

Devils and Dinner Tables: Frederick Douglass and Inherited Medieval Etiquette at Great House Farm

**McGowin Grinstead
Harvard University**

I. Introduction: The “Little Nation” of the Plantation

In an 1855 letter to his editor, Frederick Douglass—American abolitionist, author, and magnanimous preacher—professed his vocation to tell of the “histor[y] worth the writing.” This history was that of himself, drafted and edited in long form over many cold months at his writing desk in Rochester, New York. Yet his second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, extended far beyond a recounting of personal childhood memories. Through detailed and journalistic imagery, Douglass weaves a cinematic encephalogram of American slavery, providing a map that unveils the “light of truth on a system” that stands “for judgment” before “the whole civilized world” (Douglass 2003, 6). Douglass’s map does what only a primary source narrative can do: tell “the real plot of the story,” capture the atrocities of antebellum America in such a way that no reader can be left with any “illusions about slavery” (Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction* 2021, 858–59).

Each of Douglass’s three narratives begins by charting the brutal architecture of the American antebellum South that governed his earliest memories on the Wye plantation in the 1820s. Born into bondage in the “worn-out, sandy, desert-like” Talbot County on Maryland’s Eastern Shore, Douglass grew up amid the ecosystem of slavery, bound not only by the buzzing shipyards of the Chesapeake and the muddy banks of Tuckahoe Creek but also by a fiendish overseer and master, Aaron Anthony (Douglass 2003, 30). Like the Biblical Moses, Douglass was orphaned, stranded as a boy in the reeds and marshes.¹ He was separated from his mother and his grandmother, and began to labor at a young age, later confessing that, as a child, his “soul was often pierced with horrors” (“What to the Slave is the Fourth of July” 2016, 210). The brutal realities of plantation life severed his boyhood yet, masterfully, he “turned the childhood recollections . . . into a stunning description of *slave society* in microcosm” (Blight 2018, 20). In confronting his traumatic past, Douglass produced a diaphanous narrative in which to view the “microcosm” of the plantation, allowing readers to observe the systemic evils embedded in American slavery on an intimate level.

Ten years after composing his first autobiography in 1845, Douglass reaped success with *My Bondage and My Freedom*, an intimate muckraking of slavery that sold “five thousand copies in the first two days and fifteen thousand within three months” (Blight 2018, 253). At the time of the book’s publication, abolitionists and Americans alike were starved for a genuine understanding of the nature of Southern slavery. They needed then, as we do today, a history told not only by scholars from afar but one written straight from the calloused hands of a man who had worked and bled in the sweltering beds of the plantation fields. Douglass, named by

¹ Moses, Israelite and patriarch of the Hebrew Bible, began his life as a slave in Egypt. He was rescued from the Nile and brought up as a foster child of the Pharaoh’s daughter (*King James Version Bible*, Ex. 2).

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Keidrick Roy “the realist,” sacrificially offers a diagram of his life in bondage so that we, as onlookers to the ever-crowded past, may not be blinded by false narratives or Southern propaganda (Roy 2024, 212). Far from a piece of fiction, Douglass’s narrative is rich with dialogue, imagery, and anecdotes that unabashedly dissect the mechanics of slavery with the precision of a surgeon. Treasuring the sacredness of the primary text, I will close-read Douglass’s second narrative as history, examining passages where he points to a Southern feudal identity, despite Founding Fathers “such as Jefferson” who “claimed to have abolished the final vestiges of ‘feudalism’” (Roy 2024, xv).

Scholars and historians have long debated the nature of the southern plantation, classifying it on a range from “feudal” to “capitalist.” Michael Gorup resituates “antebellum slavery in the context of nineteenth-century Euro-Atlantic capitalism,” adding to the historical linkage between slavery and modern capitalism (Gorup 2023, 985). Marxian analysis, as in Cedric Robinson’s *Black Marxism*, further connects “slave owner capitalism as the product of a second colonialism, rooted in the plantation economy” (Foster et al. 2020, 98). Keidrick Roy, however, sides with Black abolitionists who “pointed to the vestiges of feudalism as another catalyst for systemic inequalities” in his recently published *American Dark Age: Racial Feudalism and the Rise of Black Liberalism* (Roy 2024, 4). Roy empowers Black antebellum-era intellectuals to define for themselves the reality of the plantation, drawing on their descriptions of slavery as the primary text of the period. Following Frederick Douglass’s characterization of “*skin aristocracy*,” Roy coins the concept “*racial feudalism*” to describe the uniquely American “hierarchical society stratified along racial lines” (Roy 2024, 8).

Roy’s “*racial feudalism*” illuminates how Frederick Douglass’s 1855 autobiography² simultaneously characterizes the American South as a medieval heir and as a singular historical phenomenon, for Roy’s concept understands the complexity of history. A limited economic analysis of production incentives, for example, would underscore the plantation’s violence, and immediate classification into a pre-existing form, such as feudalism, likewise fails to take into account the extensive perversion of racism in the North American continent. It is necessary to have a historical lens that accounts for the South’s distinct edges and points; thus, I augment the contemporary discussion of the plantation system by suggesting a new method to understand its multifaceted European inheritance: by viewing the plantation as a cultural genetic mutation, novel in the lineage of prior civilizations.

