

This is a first draft. The author does not give permission for this article to be cited or used for reprint or publication in its current format.

‘My Own Property’: Matriarchy and Maternalism in the Eighteenth-Century Lowcountry

Dr Inge Dornan

In 1786, the *Georgia Gazette* published an obituary of Katherine Stith, the wife of Georgia’s chief justice, William Stith, in which she was revered as ‘a tender, affectionate and faithful wife; a vigilant and indulgent parent; a sincere and steady friend; a kind, affable and charitable neighbour; a sensible, agreeable and instructive companion; and an unaffectedly pious Christian.’ She was also, ‘a just and humane mistress.’¹ Katherine Stith exemplified the ideals of Lowcountry maternalism. But what exactly did it mean to be a ‘just and humane mistress’ in the eighteenth-century Lowcountry?

Few studies have examined how matriarchy and maternalism shaped women slaveholders’ management of slaves in the Lowcountry. Instead patriarchy and paternalism have factored as the dominant ideologies by which historians have long understood the dynamics of colonial and antebellum slavery.² Where the presence and activities of women slave owners have been acknowledged, they have been largely subordinated and subsumed within these overarching frameworks. Careful piecing together of eighteenth century public records and a handful of surviving personal and estate records of eighteenth-century women slave owners nonetheless calls attention to the particular nature of women’s ownership and management of slaves. And in so doing, reveals how matriarchy and maternalism were essential instruments in the development and expansion of slavery in the eighteenth-century Lowcountry.

Because women slave owners occupy only a marginal place in the historiography on American slavery, their role and contribution to the ‘peculiar institution’ has been greatly underestimated. Ever since slavery was introduced to British America, women played a pivotal role in reinforcing its expansion through owning, employing, buying, selling, hiring

out and handing down enslaved persons, along with the rest of their moveable property, from one generation to the next. In theory, married women could own slaves and transact business in the Lowcountry as a slave owner, but only if they circumlocated the rule of English common law which prohibited them as *feme covert* from owning property and transacting business independently of their husband by establishing a marriage settlement or separate estate to guard their property – slaves, land, plantations - from their husband’s control. Married women could also operate as *feme sole* traders, but only with their husband’s consent. Altogether, relatively few married women seized the opportunity afforded to them by the Lowcountry’s adoption of equity procedures to operate as slave owners separately and independently of their husbands, but those who did occupy a conspicuous presence in the columns of the Lowcountry newspapers, where they advertised their businesses with their husband’s consent (as well as those who, the public was forewarned, conducted business without it). Over all, the majority of Lowcountry women slave owners acquired slaves in widowhood, where Lowcountry laws on widows’ dower rights actively facilitated their outright ownership of slaves. For in contrast to Virginia where women inherited enslaved persons for use during their own lifetime only and were therefore prevented them from selling or bequeathing them, in the Lowcountry chattel slaves were designated personalty (moveable goods) and as such were bequeathed along with all other moveable goods, including cattle, furniture, and crockery, in *fee simple* - that is, outright ownership, forever. In this way, Lowcountry law inscribed women’s ownership and management of slaves and their role in the development and expansion of slavery.³

Lowcountry husbands furthermore connived in the creation of a Lowcountry widowarchy of slave owning women by choosing to bequeath their widows a generous share of their property in the form of slaves as well as plantations. John Crowley has gone for far as to argue that husbands in colonial South Carolina were particularly open-handed when it came to allocating their widow’s inheritance, which manifest a ‘precocious liberalism’⁴ born of ‘attitudes [that were] more pro-feminine than patriarchal.’⁵ Tragically high mortality rates in the South Carolina Lowcountry, Crowley argued, created a demographic environment in which the majority of childless husbands nominated their widows their sole heir. Furthermore, he observed, most widows inherited a greater share of their husband’s wealth than if they had died intestate, and almost 70 percent were chosen by their husbands to act as their executrix.⁶ In all, 80 percent of widows whose husbands left a will were given their inheritance in *fee simple* – thus, full ownership, to sell and bequeath as they wished. Moreover, over two thirds of widows were bequeathed the remainder of their husband’s

estate, which according to Crowley was often the most valuable share.⁷ No Lowcountry husband imagined that by leaving slaves to his widow it would upend the patriarchal foundations upon which Lowcountry society was built. Indeed careful reading of Lowcountry wills clarifies that what lay behind the seemingly ‘pro-feminine’ testamentary bequests in colonial South Carolina was in fact a deeply rooted belief in the duties and obligations of the patriarch to his family and property. For South Carolina’s husbands were foremost motivated to empower their widows not to challenge the patriarchal order, but rather to maintain it, through providing their widows with the economic wherewithal to maintain themselves and their children (independent of public charity, and the threat of destitution) and to ensure that whatever property had been accumulated would remain within the family and put toward maintaining it. Expanding widows’ inheritance beyond the customary rules of intestacy signified the degree to which South Carolina’s testate husbands trusted in their widows to manage the family’s property and provide for their children in their absence. But it also illustrated just how integral widows were to ensuring that the system of chattel slavery continued, most especially in the absence of surviving adult male heirs, from one generation to the next. Far from challenging the patriarchal order, on which the system of slavery was itself based, widows’ inheritance and ownership of slaves was directed toward preserving the wealth and hierarchy by which white slaveholders legitimised and strengthened their status in the eighteenth-century Lowcountry.

It was by transforming their inheritance of slaves into a means of supporting themselves and their children in widowhood that Lowcountry widows became embroiled in the business of slave management. For women slave owners, this drew them into two main spheres of employment: the household, which involved delegating, overseeing, supervising and disciplining domestic slaves; and income generating slave management, which entailed a whole host of activities from plantation administration, including the employment and management of overseers; to deploying slaves in the running of their businesses in Charleston and Savannah; to hiring out slaves for wages. Patriarchal customs and mores dictated that the duties and responsibilities of household chores and the management of domestic slaves fell to women; tellingly, a widowed husband never donned the role performed by his wife but instead employed a housekeeper, or looked to a daughter to step into her deceased mother’s shoes, or soon remarried. That women slave owners engaged in dual spheres of slave management, one within and the other outside of the household, the former to relieve them of domestic toil and the latter to ensure that they and their children would never be reduced to

domestic toil, constituted a particular characteristic of the managerial duties and obligations of the slave owning matriarchy.

