“He was no man attall”? 

Slave Men, Honor, Violence, and Masculinity 
in the Antebellum South

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In antebellum Anderson District, South Carolina, Warren—a slave of Peter K. Norris—repeatedly threatened to kill Charles Barrett’s bondman Dan. Although Warren and his wife had been “apart 12 months,” he “accused Dan of being after” her and believed them altogether “too thick.” Separated for a year, Warren still could not stomach the thought of his one-time spouse with another man. Protecting and defending women was one component of the masculine honor code in the Old South, and men asserted their manhood when they guarded wives and preserved reputations of self and family. However, Warren was a slave.¹ Scholars long have noted that a culture of honor flourished among Southern white men, but Bertram Wyatt-Brown excepted, Southern historians have been much slower than their counterparts studying Latin America to recognize honor among slaves.² Sociologist Orlando Patterson famously characterized the slave as, by definition, a “person without honor,” and certainly Southern whites routinely dishonored slaves in their daily lives. They stripped bondpeople publicly for inspection at slave auctions and inflicted beatings in front of family and friends. Whippings provided the most enduring and visible bodily reminder of slaves’
subordination; the lash left disfiguring scars on their backs that served as an indelible marker of their inferior position in Southern society. Absent an acute understanding of honor—and its inverse, shame—slaves would have experienced the tremendous physical pain of injury but not necessarily have felt the profound humiliation of a whipping so evident in their narratives and autobiographies.\(^3\)

The degradation slaves suffered in white society only served to enhance their sense of honor among themselves. Antebellum Southern slaves descended from Africans for whom honor was not a foreign concept; one scholar has described honor as “the chief ideological motivation of African behaviour” not only among residents along North Africa’s Mediterranean coast, but among those living in sub-Saharan Africa as well. Forms and definitions of honor differed from one culture to another, but many African peoples embraced it in some variation. For Africans forcibly transported via the Middle Passage to the American South before the formal termination of the transatlantic slave trade in 1808, relocation did not erase the significance of honor in their lives. Their white masters adhered to a code of honor too, though one from which blacks were excluded. In this context, Wyatt-Brown observes, “Male honor was richly prized in the slave quarters” of the antebellum South. Nevertheless, Southern whites could not explicitly acknowledge the honor of slaves, because to do so would recognize their manhood, undermining the fundamental premise that slaves were not men. They recognized only a narrower, vertical dimension of honor in which inferiors granted respect to those who outranked them in the social hierarchy. More than whites, slaves understood honor’s horizontal component in which respect was distributed among equals. Consequently, as Wyatt-Brown noted, “[S]lave honor was confined to the slave quarters.”\(^4\)

Recovering the relationship among honor, masculinity, and violence for antebellum slave men is no simple task. The vast majority of violent episodes among slaves have gone unrecorded. If slaves belonging to the same master attacked one another, that master rarely had any legal recourse or justification for hauling the slave aggressor to court. Slaves, however, sometimes fought with bondpeople from nearby plantations. Masters might ignore such conflicts if any wounds inflicted were minor, and if they intervened at all, owners of the participants involved often handled such matters privately, without resorting to the court system. For trivial offenses, only the most litigious of masters utilized the court system for purposes of slave discipline. When slaves held by different masters severely injured, maimed, or murdered one another, though, slaveholders
often pursued redress through formal legal channels, leaving a paper trail for scholars to follow.