The metaphor of the plantation as mutation facilitates a way historians can understand how American identity was both dependent on European philosophy and yet highly individualistic, as commented on by de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*.³ In terms of inheritance, U.S. culture fed on more than just European Christianity and Enlightenment thought; wealthy landowners seized upon the agrarian nature of the South and modeled the structure of medieval, localized manors built upon the backbreaking labor of men chained to the land. The European imprisonment of serfs to the humus, their political immobility to rise out of their caste, and their land made them de facto slaves. Similarly, class mobility was denied to Southern Blacks. They lived in a rigid state, a “hierarchy” of “White over Black” (Roy 2024, 38). The plantation’s core DNA of abuse, suppression, and power lust was, as it were, grafted

² Keidrick Roy’s *American Dark Age* masterfully examines Douglass in “Chapter 9: ‘Why Am I Black?’: Frederick Douglass and Identity-Aware Liberalism,” yet this paper will close-read Douglass in Roy’s aforementioned feudal context.

³ Alexis de Tocqueville, et al., *Democracy in America*. (Cambridge, Mass: Sever and Francis, 1862).

from the peat of Europe to the fields of the New World; however, 19th-century America had mutated in such a way that, like a virus, its violent manner had evolved.

The specific DNA alteration of the Southern plantation from the parent strand of medieval Europe was its pernicious dependence on racism to govern its culture. Although many factors, such as resource distribution, religion, and geography had a stake in Southern identity, none were so potent as the razor-edged split between Whites and Blacks. Following Caroline Levine's definition of politics as "a matter of distributions and arrangements" that not only "impose order on space," but "enforc[e] hierarchies of high and low, white and black," the antebellum Southern plantation is in itself its own political form, embodying hierarchy in the cruelest sense (Levine 2015, 3). Plantations operated as micro-societies, with rigid political parties—master, overseer, and slave—dictated by blood. Geographically fractured from the industrial North, as well as cities and urban hubs, Southern plantations were free to fashion themselves as independent city-states. Slavery molded the South into a system "with a distinct class structure, political economy, ideology, and a set of psychological patterns" that resulted in its estrangement from the rest of the world (Genovese 1965, 3). The Machiavellian slaveholding class became de facto feudal lords, setting the rules and constraints of their plantations. Douglass describes this phenomenon in the early chapters of his autobiography: the slave plantation is "a little nation of its own, having its own language, its own rules, regulations, and customs" (Douglass 2003, 50).

These rules often manifested in facades of etiquette; slave owners perfected the art of normalizing violence through polite displays of power. From demanding the salutations of their slaves to the hierarchy of the dinner table, Whites in Frederick Douglass's second narrative micromanaged with a watchful eye the participation of all plantation members in their behavioral caste system. Douglass's attentiveness to etiquette, table manners, and dress in *My Bondage and My Freedom* reveals often hidden ways the South masked racial cruelty as formality, and also traces the Great House Farm Plantation's mannerisms to Europe's feudal courts, where etiquette originated in displays of chivalry. The analogy of genetic mutation summarizes the plantation's position as both an inheritor of feudal behaviors as well as its distinctive attentiveness to racism that makes it a system both familiar and alien in history.

II. The Heritability of Evil

Christianity—perhaps the most influential importation from Europe to the New World—was molded into American Protestant sects by the indelible *King James Version (KJV)* of the Bible. For Frederick Douglass, the *KJV* was the sanctuary of the soul, his one steadfast consolation from the moment of his conversion at the age of thirteen. As he wrestled with the reality of slavery, he "reached for the Old Testament Hebrew prophets" and their "awesome narratives of destruction and apocalyptic renewal, exile, and return" to shape his perception of American slavery (Blight 275). For Douglass, the *KJV* was not only a school of theology and history, but it also offered, as David Blight argues in *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*,⁴

⁴ In a review of Blight's formidable seven-hundred sixty-four page book, Diane Barnes argues that Blight "envisions Douglass as a prophet of freedom, and throughout the book he places more emphasis on the great man's connection to religion and Christianity than previous scholars have allowed," using "parables of the King James Bible as an organizing thread" (Barnes 2019, 643). For further reading on Douglass's life of faith, see D.H. Dilbeck's *Frederick Douglass: America's Prophet*.

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instruction in rhetoric. Douglass’s writing is steeped in scriptural language, reverberating with warnings of God’s impending judgment on the propagators of slavery and the “ungodly.” The biblical books of Daniel and Revelation foretell the coming day when the Lord will separate the “wheat” from the “chaff,” for “nothing is secret that shall not be made manifest; neither anything hid, that shall not be known and come abroad” (*King James Version Bible*, 2 Pt. 2.20, Matt. 3.12, Lk. 8.8). In this mode of “judgment” writing, Douglass exposes the dark underpinnings of a society founded on oppression, poking and probing at the anatomy of the plantation system. *My Bondage and My Freedom* thus reads as both a journalistic exposé and a prophetic indictment, providing firsthand insights into the political and moral depravity of American slavery.

Yet writing in the form of a biblical prophet necessitates a disentangling of the politics that plunged a generation into moral decay. Old Testament prophets such as Isaiah and Malachi warned of the imminent fall of the kingdom of Israel, a punishment for the wickedness entrenched in courts and political offices. King Solomon, cautioning against vanity and injustice, writes that he “saw under the sun the place of judgment, that wickedness was there, and . . . the estate of the sons of men . . . are beasts” (Eccl. 3.16–18). This form of religious unmasking reveals both ethical failings and oppressive political systems; Douglass’s *My Bondage and My Freedom* exemplifies “just how much this new literary self-creation was a political act” (Blight 2018, “Bondage and Freedom”).

