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"It Has Been a Season of Confinement to Me:"[1] The Solitude of Women in the Antebellum Period

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The pursuit of happiness, a longstanding part of the American dream, has often been counterbalanced by the realization that happiness is measured in comparison to personal sadness and misfortune in our daily lives. In the first half of the 19th century, social norms and economic opportunities challenged women to confront the dichotomies of happiness and sorrow. The increase in paid work in the north, generally in the textile mills of New England, was countered by forced slave labor in the south. Teaching opportunities were often a mixed blessing that provided professional pathways but were geographically isolated from friends and family. Illness and death were common occurrences that were accompanied by a sense of loss, and marriage didn't guarantee camaraderie. These issues were accompanied by antebellum women's realization that much of their lives would be spent distanced from their loved ones. Using their own words from diaries and letters, this paper seeks to illustrate that the spheres of life occupied by women were often isolated geographically or emotionally from those they loved, intensifying their feelings of discontent and unhappiness.

Though this paper focuses on the first half of the 19th century, it should be noted that woman's isolation is not unique to that period. In her examination of the status of women based upon social, racial, and gendered roles, Kathleen Brown traces the origins of gendered behavior prior to the colonization of Virginia among Native American, African, and European groups and describes the activities of women living in the colonies. While these women participated in a wide range of activities, their daily lives were highly regulated by husbands, fathers, and patriarchal community norms. Among European settlers, men outnumbered women 4 to 1, encouraging officials to plead for greater female immigration.[2] The scarcity of

[1] Letter from Olive Sawyer Brown to her cousin, November 1840, reprinted in Thomas Dublin, ed., *Farm to Factory: Women's Letters, 1830-1860* (New York: Columbia University Press), 1981, 69.

[2] Kathleen Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press) 1996.

women must have been daunting to those already here—settled far apart on farms and plantations, raising families far from their birth families in Europe. Through the 18th century, women depended upon female companions to help during times of need—childbirth, death, and sickness, even crossing racial and social divides in rare occasions.[3] This camaraderie would continue to be cherished well into the 19th century, and its absence will be examined in more detail below.

The Solitude of Work

Work took many forms for women in the years leading up to the Civil War. For many women, the traditional pattern of unpaid household work within the private sphere of the home continued uninterrupted. In the 18th century, the "pretty gentlewoman" of urban centers was occupied with the care and upkeep of the home, while rural or lower-class women existed in a less structured world of barter and business dealings.[4] This pattern of household-centered work, ever increasing in its complexity and expectations, became formalized in the works of Catherine Beecher and Sarah Josephina Hale. Beecher's 1841 book *Treatises on Domestic Economy* clearly outlined the middle-class domestic sphere, how a home should be decorated and maintained, and numerous details of household thrift and management that the mistress of the home should master. Beecher attempted to elevate the esteem of the domestic sphere, and encouraged women to strive toward an idealized home life:

> The woman, who is rearing a family of children; the woman, who labors in the schoolroom; the woman, who, in her retired chamber earns, with her needle, the mite, which contributes to the intellectual and moral elevation of her Country; even the humble domestic, whose example and influence may be moulding and forming young minds, while her faithful services sustain a prosperous domestic state; each and all may be animated by the consciousness, that they are agents in accomplishing the greatest work that ever was committed to human responsibility. It is the building of a glorious temple, whose base shall be coextensive with the bounds of the earth, whose summit shall pierce the skies, who splendor shall beam all lands; and those who hew

[3] Brown, *Good Wives*, 295-303.
[4] Sara M. Evans, *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America* (New York: Free Press), 1997, 35.

> the lowliest stone as much as those who carve the highest capital will be equally honored…[5]

Hale, a different sort of pioneer, published the first widely circulated woman's periodical, *Godey's Ladies' Book*. This magazine, like Beecher's book, offered numerous household hints and bits of advice but also included short stories and articles on fashionable clothing and accessories. Both of these printed materials were widely available to middle class women across America. Left out of the readership were the illiterate, the poor, and slave women. The effect of these writings among the middle class women was the expectation that they would provide perfect harmonious domiciles, forcing women to spend a great deal of time alone in their homes baking bread, crocheting doilies, and cleaning rugs. This labor effectively removed them from many social opportunities and created environments where women were separated from friends and families.