In South Carolina, slaves accused of crimes appeared before the Courts of Magistrates and Freeholders. Extant records most thoroughly document the South Carolina upcountry districts of Anderson (including the former district of Pendleton), Laurens, Pickens, and Spartanburg. Episodes of slave-on-slave violence comprise only a small fraction of all documented slave crimes. Upcountry slaves proved far more likely to find themselves in court for assaulting not fellow bondpeople but neighborhood whites. This is not surprising, since slave codes across the South demonstrated a much stronger interest in prosecuting bondpeople for transgressions committed against whites and white property than against others in bondage. Virtually all slaves who physically assaulted a white person would face legal action, compared to only a small fraction who attacked another slave. Court of Magistrates and Freeholders records nevertheless document no fewer than seventy-five incidents of violence among slaves in antebellum South Carolina serious enough to warrant litigation. Although this figure is paltry compared to the prevalence of cases involving exclusively white combatants, when these documents are combined with scattered supporting evidence from courts in other states, the Court of Magistrates and Freeholders accounts of slave-on-slave violence offer a glimpse into an ethic of honor among slave men shared with white men in the Old South.

Slave men occasionally lashed out at whites in violent resistance, but even more frequently inflicted violence upon their counterparts in bondage. They came to blows over the possession of property, the issue of theft in the quarters, and the repayment of debts they owed to one another. Slave men also used violence to exercise dominance in the slave cabin, defend their wives from enslaved interlopers, and take vengeance upon male slaves who successfully violated their sexual claims. An analysis of the circumstances prompting violent encounters among slave men, the words they uttered during confrontations, and the fighting techniques they utilized reveals that the ethic of honor so prevalent in Southern white society was ingrained in masculine slave culture as well. For some slave men, violence in the quarters afforded one means to construct a masculine identity within the context of a white society that routinely denied their manhood.

When male slaves behaved in the ways informed by and consistent with their honor code, they behaved as men. Bondage, many scholars have observed, directly challenged male slaves’ manhood. The master
exercised the final authority over the slave family. Without legal sanction of slave marriages, slaveholders retained the power to break up the enslaved family unit at any time, and enslaved husbands could not protect their wives from the physical or sexual abuse of the owner without risking great bodily harm. When masters whipped slave men in front of their families, they undercut male slaves’ pretense of authority over their wives and children. Moreover, despite the efforts of enslaved men to provide necessities and material comforts for their families, they typically did not supply the bulk of the family’s essential needs. All of these factors restricted the power male slaves maintained in their day-to-day lives. For masters, the ideal slave man was the perpetual “boy,” the childlike, dependent, and submissive Sambo. As fugitive Lewis Clarke lamented, “A SLAVE CAN’T BE A MAN!”

Despite Clarke’s pronouncement, slave men successfully overcame the obstacles they faced to construct masculine identities. Their domination by masters certainly contributed to Southern white men’s sense of mastery, but enslaved men also actively created their own paradigms of masculinity. In his work on the cotton frontier of the antebellum South, Edward E. Baptist has detected different models of slave manhood. Some enslaved men acted heroically, by running away, fighting masters or overseers, or otherwise defying white authority. Others served as caretakers for new families cobbled together from the shards of broken ones. Still others acted as atomized individuals, rejecting altogether ties to other slaves. Male slaves across the South also acted as men when they took the lead in courtship or engaged in competitive contests that showcased their physical prowess. Escape, violent resistance, subversion of authority, family stewardship, and autonomy all represented attempts to forge a masculine identity amid the chaos of forced migration.

Darlene Clark Hine and Earnestine Jenkins have noted that enslaved men exercised a “resistant masculinity,” but they caution against “becoming ensnared in the trap of equating manhood with violence.” Violent, aggressive behaviors, however, were crucial to the construction of masculinity and the functioning of the honor code for Southern men, whether white or black. Southern white gentlemen engaged in duels, while lower-class white men fought rough-and-tumble brawls and eye-gouging matches. For slaves, too, violence marked one expression of manhood. Bondmen sometimes defied white authority figures through individual acts of confrontation, such as Frederick Douglass’s epic fight with the slave breaker Covey. After the purported two-hour altercation, Douglass recorded, “My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defi-
ance took its place.” Douglass found redemption through violence. “This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning point in my career as a slave,” he reflected, and it “revived within me a sense of my own manhood.”

More extreme still, slave rebels such as Nat Turner “came to be associated with manhood and masculinity” because their violent actions marked “an unequivocal challenge to white male authority.”