In the Hebrew Bible, the morality of the ruling political power had a substantial effect on the prosperity of the kingdom. When the ruling party was, such as King David, “a man after [God’s] own heart,” the Israelites abounded in blessing (Acts 13.22). However, as much as God seems “to set apart,” or to make *holy*, certain familial lines, he equally differentiates the descendants of those who have disobeyed him (“holy,” *Oxford English Dictionary*). As God warns, He visits “the iniquity of the fathers upon the children of the third and fourth generation of them that hate me” (Ex. 20.5). The curse of Ham illustrates this idea: while Shem honors his drunken father, Noah, Ham’s disrespect leads to a generational curse upon his descendants, who later inhabit regions like Sodom and Gomorrah, Babel, and Nineveh, all lands which are regarded later in the Bible as dwellings of wicked and Godless peoples⁵ (Gen. 9–10). As David Brion Davis notes, “the Hebrew word for slave, ‘*ebed*,’ was one used in a sense to refer to a righteous punishment sanctioned by the Lord” (Davis 1988, 79). Old Testament misconduct was subject to heavenly judgment, and subsequently, the punishments of the wicked were worse than earthly: the repercussions of evil could be felt for generations.

What I term the *heritability of evil* is a concept inspired by the Hebrew Bible that allows sin to linger in families and governments for centuries, propelled as a transmittable trait. This theory helps explain the repetition of pernicious political systems in history, such as a society’s acceptance of slavery. When the *heritability of evil* is applied to the American South, scholars can better comprehend the plantation as a mutation or as a system welded with European feudal characteristics. Slave owners, such as Douglass’s Col. Lloyd, were reminiscent of their European predecessors in the violence of their aristocracy, entrapment of lower classes, and separation from the labor that fueled their wealth. As W. E. B. Du Bois, an admirer of Douglass, observed:

⁵ See Aaron Demsky’s “The Genesis of Jewish Genealogy” for a detailed mapping of the so-called “Table of Nations” in Genesis 10, which pairs the descendants of Noah’s three sons with regions in Mesopotamia and Egypt. This mapping has, unfortunately, been a source to promulgate racist thought, which Andre Christian Allies unpacks in his 2024 dissertation “The Curse of Ham: An Africentric-Postcolonial Reading of Genesis 9:18–27 in the Context of the Coloured People of the Cape, South Africa.”

the Virginian plantation began as “a feudal domain,” a code “based on an attempt to reestablish in America the waning feudalism of Europe” (*The Negro* 2014, 189).

Before applying this theory to Douglass’s writings, it is important to distinguish the concept of the *heritability of evil* from Christianity’s doctrine of “original sin.” Original sin, as explained by Saint Augustine, insists that because of the fall of Adam, humanity “continue[s] to suffer disturbances,” and a saint’s entire life is engaged in a war against those “evil inclinations” (Augustine 444–45). Certain Protestant sects, such as Calvinists, believe in total depravity, wherein all are born enmeshed in the sin of our first parents, Adam and Eve, thus marked as fallen creatures. The notion of inherited sinful nature has been in religious discussion for hundreds of years, but where the *heritability of evil* separates itself from “original sin” is in its application to specific families rather than operating as a universal trait. Functioning as a recessive gene, certain individuals pass down their family’s degeneration to their offspring. Evil men beget evil children, perpetuating cycles of moral and political corruption.

The cycle of oppression, however, quickly morphed into something distinctly American once it began to ferment on New World soil. The Southern feudal experiment darkened under violence and cruelty, becoming a beast resembling its feudal father. African American abolitionists agree with Du Bois that “various holdovers of the European feudal era remained operative in the United States,” yet, as Keidrick Roy distinguishes, American slavery was distinctly *American* through the establishment of feudalism based on race (Roy 2024, 100).

Frederick Douglass captures this duality in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, reflecting on his childhood plantation in Tuckahoe, Maryland’s feudal relics and sui generis system:

In isolation, seclusion, and self-reliant independence, Col. Llyod’s plantation resembles what the baronial domains were during the Middle Ages in Europe. Grim, cold, and unapproachable by all genial influences from communities without, *there it stands*; full three hundred years behind the age, in all that relates to humanity and morals. This, however, is not the only view that the place presents. Civilization is shut out, but nature cannot be . . . the whole place is stamped with its own peculiar, iron-like individuality. (Douglass 2003, 50–51)

Here Douglass explicitly confronts the plantation’s medieval roots, acknowledging the problem of the city-state plantation’s “isolation,” or rather its refusal to become industrialized and connected to the cities of the North. Douglass claims the plantation is also similar to the “Middle Ages” in “humanity and morals,” having been furnished upon a similar hierarchical structure. Yet Douglass hesitates to characterize the plantation as entirely feudal; his wavering stance demonstrates historians’ difficulty in situating the plantation in the folds of history. Through the lens of the “historic mutation,” we can understand Douglass’s partition between the South and Europe, the two civilizations having been placed alongside each other in writing without surrendering distinction.

