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PENMANSHIP EXERCISES FOR SAUCY SONS: SOME THOUGHTS ON THE COLONIAL SOUTHERN FAMILY

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About twenty-five miles north of Charleston, on a bluff above the West Branch of the Cooper River, lay the eighteenth-century estate of John Harleston, and of his sons John and Isaac after him. The elder Harleston was one of the wealthiest men in Carolina when he died in 1767. His namesake hardly had time to enjoy his inheritance. He died within a year, at the tender age of twenty-four, and the plantation passed to his younger brother. But I knew none of these details when I first came upon the Bluff Plantation Book, and I am not sure it matters that I know them even now. For what I found in that book does not depend on the data of an actual family.

What I found was a number of letters that were not really letters at all. They were never sent to anyone. They were never received by anyone. They were fictitious missives, composed by the tutor on the plantation, probably in the early 1760s, as penmanship exercises for one or both of the Harleston boys. And yet they set my sense of family life in the planting provinces.

Though they were in no way factual, they were designed to be true to life. Their author deliberately disdained the drivel that tutors of the time inflicted on students. As he put it, in a preface to the exercises, "writing masters should not give their scholars idle, silly copies which have no sense in them."¹

The exercises devised by the Bluff Plantation tutor were, as he promised, cut from a different cloth. These assignments were meant truly to engage the student, by touching upon crises he saw around him and could anticipate encountering in his own career. For all that these assignments were formally fictive, they were written to distill reality.

Exactly on that account, the reality they disclosed was enormously revealing. With one insignificant exception, the letters amounted to a series of lectures to late-adolescent males. The first and longest was "from a guardian to his ward," detailing the guardian's distress at the company his ward was keeping. Another was from an older cousin to a

* Professor in the Department of History, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. This paper is based on the address Dr. Zuckerman made at the Annual Meeting of the Society in 1981.

¹ Bluff Plantation Book 1760-1773, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, penmanship exercises, unpaginated. I am indebted to Gene Waddell, Director of the South Carolina Historical Society, for his ingenious reconstruction of the biographical background of the Bluff Plantation Book.

denomination, organized at Greer in November 1908, called itself the Fire-Baptized Church of God of the Americas, and chose Fuller as its leader.⁶⁵ It became one of the nation's largest organizations of black pentecostals, and established churches in Africa and the West Indies. Its headquarters is a school for black children, the Fuller Normal and Industrial Institute in Greenville.

Holmes was sixty years old when he received the pentecostal baptism in 1907, and he would live another twelve years. His school, renamed Holmes Bible College, became an important force in the American pentecostal movement, and its teachers helped crystallize and refine the theology of pentecostalism. The heritage of Holmes' strict Presbyterianism caused the school to exercise a conservative influence on the movement, discouraging extremism and excessive emotionalism.⁶⁶ The school trained hundreds of pentecostal ministers, especially those of the Pentecostal Holiness Church, and sent missionaries to Latin America, South Africa, and China.⁶⁷

The life of N. J. Holmes illustrates the process by which, within one man's mind, the doctrines of pentecostalism emerged from a progressive sifting-out of the currents of nineteenth-century American religion. Pentecostalism was not created at the Azusa Street mission; it evolved from holiness doctrine, from the experiences of the camp revivalists, and from the thoughts of Wesley and others before him. It inherited the legacies of each of the creeds or groups it superseded, and kept alive its own legacy: the idea that Christianity is not so much a theory as a mystic or even miraculous experience. And through the charismatic renewal of the 1960s and 1970s, the pentecostal movement would restore this legacy to the established churches from which pentecostalism itself had ultimately evolved.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*; Fuller, personal interview.

⁶⁶ Kenneth D. Benson, President of Holmes Bible College, personal interview, Jan. 14, 1981.

⁶⁷ Raymond Othel Corvin, "History of Education by the Pentecostal Holiness Church in South Carolina and Georgia," (master's thesis, University of S. C., 1942), p. 31.

younger one beginning a business, offering the novice advice on how to conduct himself. Still another was from an older brother to a younger, complaining of the youth's dissolute carriage and warning him that his debts would no longer be paid by his elders.

All of them were replete with moralistic strictures against a young man's rambunctiousness. All of them were efforts to recall him to paths of righteousness. All of them attempted, in effect, to impart morality in one fell swoop to a stripling about to embark upon the world. Their inescapable implication was that, at age twenty or thereabouts, the young man had never heard such things from his seniors before.