**Boasts, Insults, and Reputation**

The degree to which slave men struggled for status and reputation in violent contests suggests that they possessed their own keenly developed sense of honor. Like Southern white men, bondmen employed violence to redress grievances and defend wives, family, and friends from any slights or aspersions. In 1851, Spartanburg District slave Bassett struck Joseph with “a large stick” for “abusing his wife.” In Pendleton District, the slave “Leu Give the first Challeng.” He “Cursed Dianna,” a bondwoman of Jonathan Fealding, “& Calld her a Damnd Bitch.” Dianna’s sibling Jack, another slave belonging to Fealding, immediately cried out, “Dont you abuse my sister,” and Leu found himself on the receiving end of the brawl that followed. Aron Motes, a slave in Laurens District, complained that other bondpeople at a corn shucking “were trying to run over Perry,” another Motes family slave, “and he would not allow it.” When the loyal “Aron said they should not impose on Perry or he would bust their heads,” he rallied in support of a fellow bondman. As with Southern whites, slaves might invoke the concept of honor to justify violence or the threat of it. At least some bondmen demonstrated the manifestations of a code of honor shared with the slave-owning class.

In slaveholding locations as diverse as the border state of Delaware and Deep South Alabama, bondmen regularly voiced a willingness to defend their reputations and uphold the perceptions others held of them. When Delaware slaves Anderson and Emory quarreled at a camp meeting in 1858, Anderson assured Emory “that if he would follow him off the camp ground he would give him satisfaction.” “Satisfaction” appears here as the operative word, the product of an encounter to determine the better man. A former Alabama slave put it more plainly: “It used to be that one man would walk up to another and say, ‘You ain’t no good.’ And the other would say, ‘All right, le’s see.’ And they would rasle.” The resulting wrestling match helped determine rank among slave men.
Slave men vocalized their readiness to protect themselves and their loved ones with violence, and their assertions and threats not only provided a warning to an adversary but announced to enslaved audiences or anyone within earshot that they would not submit meekly to another slave’s insult or challenge. Threats preceded violence among slaves by mere moments or as long as weeks before a violent confrontation occurred. In Anderson District, Hew Wilson’s slave “Charles said that he would knock Moses head off” before they in fact “attempted to kill Each other contrary to the lawes of this state.” Also in Anderson District, Jake informed Baylis that “he could whip him.” He then violated Baylis’s physical space by shoving “his fist in Baylis’ face.” Baylis instructed him to desist, but defiantly, “Jake said he would put his hand on him as he pleased,” and proceeded to “[p]ut his hands on his shoulders.” After one more warning to “keep his hands off of him,” Baylis gave Jake a sharp kick. In another episode, a Spartanburg District slave named Jason approached the bondman Larken, reporting the rumor that the latter had said he could “whip” Jason. Larken replied, “Goddamn you if you will follow me to the end of the lane I can do it.” Not merely rhetorical devices, such pronouncements sometimes portended danger or death. In Mississippi, the slave Norvall mocked Simon “for his awkward plowing.” A seething Simon, humiliated by Norvall’s “laughing,” retorted that “if he did not quit it, he would be damned if he didn’t put his head under the dirt.” A week later, Norvall was dead.