Douglass’s writing illuminates how the *heritability of evil* could be passed over both the vast Atlantic Ocean and through the crevasses of time, spawning the rigid rules of the plantation and releasing it to morph into a new diabolical manifestation. Much like the noble courts of feudal Europe, everything in Douglass’s sphere was dictated “according to plantation *etiquette*” (Douglass 2003, 54). White men fashioned themselves to be “well-bred southern gentlem[e]n,” quite “alive to the sentiment of honor,” just as a chivalrous knight would be in the court of his queen (Douglass 2003, 188). Though the South distinguished itself in racial cruelty, the

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mannerisms of the White upper class seemed to be traced from European skin. Bertram Wyatt-Brown, in his book *Southern Honor*, stresses “the continuity of human ethical principles,” admitting that “for better or worse, we are [the past thinkers’] heirs” (Wyatt-Brown 2023, xi). Honor was just as central to Southerners as it was for the feudal hierarchy; because of this, it was important for Whites that Blacks not only remain subordinate but that they “show obedience with apparently heartfelt sincerity,” resulting in a greater level of violence against Black personhood (Wyatt-Brown 2023, 363).

A strong piece of evidence for the *heritability of evil* is both American slavery’s and European feudalism’s dependence on inherited power and patrimony. In both contexts, social status and authority were determined by bloodlines. As in an English manor or feudal castle, plantation life revolved around the master’s family, each generation maintaining its hold over the land. Douglass’s first master, Col. Lloyd, was an inheritor of “perhaps the richest family in Maryland” (Blight 2018, 22), and his family enjoyed the status of being in “the sacred precincts of the great house” (Douglass 2003, 81). Young Douglass was personally implicated in the evil of legacy when his master, Captain Anthony, died, leaving him to be “valued and divided with the other property” between “his two children, Andrew and Lucretia” (Douglass 2003, 128). This concentration of familial power was a result of the “call upon master and family of the estate to be responsible for their position as lord of the community” (Stephens 1995, 16). In the antebellum South, many factors in life were predetermined for a child before it was even born; whether or not the person would be a slave or a free person, an inheritor of wealth or uneducated, and even the professions of their future descendants. This cruel predestination of fate ruled the citizens of the plantation. In a setting that cherished heritage, one need not wonder how easily good and evil natures, political structures, and religious ideologies were inherited.

The legacy of oppressive feudal power structures elucidates how seamlessly the Southern land-owning gentry was able to exert authority over their slaves. Inheritors of the worst of evils, British immigrants’ descendants “folded feudalism into [the United States’s] emerging liberal order,” shaping the South in prioritizing dynastic family structures and managerial style (Rabbiee 2020, 8, 17). This importation of despotism is evident in Douglass’s depictions of the Maryland plantations; the idea of “rank and station” was “rigidly maintained on Col. Lloyd’s plantation” and “non-intercourse was observed between Capt. Anthony’s family and that of Mr. Sevier, the overseer” (Douglass 2003, 60). Escaping from the station one was born into was impossible; our “destiny was now to be fixed for life” (129), as Douglass puts it.

If the *heritability of evil* caused the plantation to receive from Europe feudal structures in its DNA, then the overseer was the phenotype, or physical expression, of these evil traits. The arrival of Mr. Gore on Col. Lloyd’s plantation in Tuckahoe was the incarnation of the hellish terrors of slavery. Mr. Gore, along with the slave overseer, is described by Douglass “as distinct from the slaveholding gentry of the south as are the fish-women of Paris,” taking the “raw material of vulgarity and brutality . . . and stamp[ing] it as a distinct class of southern society.” His every expression invokes the demonic and demonstrates the “mean ambition of his class” that embeds evil in its very nature (Douglass 2003, 90–91). Douglass’s classification of the overseer “fraternity” allows for interpreting Mr. Gore’s faults as not only a result of an ill-formed conscience, but a result of being a member of an entirely corrupted species. Evil, then, is not unique to individuals on the plantation, but rather it has pervaded the nature of an entire social class with the inheritance of malice.

Douglass directly engages with the notion of the *heritability of evil* in the first chapter of

his first autobiography. “If the lineal descendants of Ham are only to be enslaved,” he notes, referencing the generational curse upon Noah’s sinful son, then, “according to the scriptures, slavery in this country will soon become an unscriptural institution; for thousands are ushered into this world, annually, who—like myself—owe their existence to white fathers, and, most frequently, to their masters, and masters’ sons” (*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* 2011, 15). Douglass is alluding to a racist theory that claimed that Ham’s descendants were Africans, and therefore accredited the Bible as justification for treating Blacks as a “lesser and cursed species.” Yet in their hypocrisy, Douglass points out that White Southerners dependent on inheritance must realize that they cannot apply curses to racial groups without recognizing that they themselves are blood-related to their own mixed-race children.

Despite many Americans imagining themselves as bearers of new Enlightenment ideals, long-standing racist and class-based ideologies were very much present in the upbringing of the young nation. In Douglass’s time, America was barely a generation removed from being “under the British crown.” Douglass reminds Americans of this close connection, explaining that only a few decades before, England was seen “as the fatherland” which imposed “upon its colonial children such restraints, burdens, and limitations” in its “mature judgment” (“What to the Slave is the Fourth of July” 2016, 197). The scaffolding and persona of the U.S. was “indebted to medieval thought,” and in the decades leading up to the Civil War, the South uplifted its “neo-feudal aristocracy,” showing favor for “English precedents” over “reason” (Rabiee 2020, 9, 11). It would be naive to imagine that the Southern civilization originated without a parent country; however, it is critical to avoid quickly classifying her as an asexual, or exact reproduction of feudal Europe, when in reality she is a much more complex and multifaceted body.