Other groups of women participated in emerging forms of paid work during this period. Examples include young women of New England who migrated to textile centers such as Lowell, Massachusetts. These women formed the first identifiable female paid workforce in the United States, and while they enjoyed what little payment they received, the reality of work was that it created emotional turmoil for many of the young ladies. Mary Paul, a young woman from northern Vermont who worked in the Lowell mills wrote her father, "If there were any way that I could make it expedient I would go back to Claremont myself and I sometimes think I ought to do so but the chance for one there is so small, and I can do so much better elsewhere that I have thought it was really better for me to be somewhere else. But the thought of you always makes me wish to be where I can see you oftener."[6]

Teaching was a viable employment opportunity for unmarried women. In the early part of the 19th century, Catherine Beecher traveled the country espousing the virtues of female schoolteachers. Often exploited in mills and other worksites, women could move to unsettled parts of the country and establish schools, "setting the moral tone of the community."[7] This was a more appropriate job for a young woman than the sweatshops of Lowell and New York City

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[5] Catherine Beecher, *Treatises on Domestic Economy*, 1847, rev. 3rd ed, reprinted in *Root of Bitterness: Documents of the Social History of American Women*, ed. Nancy Cott et al. (Boston: Northeastern University Press), 1996, 132-137.

[6] Letter from Mary Paul to her father, Bela Paul, Nov. 27, 1853. Reprinted in ed. Thomas Dublin, *Farm to Factory: Women's Letters, 1830-1860* (New York: Columbia University Press), 1981, 112.

[7] Kathryn Kish Sklar, "Catherine Beecher: Transforming the Teaching Profession," in ed. Linda K. Kerber and Jane Sherron DeHart, *Women's America: Refocusing the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2000, 161.

and would contribute to the promotion of "national morality." The women who filled these teaching positions around the country were young, and the committees who brought them to the scattered settlements in the west provided room and board in the home of a local citizen. These accommodations may not have been an improvement over the homes they left. Sklar relates the story of one young woman who boarded with a family of two parents and eight children in a two room home.[8] One thing that was missing from their new homes was old friends and kinship networks. Letters bridged the gap, but the technology of the era did not allow for speedy delivery. Earning less than half of a male teacher's salary, frequent trips home were not feasible either. Mary Ann Longley Riggs traveled with her husband from Indiana to Minnesota in the 1930s to teach Dakota Indians. Through the correspondence she maintained with her mother, it was clear that she longed for the companionship and civility of other women raised in the Victorian model.[9] Elizabeth Hodgdon, a single woman, taught at a school within a day's journey from her childhood home in Rochester, N.H., yet it was far enough that letter writing was necessary to maintain familial ties. Her letters indicate a general contentment with her occupation but also a longing to be with her family and away from the stress of her duties.[10] This homesickness must have been amplified many times over when separated by hundreds of miles of poor roads.

The Solitude of the South

Free women of the south differed from their northern counterparts. While the north had a burgeoning manufacturing economy, the economy of the south was centered on domestic agricultural production. As the slave-based agricultural economy became more entrenched, the patriarchal power systems became similarly rooted. Because homes were located on the plantations, women of the homes were spaced a far distance from towns and neighbors, making friendships difficult to maintain. Establishing a friendship with a slave woman, or even a yeoman's wife, was socially unacceptable. The solitary nature of being a plantation wife, charged with the task of supervising slaves without being given the necessary authority, was arduous, and the frustration and loneliness of this life was expressed in letters. Mary Kendell wrote her sister, "for about three weeks I did not have the pleasure of seeing one white female

[8] Sklar, "Catherine Beecher," 163.
[9] Evans, *Born for Liberty,* 97.
[10] Elizabeth Hodgdon, letter to her parents, July 21, 1841. Reprinted in ed. Thomas Dublin, *Farm to Factory: Women's Letters, 1830-1860* (New York: Columbia University Press), 1981, 52-57.

face."[11] Sarah Gayle, wife of an Alabama congressman, kept a journal that recorded her sadness at leaving her childhood home and friends, noting often that she would not be seeing many of them again.[12] She was eager to establish a new home in Tuscaloosa after her husband became governor, and her diary entries place great importance upon "the comings and goings from her friends' houses, their sharing of skills, resources, and amusements."[13] Despite the longing for lasting friendships, Sarah Gayle did not consider establishing relationships with the slave women within her own household.