Male slaves’ ritual boasts and challenges reverberated throughout the quarters. Although not as elaborate or fanciful in their inflated words as the bragging of the “half horse, half alligator” Mike Fink and other semi-legendary or wholly fictional characters in the Southwestern humor genre, slaves nevertheless employed the exaggeration and masculine boasting reminiscent of the tall tales of the Old Southwest. At a Laurens District corn shucking, a dispute erupted in which “Aron boasted of his manhood” and crowed that “he was the best man there.” Pendleton District slave Leu similarly declared himself “the best man of the Turff,” right before other bondpeople deflated his ego by beating him into submission. In Anderson District, Toney announced that “he would whip Dick or any other negro that accused him of stealing leather” or “talked about him,” because “he had as many wepons as any one els.” One Saturday night, the bondman Lewis averred that Jackson Wilson’s “Ben nor no other man should curse him.” When Ben, reluctant to yield, dared to say “he would curse him or any other man,” Lewis shoved him. Ben responded by stabbing him with a knife. On the way back from a
Christmas ball, the slave Ed also engaged in loud talk, bragging that he “could whip any man in the crowd except freinds.” He “jumped up[,] slapped his hands together[,] and said . . . I dont fear no man.” For good reason: Ed “drew a pistol” and warned his fellow slave revelers to “stand back Gentlemen.” When one voice in the crowd, perhaps not believing his eyes, questioned if Ed really did have a gun, the armed slave snapped “that he did not tell no damned nigger what he had.” The possession of a firearm enhanced Ed’s self-esteem and, as he believed, commanded the respect of all his fellow slaves, whom he degraded as beneath himself in dismissing them as “damned nigger[s].” Nero displayed similar bravado when he declared “that he was man a nuff” to draw his knife and stab Griffin Brazeale’s slave Sam multiple times “for no Reson or caus what ever.” Throughout these altercations, the bondmen explicitly linked their violence in word and deed to a presumed sense of what it meant to act as a man.\textsuperscript{16}

Verbal assaults frequently served as a prelude to physically violent encounters among slaves, a braggadocio explicitly bound with conceptions of manliness shared within the culture of bondmen. Insults offer an unconventional pathway into the culture in which the offending words were uttered. Individual cultures betray certain patterns of insults reflective of those cultures’ values. Insults function by way of a shared language and set of expectations regarding behavior. They make sense because they strike inversely at that which society deems proper, respectable, and desirable, thereby revealing, in the negative, the social values of a given culture. Analyzing insults is particularly useful in the study of subaltern peoples such as slaves, who leave relatively little written documentation of their own. Insults often provoke violence, and violent episodes can generate a paper trail of official records.

Although these records are filtered through the minds and words of white magistrates, reading the evidence of insults backwards exposes social tensions and the origins of disputes, laying bare the mutual cultural understandings of the parties involved. By their nature, insults show disrespect, attack honor, and damage reputation. Slanderous words impinged on one’s social rank and status, elevating the slanderer and degrading the slandered. Collectively, slaves already occupied a debased position in Southern society, so insults spoken by the master, however personally hurtful, did not necessarily shape what bondmen thought of themselves and one another. However, when slaves spit verbal venom upon one another, it likely stung, for slaves were peers inhabiting the same social plane. If one’s equal voiced the insult, it mattered: one slave was
attempting to establish superiority or dominance over another and deny the second slave’s expectation of treatment as an equal. Their relationship was no longer reciprocal, but imbalanced. With social identity challenged through insult, the target of the offensive language might resort to violence to reestablish the social equilibrium.¹⁷

Court of Magistrates and Freeholders records reveal a range of insults slaves hurled at one another. Students of African American culture have described creative verbal sparring and dueling among blacks—playing the dozens—as a ritual contest. The very structure of such contests instilled discipline and emotional control in the participants, precluding the eruption of violence. In contrast, the known insults upcountry South Carolina slaves employed lacked the oral agility and theatrical wordplay of the dozens; instead, their blunt, forceful, and offensive words provoked violence. Some trial papers document only that a slave used “sasey language,” but at times the records are more explicit, alleging a verbatim transcript as recalled by the witnesses. Bondpeople adopted “bitch” when referring to enslaved women and “son of a bitch” to describe slave men, verbally locating their adversary both in terms of gender difference and on the subhuman level of dogs. In Anderson District, the slave Ed called William J. Duckworth’s slave George a “damned son of a bitch” because George did allegedly “bed up with my wife every night,” and bondman “Jeff said Emory was a reel footed sun of a bitch.” Bondmen sometimes called male slaves “rascals” or “rogues” as well. E. G. DuBose’s slave Henry called John “a dam raskel,” and Jake complained that “Baylis had cursed him like a dammd rascal.” When Anderson District slave Steve refused to hand over “what he owed him,” the cheated bondman “Jess cald him a damned rogue.” The terms “rascal” and “rogue” both refer to someone judged dishonest, unprincipled, or mischievous, suggesting that in the quarters, slaves respected honesty, fairness, and trustworthiness. By identifying the scoundrels among them, slaves hinted at the boundaries that excluded certain slaves from the social group for violating cultural expectations of approved behavior.¹⁸