In the letter from the older brother to the younger, this was quite literally the case. "Whilst my mother and father were living," its author told his "Dear Billy," "they both supplied you not only with the conveniences of life but indulged you, if I may be so free as to say so, in your lenity and extravagancy." Now that they are dead, he declares, he means to put a period to their liberality. "The frequent supplies that our indulgent parents sent you" simply encouraged dissipation. "They were thrown away" upon you in your "imprudence." So Billy must be warned to be responsible for his own behavior, for the first time in his life.²

In the letter from the guardian to his ward, the older man informs the eighteen-year-old that he has heard "with the utmost concern" that "you have entered yourself a member of a disorderly club, that you have too little regard for your reputation, are often disguised in liquor, keep bad hours, break the rules of your master's house at least twice a week, and, in short, make the whole family very uneasy." When rebuked for all this by your master, you treat him with "indecentcy," give him "pert answers," put on "such saucy airs as are insufferable," and, "instead of being submissive and giving him the least prospect of a future amendment, you repeat the offense" and actually make "his wholesome admonitions the topic of ridicule amongst your profligate companions."

The guardian warns his charge of "the fatal consequences that must too soon attend you without a speedy reformation." Your "indiscreet" behavior will lead ineluctably to "a taste for the same vicious course of life." "Taking what you call small liberties at present" will "lead you on in . . . time to take much greater," until finally you "arrive at such a pitch of obduracy as to be subject to no manner of restraint."³

All these letters were cautionary tales about the ruinous consequences of early license. All of them were pleas for alteration, addressed to orphans by men who stood in the stead of a father. If they were

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

fictions, they were fictions not only adapted to but also reflective of fact. At the very least, the tutor who composed them served as a substitute father himself, for young men neglected if not orphaned by their natural sire. As likely, he confronted in his own right the dilemmas he displaced in his invented letters onto guardians, cousins, and brothers. As likely, he too dealt with profligate sons, nurtured in paternal neglect and indulgence and maturing in impertinence, indiscipline, and dissoluteness.

The tutor shrewdly saw that such scions had to be chastened, "for what we learn in our younger years sinks in to the memory, adheres to us till old age, and has a prevailing influence over all our conduct." But he seemed not to see at all that eighteen was hardly a lad's "younger years" or early enough to "inculcate virtue."⁴

I, on the other hand, could hardly help seeing it, because I had just completed an extended study of the diaries of William Byrd and found a fascinating unconcern for his children in that early-eighteenth-century Virginian.⁵ I had also canvassed other diaries of other colonial southerners and discovered a similar indifference to children or, at any rate, a similar uninvolvedness in their rearing.⁶ Now I was observing the other end of the process: not just what went in, at the age of two or ten, but also what came out, at the age of twenty. And everything connected.

Indeed, the connections implied a strikingly suggestive formula for trouble. Parental neglect while children were young would engender willfulness in the little ones. Parental indulgence as children grew older would entrench and even enhance such self-assertiveness. And finally such self-assertiveness would oblige parents to attempt, before launching their offspring into adulthood, the very alteration of obduracy that the guardian urged upon his ward in the penmanship exercises.

I began to think of the Bluff Plantation letters in terms of the sententious instructions Polonius gives his son Laertes in their fatuous farewell in *Hamlet*. "To thine own self be true" and all the rest of that rhetoric, not silly in itself so much as vapid in context. And once I began to think in such terms, I started seeing Polonian preachments and partings everywhere, in real letters as well as in imaginary ones, from real fathers and mothers as well as from step-parents and guardians. The tutor's fictions helped me find my way to their factual analogues.

More than that, they helped me understand these parting pronouncements as I think they should be understood, despite their appar-

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Michael Zuckerman, "William Byrd's Family," *Perspectives in American History* 12 (1979): 253-311.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 299-306.

ent expression of a patriarchal authority scholars so fondly impute to the early southern family. Richard Ambler may have urged his sons to accord the "admonitions" he "judged necessary" for their guidance "more than one reading." James Habersham may have bid his son give similar injunctions "a fair and candid reading on the first day of every month for one year after [his] arrival in London," as "a proof of the filial duty" he owed his father. But though their dicta read as if written in thunder, the men who penned them acknowledged themselves "anxious, very anxious," about their boys' behavior.⁷