Slave labor brought unique forms of separation and loneliness to black women of the south. Mothers routinely saw their mates and children sold at auction. Marriages were not recognized legally, so lovers were commonly separated. Harriet Jacobs suffered many separations: from the man she loved, from her mother and other family members, as well as her own children when Mr. Flint sent her to the plantation of his daughter.[14] The plantation was within walking distance of her former home, and, though dangerous, she was frequently able to visit her family secretly. Though far from ideal, this was preferable to the outcomes of many slave women who were sold to far-distant plantations and permanently separated from their loved ones. The pain of separation followed Jacobs throughout her life as she watched her children grow up from a distance—at first in her mother's garret and later in the neighborhoods of New York.

White women of the south, who expressed great sadness at the lack of companionship for themselves, had little sympathy for the solitude of the slave women or the system that kept these women enslaved. For all their misgivings on the institution of slavery, their focus was often on the inconvenience of supervision and not on the emotional heartache felt by its victims. Sarah Gayle's diary reveals that, though she cared deeply about the well-being of the slaves in her household, she showed "willing complicity in a social system that permitted them (white slaveholders) to flourish through the enslavement of others."[15] The diary of another slaveholding woman expressed the sentiment that for all its evils, slavery wasn't detrimental to the well being of blacks. In the fall of 1864, well into the Civil War, she wrote, "I have sometimes doubted on the subject of slavery. I have seen so many of its evils chief among which is the terribly demoralising influence upon our men and boys but of late I have become convinced that the Negro as a race is better off with us as he has been than if he were made free." A few months later, after

[11] Letter from Mary Kendell to her sister, 1853, reprinted in Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 1988, 39.
[12] Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household,* 11.
[13] Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 13.
[14] Linda Brent, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (New York: Harcourt Brace), 1973.
[15] Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household,* 27.

the northern victory, she expresses her anger at the absence of servants: "For the Negroes I know that I have the kindest possible feeling—for the Yankees who deprive us of them I have no use whatever."[16] Clearly, she did not anticipate the prospect of performing many of the "slave" chores herself.

The Solitude of Sickness and Death

Sickness and death often left women alone—either caring for the sick or widowed by the death of a spouse. Brown writes of the contributions of friends and family members during childbirth and quotes from letters of condolence following deaths among white women in Virginia in the 18th century.[17] This pattern continued into the 19th century, especially the use of letters to express grief and sadness. Smith-Rosenberg's examination of many 19th century writings attests to the role women played during times of sickness and death, often within a family, but also as friends and neighbors. So close were many of these relationships and frequent were episodes of caring for one another that subsequent separation "could cause loneliness and depression and would be bridged by frequent letters."[18]

Women frequently were isolated in their role of caregiver. When a child or husband became ill, it fell to the mother or wife to provide nursing care. During what could be a lengthy recovery or eventual death, the woman was separated from the physical proximity of friends and family. Olive Sawyer Brown wrote in a letter to her cousin that her son had been ill for four months and that "if nothing else befalls him I think he will recover again. It has been a season of confinement to me."[19]

The loss of loved ones was a common theme in the letters of 19th century, and the words expressed the loneliness of these permanent partings. Due to the technologies of the time, postal notification of the death of parents or friends often did not allow kin to be with a dying relative in time, often arriving after the death. Olive Sawyer Brown's letters are often filled with news of death, but the letter in which she describes her brother's death and the late arrival of her mother is particularly heart wrenching. "Mother started for Lowell as soon as she got the letter," Olive wrote, "but before she got there he was dead and buried. All my dear Mother could see was the little spot

[16] From the diary of Gertrude Clanton of Augusta, Georgia, reprinted in Cott, 274-280.
[17] Brown, *Good Wives*, 303.
[18] Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth Century America*, in ed. Linda K. Kerber and Jane Sherron DeHart, *Women's America: Refocusing the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2000, 168-183.
[19] Letter from Olive Sawyer Brown to her cousin, 69.

where [he] was laid."[20] The loneliness of the surviving family member after these frequent deaths was clearly expressed in the words of one Lowell worker: "I have no home, … death hath taken for his own those dear presiding spirits, and strangers now move in their places. Ah! I have

> 'no kind hearted mother to wipe the sad tear,
> no brother or sister my bosom to cheer.'"[21]