**Lying and Fighting**

Entrenched in the honor of the quarters, slaves also bristled when other bondmen gave them the lie. “Giving the lie”—calling someone a liar, questioning his word, and hence divorcing him from the culture of honor—provoked countless battles in honor-bound Southern white
society, but has been insufficiently addressed among the enslaved. Masters assumed that slaves chronically lied; bondpeople told falsehoods, feigned illness, broke or “lost” tools to avoid work, and stole with impunity. It was no accident that the law prohibited slave testimony against white defendants in Southern courtrooms. “Whites,” Kenneth S. Greenberg writes, “assumed that slaves lied all the time—and that their lies were intimately connected to their position as slaves.” Indeed they were, not because slaves lacked honor but because lying was a necessary part of slaves’ performance, part of the mask they wore in the presence of whites.19

However, whereas slaves routinely lied to whites, they expected honesty and truthfulness among themselves, as suggested in three cases from Anderson District that demonstrate the umbrage they took when a fellow slave accused them of deceit. “[T]he dam lie passed” between Charles Irby’s slave George and John S. Carter’s Jim, the latter of whom admitted to carrying a pistol as he left a Christmas dance. A trio of slaves testified that they “heard Bas give Joe the Dam lie” as “they cursed one another a while,” and Martin Hall’s bondman Dandy “threw a stone and hit Jim,” the property of T. W. West, “in the side & wounded him sever[e]ly” because Jim “give the God dam lye.” The obsession with lies in Anderson District was not unique. Copiah County, Mississippi, slave Simon confessed to killing Norvall “because the deceased had told lies on him.” In nearby Marion County, “the negroes Harry and Claiborne Faulk had a quarrel with [James Duncan’s slave] Green at his house in which the ‘damn lie’ and other offensive epithets of like character” were passed. Only the intervention of a white man “prevent[ed] a more serious difficulty.” If slaves possessed no sense of honor, as Southern whites claimed, it would not have mattered whether another bondperson had “given the lie.” That slaves responded promptly and violently suggests a compelling need to defend the honor they knew they possessed.20

The derogatory “fighting words” anchored in the language of honor sparked conflicts involving fists, sticks, rocks, knives, and fence rails, but slave men also utilized the rough-and-tumble fighting techniques more common among lower-class white brawlers. Such fighting flourished in the Southern backwoods and upcountry regions not yet fully incorporated into the market economy. There, values of the market had yet to replace the rural values of a semi-subsistence agricultural society. In such close-knit localities, the ethic of honor bound neighbors together. Southern gentlemen scoffed at lower-class claims to honor, but the rough-and-tumbles characteristic of the upcountry showed that its white residents, though socioeconomically inferior to the Southern gentry, were no less
men. They willingly sacrificed their bodies, exposing themselves to ear biting and eye gouging, in defense of honor, reputation, and community standing. Contests among slaves displayed some significant overlap with the fighting styles of lower-class whites. In Pendleton District, the slave “Jack bit off pt of one of Lue Ears,” Pickens District bondman Jesse was charged with “Biting Wiley Right year off,” and when William Duckworth’s slave Ned attacked Steve in Anderson District, he “bit of a peace of his year.” Archibald Nicholes’s slave Elijah appeared in court in 1845, charged with “fighting and abusing Dick the property of Cannon Brazeale.” Dick testified that Elijah “threw him twice Down on the ground struck with his fist gouged him and scrched him.” For some slave men, as with lower-class whites, the ritual violence of ear biting and eye gouging represented a form of manly assertion in a society that denied their claims to honor. Male slaves who participated in rough-and-tumbles verified their manhood to themselves and to the enslaved spectators looking on.