Though these purported patriarchs proposed, their sons disposed; and even the ones who seemed to heed were often just playing a part. Peter Manigault might assure his parents that he had "read over with great attention" the "good advice" they proffered. He might promise to "observe every tittle" of it and actually beg for more, because it was "the business of [his] life" to "satisfy" them. Still, the plain truth was that his repeated protestations of deference to their desires served primarily to perpetuate his independence and their indulgence. As long as he kept them convinced that he would "willingly acquiesce in everything" they wished, they left him on his own in London and met his monetary requisitions lavishly besides. As long as he did nothing to disturb their supposition that he would "heartily submit [him]self" to whatever they thought "proper," he was free to carry on for years in a fashion that led Billy Drayton, his partner in pleasure in the metropolis, to consider him a "gay Lothario," much addicted to "the pleasures of . . . frisking and capering."⁸

In almost every case, the problems that could have been predicted between indulgent fathers and saucy sons seem much more evident than the dutifulness the fathers finally demanded. Men who disdained paternal power for twenty years could not suddenly assume it effectively in a single day. When they attempted to assert such dominance, they only occasioned stress between the generations, because their effort appeared as an alien intrusion on the life the sons had known so long.

Indeed, in one of those intriguing ironies that help constitute cultures, the young men who resisted so strenuously the eruption of their

⁷ Lucille Griffith, ed., "English Education for Virginia Youth: Some Eighteenth-Century Ambler Family Letters," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 69 (1961): 17; *The Letters of Hon. James Habersham, 1756-1775*, in Georgia Historical Society, *Collections* 6 (1904), pp. 68-71.

⁸ Mabel Webber, ed., "Peter Manigault's Letters," this *Magazine* 31 (1930): 172, 179; "Six Letters of Peter Manigault," *ibid.* 15 (1914): 123, 120-21; William Drayton to Peter Manigault, April 18, 1753, in Manigault Family Papers, South Caroliniana Library, Columbia, legal size folder 1.

fathers into their affairs recapitulated the paternal pattern as they themselves matured. For without any example or experience of steady surveillance and constructive correction, wild sons could hardly turn all at once into consistent and conscientious disciplinarians of their own offspring. Inevitably, they found it more congenial and convenient to be as slack with their own children as their fathers had been with them, and in the end simply to summon up the energy for that one ritual lecture or letter fifteen years too late.

An increasing company of historians have recently been emphasizing the patriarchal quality of colonial southern family life. But, as this little sketch implies, few planter fathers played the patriarchal part in any earnest. Few, in fact, ever even had an extended chance to try. With the withering mortality rates of the provincial south, far less than half of all parents saw their own children into adulthood, and fewer still saw grandchildren. In all of Charles Parish, Virginia, over an entire century from 1660 to 1760, only a dozen men and women lived long enough to be grandparents. And what was true for the elders was still truer for the young. A father of several children might survive to see the oldest attain maturity, and thus be counted in the demographic computations among the ranks of parents who did successfully bring a child into adulthood. But the better part of his brood might reach their majority after his demise, with an accordingly different experience of adolescence than their older siblings. Few southern sons grew to manhood under the government of their own father.⁹

It was no accident, then, that the penmanship exercises in that plantation book were predominantly letters addressed to young men bereft of their parents. Orphanage, and its attendant autonomy, was a paradigmatic prospect in the eighteenth-century south. Even those who did not go through it had cause to suppose they would and a host of friends who actually did.

It was no accident, either, that those penmanship exercises were written by a tutor. For even parents who lived to see their children come of age did so from a distance. They scorned to spend time with little ones on the plantation, and sometimes they put the fledglings still further off. Byrds, Carters, and other leading families of Virginia sent children, and infants too, across the ocean to be brought up in the mother country. Eliza Lucas Pinckney left her boys there when she returned to South Carolina. And if Eliza's letters leave little doubt that she adored her sons, after her eighteenth-century fashion, and grieved to part from

⁹ Daniel B. Smith, "Mortality and Family in the Colonial Chesapeake," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 8 (1978): 403-27.

them, the same cannot always be said for others. King Carter left his sons to the ministrations of his business agents in England for years, without ever really caring to be told of their emerging character or competences. William Byrd never asked after his daughters at all, even to ascertain whether they lived or died.¹⁰

Parents who held their children closer to home still sometimes sent them off to live with other planters or merchants. Or they put them to board with schooldames. Or they abandoned them to tutors on their own plantation. Philip Fithian served as such a tutor on Robert Carter's estate at Nomini Hall, and the diary he kept discloses that his young wards saw their proper parents far less than once a week. They ate in a separate dining room and slept in a separate house.¹¹