III. Southern Etiquette: The Cruellest Performance of Power

While legal, religious, and governmental systems are influential in ordering a community, “the ‘little rules’ of manners are necessary to enact the larger social order in every encounter” (Hemphill 1999, 4). The late historian C. Dallett Hemphill argues that manners offer a “new perspective on society,” since they illuminate “how power was actually distributed and how larger changes in cosmology, polity, or economy were being worked out in everyday life” (Hemphill 1999, 4). The interactions of class on Douglass’s plantation, from dinner at the master’s house to formal greetings, are complicated by Hemphill’s theory, offering concrete examples of the broader politics governing the South. The history of manners is a particularly productive lens for Southern historians because of its direct relationship to race relations. From the segregation of buses, schools, and restaurants to a White man’s refusal to address a slave by name, the violent regulation of race governed the South even after the ratification of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments. Racial etiquette “provided a script for all members of southern society,” and the violent consequences that resulted from breaking that script prompted Jennifer Ritterhouse to claim that etiquette “did not simply reflect [Southern] culture, but helped to *make it*” (Ritterhouse 2007, 23). This is because etiquette enabled Whites to maintain a sense of honor while dehumanizing Black people, envisioning themselves as chivalrous in the tradition of the English gentleman, even as they masked their racial cruelty behind the veneer of

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manners.⁶

Behavioral manners were an instrumental regulation to maintaining the status quo; etiquette on the plantation was as salient before the Civil War as it remains in the contemporary South. Flannery O’Connor’s realism and short stories, for instance, resonate so powerfully because of her careful observance of Southern behavioral norms in her characters’ interactions. She famously commented in 1963 that for two races to live alongside each other, a “code of manners based on mutual charity” is necessary for survival, and such a code provided the South “enough social discipline to hold us together and give us an identity” (qtd in Day 2001). In the South, a display of good manners signified an understanding of societal rules and a conscious decision to follow them. In this way, manners are “clear structures of power” that emphasize “overt expressions of hierarchy such as bowing, ceremony, differences in class and address, but also more subtle forms of human relations . . . and reinforced social distinctions” (Ownby 2007, viii).

Manners, therefore, are performative and signal class status. The appearance of being “genteel,” defined as “having the manners or lifestyle associated with people of a high social position,” has always been of great importance to this southern elite (“genteel,” *Oxford English Dictionary*). *Genteel*, or *gentility*, is derived from the classical Latin *gentilis*, a word used to classify people according to family or racial group. The American South inherited this form of classification from the ancient Romans and British, performing manners as a signifier of their “moral uprightness,” “coupled with high social position” (Wyatt-Brown 2023, 88). In every civilization, one party tries to assert its power over the other. For the Southern elite, the desire to continually segregate race and class manifested in a complex system of unspoken societal rules, presented through the artifice of manners.

Manners were not only a means of asserting social and racial superiority, but they were also fashioned as a justification for one’s righteousness. Norbert Elias, who viewed the antithesis of Western expression in the Middle Ages to be between the Roman Catholic Church and its heretics, pointed to “civilite” as the Church’s way of promoting herself as holier than the pagans; none in medieval Europe were as chivalrous as the crusaders, and the most virtuous were those highly connected to Church power. The earliest verses on the precepts of behavior were written by Latin-speaking clerics, followed by the 15th century’s “great epic poems of chivalrous society,” and later, in collections of poetry dedicated to table manners (Elias 1982, 60). Thus, exterior etiquette became strongly linked to an expression of a devout interior life.

One of Douglass’s masters, Captain Thomas Auld, is characterized as “intense[ly] selfish” and “destitute of every element of character capable of inspiring respect,” yet often he “tried to conceal” his malicious emptiness, doing so “with the appearance of piety” (Douglass 2003, 140–42). Auld, like many other slaveholders, practiced the virtues most acclaimed by society; at the time, these were religious behavioral mannerisms, such as church attendance, preaching, public prayer, and almsgiving, all mechanisms for identifying themselves as saintly, despite their cruel treatment of slaves behind closed doors. Douglass said of these Christians that they “attend with Pharisaical strictness to the outward forms of religion, and at the same time neglect the weightier matters of law, judgment, mercy, and faith” (Douglass 2011, 118). Douglass’s understanding of religious hypocrisy comes straight from the Gospels; in the

⁶ Hildegard Hoeller writes in her commentary on the American novel of manners that “manners, in a European sense are, after all, a decidedly undemocratic concept, designed to separate classes along unspeakable yet visible lines of taste and behavior,” concluding that “a mannered American is then perhaps not American at all” (135–36).

appendix of *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, he quotes Jesus' rebuke against the Pharisees⁷ as an example of "the overwhelming mass of professed Christians in America" (Douglass 2011, 118). To Douglass, slaveholders are but Pharisees eager to be noticed amid their virtuosity, cloaking their interior vice with outward displays of Christian fraternization.

The Southern elite, with their self-righteous sense of morality, often failed to recognize that the very manners they upheld as markers of civility served as a form of restraint—not only for the enslaved, but perhaps even more so, for themselves. As Douglass observes, the "slaveholder, as well as the slave, is a victim of the slave system" (Douglass 2003, 61). The elite's stress on social behavior was driven by their anxiety over maintaining their perceived class status. The "favored and petted white children" of wealthy slaveholders were enslaved in conduct. These children were reprimanded for minor infractions, such as "handling his little knife or fork improperly," or "soiling the tablecloth," bound for life to the meticulous "ceremony of [dressing or] undressing" (Douglass 2003, 34–35). Their early lessons in behaviors from their parents, often met with punishment, trained their mannerisms to be performed with perfection, cycling the elite's anxiety of appearance through the generations.

