

Genteel Domesticity in the Postbellum South

by

Cita Cook
West Georgia College

In the years immediately following the Civil War, plantation mistresses across the South faced the dilemma of how to redefine their proper domestic role. Severe economic reversals required many to manage household duties without the help of servants. Because of the new freedom of domestic workers to choose and reject their employers, often wealthy women, as well, often had to sweat in the kitchen, learning to make biscuits. The resulting reconstruction of southern genteel domesticity gave elite white women the opportunity to develop a new sense of themselves as skilled housewives, but only if they were willing to dispense with the assumption that they were too refined to perform chores once done exclusively by black slaves.¹ In the end, most of them sacrificed any pride they took in their new household abilities to their belief in a social hierarchy that put planters and their descendants at the top.²

Although antebellum plantation mistresses had generally led busy lives, with many more responsibilities than readers of nineteenth century literature about plantation life might suspect, most had developed a strong sense of which tasks were appropriate for a white lady and which for a black slave.³ They might have been proud of their ability to bake cakes or sew elaborate embroidery, but they had not expected to scrub the cake pans or iron the ruffles on their ballgowns. The emancipation of the slaves meant that elite southern women could no longer demand such rigid boundaries between genteel and menial household chores. They discovered that the work that they had not normally done before could be a lot harder than it looked and that it swallowed up time for more elegant pursuits. The appeal of toiling for the sake of their families and their class only temporarily made up for the discomforts. Many shared the sentiment of Anna Butler on a plantation in Louisiana that "housecleaning may be a very pleasant and romantic occupation in books, but...it is trying upon the feelings, as well as the hands and clothes."⁴

Domestic ideology in novels and prescriptive literature both reflected and affected genteel white women's particular reactions to the need to expand their repertoire of household skills. As southern elite whites concentrated on restoring their economic and social status, they revitalized the idealized Southern Lady as a symbol of their moral right to control the labor and behavior of African Americans. Some fictional postbellum ladies without servants smiled in front of vine-covered cottages as if cooking and cleaning were the easiest jobs in the world, but the standard cultural image of Reconstruction plantation mistresses was that of patient martyrs to economic deprivation and an irresponsible workforce. In one Confederate Memorial Day speech, for example, Sutton Scott, an Alabama lawyer, praised the women who, in the midst of "ruin and...desolation...bared their dimpled arms, took the jewels from their rosy fingers, to do singly and alone what scores of ser-

vants had done for them before."⁵ Emma Holmes, a twenty-one year old South Carolinian, projected the image she probably wanted for herself when she proclaimed in April of 1865 that she could fill her diary with "the heroism & spirit of the Southern women...fragile women, left without a servant...cooking & washing without a murmur."⁶

Such praise tended to include the implication that these sacrifices were temporary aberrations, necessary only until the "proper" leaders of the South could rebuild a social system which clearly distinguished household mistresses from menial domestic laborers, whether paid black workers or white farmwives demeaned by the elite as "common." The ladies of Reconstruction may have agreed to cook breakfast and wash clothes under the pressures of the new order, but that did not necessarily mean that they were ready to do so indefinitely.

Plantation mistresses and their daughters first encountered household chores previously considered beneath them whenever their slaves felt free enough to leave on their own. Susan Bradford's discovery that all of the servants on her family's Florida plantation had left overnight meant to her, "Nobody to get breakfast; nobody to clean up the house; no maids to look after the wants of 'milady;'...Not a servant, not one and we unused to work."⁷ The complaint of one Louisiana woman was not unusual. "I never even so much as washed out a pocket handkerchief with my own hands, and now I have to do all my work."⁸

Although the circumstances varied from household to household, most women reacted to the loss of servants with a complicated array of ever-changing emotions. Generally, any pleasure they took in their ability to confront new tasks gave way to frustration and bitterness once the novelty wore off. When Emma Holmes, who was still living with her parents, realized that slavery was doomed, she began making her bed, sweeping, dusting, and "practicing washing." She was impressed by how much time housework took, but enjoyed showing the servants that her family was "by no means entirely dependent on them." She and her sister agreed to take turns churning butter and making biscuits, but they first had to find experienced black workers who would teach them how to do the work and praise them for their "industry and 'smartness.'"⁹ When the sisters decided to learn to iron, two black women showed them, "respectfully & willingly," how "to go to work."¹⁰ Two months later, however, Holmes declared that she did not like cooking and washing and missed having things "all ready prepared" for her use.¹¹