And even among planters too poor to provide tutors and separate quarters for their young ones, parents put children apart from them. Diaries of lesser planters, merchants, and ministers show offspring impinging on parental consciousness no more than once or twice a month.¹² Newspapers of the day testify to an endemic neglect that led recurringly to little boys and girls burning to death or drowning in the course of unattended play near fire or water.¹³ Court and vestry records reveal children of eight years old, and five, and infants of fifteen months, and even nine, bound out to trades; the majority of them were, obviously, orphans, but many had one or both parents living.¹⁴ And foreign travelers tell of the abdication of parents too, reporting on the one hand that children were already at work by the age of eight and, on the other, that southern scions enjoyed "the greatest liberty" because their elders "concern[ed] themselves very little" with what they did. "They go, come, enter, and leave" without any necessity to fit themselves to adult modes of "politeness and good manners."¹⁵

¹⁰ Hunter Farish, "Introduction," in *The Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian* (Charlottesville, 1968), pp. xviii-xix; Julia Spruill, *Women's Life and Work in the Southern Colonies* (Chapel Hill, 1938), pp. 187, 205-6; Elise Pinckney, ed., *The Letterbook of Eliza Lucas Pinckney, 1739-1762* (Chapel Hill, 1972), pp. 94ff; Louis Wright, ed., *Letters of Robert Carter, 1720-1727* (San Marino, 1940), esp. p. 12; Zuckerman, "William Byrd's Family," p. 268-69.

¹¹ *Journal and Letters of Fithian*, esp. pp. 31-2, 80, 81, 119, 132, 134.

¹² E.g., "Journal of Col. James Gordon, of Lancaster County, Virginia," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 1st ser., 11 (1902-3): 98-112, 195-205, 217-36; *ibid.* 12 (1903-4): 1-12; "Diary of John Blair," *ibid.* 7 (1898-99): 133-53; *ibid.* 8 (1899-1900): 1-17; Zuckerman, "William Byrd's Family," pp. 299-306.

¹³ E.g., "Diary of John Blair," pp. 133.

¹⁴ Spruill, *Women's Life and Work*, pp. 55-59.

¹⁵ Ferdinand Bayard, *Travels of a Frenchman in Maryland and Virginia* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1950), p. 56.

So far from reaching out to their youngsters, plantation parents left them essentially to their own devices, amid "a great family of negroes," even when they allowed them to remain on the plantation at all.¹⁶ Visitors often commented on the common practice of leaving children in the care of slaves, some celebrating the kindness of the young masters toward "the servants who constantly attend them," others lamenting "that their children's morals are debauched by the frequency" of such intercourse.¹⁷ But even when southerners realized that they "suffer[ed]" their sons "too much to prowl amongst the young negroes, which insensibly causes them to imbibe their manners," they were unwilling to assume responsibility for raising their children themselves. Robert Wormeley Carter, whose life was made miserable by his acrimonious dependence on his father Landon, mustered the courage to leave the ancestral estate just once. As he prepared to go, he discovered that his departure would lead Landon to "take away the maids that tended [his] children." And the spectre of having to tend them himself so shook his resolution that he elected instead to stay.¹⁸

The results of such reluctance to tend children were apparent on every hand. Southern youths abroad seemed "spoiled" by the amplitude of their allowance and the absence of parental oversight. Those sent to school in the "indulgent" southern settlements seemed "pampered much more in softness and ease than their neighbors more northward." And even those who remained at home were hardly hindered by the proximity of their parents. As one planter noted, his peers believed that "to curb their children is to spoil their genius."¹⁹

Of course, such rhetoric suggests patterns progressive in our own present sense. But the suggestion is misleading. The disinclination of eighteenth-century southern parents to curb their sons and daughters arose out of an utterly different cultural complex than modern permissiveness does. Rather than reflecting overweening anxiety about the personal growth and development of the youngster, it was meant merely to unburden the parent. Rather than representing a doting absorption in the psychic life of the child, it expressed an effective indifference.

¹⁶ Marion Tinling, ed., *The Correspondence of the Three William Byrds of Westover, Virginia, 1684-1776* (Charlottesville, 1977), vol. 1, p. 32.

¹⁷ *Journal and Letters of Fithian*, p. 26; "Observations in Several Voyages and Travels in America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 1st ser., 15 (1906-7): 149.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 158; Robert Wormeley Carter Diary, Aug. 25, 1766, typescript, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Research Archives.