Slave men, then, protected the women they claimed, settled scores with enemy bondmen, issued threats, boasted of their manhood, brooked no insults, and entered into rough-and-tumbles designed to inflict permanent scars on the loser. Many of these hallmarks of enslaved masculinity were familiar to various peoples on the African continent, and generations of tradition may have informed the behavior of slave men in the Old South. By the antebellum decades, though, most African American slaves had been born and reared in the United States. Blacks and whites culturally borrowed from one another freely and frequently in Southern society, and the environment in which slaves lived greatly conditioned the way honor manifested itself in the quarters. The parallels between enslaved masculinity and Southern white masculine culture, and specifically with lower-class white male behavior, were remarkable. It was no coincidence that, in the South Carolina upcountry and in other parts of the South, slave and white men, poor white men in particular, shared a common culture of honor and violence.

Through their routine contacts of drinking, gambling, socializing, and trading, slaves and poor whites engaged in a process of cultural exchange. Through these transactions, male slaves imbibed lower-class white definitions and expressions of honor. After the slave Jesse accused Wiley of stealing his tobacco, the white James P. Jenkins of Pickens District informed Wiley that if he “wold tak the like of that he was no man attall.” Only after a white man reminded the slave of the rules of honor as he understood them did a brawl commence between the slaves—but
was this prompt necessary? Perhaps Jenkins was simply picking a fight between two bondmen for his own amusement, but Jesse and Wiley may have been preparing to fight regardless of his urging, or they may have preferred to delay their confrontation until no whites were present. If so, Jenkins’s remark only reinforced sentiments already present and authorized their violence in his presence without fear of reprisal.  

Slave men seemed to understand that their sense of honor had its limitations within the constraints of Southern white society. In Anderson District, for instance, the slave Lewis had jettisoned his hat and umbrella while frantically escaping the patrol. This earned notice in the quarters. Slave Aaron remarked “that he would have fought a duel before any body should have taken his hat from him that way,” and that he was willing to “loose every drop of blood in him before he would give up his hat and umbrella” as Lewis had. “Six or Eight negroes” who heard this, however, “all busted out in a Laugh.” What was so funny? Interpreting humor over time proves difficult because modern observers of the past must reconstruct the cultural context in which the humorous comment or situation occurred. At the most basic level, the slaves who overheard the conversation may have considered it ridiculous to risk one’s life over a hat and umbrella, for the value of the property was not worth the potential harm to the body. More substantially, the comment may have evoked laughter because Aaron was asserting a foolish willingness to stand up to the patrol, or exhibiting an overblown sense of honor that exceeded reason, elevating himself socially to the level of the white patrollers. Perhaps the mention of “a duel” elicited the laughter. Duels were clearly the preserve of elite white gentlemen; lower-class Southern whites did not even participate in them, so the thought of a slave, at the bottom rung of Southern society, drawing a pistol in a duel might have struck the “Six or Eight negroes” as humorous. Duels were always fought among participants who considered themselves social equals. That Aaron’s hypothetical duel would have pitted him on the grounds against a white opponent may have exacerbated the humor of the mental picture the amused slaves were drawing. Whatever the reason, Aaron got the joke, for he, too, “Joined in the laugh.”