The role and responsibilities of widowed women slave owners led to the formation of a discernible business culture founded on notions of a gendered moral economy which was intended to support and shore up the economic interests of Lowcountry widows.⁸ Elizabeth Timothy tapped into this ethos when she appealed to the South Carolina public to support her when she took over her husband's role as printer and editor of *South Carolina Gazette* following his death. Thus she wrote in the *Gazette*:

‘Whereas the late Printer of this *Gazette* hath been deprived of his Life, by an unhappy Accident, I take this Opportunity of informing the Publick, that I shall continue the said Paper as usual; and hope, by the Assistance of my Friends, to make it as entertaining and correct as may be reasonably expected. Wherefore I flatter my self, that all those Persons, who, by Subscription or otherwise, assisted my late Husband, in the Prosecutions of the said Undertaking, *will be kindly pleased to continue their Favours and good Offices to his poor afflicted Widow and six small Children and another hourly expected.*’⁹ (my italics)

Timothy hoped that emphasising her status as a ‘poor afflicted widow’ would help to reinforce public support for her role as editor and printer of the colony’s foremost newspaper (and as America’s first woman newspaper editor and printer). Henry Laurens, who was one of the most prominent merchants and slave traders in the colony of South Carolina and who in the course of his career counted upwards of forty of the colony’s businesswomen on his books, considered it pars for the course that the colony’s widows sought to secure special favours and privileges in the operation of their businesses based on their ‘poor afflicted’ circumstances, and he himself consciously advocated offering them preferential treatment and special favours. As he explained in a letter to Widow Stokes’ father-in-law: ‘all my design in my past transactions relative to your Son...& his Widow was to serve people who stood in need of my assistance’ and therefore, he admitted, ‘I made a present to the Widow [Stokes] of my commission & other charges.’¹⁰ Laurens was not alone in tailoring his services to widows-in-need. When the widowed Eliza Lucas Pinckney found herself struggling to revive the family’s plantations, after allegedly ‘ignorant’ and ‘dishonest’ overseers had permitted them to fall into disarray while she and her husband were in England, she learned of overseers and plantation managers who specifically sought to serve widowed

women planters. Of one such gentleman, she wrote: he is ‘a Dutchman, originally Servant and Overseer to Mr Golightly, who has been much solicited to undertake for many gentlemen; but as he has no family but a wife and is comfortable enough in his circumstances, *refuses to do it for any but women and children that are not able to do it for themselves.*’¹¹ The presence of planter matriarchs offered a ready market for men such as Mr Golightly to capitalise on the needs (and perceived neediness) of the Lowcountry’s widowed women planters.

This may well have made them vulnerable to exploitation, but as Laurens’ dealings with various businesswomen and slave owners confirms, quite the reverse was also true. For not all widowed businesswomen acted as gratefully and deferentially as Widow Stokes, some - in Laurens’ case, on more than one occasion – attempted to profit from a business culture that conferred special advantages and privileges on widows. As Laurens bitterly complained of a business arrangement that went sour with Widow Grinnon: ‘I did not expect [such treatment] & it is enough to discourage one from running any risque to serve a friend in need, & from shewing any indulgence to Widows complaining of distressed circumstances.’¹² Merchants and traders such as Laurens liked to think of themselves as paternalists, ‘indulging’ widows who strove to support themselves and their children. Rather naively, they do not appear to have entertained the idea that the Lowcountry’s ‘poor afflicted’ matriarchs might well exploit their circumstances – tapping into gendered notions of widows’ helplessness and vulnerability – for their own advantage and profit.

Not everyone in the Lowcountry subscribed to an ethos of special treatment and favours towards the slave owning matriarchy. Notably, widows were sometimes forced to defend their ownership of slaves (and plantations) in the face of challenges posed, for the most part, by their Lowcountry male counterparts. Sarah Ann Twaddell, for example, was forced to warn the public in Lowcountry Georgia that two slave runaways advertised by B. Tid were, in fact, ‘not his property’. She went on to say: ‘nor has he any claim to them, *they are my own property.*’ (my italics)¹³ Martha Richard forewarned the public ‘from contracting or bartering with my son, John H Richard, for land, Negroes, or any kind of property whatsoever, as he has no property to comply with any such contract.’¹⁴ Similarly, Ruth Townsend was forced to forewarn the public from trading with her son who, she reported, ‘has mortgaged two Negroe Men’ belonging to her deceased husband’s estate, which we may fairly surmise were not lawfully bequeathed to him. There is a conspicuous absence of evidence of sons and male kin defending their rights to slaves and land against widowed mothers and relations in the Lowcountry newspapers.

Perhaps not unsurprisingly, the most persistent and pronounced challenge to women's ownership and management of slaves came from the enslaved themselves. Gone was the rhetoric of helplessness and vulnerability of the poor afflicted widow when, for instance, Elizabeth Timothy advertised for the capture of her slave Piero - or, as he 'commonly stiles himself', Peter. Within a week of his escape, Timothy inserted a notice in the *Gazette* instructing anyone who captured him to waste no time in dispatching him to the workhouse; in the meantime, she warned, no one was 'to entertain, harbor nor employ the said Negroe on pain of being prosecuted with the utmost Rigor of the Law.'¹⁵ Peter's decision to run away constituted a flagrant affront to Timothy's ownership and authority, it also represented a financial blow to her business, for he was responsible for delivering the *Gazette* to subscribers in and around Charlestown. It is hard to be sure whether Peter managed to secure his freedom, but when Elizabeth Timothy died his name did not appear in her inventory.¹⁶ The impact of Peter running away, coupled with Timothy's reaction to it, underlines the fact that ownership and management of slaves comprised an indispensable part of many widows' livelihood and the assertive and belligerent rhetoric they deployed to recapture runaways and to deter the public from conspiring with them only serves to reinforce this.