This anxiety manifested in a strong motion to keep the slave from rising in social status through manners. Whites sometimes favored a slave's profanity, bad temper, and ill choice of words because it allowed for further dehumanization. On commenting on dinner manners in *De Civilitate Morum Puerilium*, Erasmus advises young princes not to eat "the moment they have sat down" because that is what the "wolves do" (qtd in Elias 1982, 89). A man uninformed of certain mannerist rules could be equated to being an animal. Slaveholders propagated this comparison on the plantation, particularly during the Christmas holidays. Though the slaves were given time off to enjoy the season, this was only a pretense to "better secure the ends of injustice and oppression," particularly through coercing their slaves into becoming "deplorably drunk" with "cunning tricks," as Douglass reports (Douglass 2003, 186–87). Paradoxically, the behavioral standards were reversed; "not to be drunk . . . was disgraceful," and "he was esteemed lazy . . . who could not afford to drink whiskey" (Douglass 2003, 184). The slaves were kept in habitual sin and denied access to the Christian set of virtues lest they rise in social repute.

Douglass's childhood is an example of the slave owner's promotion of undignified behavior. Douglass goes so far as to remark how he was much freer from the rigid social expectations of the South than his master's children, enabling him to be "in his life and conduct, a genuine boy, doing whatever his boyish nature suggests" (Douglass 2003, 34). No one was bothered by the young Douglass's roaming about directionless, playing in the mud and dust as wildly as "horses, dogs, pigs, and barn-door fowls without . . . incurring reproach of any sort" (Douglass 2003, 34–35). Although this lifestyle seemed more "free" in nature, the lack of guidance in the behavioral rules of society resulted in young Douglass being cast off apathetically as a barn animal, intentionally part of a scheme on behalf of his master to prevent him from ever approaching success.

While reflecting on his boyhood experiences, Douglass observes the differences between himself and the White boys of the plantation, narrating these memories from the third person. He strings a series of repetitive, simple sentences with verbs immediately following the pronoun "he." It is not until the end of chapter one's commentary that Douglass reveals what the reader is likely already aware of, that "such a boy . . . was the boy whose life in slavery I am now narrating." His paragraph of definitive statements issues unwavering claims about the nature of

⁷ See Matthew 23

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the slave boy’s childhood in childlike simplicity and readability, yet with a tone that is distant and cold. His refusal to take possession of verbs through the first person “I” is Douglass’s subtle method of disassociating from his childhood. Although the young Douglass “literally runs wild” with “no nice little speeches to make for aunts, uncles, or cousins,” he seems to retrospectively yearn for a stern fatherly reproach as was received by the master’s children (Douglass 2003, 34–35). This yields a complex dilemma for Douglass to puzzle out: is it wrong for him to desire to be a part of the White behavioral system, corrected and reprimanded for his manners as a youth, so that in his adulthood he may know the rules of etiquette and advance socially in the realm of the upper class, or should he rightfully deny manners altogether because they have violently bonded his race?

Douglass’s fellow slaves wrestle with their conflicting relationships to the cruel behavioral standards placed on them through different adaptations of White, European manners. Among the slaves in Tuckahoe, manners were used to divide rank; according to Douglass, “strange and ridiculous as it may seem, among a people . . . with so many stern trials,” there is “not to be found, among any people, a more rigid enforcement of the law of respect to elders than they maintain.” Young slaves had to not only demonstrate obedience to their masters, but also approach the company of an older slave “with hat in hand, and woe betide him if he fails to acknowledge a favor, of any sort, with the accustomed ‘*tank’ee,*’ &c” (Douglass 2003, 54). These instructional customs between slaves were just as purposeful as the master’s enforcement of manners. These aforementioned slave elders, who naturally desired to be shown the respect that was denied to them, believed that adoption of the White behavioral system was the path to promoting themselves. Yet Douglass recognizes that even though societal standards are built on a European backbone, etiquette can still be utilized for a slave’s glory. He goes so far as to champion the idea of the “black gentleman,” proclaiming that there is no more well-mannered man than “in the African” (Douglass 2003, 54). This powerful declarative sentence reclaims the European genteel identity for the empowerment of the slave. The slaves’ use of manners amongst themselves is a way in which they can utilize a form that has bound them in the behavioral encampment and reverse it, flipping societal hierarchy on its head.

IV. Demons Beneath the Dishes: Table Manners from the Medieval Era

The manners that governed both slave and master were not unique to the plantation but “determined largely by . . . inheritance from European nations,” and nowhere is this more evident than “in the conventions governing our table manners and practices” (Carey 1933, 1). The *heritability of evil* expresses itself in the dining room; it is in this setting that manners divide class as sharply as a steak knife, demonstrating again the performative nature of manners and the anxieties associated with them. Yet dinnertime is also a repeated form echoed throughout history. Mealtime in the master’s house is not isolated to the plantation civilization but rather speaks to traditions of hierarchical power relations, such as a king hosting a feast in which he is seated at the head of the table, or younger daughters who were customarily obligated to serve food to their brothers. In an article published by the *American Anthropologist* in 1888, Garrick Mallery interprets manners as “ceremonial customs” (Mallery 1888, 193), tracing performed social behaviors as far back as the Middle Ages. Dinner, in particular, he sees as “no longer a meal, but an institution” and as “the great theatre of London life,” emphasizing the performed nature of an upper-class meal (Mallery 195).