The Solitude of Marriage

Most young women of the early 19th century aspired to find and marry a suitable partner. These marriages served many functions—economic and social partnerships especially. They might even have been based upon love, but they did not guarantee emotional camaraderie. Many women experienced physical separations when their husbands traveled for business, such as in the Stanton family. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the famed women's rights colleague of Susan B. Anthony, was often left alone to both raise her children and campaign for her cause while her husband Henry pursued his legal work. Legislative work also took men away from their wives and children for long periods of time. As a young state legislator, then governor of Alabama, John Gayle's work left Sarah for long periods of time. Even in times of pain and danger, Sarah understood that she may have to manage alone, writing that a husband need not "witness the sufferings of his wife… but I am too selfish not to covet the comfort and support of his presence."[22] Even when their husbands did not travel, they may have been separated emotionally from their wives. The strong ideology of separate spheres—regulating men to paid employment outside of the home, and women to the care of the home and children—effectively removed men from the home, leaving wives alone again.

Feelings of loneliness, even abandonment, were different for women of the south. Among slave women, separation from their partners was uncontrollable. Harriet Jacobs was not allowed to choose her suitor and was prevented from establishing a relationship with the man of her choice. For slave women, ownership also meant separation, since partners could be sold at auction, effectively ending unions. For slave-holding women, emotional abandonment by their husbands was likely. Writings of the early 19th century (and earlier) generally acknowledge the propensity of slave-holding men to engage in sexual liaisons with their slaves, both consensual and forced, creating animosity in the household between wife and slaves.

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[20] Letter from Olive Sawyer Brown to her cousin, 68.

[21] Elizabeth E. Turner, *The Lowell Offering*, vol. V, 1845, reprinted in Benita Eisler, ed., *The Lowell Offering: Writings by New England Mill Women (1840-1845)* (New York: W. W. Norton), 1977, 136.

[22] Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation*, 12.

Acknowledgement of these affairs accentuated the ambiguity of their roles and intensified conflict in the lives of these women, and their reactions were often defensive or misplaced as a result. Mrs. Flint expressed her frustration and anger by harassing Harriet Jacobs, rather than directing it at Mr. Flint. The reasons for this are numerous, including the widespread belief that black women were seductive, sexual beings who encouraged this behavior among white men. Additionally, Mrs. Flint, as a woman, was not in a social or legal position to question her husband's behavior, nor could Harriet Jacobs resist Mr. Flint's advances. This sense of powerlessness and abandonment contributed to both women's solitude and lack of meaningful agency.

Even when husbands honored and maintained both physical and emotional proximity to their wives, women were often encouraged to keep to themselves, foregoing close friendships and frequent visits with friends. In a letter to his daughter upon her marriage, one father admonished his daughter to "secure and keep alive the love and affection" of her husband. His opinions on the private and solitary role of the wife are illustrated in two pieces of advice he offered his daughter. First, he encouraged her to keep emotional heartache to herself and not to "disclose any family discord to your nearest friends." Following this, he cautioned her to limit contact with her friends, stating "an overfondness for visiting is the same in a woman as that of gambling in a man, and is equally inconvenient to the interest of a family and may be equally ruinous."[23] The close contact between female friends and family members as discussed by Smith-Rosenberg may have been threatening to males, who didn't participate in these rituals and perhaps didn't understand them. Discouraging contact altogether seemed a plausible solution.

Conclusion

The letters and diaries of women who lived during the first half of the 19th century indicate that solitude and loneliness were common afflictions. Paternalistic traditions that prohibited women from forming close emotional bonds with their husbands increased the importance of other relationships. When these associations with other women were broken, through sickness, death, marriage, work, or transfer of ownership in slavery, the women expressed great sadness and mourning at the loss of companionship. Without power or ability to make great social or legal changes to reduce the severity of these losses, women longed for a time when they could be with their loved ones. When Harriet Jacobs wrote, "The dream of my life is not yet realized. I do not sit with my children in a home of my own,"[24] she was not speaking just of freedom to live in a home of her

[23] Letter from A. Jocelyn to his daughter, reprinted in Cott, 91-97.
[24] Linda Brent, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* 207.

own but also to relieve the sense of loss she felt at the separation from those she loved. This was a feeling shared by women of all races and all walks of life.