Hiring out slaves for wages epitomised the matriarchal nature of women's approach to slave management, for it underscored the economic as opposed to maternalist relationship at the heart of women's slave ownership. Hiring out slaves offered women (just as it did their male counterparts) the chance to benefit financially from their slaves' labour whilst at the same time divesting themselves of the need to engage with the day to day supervision and disciplining of their slaves. In practice, however, it not infrequently led women slave owners to confront the realities of slave management, when slaves like Peter refused to act like slaves. Elizabeth Smith's series of notices in the *South Carolina Gazette* regarding her slave Lancaster are a case in point. 'He constantly earns Money (which he loses either by *Gaming* or spends among the little *Punch-Houses*),' she stated. Having warned the public in a previous advert not to employ him, she would, she said, '*assuredly*' prosecute anyone who flouted her authority. By the time she placed her final notice in the *Gazette*, Lancaster had fled for good.¹⁷ Like countless other slaves who were hired out, Lancaster used the opportunity to earn money to push the boundaries of slave status, eventually overthrowing them altogether. When Charlotte Allston considered hiring out her slave James, she was warned by her friend and factor, Charles Kershaw, that because he was 'very indolent' he required 'a very tight hand kept over him', and therefore if she wished to hire him out, she would be wise to 'give him [his employer] a complete command over him'. Kershaw

furthermore added: ‘James may perhaps go on very well with Mr Black [his employer] for a few months, but after that he will have bad notions put into his head – he will want to work out and pay wages which is much the same as giving him his freedom.’¹⁸

Countless enslaved men and women made a bid for freedom in the eighteenth-century Lowcountry. The columns of the Lowcountry newspapers bear witness to the methods slave owners deployed to retrieve and punish their slaves, which together provide a grim and graphic testimony of the brutal realities of Lowcountry slavery. In publishing descriptions of their runaway slaves, slave owners betrayed both the physical and psychological trauma they inflicted on enslaved men and women, as a result of whipping, beating, branding, burning, shooting, as well as castration. Thus Elizabeth Deveaux described her runaway slave Flora as having ‘a scar of an old burn on her left arm and likewise one on her temple, and a scar of a whip on her right arm.’ [GG July 13 1774] Henrietta Jones’ slave Joe had a ‘piece out of his right ear.’ [GG Dec 2 1784] Jane Griggs’ slave Tenah, also ‘lost a piece of one of her ears’. [GG Dec 8 1785]. Christiana Antz’s slave Phebe was ‘well known about town and branded on both shoulders’. [GG August 12 1790]. Mary Cahill’s runaway slave, Aggy, bore ‘some scars on her arms and one on the back of her neck [which] apparently is from lately being flogged’. Slave owners’ runaway advertisements also spoke to the extreme neglect as well as hazardous working conditions to which they subjected their slaves: Will lost all his toes due to frostbite;¹⁹ Richmond broke his arm (or it had broken) and ‘wrong set’.²⁰ Signs of psychological suffering were also visibly manifest in slaves described as having a ‘sullen countenance’²¹ or a ‘remarkable down look’ (which is how Elizabeth Harvey described her slave, Sack)²², or a terrible stammer (which afflicted Isaac, who was known to stutter badly especially when ‘scared’).²³ Henrietta Jones also described her runaway slave, Big Tom, as having a ‘morose countenance’ and another of her runaway slaves, Cudjo, as having a ‘sour look’.

Like many of their male counterparts, Lowcountry women slave owners resorted to sending their slaves to the workhouse to be punished upon recapture. When advertising for the retrieval of her runaway slave, Hannah Bullock, Elizabeth Bullock ordered that she be sent directly to the workhouse in Charleston – although, by all accounts, this did not have the desired impact, for Elizabeth Bullock ended up selling Hannah, who then ran away from her next owner, Eliza Johnson, who in turn when advertising for Hannah’s recapture, instructed the public to deliver her (once again) straight to the workhouse.²⁴ Anne Matthews also issued instructions that her slave Diana, who ran away with her two children, be delivered to the workhouse once caught.²⁵ By sending their recaptured slaves to the workhouse to be punished

(whipped, with up to twenty or thirty lashes on the bare back), women slave owners avoided applying the whip to their slaves themselves. Delegating the punishment of their slaves to others – overseers, constables and the warden of the workhouse - may have been a preferable method of punishment, especially for women slave owners, since it reduced the threat of immediate physical retaliation. Of course it did not absolve them of responsibility for the violent punishment which resulted from sending their slaves to the workhouse. Indeed Rebecca Massey's notice for the recapture of her slave, Ruth, is a telling reminder that women slave owners could be just as merciless as their male counterparts when it came to punishing their slaves: 'Whoever takes her up, gives her 50 good Lashes, and deliver her to me.'²⁶ Equally chilling was Mary Ellis's notice for the recapture of her slave, Catharina: 'dead or alive'. For which she offered a £10 reward.²⁷ Both Massey and Ellis acted as consummate slave owning matriarchs when confronted with runaway slaves, harnessing the full force and power at their disposal to threaten, warn, deter and punish – to the point of inflicting physical trauma, even death.

The cruel and callous forms of punishment meted out by Lowcountry slave owners was considered by many in the colony of South Carolina to have been a key cause of the largest slave insurrection in British America, the 1739 Stono Rebellion. It was in the wake of the revolt that South Carolina introduced the 1740 slave code. The new slave code marked a major turning point in the Lowcountry's approach to slave management not only because it acknowledged and outlawed many barbaric forms of punishment practiced by slave owners but also because it specified what constituted 'just and humane' treatment of slaves. In so doing it established a legal framework, built on a moral argument that concomitantly condemned and made socially reprehensible the savagery of slave owners, as it also underwrote the emergence of an ideology of maternalism (and paternalism) in the colonial Lowcountry. Thus the code admonished: 'cruelty is not only highly unbecoming [in] those who profess themselves Christians, but is odious in the eyes of all men who have any sense of virtue or humanity.' It went on to confirm that the new slave laws were designed 'to restrain and prevent barbarity being exercised toward slaves'. It was not only – or even primarily - the morals and manners of Lowcountry slave owners that were at stake, but the peace and order of the entire colony. For as the code clarified, the new laws were constructed 'so that the slaves may be kept in due subjection and obedience, and the owners and other persons having the care and government of slaves, may be restrained from exercising too great rigour and cruelty over them; and that the public peace and order of this Province may be preserved'. Slaves were defined as chattel property but, according to the new slave code, this did not give