Norbert Elias's historical mapping of upper-class Western table manners begins with him quoting a thirteenth-century poem written as a litany of rules for court behavior. As European civilization matured over time, developing a division of labor and a pool of resources, dining became the chief expressive mode of the elite, for a "barbarian only eats . . . the cultured man can dine" (Mallery 1888, 195). The abundant table of a nobleman was his boast of personal wealth; his polished etiquette was his gentle defiance of human nature. As wealth and power consolidated over time, reaching their height in the era of absolutist monarchs, such as Louis XIV, plebeians who were not in the court "familiarize[d] themselves with the manners and customs of the court" to associate themselves with the aristocrats (Elias 1982, 100). From the king's inner circles sprang forth a diluted stream of fashions, customs, and behaviors that the lower class did their best to mimic. Yet upper-class Southerners wished to drink not only at the runny downstream of the European elite but rather to make themselves the American fountainhead. Their ease with etiquette, the "mystiques of the paternalistic male and the gracious female," suggested "upper-class southerners were trying to live out manners they associated with an old landed aristocracy" (Ownby 2007, X). Manners were the slave-owning South's attempt to create an American aristocracy.

In Frederick Douglass's accounts of dinner on the plantation, the various cast members gathered around the superfluous table reveal the master's attempts to make aristocracy out of artifice, crafty as Rumpelstiltskin spinning spools into gold. The house slaves are dressed in costume, "discriminatory selected" with "special regard to their personal appearance" so that "in dress, as well as in form, in feature, in manner and speech, in tastes and habits, the distance between [house slave and field hand] . . . was immense . . ." (Douglass 2003, 81). The slaves selected to be house servants "constituted a sort of black aristocracy on Col. Lloyd's plantation," and are intentionally set apart in such a way from the field hands to intensify division amongst the slaves (Douglass 2003, 83). They are draped in their master's silk and taught an elevated mode of speech and manners as a means of distinction. Nowhere is the divide of power so sharply visible as at dinner in the great house.

To further emphasize the immense hierarchical distance between field hand, footman, and master, Douglass contrasts the "glittering table" with the deprivation of the "poor slave" (Douglass 2003, 81). He begins chapter seven, "Life in the Great House," not with a description of wealth or opulence, as one might expect, but rather, Douglass chooses to subvert the reader's expectations by focusing his attention on the slave:

The close-fitted stinginess that fed the poor slave on coarse corn-meal and tainted meat; that clothed him in crashy tow-linen, and hurried him on to toil through the field, in all weathers, with wind and rain beating on his tattered garments; that scarcely gave even the young slave-mother time to nurse her hungry infant in the fence corner; wholly vanishes on approaching the sacred precincts of the great house, the home of the Lloyds (Douglass 2003, 81).

Despite a biting emphasis on scarcity, Douglass's opening sentence is strung with an abundance of clauses. He poetically draws out in length sympathy from the reader for the "tattered" slave beaten "with wind and rain." With rhetoric inundated in pathos, Douglass situates the reader's gaze on the slave before allowing him or her to enter, through imagery, the luxurious home of his master. The reader retains Douglass's images of the "hungry infant" torn from its mother's arms throughout the litany of foods displayed on the master's table, such as "black-necked wild goose, partridges, quails, pheasants . . . beef, veal, mutton, and venison" (Douglass 2003, 81–

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82). This contrast makes the surplus of the “table of the great house” even more repulsive, for it embodies the religious hypocrisy Douglass so despised.

What is more insidious about the master’s table is its reliance on the importation of both foods and slaves from abroad. During the time of Douglass’s writing, the Western world reigned under the “age of empire,” burying in its breast the evils of imperialism, and exercising power over its colonial counterparts. According to Edward Said, although it is difficult to “show the involvements of culture with expanding empires,” we must attempt to connect trade routes and nations because “geography and power” are at stake (Said 1994, 7). Douglass does not forget to list his master’s imports in great detail in his commentary on dining:

The fertile garden . . . with its scientific gardener, imported from Scotland . . . Baltimore gathered figs, raisins, almonds, and juicy grapes from Spain. Wines and brandies from France; teas of various flavors, from China; and rich, aromatic coffee from Java, all conspired to swell the tide of high life, where pride and indolence rolled and lounged in magnificence and satiety (Douglass 2003, 82).

Luxury goods arrive at the master’s table from abroad, likely at great pains from laborers along trade routes; yet, *men and women* have also been imported to the plantation, listed by Douglass alongside a bulk of items. The slave trade dehumanized people sold in markets; at the theater of the dinner table, they are degraded further to become a decoration, meaningful only in easing the shift from scene to scene like stagehands, replacing appetizers with entrees with quiet swoops of their clean, white gloves. At this, etiquette is achieved for the indolent slave master, yet it is at the cost of an inscrutable number of small, silent deaths of personhood.

