

Andre Ye

Dr. Reagan

TS History

2 December 2020

The dynamics of an individual's role in society can be determined by a detailed analysis of two overlapping spheres: physical labor and social standing. Physical labor refers to the intensity and type of work the individual can or is obligated to perform, whereas social standing refers to their status and respectability. In the realm of working-class society, traditionally, men, thought to be capable of higher physical, 'masculine' labor, would be held at a higher social status. Women, thought to be physically weaker, could maintain a relatively high social status if their 'feminine' work was not on par with that of men. When women began to participate in industrial work, attitudes of the cult of domesticity towards their role in more masculine physical labor diminished their social status – such work was considered 'unwomanly'. On the other hand, slavery, in its homogenous approach towards labor, ignored sexual difference in pushing male and female slaves alike to the same brutally high standards of work and the same low social standing. When slaves were viewed as inhuman, this homogeneity did not threaten notions of gender difference in white society. However, as slaves were seen to be more human, this glaring contradiction emerged: female slaves were and did labor as hard as male slaves. Thus, slavery played an important role in the feminist movement's goals of equality in both the spheres of labor and social positioning by supporting arguments that equal labor capability should warrant equal societal recognition of that work.

The institution of slavery, in its extreme greed for labor, was homogenous in its towering physical demands and low social positioning of slaves, regardless of gender. Frederick Douglass states this almost explicitly in his slave narrative: in expectations of labor, "no age nor sex finds any favor."¹ Characteristics

¹ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself*. (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845), 1.

that would usually differentiate position in a social hierarchy, like gender or marital status, were irrelevant; slaves of all backgrounds would “...drop down side by side, on one common bed – the cold, damp floor.”² There was no room for labor or social mobility; slaves could not change their circumstances regardless of any differences among them. This does not mean that male and female slaves had the same experience, but instead that both were manipulated in different but nevertheless degrading manners that pushed them to the same end of the labor and social scales. The traditional societal gendered traits – masculinity, in being confident and physically strong, and femininity, in being obediently secondary and not participating in ‘masculine work’ – were repressed and altered by the institution of slavery. The ideal slave, regardless of gender, was productively masculine in labor and submissively feminine in social positioning; that is, neither societally masculine nor feminine, but a slave. In this sense, social positioning refers both to that of society imposed onto the slave, and that of the slave’s “internalized position” – for him to feel emasculated and hopelessly chained, and for her to feel weak and exploited.³

Harriet Jacobs, in her slave narrative, details the exploitation of her femininity. “That which commands admiration in the white woman”, Jacobs laments, “only hastens the degradation of the female slave.”⁴ Beauty, a prized pillar of respected femininity, has been perverted and repurposed by slavery. Frederick Douglass, in the same vein, also narrates the emasculation and hopelessness instilled by slavery. He describes one of the turning points in his career as a slave, however, when he wins a physical fight against Mr. Covey, the ‘slave-breaker’. What he celebrates, though, is not his physical prowess – an aspect of his labor – but instead the “rekindle[ing of] the few expiring embers of freedom, and [the] reviv[ing] within me a sense of my own manhood.”⁵ That is, such an interaction built within Douglass a sense of social masculinity – of confidence and autonomy, one that materialized: Mr. Covey never whipped Douglass again⁶. Similarly, Jacobs expresses admiration for her grandmother, a former slave, who Dr. Flint – the slaveowner – is afraid of. It is how she carries herself – her “high spirit”, an

² Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 1.

³ It is important to note the use of the words ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ in this essay, which refer not to being male or female, but instead the societal perceptions of what masculinity and femininity *should* have meant.

⁴ Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (Boston: 1861), 46.

⁵ Douglass, *Narrative in the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 6

⁶ Douglass, *Narrative in the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 6

“indignation [that]... once roused, [could not be] ...easily quelled”, initiating a violent altercation with a white gentleman over an insult,⁷ a very *masculine* attitude – that explains this fright. In both the cases of Douglass and Jacobs’s grandmother, the adoption of masculinity in a social aspect while retaining masculinity in a labor aspect was a rejection to slavery: such an action refused to conform to the ideal template of a slave. Furthermore, it was the only action a slave could take: the intensity of labor was not in the control of the slave’s hands, and thus both biological sexes adopted mental masculinity to break free from the grasp of slavery. As the agency and freedom of slaves went from inexistent to tentative, the social masculinity and independence of slaves only increased.

This threatened both slavery and traditional gender hierarchies: when female slaves, which had labored to the same standards as males, rejected slavery, they became *societally masculine* in that they labored as hard as and were as confident as a male. Douglass and Jacobs both detail the threat to the reputation and masculinity of slaveowners that was perceived when the slave adopted social masculinity. As a result, in both cases, the slave was left alone by the slaveowner: the power hierarchy, although still present, had collapsed to a large degree. The humanization of slaves not only drilled away at slavery, but also attitudes of the cult of domesticity. The argument against women’s rights was premised on their *lack* of strength – something female slaves were a living contradiction of. In her speech, “Ain’t I a Woman?”, Sojourner Truth – in recognition of this – makes a claim that women deserved societal respect and rights equal to that of a man on the basis that they could labor as hard as a man. She points out and rejects two positions – that women should be feminine in labor and that women should be feminine in society – and instead argues for equality in both spheres. In response to the first position, “that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches”⁸ – avoiding ‘masculine’ activities for ‘feminine’ ones, Truth points out her experiences laboring as a female slave as a contradiction. “I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me!” Truth declares. “I could work as much and eat as much as a man... and bear the lash as well!”⁹ This rebuke dissolves the assumption of the second

⁷ Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 47

⁸ Sojourner Truth, “Ain’t I a Woman?”, Women’s Convention, December 1851, Akron, Ohio.

⁹ Truth, “Ain’t I a Woman?”

position: that women should not have as many rights as men because by God's design, a man was chosen to be the powerful and strong savior. Truth makes a rhetorical choice in her rebuttal – “the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone”¹⁰ – indicative of the emphasis on women's capability for physical labor in her argument for the equality of social role between men and women.

These arguments coincided with the objectives of feminists, which had abandoned the traditional model of femininity – that a woman should be subservient, with ample social status but little autonomy and control in society. By increasing the agency and freedom of slaves, the more such a contradiction would emerge and the more destabilized a traditional gender hierarchy would become. As industrialization rose alongside slavery – and with it, rising amounts of women in the industrial workforce – a powerful coalition with common interests formed. Slave women, in defiance of traditional gender dichotomies, were by societal definitions masculine. To extract more labor, corporations argued that such masculine work was societally feminine, and yet again female slaves were in opposition to this notion. Even as many, including some male abolitionists, attempted to suppress this contradiction, it inevitably resurfaced as the humanity of slaves was recognized and their social standing stood on higher footing. Slavery forced gender structures conflicting with the traditional societal ones onto slaves with the argument that they were inhuman; hence the abolition of slavery was tied to the fight for women's equality.

¹⁰ Truth, “Ain't I a Woman?”