slaveholders a free rein to use, exploit and abuse enslaved persons as they wished – if for no other reason than, as had been shown with the Stono Rebellion, how they treated slaves had potentially dire consequences for the entire province. Thus it was made a crime for a slave owner to wilfully murder their own slave on pain of a £700 fine and removal or exclusion from holding public office; while slave owners who killed their slave in the ‘sudden heat of passion, or by undue correction’ were fined £350. Owners were also fined £100 if they ‘wilfully cut out the tongue, put out the eye, castrate or cruelly scald, burn, or deprive any slave of any limb or member, or shall inflict any other cruel punishment’ upon their slaves – all forms of punishment inflicted on the enslaved as documented in descriptions of runaway slaves and those advertised for sale in Lowcountry newspapers. Henceforth, ‘whipping or beating with a horsewhip, cow-skin, switch or small stick, or by putting irons on, or confining or imprisoning such slave’ were deemed justifiably acceptable. Although, crucially, the degree to which a slave could be beaten or whipped and the length of time they could be confined was not specified. The code typically stipulated twenty lashes ‘on the bare back’ for a range of crimes and public disorder offences committed by slaves. But notably, it was permissible to punish a slave by death for striking a white person.

The code also spelled out what it deemed to be just and humane methods of slave management. Thus it criminalised failure to provide slaves with ‘sufficient cloathing or food’ subject to a maximum £20 fine. Overwork too constituted a crime - a practice which, as the slave code observed, was common in the Lowcountry:

‘whereas many owners of slaves, and others who have the care, management and overseeing of slaves, do confine them so closely to hard labour; that they have not sufficient time for natural rest—Be it therefore enacted, That if any owner of slaves, or other person who shall have the care, management, or overseeing of any slaves, shall work or put any such slave or slaves to labour, more than 15 hours in 24 hours, from the 25th day of March to the 25th day of September, or more than 14 hours in 24 hours, from the 25th day of September to the 25th day of March; every such person shall forfeit any sum not exceeding or under £20, nor under £5 current money, for every time *he, she or they* shall offend herein.’ [my italics]

The 1740 slave code typically referred to ‘slave owners’ universally or specified masters *and mistresses* when prescribing the laws pertaining to slave management. Which is to say that in the eyes of the law, women slave owners were not considered marginal actors in the business

of slave management in the Lowcountry; or any less guilty or less likely to be responsible for acts of cruelty – excessive punishment, neglect, overwork - which the new slave code sought to outlaw. It almost goes without saying, however, that what the law prescribed was not necessarily what was practiced and that what the law proscribed was not necessarily what was not practiced. Even the 1740 slave code recognised the difficulty - ‘by reason of the extend and distance of plantations in this Province, the inhabitants are far removed from each other, and many cruelties may be committed on slaves’ – of monitoring and punishing slave owners and managers who failed to adhere to the slave code.

From the mid eighteenth century it is nonetheless evident that the new slave code gave legislative muscle to an emerging ideology of maternalism (and paternalism) which encouraged a number of Lowcountry slave owners to adopt a less merciless approach to slave management, most especially when seeking to retrieve their runaway slaves. Thus rather than threaten their slaves with immediate punishment, and the workhouse, they instead offered them the chance of forgiveness – though often with the caveat, *if they returned willingly*. When Mary Simmons placed a notice in the *South Carolina Gazette* to retrieve her runaway slave, she declared: ‘*If she returns of her own accord, she shall be forgiven.*’²⁸ (My italics). In all, only twenty-one such notices offering runaway slaves forgiveness and the chance to avoid punishment appeared in the *South Carolina Gazette* between 1750 and 1775, and no such offers of immunity from punishment appeared in runaway notices in the paper before that date.²⁹ Clemency was rarely conferred freely, but more often than not came with strings attached and was contingent on a runaway returning willingly and ‘immediately’ ‘within 8 days’ ‘within the next ten days’. In fact the consequences of failing to do so were not infrequently merciless. John Forbes, for instance, was prepared to offer his slave Abram ‘forgiveness if he will immediately come to Charles-Town’, but ‘if he does not speedily come in’, Forbes wrote, ‘he shall be when taken most rigorously punished.’³⁰ Joseph Gibbons similarly proclaimed with regard to his slave, Limus, ‘if he will return to his duty in ten days he shall not be whipped, but if not, any person that may bring his head, hand, or foot, after that time, shall be rewarded.’ [GG February 17 1768] Altogether, the many advertisements for runaways in the Lowcountry newspapers expose the reality of how maternalism/paternalism operated when slaves rejected their owners’ authority: forgiveness on one hand and the threat of retribution on the other. Altogether, the offer of forgiveness, when it was extended to a slave runaway, amounted to a mode of slave management which far from signalling a reduction in discipline and punishment constituted a means of

reinforcing it – and sometimes violently so - under the guise of a rhetoric of justice and humanity.

The maternalism which underwrote Mary Simmons' offer to forgive her slave Ruth was the embodiment of Lowcountry notions of gentility which shored up the claims of wealthy women slave owners to elite status. The portrait painted of Katherine Stith in her obituary, introduced at the beginning of this study, represented all the attributes of a genteel lady and exemplary maternalist: 'tender' 'faithful' 'sincere' 'steady' 'kind' 'charitable' 'sensible' 'instructive' 'unaffectedly pious' and 'a just and humane mistress'. Eliza Lucas Pinckney, who was the wife of Charles Pinckney who as Speaker of the South Carolina Commons House of Assembly was responsible for the introduction of the 1740 Slave Code, also epitomised the ideals of genteel maternalism. In 1745, she compiled a series of 'resolutions' in which she vowed to 'make a good wife to my dear Husband,' to 'be a good Mother to my children' and to 'make a good Mistress to my servants'. She further vowed to treat her slaves (whom she often preferred to refer to as her 'servants') 'with humanity and good nature; to give them sufficient and comfortable clothing and Provisions, and all things necessary for them. To be careful and tender of them in their sickness, to reprove them for their faults, to Encourage them when they do well, and pass over small faults; not to be tyrannical or peavish or impatient towards them, but to make their lives as comfortable as I can.' She concluded by resolving to 'be a universal lover of all mankind'. She intended for her resolutions to be kept private and therefore labelled them 'papers belonging to myself onely (sic).'31

