devastated by their children's suffering and the family instability that resulted from a child's death, and parents of both genders shared an understanding that God and religion played a central role in their lives, particularly in times of duress. The Bible promised Christians both a world of tribulation and the spiritual potential for comfort, and elite southerners accepted these promises as a fundamental part of their worldview. The gender hierarchy which southerners embraced, however, dictated that parents would grieve differently even if they shared an equal love for their children. Women sought to demonstrate their submission to God's will as a way to serve their husbands and children while also ensuring their salvation and the possibility of heavenly reunion. Men, meanwhile, mourned privately, but continued to perform publicly, donning a façade and carrying on with their business endeavors.<sup>36</sup> Even in

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<sup>35</sup> Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 4.

<sup>36</sup> See NRSV, Matt 5: 4, 4: 12; Luke 12: 4-7. See also Matthew 10: 31, 9: 2, 6: 25, 10: 2-8; Luke 8: 50, 12: 32; John 14:1, 16:33. Faithful nineteenth-century southerners expected to suffer. Jesus promised those who sought his word in the Bible, "in the world you will have tribulation." Beginning with the "sorrow" of childbirth, then, southerners influenced by evangelical Christianity anticipated a difficult lot in life. For all of its promises of affliction, however, the Bible also offered assurances that those who mourned would be comforted and those who suffered with faith need not fear death. The Gospel of Luke, for example, instructed believers not to fear the death of the body as long as they did not deny Jesus. Indeed, demonstrating faith was often described as being a crucial component of earning Christ's comfort instead of his wrath. Southerner slaveholding parents grieving the death of his child sought resignation, then, as a means of ensuring that death was not an end, but a beginning to everlasting life—as a means of evidencing they were Jesus' "wheat" rather than the "chaff" to be "burned with unquenchable fire."

midst of what they understood to be the greatest affliction, elite parents adhered to southern hierarchies and concerned themselves with their public reputations.

It was also in moments of death and grief that the reality behind southern ideals came to light. For all of their talk of submission, few southerners ever attained it—their devotion to God simply could not outweigh their love for their children. For all their insistence on manly emotional self-control, moreover, fathers often fell apart after a child died, relying on the dependents they were supposed to control and the peers they were supposed to impress for emotional support. Finally, for all their professions of devotion to a “family, white and black,” slaveholding southerners demonstrated callous disregard for their bereft slaves and rarely shared their pain following a child’s death with the enslaved “family members” in their midst. Grieving the death of a child forced slaveholding parents to confront their beliefs about life and death and to contend with their fear that death was an end rather than a beginning. As bereft parents do today, southern mothers and fathers did whatever it took to honor their children and comfort themselves, sometimes adhering to cultural dictates, other times breaking them, but always balancing their existence as southerners with their role as parents and as individuals facing a crushing loss.

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 Hunter-Garnett Papers [micfilm]  
 Jacob Van Lear Papers

John Randolph Letters  
 Letter from Peter Carr to William H. Cabell  
 Letters from Laura H. Wirt to Louisa Carrington  
 Letters of the Bradford Family  
 Letters of the Cabell and Carrington Families  
 Lucy C. Cocke Diaries  
 Maria Ball Carter Tucker Commonplace Book  
 Papers and Diaries of Anna Maria Henkel  
 Papers of Charles Elisha Taylor  
 Papers of Franklin Fretwell  
 Papers of James Westhall Ford  
 Papers of William Augustine Washington  
 Payne-Lomax Family Papers  
 Pritchard-Magruder Family Letters  
 Records of the Rorer Family  
 Septimia Randolph Meikleham [micfilm]  
 Twyman Family Papers  
 Watson Family Papers [micfilm]

## VHS

Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, VA  
 Anne Jennings Wise Hobson Diary  
 Bolling Family Papers, section 9  
 Bruce Family Papers, section 1  
 Charles Palmer Letter  
 Cooley Family Papers, sections 4, 5, and 6  
 Davis Family Bible Records  
 Early Family Papers, esp. Mary Virginia Early Brown Diary [micfilm]  
 Emily Howe Dupuy Papers, section 6  
 Gatewood Family Papers, sections 1, 3, and 4  
 George Bolling Lee Papers, section 54  
 Grigsby Family Papers, section 18  
 Hugh Davis Letter, 1819  
 Hunter Family Papers, section 1  
 Judith (Gates) Winfree Memoir, *A Little Southern Girl's Memories Without Her Mother* [1856-1871]  
 Mahala Perkins Harding (Eggleston) Roach Diary [micfilm]  
 Maria Louisa Shackelford Fontaine Memoir  
 Mason Family Papers, section 5  
 Miller Family Papers, section 7  
 Pegram Family Papers, section 5  
 Peyton Family Papers, section 22  
 Preston Family Papers, sections 1 and 2  
 Richard Eppes Diary  
 Ridley Family Papers, section 1  
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