Holmes' satisfaction with the way in which experienced black household workers passed on their skills probably indicates that these freedpeople knew how to teach white employers in a deferential way, without revealing any scorn they felt for such incapable adults or any resentment they harbored for the lack of appreciation for the work they had done for so many years. In the plantation society of novels, devoted servants were the first to warn young women away from harsh menial work. A postwar mammy in a story by Sherwood Bonner told two young women to keep away from the fire where she was cooking hominy. "Lor', chillen! ...it's too hot for you to be in here. Massy knows if I wazn't seasoned to it I'd drap in my tracks."¹²

When young Elsie Dinsmore, the southern heroine of a popular series of novels for girls by Martha Finley, was visiting her friend Lucy, they decided to amuse themselves

by "going into the dominions of Aunt Viney, the cook, and assisting in beating eggs and making cake." Aunt Viney reacted to their plans with astonishment. "'What! Missy help ole Aunt Viney wid dose lily-white hands?....you' lily hands no' hab strength to stir, an' de fire spoil yo' buful 'plexions for shuah.'" The girls had their way, of course, with their ignorance of the most basic principles of cooking causing much mirth for Viney. Viney was particularly shocked when Lucy explained that they wanted to learn how to cook because they might have to do it for themselves sometime.¹³ In spite of this implied fortune-telling by an author of a novel published in 1872 about antebellum girls, however, Finley described Elsie Dinsmore's slaves as staying loyal after emancipation and she included no references to Elsie cooking as an adult.

Basic cooking and laundry remained, for most elite women, the most dreaded responsibilities, both because the work was hot, strenuous, and sometimes dangerous and because it was tainted by its association with black labor. When Kate Foster and another young woman baked cakes for a children's party near Natchez, Mississippi in mid-1863, she was pleased with her abilities and contemplated, in a spirit similar to that of Elsie Dinsmore's friend, that she might have to do her own cooking some day. When Foster had to do most of the housework because a servant was ill, she declared that it was "not hard to do" and that the only task that she did not like was "taking out the slops." That fall, however, she decided that six weeks of washing had nearly ruined her for life, as she was "too delicately raised for such hard work." Five years later, she had difficulty accepting the chores her aunt needed her to do because she found it so "hard to come down to a level with a servant."¹⁴

Men's attitudes about the work of their wives and daughters could affect how the women reacted to the new responsibilities. In May of 1865, Ella Gertrude Thomas, a thirty-one year old wife and mother living near Augusta, Georgia, was relatively stoic as she dried the breakfast dishes for almost the first time in her life. By the end of 1870, however, when she tried to save money by doing without household servants, the frustration of having to make all the beds and wash all the dishes caused her "to think that it was in very bad taste to have three meals in one day" and she marveled at how rapidly her "homely but necessary duties followed each other." One night, "when washing some greasy plates, with an instinctive shrinking from [the] unaccustomed work," she complained to her husband that he did not seem to appreciate how "troublesome" such work was for her. He unsympathetically replied that it was her fault for being unwilling to hire someone, not considering that his financial ineffectiveness had led her to try to do the work alone. The next day she hired someone to wash the dishes and do other bothersome tasks.¹⁵

Whether the necessity for genteel white women to take over the housework came from poverty or from the difficulty of finding servants, decisions as to how the females of a family should divide the work could engender either a sense of comradeship or bitter strains. Teenager Nellie Ker complained that she hated cooking when her father, who was struggling to turn a Louisiana farm into a plantation like those his father had once owned, refused to hire someone to do the work. At one point, her step-mother took over the kitchen, but "she made so many disagreeable remarks about it" that Nellie agreed to cook for the rest of the winter. This promise turned out to have tragic consequences

when Nellie's carelessness with old ashes led to a fire which destroyed her father's house.¹⁶