Pinckney's correspondence with family members, friends and overseers exemplifies the ideals of maternalism to which she aspired as a slave owner and planter, and were most clearly manifest in the sphere of domestic slave management. In a letter to her daughter, Harriott, who during widowhood followed in her mother's footsteps and herself became a slave owner and planter, Pinkney outlined the daily chores performed by her household slaves and in so doing, passed on the attributes of maternalist slave management she expected her daughter to emulate:

'Mary-Ann understands roasting poultry in the greatest perfection you ever saw, and old Ebba the fattening them to as great a nicety. Daphne makes me a loaf of very nice bread. You know I am no epicure, but I am pleased they can do things so well, when they are put to it ... I shall keep young Ebba to do the drudgery part, fetch wood, and water, and scour, and learn as much as she is capable of Cooking and Washing. Mary-

Ann Cooks, makes my bed, and makes my punch, Daphne works and makes the bread, old Ebba boils the cow's victuals, raises and fattens the poultry, Moses is employed from breakfast until 12 o'clock without doors, after that in the house. Pegg washes and milks. Thus I have formed my household, *nobody eats the bread of idleness when I am here, nor are any overworked.*³² (my italics)

Pinckney's self-image as a maternalist led her to praise Mary-Anne, Old Ebba and Daphne's particular culinary skills while simultaneously making it clear to her daughter that the satisfactory execution of their chores depended on her exercise of authority over them: 'I am pleased they can do things so well, *when they are put to it*'. Pinckney was careful to justify the grounds upon which she exercised such overarching authority over her slaves with reference to Christian precepts of female domesticity and industry. In clear reference to Proverbs 31:27 'She looketh well to the ways of her household and not eateth the bread of idleness', Pinckney boasted: 'nobody eats the bread of idleness when I am here, nor are any overworked'. Thus she wedded patriarchal ideals about women's role and place with Christian precepts to invoke an ideology of maternalism which simultaneously legitimised her management of slaves and underwrote her status as a genteel Lowcountry planter.

It was in the management of her slaves' health that Pinckney's maternalism found its clearest expression. Which also bespoke her resolution 'To be careful and tender' of her slaves 'in their sickness' and 'to make their lives as comfortable as I can.' Pinckney's correspondence is punctuated with references to her slaves' illnesses and her methods of nursing them. That she named the slaves concerned, and often betrayed intimate knowledge of their physical ailments, in a tone and manner as if speaking about members of her own family, suggests that they were most likely household slaves who were well known to her family and friends. Thus she wrote of Juno, her 'breast is a good deal better' and 'her Child well.'³³ And Dye: 'I hear complains of a pain in her knees ... [and] her child has the thrush and I am told is but puny.'³⁴ And 'little Dick' who 'has been extremely ill', she wrote, 'I was afraid we should have lost him also. I believe taking him in ye house and good nursing was a means of saving him also.'³⁵ The ill-health and deaths of one or two other slaves were also mentioned by name in Pinckney's letters, but none featured more frequently than Sibb. 'I hope Sibb's got better'³⁶; 'I am very sorry to hear poor Sibb is ill again'³⁷; 'Sibb was taken with a fever two days ago but it is luckily off this morning ... it would have distressd me a good deal to have left her so ill'³⁸; 'Sibby has been extremely ill with a Rheumatic fever ... I had her in the house and she has been well nursed tho' is still very weak.'³⁹ Juno, Dye, little

Dick, and Sibb stood at the receiving end of Pinckney's resolutions to live up to the ideals of Lowcountry maternalism. They not only occupied a conspicuous role in her correspondence, where Pinckney mentioned few other slaves by name, but were also the primary beneficiaries of her vow to provide comfort and compassion to her slaves during sickness. Without exception, the focal point of Pinckney's references to her slaves' health rested with an affirmation of her authority and control over them, based on a sometimes intimate knowledge of their illnesses and her intervention in ministering to their needs. Indeed as well she might boast that it was as a result of her decision to bring little Dick into her house and ensure he received 'good nursing' that he was saved. None of the many dozens of other slaves whom Pinckney owned were individually acknowledged in her correspondence, and in so far as her correspondence offers a telling insight into her methods of slave management, none other than those mentioned by name received such preferential treatment.

Frances Kemble, who married Georgia slaveholder, Pierce Butler, and wrote critically of slavery and of her experience living on his plantation in the late 1830s, wrote scathingly of the favouritism which, she observed, southern slave owners 'are fond of exhibiting'; and 'the degree of license to which they capriciously permit their favorite slaves occasionally to carry their familiarity' they deem, she shrewdly discerned, 'as an undeniable proof of the general kindness with which their dependents are treated.' Intent on exposing this myth, she continued:

'It is as good a proof of it as the maudlin tenderness of a fine lady to her lap dog is of her humane treatment of animals in general. Servants whose claims to respect are properly understood by themselves and their employers, are not made pets, play things, jesters, or companions of, and it is only the degradation of the many that admits of this favoritism to the few – a system of favoritism which, as it is perfectly consistent with the profoundest contempt and injustice, degrades the object of it quite as much, though it oppresses him less, than the cruelty practiced upon his fellows.'⁴⁰

The limits of Eliza Lucas Pinckney's maternalism/favouritism were evident when she reported on the death of one of her carpenters during the 1760 smallpox epidemic: 'I lost one only a valuable Carpenter who took it ye natural way,'⁴¹ she wrote. Referring to her slave by occupation and not by name, Pinckney unwittingly revealed that the measure of his loss to her was purely economic.⁴²

Frances Kemble wrote of the ways in which enslaved women most particularly sought to pressure and persuade their owners to live up to the claims of Lowcountry maternalism which they espoused, most especially when it came to providing them with adequate food and clothing and mitigating conditions which undermined their health through overwork and their wellbeing through the sale and separation of families. Kemble reported, ‘no time, no place, affords me respite from my innumerable petitioners ... they flock in with urgent entreaties, and pitiful stories, and my conscience forbids my ever postponing their business for any other matter’.⁴³ Kemble, who was born and raised in Britain and was avowedly against slavery, went on to explain the source of her guilty conscience and felt need to listen to the pleas of her husband’s slaves:

‘for with shame and grief of heart I say it, by their unpaid labour I live – their nakedness clothes me, and their heavy toil maintains me in luxurious idleness. Surely the least I can do is to hear these, my most injured benefactors; and, indeed, so intense in me is the sense of the injury they receive from me and mine, that I should scarce dare refuse them the very clothes from my back, or food from my plate, if they asked me for it.’⁴⁴

We can fairly assume that Butler’s slaves would never have dared ask for the clothes off their mistress’s back and the food on her plate. For as Kemble recounts, her husband severely disapproved of his female slaves appealing to her to ameliorate their condition, and on occasion instructed them to be punished for doing so. Which is what happened to ‘poor old Teresa’ who, Kemble explained, protested about ‘her back being broken by hard work and child-bearing’ and was ‘flogged for having complained to me as she did.’ Mortified by old Teresa’s punishment for simply having complained to her, Kemble admitted that when a group of pregnant women petitioned her ‘to have their work lightened’, ‘I was, of course, obliged to tell them that I could not interfere in the matter, that their master was away, and that, when he came back, they must present their request to him: they said they had already begged ‘massa’, and he had refused, and they thought, perhaps, if ‘missis’ begged ‘massa’ for them, he would lighten their task.’ Kemble agreed to talk to her husband, although she admitted to the women that she thought it ‘would be no use’. When she spoke to the overseer, ‘He seemed evidently annoyed at their having appealed to me’, she wrote, and dismissed their appeals.⁴⁵ Kemble’s journal makes clear that any steps she took to ameliorate the conditions and treatment of the slaves on her husband’s plantation were subject to his authority and

approval, and by contravening this, she jeopardized the lives and wellbeing of those women who appealed to her for support and assistance. Pierce Butler's slaves held Kemble to account (and Butler, too, as much as they could) to an ideology of maternalism – to provide them with adequate clothing and food and a reasonable workload, just as the 1740 South Carolina slave code, which also formed the basis of the 1755 Georgia slave code, prescribed. Their efforts were largely thwarted, however, not because their mistress refused to listen, but because in a male headed household she was unable to act.

Unlike Kemble, Elizabeth Blythe was head of her own household and therefore had full authority to establish how her slaves were treated and the conditions under which they labored. Like most of her widowed planter counterparts, she delegated the management of two of her plantations in Georgia to an overseer. She was clear and firm about how he should manage her slaves - 'in a planter like manner' - and ensured he was contractually obliged to follow her instructions lest he be sacked. Thus Blythe dictated that he should manage her plantations 'with care, skill, fidelity, sobriety, & ability, & more especially with moderation & humanity to the negroes'. The agreement went on to spell out precisely what she meant by 'moderation' and 'humanity': 'he will in no instance strike a negro with a stick & in case of any uncommon occurrence on either of the said plantations, which in the opinion of him the said Wm J Thompson might call for the exercise of severity, he will in no event use it, without first applying for & obtaining the sanction of Mr B Allston or Mrs Blyth, or of Mr Keith & that should he violate any part of the above written agreement, he may be discharged from his employment.'⁴⁶ By creating a contract which set out how she wished her slaves *not* to be treated, Blythe maintained some degree of authority and control over the management of her slaves all the while she delegated the practical task of managing them to an overseer. Of course, a contract in no way guaranteed that Thompson would not mistreat her slaves, only that in the event he was found to exercise severity toward them without permission, he would be dismissed. Elizabeth Blythe's self-image as a planter was rooted in an ideal of maternalism which induced her to stamp her authority on how her slaves were managed on her plantations. How common it was for women planters to go so far as to make it a contractual obligation on the part of their overseers not to resort to severity, without at least applying to them for permission, is nonetheless hard to say.

The maternalism to which Eliza Lucas Pinckney aspired – to be a good mistress, to treat her slaves with compassion when they were unwell, to feed and clothe them, not to be tyrannical and peevish, to pass over small faults – was, like all resolutions imply, more representative of an ideal than the norm. That maternalism was an ideology which Pinckney

attempted to live up to and not a reflection of the reality of slaveholding by which she lived may be gauged in the instances when she betrayed her frustration at her slaves' refusal to bend to her authority. Like many of her male and female slaveholding counterparts, she depended on her slaves to carry letters, messages and information back and forth between family, friends and neighbours – one such messenger was her slave Harry. In 1768, Pinckney received word via Harry that her son-in-law, Daniel Horry, had been injured, in the course of interrogating Harry for further information about his condition, she unwittingly disclosed the unsteadiness of her claim to maternalism when faced with slaves who undermined her authority. She wrote to her son-in-law: 'I don't believe Harry would utter a sentence more than he is commissiond to do for the world, I asked him many questions, particularly about your wound and whether it was still bad, but I could not get anything out of him more than that it is a scratch, though Harriott calls it a deep Gash; had the Major such a servant I believe his secret never would have been discovered.'⁴⁷ Pinckney did her best to mask the incident with a degree of humour but was she undeniably irritated by Harry's refusal to be drawn on the details of her son-in-law's injury, despite subjecting him to a rigorous quizzing. In another instance, Pinckney wrote to her daughter of her frustration at not being able to communicate with her slave, Ralph. 'Onia says he understands English very well, but I think he speaks it very badly, I cant understand him,' she wrote.⁴⁸ Not only was Onia daring enough to dispute Pinckney's judgement, she also, in so doing, colluded with Ralph to frustrate Pinckney's claim to wield complete control over them.