One pair of South Carolina slaves did attempt to emulate a duel to resolve a dispute, but without much success. In 1817, the slave Paul accused John Adams’s Solomon “of carrying a negro girl to some person in Camden, words took place which brought on an argument,” and they resolved “to have a Civil fight.” Paul “agreed to fight with Solomon,” testimony revealed, “because the latter was always picking at him.”
and now Paul would respond like a man. As in a duel, the combatants each had “seconds.” Solomon had three seconds—fellow slaves Kildare, Frank, and Buck—while Paul had seven, including bondmen Eben and Charles. Like any responsible second, Kildare and Frank “advised them to not fight” and “endeavoured to make peace.” The pair also wanted to guarantee that “no injury should be done Solomon” after the fight, for they shared the same master, and as Kildare explained, he feared “his man should blame him if any thing happened.” Paul’s friend Eben, however, “went out with Paul to see [that he] had a fair fight.” For insurance, Eben concealed “two bricks in his pockets.”

The duel commenced “on the grounds”; however, in the absence of pistols, what resulted was a strange hybrid, a brawl initially shrouded in decorum. Paul knocked Solomon down, but Solomon soon gained the advantage. As Frank parted the opponents, Eben mistakenly believed Frank was joining the fray. Noting that “one was enough to fight another,” Eben fell upon Solomon, and Charles, another of Paul’s seconds, joined in, striking “Solomon on the leg with a stick.” Eben also carried a makeshift sword Kildare described as “some three edged thing . . . with a cob stuck on the end of it for a handle,” but no one realized it until after the fight. John Martin, a white man present during the entire episode, asked Eben to relinquish the weapon. Eben “replied he could not give it up any how and live,” and instead tossed it on the ground near Charles, who retrieved it and fled the dueling grounds. John Martin played a mysterious role in this confrontation, almost acting as a judge. In the heat of the brawl, Eben threatened to hit Kildare, but “he asked permission of the white people who were there,” who disallowed it. Martin and at least one other white refereed the conflict, perhaps part of the slaves’ effort to add legitimacy to their duel. The duel likely resolved none of the slaves’ differences, as they all appeared in court charged with a “riot.”

Although Southern whites mocked slave pretensions to honor, slave men’s degradation in white society enhanced their sense of honor among enslaved peers. A confrontation on the plantation of Spartanburg District farmer David Golightly Harris resulted in a loss of honor for one defeated bondman. Like any master, Harris surely preferred his slaves not engage in violent scrapes and suffer harm. As former slave Henry Gladney explained, “My old marster no lak dat way one of his slaves was crippled up” by fighting on the plantation. Injured slaves might require time off work, not labor as quickly or efficiently, or lose
monetary value if their wounds proved serious enough. But slaves did enter into violent conflicts. “York and Old Will had a fight,” Harris’s wife recorded, and the elder slave’s defeat at the hands of the younger York humbled him. No longer comfortable remaining on the plantation where York cost him honor among his fellow slaves—and perhaps still menaced him—Old Will asked his mistress for permission to locate a new master. As Emily Liles Harris explained of her aged bondman, “York has given him a whipping and he wishes to leave the place.” The elderly slave’s request suggests the pride that bondpeople maintained in the face of bondage.26

Slave men confronted many challenges to their masculinity, but violence afforded one avenue for them to display their manhood in the quarters and avenge any loss of honor. That one slave affirmed at trial that the gun Anderson District bondman George had clutched in his hand was authentic “& not merely a representation made of wood” suggests that a few slaves even carried fake wooden pistols as a demonstration of their power and capacity for violence.27 Although it risks reinforcing stereotypes of black deviance or criminality,28 examining slave life through the lens of violence is useful in prying into the culture of enslaved men. Prior to the 1980s, scholars accepted the experiences of male slaves as normative and therefore functionally genderless. Since then, historians such as Deborah Gray White, Stephanie M. H. Camp, and many others have called attention to the gendered lives of enslaved women. Their work revealed that female slaves’ lives differed in significant ways from those of male slaves. Few attempts have been made, however, to view the experiences of enslaved men from the same gendered perspective. Slave men had at their disposal many models of masculinity, but in the context of antebellum Southern society, it would have been surprising had violence not become enmeshed in their definitions of masculinity and honor.

Notes

1. Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, microfilm reel C2775, case #394, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia, hereinafter cited as SCDAH.