¹⁹ Griffith, ed., "Ambler Family Letters," p. 11; "Observations in Several Voyages and Travels," p. 157; Jack Greene, ed., *The Diary of Colonel Landon Carter of Sabine Hall* (Charlottesville, 1965), p. 997.

Mothers and fathers were permissive primarily because they did not wish to be bothered.

Indeed, even parents who showed a semblance of solicitude came in the end to a comparable posture. Richard Ambler informed his boys that their careers would "be left to [their] own choice," but he did so because he had such a scant sense of their conduct and competences anyway. John Smith said he would "not be fond of putting [his son] to any study he did not like," but he said it because he was ignorant of the lad's inclinations in any case.²⁰ Such fathers conceded sons their own way because they had so few alternatives. Their permissiveness was itself a measure of how remote they were from their families, and how far from patriarchal proclivities.

Children raised under such a regime came to presume on its prerogatives. Like St. George Tucker, they found their father's benignity manifest in his liberality. Like Peter Manigault, they gloried in "the goodness of an indulgent father" who put "no . . . stops in the progress" of their plans. And if youths defined parental allowance of their desires as a preservative of filial affection "firm against all attacks," parents apparently concurred. A 1767 almanac in the Charleston Library Society gave prominent place to a long essay "on the prudent lenity of parents, toward their children," which extolled the "happy effects" of "gentle and tender treatment." In it, a fictive father reclaims his son from "the most vicious and extravagant courses" by "mildness" and "irresistible goodness" rather than resorting to strenuous discipline.²¹

Had parents pursued paths of patriarchal severity, they might merely have aroused their errant sons' resentment. Peter Manigault reacted to a rare display of paternal distrust and anger by writing his mother, "this I know, that mildness is much apter than harshness to produce affection." Philip Fithian concluded that his tutees had grown so used to freedom and uncontrol, "from a false method in their early education," that they claimed such privileges "as a necessary right." If you attempt to keep your charges "much at home and close to business" he warned his successor, "they themselves will call you unfeeling and cruel and refuse to be industrious."²²

²⁰ Griffith, ed., "Ambler Family Letters," pp. 16, 20, 22, 20.

²¹ Eliza Tucker to St. George Tucker, Aug. 12, 1770, in Tucker-Coleman Papers, microfilm in Colonial Williamsburg; Webber, ed., "Peter Manigault's Letters," p. 276, 278; almanac from New York, 1767, title page missing, in bound volume of miscellaneous almanacs 1753-87, Charleston Library Society, Charleston.

²² Webber, ed., "Peter Manigault's Letters," p. 61; *Journal and Letters of Fithian*, pp. 165-66.

Yet even as Fithian recognized that the Carter children took government for tyranny, he saw that the dilemma went deeper. For in the absence of control, he counselled, they would behave in ways all too likely to "scandalize the family." They were so undisciplined that they simply could not be trusted with the liberty they demanded because it had become "habitual" with them. And others experienced the same difficulties Fithian did. John Drayton had sons so "wild and ungovernable" that they would take "no counsel from [him] nor yet pay no obedience." But even as they made him "so unhappy and . . . so miserable" by their behavior, they considered him "a tyrant" for his futile efforts to constrain it.²³

It was fitting, then, that the Bluff Plantation tutor's penmanship assignments revolved around the "unreasonable liberty" allowed to saucy and impertinent sons. For impudence was endemic among provincial southern youth. English visitors who could hardly have been strangers to dissipation on their own shores were struck by the "unbounded licentiousness" that seemed "to taint the morals of the young gentlemen" of the Chesapeake.²⁴

Youth who were "modest and agreeable in behavior" and "never impudent in company" were, by contemporary account, "rare" in the colonial south. Uncontrol and intemperance, on the other hand, were "generally called good living." If young Billy Drayton waxed momentarily philosophical in asserting "the uncertainty of all sublunary enjoyments" and insisting that "extremes even in pleasure are disagreeable," he could not sustain such philosophy for so much as a single letter to a friend. In the very midst of his celebration of restraint and resignation, he confessed his own incapacity for self-control. "It is not my nature," he acknowledged.²⁵

Billy Drayton was by no means unusual in his impetuousness, but one more must stand surrogate for the others. George Washington's stepson, Jack Custis, regularly rambled around at night "in company with those who do not care how debauched and vicious his conduct may be." He drove his father to distraction and his tutor to despair that he was "too warm" and self-willed. "I never did in my life know a youth so exceedingly indolent or so surprisingly voluptuous," the young man's mentor reported to the master of Mount Vernon. "One would suppose

²³ Ibid.; Robert Weir, "Rebelliousness: Personality Development and the American Revolution in the Southern Colonies," in Jeffrey Crow and Larry Tise, eds., *The Southern Experience in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 1978), pp. 33-34.