The American Revolution fully exposed the myth of maternalism to which Pinckney cleaved in her identity as a genteel slaveholder and planter. Whether she was truly surprised when her slaves seized the chances afforded by the dislocations of war to challenge and contest her ownership and authority over them is hard to say, but there is little doubt about the impact of their actions on her livelihood and status. In a letter to her son, Thomas Pinckney, in 1779, she highlighted her complete loss of control and authority over her slaves: 'I sent Prince the Taylor from Goose Creek to order the Belmont people to Cross Scots ferry and come to me at Santee and I hear Mr. Horry did the same *but they are not come.*'⁴⁹ (My italics). She further noted, 'I know not what to do in regard to the Beach hill and Belmont Negroes ... for *they all do now what they please every where and several plantations of Negroes attatch'd to their homes and the little they have there have refused to remove ... I think they are out of the way of being taken away [by the British] at present unless they choose to go to them and in that case I fear we should not be able to prevent it.*'⁵⁰ (My italics). The Revolutionary War wrought severe disruptions to the routines of plantation and

slave management and discipline and exposed the fragile lines of authority that underpinned Pinckney's maternalism. After receiving word from her son that his house had been burned to the ground down and his slaves carried away, she observed, 'nor do I know whether they went voluntarily (*sic*) with the Enemy or were taken by force.'⁵¹ By conceding it was possible her slaves 'went' (absconded) voluntarily to the British, Pinckney acknowledged the reality of enslavement which maternalism did its best to disguise. In a letter devoid of genteel niceties, she railed to her friend Rebecca Evance, in 1780: 'I tell you I have been Robbd and deserted by my slaves my property pulld to peices (*sic*), burnt, and destroy'd, my money of no value, my Children sick and prisoners.'⁵² Pinckney's maternalism collapsed in the face of her slaves' rejection of her authority and ownership, and she was finally forced to concede the gulf that had in reality always separated 'my slaves' (her 'black girls' and 'servants' as she commonly called them) from 'my children'. Thereafter, her maternalism gave way to the true value and meaning of matriarchal slave ownership, as she explained in a letter to a friend: 'I would sell some of my Negroes that remain in my possession; and make Instant paymt of the £200 I borrow'd of you with the Interest', she wrote, 'but the slaves in this country in genl. have behaved so infamously and even those that remaind at home so Insolent and *quite their own masters* that for this reason ye precariousness of the province & want of money — — there are very few purchasers & their value is so trifling that it must be absolute ruin to sell at this time.'⁵³ (My italics). For all Pinckney's resolutions to be a 'good mistress' and to make her slaves' lives 'as comfortable as I can', her vision of maternalism was contingent, at heart, on her slaves acting as slaves. Strip away the layers of maternalist ideology and at core lay the economic reality that slaves - acting as slaves - formed the basis of women slaveholders' livelihoods and their families' socio-economic status. When they acted otherwise and became 'quite their own masters', maternalism ceased to have much meaning.

I have argued here that slave owning matriarchs placed economic self-interest at the forefront of their approach to slave management. Through vigorously defending their ownership and authority over their slaves: denouncing male kith and kin who challenged their proprietorship; threatening to prosecute anyone who unlawfully harboured their slaves; and punishing those slaves who flagrantly flouted their authority and ran away. The Stono Rebellion marked a major sea change in approaches to slave management in the colonial Lowcountry, for it inscribed in law the key precepts of maternalism, including the rationalisation of punishment and the shunning (and shaming) of excessive wanton cruelty and overwork, as well as providing adequate food, clothing and shelter to the enslaved. Much

of what historians have typically framed as paternalism in fact owed a great deal to *maternalism*: the most notable attributes of which were rooted in the household sphere and domesticity – in the provision of food and clothes, nursing and healthcare, for example – and underscored by forms of behaviour long deemed quintessentially feminine, such as tenderness, affection, piety, charity, and compassion. Maternalism disguised the grim reality of overwork and punishment that lay at the heart of slavery – and was exposed in runaway advertisements - with a set of obligations and responsibilities that persuaded slave owners they were ‘just and humane’. Offering slaves forgiveness – or else – perfectly exemplifies how ideal and reality inhered in the operation of Lowcountry maternalism/paternalism. It came with strings attached. In the same way as favouritism, which as Frances Kemble observed also epitomised Lowcountry maternalism, where compassion and care was extended to the few in lieu of the many, and was entirely dependent on the favoured few acting as slaves. When slaves ceased acting as slaves and became ‘quite their own masters’ so the veneer of maternalism quickly disappeared. As the callousness and cruelty evidenced in advertisements for slave runaways, before as well as after the 1740 slave code, confirm. Indeed there is perhaps no greater testimony to the myth of maternalism than in the actions of the enslaved themselves, fleeing their owners out of fear, punishment or more fundamentally, the desire to be free. And, as well, in the fact that relatively few Lowcountry matriarchs/maternalists when they had the chance to decide their slaves’ fate chose not to free them.⁵⁴ Nowhere was the reality of matriarchy and maternalism more keenly exposed than when Eliza Lucas Pinckney was forced to acknowledge that her ‘slaves’ – far from being akin to members of her own family – seized the opportunities wrought by the dislocations of the American Revolution and robbed her and fled. She could not even sell those left behind because when slaves ceased to act as slaves they were, as she herself acknowledged, worthless. This was stark reality of matriarchal slave ownership and management in the eighteenth-century Lowcountry, where the economics of slave ownership underwrote the grim reality of slave punishment and exploitative labour at the same time as an ideology of maternalism persuaded women slave owners that they were ‘just and humane’.

¹*Gazette of the State of Georgia* 6 July 1786. Also see *Gazette of the State of Georgia* 21 April 1791, Mrs James Houston, Savannah.

² For example, Philip D Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth Century Chesapeake & Lowcountry* (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill and London, 1998).

³ For a detailed discussion on the laws on women’s property ownership and legal status see, Marylynn Salmon, *Women, Property and the Law*

⁴ Crowley

⁵ Crowley

⁶ Charles Pinckney, (1699-1758), Will, 13 February 1756 in *The Papers of Eliza Lucas Pinckney and Harriott Pinckney Horry Digital Edition*, ed. Constance Schulz. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2012. (Hereafter *Papers of Eliza Lucas Pinckney*) <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/PinckneyHorry/ELP0199> (accessed 23 February 2018).

⁷ Crowley, 'Family Relations', 45.

⁸ Cite E P Thompson and explain.

⁹ *South Carolina Gazette*

¹⁰ George C. Rogers Jr., David R. Chesnutt, Philip M. Hamer, James C. Taylor, eds., *The Papers of Henry Laurens, 1724-1792* (Columbia, S.C., 1968) vol 4, 49-51 (my italics).