2. On honor in the Old South, see Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); Edward L. Ayers, Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19th-Century American South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Kenneth S. Greenberg, Honor & Slavery:


13. Spartanburg District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, microfilm reel C2920, case #128, SCDAH; Pendleton District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, microfilm reel C2916, case #20, SCDAH; Laurens District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, 1808–1865, Box 1, Folder 67, SCDAH.


15. Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, microfilm reel C2919, case #371, SCDAH; Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, microfilm reel C2917, case #160, SCDAH; Spartanburg District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, microfilm reel C2920, case #117, SCDAH; *Simon, a slave v. the State of Mississippi* (1859), Box 5849, Case 8900, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, hereinafter cited as MDAH.

16. Gorn, “‘Gouge and Bite,’” 28–31; Edward E. Baptist, “Accidental Ethnography in an Antebellum Southern Newspaper: Snell’s Homecoming Festival,” *Journal of American History* 84 (March 1998): 1355–83; Laurens District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, 1808–1865, Box 1, Folder 67, SCDAH; Pendleton District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, microfilm reel C2916, case #20, SCDAH; Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, microfilm reel C2775, case #400, SCDAH; Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, microfilm reel C2917, case #195, SCDAH; Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, microfilm reel C2919, case #292, SCDAH; Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, microfilm reel C2917, case #189, SCDAH.


Forret: “He was no man at all”?

358; Kershaw District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, 1800–1861, Box 1, Folder 33, SCDAH; Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, microfilm reel C2919, case #292, SCDAH; Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, microfilm reel C2918, case #264, SCDAH; Clarendon District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, 1863–1865, Folder 4, SCDAH; Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, microfilm reel C2917, case #160, SCDAH; Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, microfilm reel C2919, case #368, SCDAH. In North Carolina, Susannah Wilkins’s slave Nelson murdered Benjamin Ward’s bondman Gabriel. According to one report, “the death of Gabriel was sudden and entirely unpremeditated . . . provoked by a gross insult immediately resented by a blow stricken with a large piece of fence rail which happened to be at hand.” See Governor’s Papers, Gov. Edward B. Dudley, G.P. 90, folder October 1839, North Carolina Department of Archives and History, Raleigh.

19. Greenberg, Honor & Slavery, 8, 12, 40, 11 (quotation), 32

20. Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, microfilm reel C2919, case #292, SCDAH; Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, microfilm reel C2917, case #185, SCDAH; Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, microfilm reel C2775, case #384, SCDAH; Catterall, Judicial Cases, vol. 3, 356; Green, a slave v. the State of Mississippi (1849), Box 5817, Case 2915, MDAH.

21. William B. Taylor, Drinking, Homicide, and Rebellion in Colonial Mexican Villages (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1979), 159; Gorn, “Gouge and Bite,” 34, 21, 33, 41; Pendleton District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, microfilm reel C2916, case #20, SCDAH; Pickens District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, 1829–1862, Folder 11, SCDAH; Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, microfilm reel C2918, case #261, SCDAH; Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, microfilm reel C2917, case #167, SCDAH. Jess and Wiley also appear in McDonnell, “Money Knows No Master,” 38.

22. Iliffe, Honour in African History.


24. Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, microfilm reel C2917, case #185, SCDAH; Gorn, “Gouge and Bite,” 41.

25. Kershaw District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, 1800–1861, Box 1, Folder 24, SCDAH.

blows in 1864 in a dispute over how properly to construct a fence. Sam insisted Fed “had not built it right” and struck him with a fence rail. It was in the best interests of both slaves to build the fence correctly, and in that sense, Sam may have wanted it constructed to the satisfaction of the master so that the bondmen could avoid a whipping. Read another way, without necessarily internalizing the master’s values, Sam may have felt a sense of pride in workmanship entirely independent of his desire to please the master and stay his hand. See Spartanburg District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, microfilm reel C2922, case #270, SCDAH.

27. Anderson District, Court of Magistrates and Freeholders, Trial Papers, microfilm reel C2918, case #278, SCDAH.