Improved kitchen technology could have been a help to some beleaguered southern housekeepers, but many neglected to take advantage of it. Maria Fleet, a Virginia widow, declared in 1867, on the arrival of her new stove, that she had not been so pleased with anything since they "got the piano." She felt that way, however, because the effectiveness of the stove meant that she would not have to hire an assistant for her longterm cook.¹⁷ Other black cooks were not so lucky as the woman who worked for Fleet. Letters between white women include many more references to improved sewing machines than to kitchen appliances. Part of the mystique that developed around the idealized black cook was that she preferred the old methods of doing things. Since most white women were more interested in finding just such "a treasure" than in becoming efficient cooks themselves, they may have considered a new stove to be a needless expense.

Whatever the experiences of individual postbellum genteel housewives, the increasing popularity of southern cookbooks during and after Reconstruction implied that more and more "rosy fingers" were becoming busy in southern kitchens, whether or not they planned to do so indefinitely. The prescriptive messages in these books varied. Some editors considered an increased domestic proficiency to be healthy in and of itself. Others presented a willingness to cook as either a patriotic sacrifice similar to those expected in wartime or a grudging acknowledgment that ladies could no longer force black people to work for them. A reviewer in 1871 presented one book as an attempt to guarantee that "the choice secrets of the far-famed Southern cookery" not "be lost to mankind" since so many family cooks had been "turned adrift" and the antebellum "merry careless negro" had become "the uneasy saturnine freedman" of Reconstruction.¹⁸ These cookbooks seldom acknowledged, however, when black women were actually the creators of cherished recipes.

The cookbooks were not often explicit as to which kitchen tasks a lady should expect to do regularly and which she could or should delegate to hired servants, although there were underlying messages that all servants required oversight. Marion Tyree suggested that a housekeeper who understood both the practice and "the theory of bread-making" could "give more exact directions to her cook" and "detect and rectify any blemish in the bread." Tyree also warned that servants could be trusted only with an "old-fashioned" hand-crank ice-cream freezer, as opposed to the new "patent" kind, and that taking the time to hem coarse linen dish rags discouraged servants from throwing them away.¹⁹ Southern cookbooks were not the only ones to imply that their readers were apt to have hired workers to direct in the kitchen, but the historical context of references to southern African American "Mammies" was different, in many ways, from that for comments about Irish American "Bridgets" in northern cookbooks.

In 1862, teenager Sarah Morgan had reacted to news of the forthcoming Emancipation Proclamation by foretelling how sad she would feel when she could no longer enjoy the playful interchange with black workers in the sugar house, such as when Jules would wipe "the handle of his paddle on his apron, to give 'Mamselle' a chance to skim the kettles and learn how to work!"²⁰ Her youthful image of her family's slaves

portrayed them as, above all, anxious to please. In an article in The Charleston News eleven years later, however, she emphasized the incompetency and irresponsibility of black workers. Morgan suggested that a household mistress needed to pay "close attention to the details of the kitchen and pantry" if she expected her servants to work with the proper discipline. She concluded that it was "useless to expect servants to practice what the mistress disregards."²¹

Occasionally, cookbook editors called for a new domestic work ethic that blended housewifely values more common in the North with a sense of postbellum southern reality. In 1870, E.W. Warren announced, "The race of good cooks among us is almost extinct" and "the night for the dreamy visions of elegance and luxury in connection with a life of indolence has suddenly given place to the day of enterprise and industry." This plight required "every mother, wife and daughter" to "become a practical operator in the domestic circle," using her earlier experience as "queen in the parlor" to become "queen in the kitchen."²²

While encouraging southern white women to develop a new skill that could make them less reliant on black cooks, some cookbooks also legitimized that skill as a way to strengthen the female mission to make men more comfortable. Mrs. A. P. Hill assured young wives in 1867,

there is a great deal of happiness in a well-dressed mutton chop, or a tidy breakfast table. Men grow sated of music, are often too wearied for conversation, however intellectual; but they can appreciate a well-swept hearth and smiling comfort Women of a higher order of mind...know that their feminine, their domestic duties, are their first duties.²³