¹¹ Letter from Eliza Lucas Pinckney to George Morley, 14 March 1760 in Elise Pinckney, ed., *The Letterbook of Eliza Lucas Pinckney, 1739-1762* (Charleston, S.C., second edition, 1997), 144 (my italics).

¹² *Ibid.*, vol 5, 173-74 (my italics). For further instances where Laurens' clashed with the colony's widowed entrepreneurs: Mrs Edmonds, vol 9, 333 and Widow Rachel Caw, vol 4, 620-29.

¹³ *Georgia Republican* August 18 1810.

¹⁴ *Gazette of the State of Georgia* February 8 1787.

¹⁵ *South Carolina Gazette* 7-14 June 1740

¹⁶ Inventory of Elizabeth Timothy, 2 July 1757, South Carolina inventories vol. S, (South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia, S.C).

¹⁷ Smith first advertised Lancaster spending his wages on himself, 1 January 1741, *SCG*; she advertised Lancaster as a runaway on 10 October 1741, *SCG*.

¹⁸ Charles Kershaw to Charlotte Allston, Charleston 8 Feb 1819, Charlotte Anne Allston Papers, SCHS.

¹⁹ *South Carolina Gazette* 13 October 1757.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 29 May -5 June 1742.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 12 February 1756.

²² *Ibid.*, 24 September 1772.

²³ *Georgia Gazette* 20 December 1764.

²⁴ *South Carolina Gazette* 6 December 1751 and *South Carolina Gazette and Country Journal* 30 September 1766.

²⁵ *South Carolina Gazette* 25 July – 1 August 1761.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1 February 1739.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 3 February 1757.

²⁸ *South Carolina Gazette and Country Journal* 17 December 1771.

²⁹ This assessment is based on an analysis of runaway notices in the *South Carolina Gazette* in Lathan A. Windley, *Runaway Slave Advertisements – A Documentary History from the 1730s to 1790* 4 vols (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1983).

³⁰ *South Carolina Gazette* 25 September - 2 October 1762.

³¹ Harriott Horry Ravenel, *Eliza Pinckney: Women of Colonial and Revolutionary Times* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1896), 115-118.

³² Eliza Lucas Pinckney to Harriott Pinckney Horry, n.d, in *Papers of Eliza Lucas Pinckney* <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/PinckneyHorry/ELP0754> (accessed 22 February 2018).

³³ Eliza Lucas Pinckney to Harriott Pinckney Horry, 12 May 1778, in *Papers of Eliza Lucas Pinckney* <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/PinckneyHorry/ELP0445> (date accessed 22 February 2018).

³⁴ Eliza Lucas Pinckney to Harriott Pinckney Horry, [May] [1774], in *Papers of Eliza Lucas Pinckney* <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/PinckneyHorry/ELP0455> (date accessed 27 February 2018).

³⁵ Eliza Lucas Pinckney to Harriott Pinckney Horry, 8 June 1778, in *Papers of Eliza Lucas Pinckney* <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/PinckneyHorry/ELP0444> (date accessed 22 February 2018).

³⁶ Eliza Lucas Pinckney to Harriott Pinckney Horry, 1 March 1775, in *Papers of Eliza Lucas Pinckney* <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/PinckneyHorry/ELP0442> (accessed 22 February 2018).

³⁷ Eliza Lucas Pinckney to Harriott Pinckney Horry, 9 March 1775, in *Papers of Eliza Lucas Pinckney* <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/PinckneyHorry/ELP0443> (accessed 22 February 2018).

³⁸ Eliza Lucas Pinckney to Harriott Pinckney Horry, 28 May 1778, in *Papers of Eliza Lucas Pinckney* <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/PinckneyHorry/ELP0446> (accessed 22 February 2018).

³⁹ Eliza Lucas Pinckney to Harriott Pinckney Horry, 8 June 1778, in *Papers of Eliza Lucas Pinckney* <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/PinckneyHorry/ELP0444> (accessed 22 February 2018).

⁴⁰ loca 878-879 FK.

⁴¹ Eliza Lucas Pinckney to Rebecca Raven Evance, (Mrs. Branfill), 19 June 1760, in *Papers of Eliza Lucas Pinckney* <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/PinckneyHorry/ELP0363> (date accessed 27 February 2018).

⁴² 874 FK

⁴³ 951 FK

⁴⁴ 956 FK

⁴⁵ 1825. FK

⁴⁶ 15 January 1822 Agreement between Elizabeth Blyth and William Thompson, RFW Allston papers, Allston Factor's letters, letters to Charlotte Anne Allston 1808-1809, South Carolina Historical Society.

⁴⁷ Eliza Lucas Pinckney to Daniel Huger Horry, Jr., 9 March 1768, in *Papers of Eliza Lucas Pinckney* <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/PinckneyHorry/ELP0401> (date accessed 27 February 2018).

⁴⁸ Eliza Lucas Pinckney to Harriott Pinckney Horry, [February] [1775], in *Papers of Eliza Lucas Pinckney* <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/PinckneyHorry/ELP0454> (date accessed 22 February 2018).

⁴⁹ Eliza Lucas Pinckney to Thomas Pinckney, (1750-1828), 17 May 1779, in *Papers of Eliza Lucas Pinckney* <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/PinckneyHorry/ELP0967> (date accessed 23 February 2018).

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Eliza Lucas Pinckney to Rebecca Raven Evance, (Mrs. Branfill), 25 September 1780, in *Papers of Eliza Lucas Pinckney* <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/PinckneyHorry/ELP1013> (date accessed 23 February 2018).

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Of all women who possessed slaves and recorded a will between 1750 and 1775, fifteen women (of 144) manumitted a slave(s). Four also gave their slaves money, three requested their slaves pay for their freedom, a further three fixed the age or period of time of their slave's freedom, and five attached no conditions at all but also offered no financial or material support to their manumitted slave(s). These figures derive from an analysis of all wills recorded by women slave owners between 1750 and 1775 in *Records of the Secretary of State, Recorded Instruments, South Carolina Wills* vol. NN, col. TT, vol. SS, vol. QQ, vol. PP, vol. RR, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia, South Carolina.