After Douglass’s commentary on the “dazzle and charm” of the rotating menus and the appearance of the servants and the room, Douglass directly addresses the reader with a series of rhetorical questions, demanding their conscious confrontation with the evil described. He does not spare his blunt judgment of the supper ‘institution,’ but rather condemns the master family’s performed dining as harshly as the prophet Jeremiah; “lurking beneath all their dishes,” Douglass exclaims, are “invisible spirits of evil, ready to feed the self-deluded gormandizers with aches, pained, fierce temper, uncontrolled passions . . . and gout” (Douglass 2003, 84). The demonic is disguised by the appearance of gentility, void as godless Pharisees; Douglass admits to this point, claiming, “Alas! It may only be a sham at last!” This exclamatory remark reveals Douglass’s critical interpretation of his memories, that the practiced etiquette was itself a fiction. Everything at the dinner time stage is measured to segregate and reinforce caste, from uniformity to permitted dialogue.

The hierarchy of the dinner table translates over to American Protestantism, distinctly pronounced during the distribution of the Lord’s Supper. The Lord’s Supper, which Douglass refers to as “the most sacred and most solemn of all the ordinances of the Christian church,” is intended to be a unitive rite in which all members of the body of Christ partake equally of Christ’s gift.⁸ Yet even as a freedman, Douglass is permitted to receive communion only after all the Whites have left the altar rail. As the Whites sang “very sweetly” and “the colored members . . . went forward” to receive, Douglass “went *out*,” rejecting a church that failed to

⁸ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines the distribution of communion as “the source and summit of the Christian life . . . the efficacious sign and sublime cause of that communion in the divine life and that unity of the People of God by which the Church is kept in being” (CCC 1324–25).

care for his soul as an equal (Douglass 2003, 259–60). The Whites’ refusal to take bread and wine alongside even a freed slave at the altar rail of God demonstrates how deeply embedded their systems of hierarchy were within society. Segregation dominates in the privacy of the home as well as in the holy sacrament.

Their issuance of holy communion is not godly, but rather, according to St. Paul, sacrilegious. St. Paul sternly corrects citizens of Corinth for their abuse of the Lord’s Supper, claiming that their divisions of class during the consumption of communion lead them to “eateth and drinketh [their] damnation” (1 Cor. 11.29). The Christian churches of New Bedford, likewise, are guilty of division during the administration of communion. They would better fit the mold of Christian brotherhood if “when [they] come together to eat,” they “tarry one for another” (1 Cor. 11.33).

In all likelihood, the table of the slave more closely resembled the egalitarian “wedding feast” of heaven than any fabricated feast or contrived communion ritual staged by slaveholding Whites. Douglass’s childhood caregiver and grandmother, Betsy Bailey, was a priestess in her rite, speaking in tongues to the fertile Maryland soil to produce a plethora of potatoes to feed her young. “‘Grandmother Betty,’ as she was familiarly called, was sent for in all directions, simply to place the seedling potatoes in the hills; for superstition had it that if ‘Grandmamma Betty but touches them at planting, they will be sure to grow and flourish’” (Douglass 2003, 31). Her providential fortune in finding food for the grandchildren and neighbors entrusted to her care was Nature’s confirmation of her place with the “elect.”⁹ Holiness exuded from her fingertips; her magic could not be contained by Whites despite their various tools of suppression, such as young Douglass’s malnourishment by Aunt Katy.¹⁰ Betsy Bailey demonstrated that eating could be a ceremony of love rather than an antiquated form. Even though slaves were dehumanized at the master’s table, they challenged the European structure of manners by living more naturally and authentically. Douglass enjoyed his boyhood eating sweet potatoes and fresh fish caught from his grandmother’s hands, roaming in the open air “freed from all restraint;” he admitted that for most of his “first eight years of life,” he was a “happy boy, upon whom troubles fall only like water on a duck’s back” (Douglass 2003, 35).

Yet this quiet defiance of European manners could not undermine the violence of the plantation system. Slaveholders, desperate to emulate the landed gentry, were consumed with avarice for their European counterparts, conspiring to resurrect the rubble of feudal manors on their white-columned estates. Their insecurity over class and identity in the New World manifested in displays of dominance, often enforced through brutal punishment. When enslaved individuals failed to conform to the prescribed codes of conduct, their so-called “bad manners” were met with unyielding chastisement; the penalty for a slave’s bad manners was a brutal whipping, for it was said “that he has the devil in him” (Douglass 2003, 190). The consequence of the *heritability of evil* was the recycling of malevolent power dynamics that had chained the serfs to the earth hundreds of years before Douglass’s birth.

The antebellum South’s behavioral performances inevitably forced its actors to reenact scenes from a European past, wherein footmen waited upon their lords with silver trays and

⁹ See Robert White’s translation of John Calvin’s sermons in *The Doctrine of Election* for further clarification on “the elect.”

¹⁰ Most slave children, too young to work as a field hand, were denied proper nourishment; “the bitter pinches of hunger I had to endure . . . I have fought with the dog . . . for the smallest crumbs” (Douglass 2003, 58). See also “Slave Child Mortality: Some Nutritional Answers to a Perennial Puzzle” by Kenneth F. Kiple and Virginia H. Kiple.

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vassals adhered to codes of chivalry. Frederick Douglass’s descriptions of the plantation’s evident fidelity to manners, particularly at mealtime, suggest the primacy of European feudal power, even in a country that claims to be built of a character entirely her own. Scholars must grapple with *the heritability of evil* by identifying its presence elsewhere, not only in the writings of Douglass but also in the broader cultural and literary landscape of American history, particularly in its intersection with race and gender. Beneath polished exteriors, etiquette remains a tool for sustaining hierarchies and widening social divides. The *heritability of evil* embedded in American DNA reveals persistent connections to European ancestry, perpetuated in mutations that reveal antagonistic cultural norms.

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