White southern women also knew, however, that their artistic and intellectual "accomplishments" had long served to distinguish elite ladies from common housewives. Their new household chores challenged their class status not only because they had to do menial work but also because it restricted their time for more genteel activities. South Carolinian Minnie Adger wished in 1869 that she could "secure three hours for reading and studying, and three hours for practising" the piano, but she found it useless to try because housekeeping in the country, even with some servants, took up so much time.²⁴

During the Civil War, the Confederate novelist, Augusta Evans, had suggested that the typical southern lady was so used "to having every office in the household performed by others while she sits passive and inert," that she languished and suffered physically as a result. Evans had been convinced that "she who kneads the bread is very rarely troubled with dyspepsia and one who habitually churns her own butter, or inadvertently handles her own broom, is a stranger to the horrors of asthma, and nervous headaches."²⁵ Eighteen months after the war, however, Evans complained about having to spend so much time cooking and cleaning that she had none left for her intellectual work. As economic problems complicated the issue of how she should spend her time, she felt exhausted by "the question of bread and butter."²⁶

Although the leaders of white southern society usually condoned a genteel woman's desire to have time to develop her mind, they expected her to harmonize such activities with her household responsibilities. An article in 1874 on the accomplishments

of the eighteenth century British scientific author Mary Somerville noted that "her intellectual pursuits were made subservient to her domestic duties" and complemented her "womanly...pride and pleasure...in her own skill in the art of cookery and in the feminine accomplishments of embroidery and delicate needlework."²⁷ In a book of household hints, Marion Harland imagined "Emily Bronte reading German while she kneads the batch of home-made bread" and quoted an American "authoress" who had claimed, "My happiest thoughts come to me while I am mixing cake. My most serious study-hours are those devoted apparently to darning the family stockings."²⁸ Such images suggested that a woman's identity and social position could be determined more by what went on in her mind than by what she did with her hands.

Neither the concept of finding ways to be creative while carrying out repetitive physical work nor access to cookbooks with easy recipes and good-natured encouragement could counteract the ongoing desire of white women to find and afford African American workers who would relieve them of the work they hated most. For decades after the Civil War, letters between southern white women were full of references to their desperate search for "good servants." A mythology even developed about the power a skillful black cook could wield in a white household. According to the Natchez newspaper in 1880, many families had boarding house or restaurant food brought to their homes, an apparent compromise between the difficulty of finding a regular cook and the unwillingness of genteel women to do the work themselves.²⁹

As women who thought of themselves as southern ladies accommodated to the limitations of economic constraints and the "servant problem," the redefinition of genteel domesticity made room for tasks and responsibilities that were previously considered too menial for proper ladies but did not totally erase the ideal of a cultured life of leisure. Willingness to scrub laundry or greasy pots and pans became a sign of noble sacrifice at times when the southern elite considered itself victimized by either northern aggression or the alleged laziness and disloyalty of black domestic workers. Racial and regional concerns meant that, as long as women of the traditional planter class could identify themselves as hapless survivors of an unjust reversal of fortune, they could hope and wait for a restoration of the social order they had once known rather than either respecting the dignity of the workers they hired or finding new satisfactions in the work they did for themselves.

NOTES

1. "Genteel domesticity" refers to the conceptions about domestic work held by all who, regardless of their economic status after the Civil War, identified with the antebellum elite mistresses of large plantations.

2. For some discussion of the domestic experiences of southern women during and after the Civil War, see especially: Jacqueline Jones, Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family from Slavery to the Present (New York, 1985); Leon Litwack, Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery (New York, 1979); George C. Rable, Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism (Urbana, Illinois, 1991); and Anne Firor Scott, The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930 (Chicago, 1970).
3. The authors of New South plantation literature such as Thomas Nelson Page tended to describe antebellum plantation mistresses as having had more household responsibilities and as having done more actual work than had earlier authors such as John Esten Cooke.
For discussion of the domestic work of antebellum plantation mistresses and their slaves by recent historians, see especially: Catherine Clinton, The Plantation Mistress: Women's World in the Old South (New York, 1982); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South (Chapel Hill, 1985); Jacqueline Jones, Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow; Sally McMillen, Southern Women: Black and White in the Old South (Arlington Heights, Illinois, 1992); and Anne Firor Scott, The Southern Lady.
4. Anna Butler to Mary Ker, December 25, 1865, Mary Ker Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.
5. Sutton S. Scott, "Memorial Day," 1877, in Sutton S. Scott, Southbooke (Columbus, Georgia, 1880), p.59.
6. Emma Holmes, April 7, 1865, The Diary of Miss Emma Holmes, 1861-1866, edited by John F. Marszalek (Baton Rouge, 1979) p.435.
7. Susan Bradford Eppes, Journal, January 1, 1866, quoted in Through Some Eventful Years by Susan Bradford Eppes (Macon, Georgia, 1926) p.309.
8. Quoted in Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery by Leon Litwack (New York, 1980) p.354.
9. Emma Holmes, May 29, 1865, The Diary of Emma Holmes, p.445.
10. Emma Holmes, June 15, 1865, The Diary of Emma Holmes, p.456.
11. Emma Holmes, August 15, 1865, The Diary of Emma Holmes, p.467.
12. Sherwood Bonner, "C.G.; or Lilly's Earrings," Lippincott's, September 1878, p.363.
13. Martha Finley, Elsie's Girlhood (New York, 1872) pp.83-86.
14. Kate Foster, Diary, July 4 and November 15, 1863, March 12, 1868, William R. Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.
15. Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, Diary, May 29, 1865, December 12, 1870, in The Secret Eye: The Journal of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, 1848-1889, edited by Virginia Ingraham Burr (Chapel Hill, 1990) pp.272, 349.
16. Nellie Ker to Mary Ker, February 3, 1873, November 11, 24, 28, 1875, Mary Ker Papers, SHC.

17. Maria Fleet to Fred Fleet, January 25, February 24, 1867, in Green Mount after the War: The Correspondence of Maria Louisa Wacker Fleet and Her Family, 1865-1900, edited by Betsy Fleet (Charlottesville, 1978) pp.23-24.
18. "The Housewife by Mrs. Sarah A. Elliott," The Southern Magazine, May 1871, p.631.
19. Marion Cabell Tyree, Housekeeping in Old Virginia (Louisville, Kentucky, 1879), pp.19, 312, 24.
20. Sarah Morgan, November 9, 1862, The Civil War Diary of Sarah Morgan, edited by Charles East (Athens, Georgia, 1991) pp.330-331.
21. Sarah Morgan, "Woman's Work," The Charleston News, November 1873.
22. E.W. Warren, "Introduction," Mrs. Hill's Southern Cook-Book, 1870, p.6, in Alan Grubb, "House and Home in the Victorian South," in Carol Bleser (ed.), In Joy and In Sorrow (New York, 1991), p.170.
23. Mrs. A. P. Hill, Mrs. Hill's New Family Receipt Book for the Kitchen, New York, 1867, pp.129-130, in Grubb, "House and Home," pp.166-167.
24. Minnie Adger to Janie Smyth, July 3, 1869, Adger-Smith-Flynn Paprs, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina.
25. Augusta Evans to J.L.M. Curry, July 15, 1863, J.L.M. Curry Papers, Library of Congress, quoted in Domestic Novelists in the Old South: Defenders of Southern Culture by Elizabeth Moss (Baton Rouge, 1992), pp.30-32.
26. Augusta Evans to J.L.M. Curry, October 7, 1866, J.L.M. Curry Papers, Library of Congress, quoted in Moss, p.171.
27. "Mary Somerville," Southern Review, April, 1874, p.437.
28. Marion Harland, Breakfast, Luncheon and Tea (New York, 1877) pp.7-8, 98.
29. Natchez Daily Democrat and Courier, October 3, 1880.