²⁴ "Observations in Several Voyages and Travels," p. 222.

²⁵ Greene, ed., *Diary of Landon Carter*, p. 559; William Drayton to Peter Manigault, April 4, 1753, in Manigault Family Papers, South Caroliniana Library, box 1, folder 1.

nature had intended him for some Asiatic prince." Washington, who could control his Congress, his cabinet, his officers, his troops, and even his own temper, simply could not control his son.²⁶

Washington regretted his inability bitterly, and so did other provincial southern parents. But for all their chagrin, they never did anything efficacious in the way of amendment. Like the imaginary guardian in those idealized penmanship exercises, they implored their offspring to "consider before 'tis too late" the effects that "ill habits in time may lead you to." Like him as well, though, they addressed their pleas to young men of eighteen and twenty who were beyond any basic reformation.²⁷

Robert Carter swore that his sons' "improvement in learning and manners" was "one of the greatest blessings" he wished "in this world." He resolved, therefore, that "the principles of our holy religion shall be instilled into [them] betimes." But his very grammar and diction betrayed his belatedness in inaugurating their training. His boys were already adolescents, and he was still speaking in the future tense.²⁸

Eliza Lucas Pinckney begged her brother to "lay down betimes a plan" for his "conduct in life," so as not to succumb to his "irregular passions" and become a "burthen to society and himself." But she seemed scarcely to have considered that early adulthood might be an implausible age to begin acquiring self-discipline. James Habersham hailed Henry Laurens for the "seed" he had "sown in [his sons'] unwary hearts." The Georgia merchant was sure that it would "shoot out ultimately" to his Carolina correspondent's "comfort," when his boys came "more on the state of life." But the oldest of Laurens' heirs was already seventeen when Habersham was holding his heart unwary and his state of life undeveloped.²⁹

Only an outsider such as Fithian, raised in the Quaker colony of New Jersey, appeared to appreciate the importance of steady surveillance and sustained supervision, from earliest infancy, in the conditioning of character. And only an outsider such as Fithian seemed to see the significance of parental models. "My duty," he recognized, "require[s] my presence pretty constantly, and I am forced to produce an example for what I find it necessary to enforce on our boys, in order to do it with some face."³⁰

²⁶ Stanislaus Hamilton, ed., *Letters to Washington and Accompanying Papers* (Boston, 1898-1902), vol. 4, pp. 24, 41-2.

²⁷ Bluff Plantation Book.

²⁸ Wright, ed., *Letters of Robert Carter*, p. 25.

²⁹ Weir, "Rebelliousness," p. 42; *Letters of Hon. James Habersham*, p. 133.

³⁰ *Journal and Letters of Fithian*, p. 129.

But if Fithian understood the efficacy of example, the parents who employed him and his fellow tutors did not. By indifference, indulgence, and erratic interaction with their offspring, they provided what Jonathan Boucher called, with exquisite exactness, "a strange, imperfect, desultory kind of education." Then, seeing with Boucher that they had "spoiled" their sons, they attempted to undo years of neglect in a sudden flurry of Polonian precept.³¹

At Anne Broughton's parting from her son Nathaniel, she inundated him with injunctions not to be "led into sin by the ill examples" all around him, not to let "the present enjoyments of this world . . . take up all [his] thoughts and affections," not, indeed, to "neglect [any] known duty, nor [commit] any evil." Richard Ambler besieged his boys with advices for every occasion. St. George Tucker's father, mother, sister, brothers, and cousin all sent salvos of counsel from their home in Bermuda when he left to begin his study of law. And Charles Carter of Cleve warned his daughter Molly in much the same manner to "remember that one hour's sickness may deprive her of every beauty that a foolish woman can boast of."³²

Henry Tucker sought to secure his son's "honor and virtue" by arranging for a mentor for the young man and demanding that it be "by his consent" that St. George "go anywhere." St. George was not to suppose himself "left at [his] own head." And other elders also attempted to impose a suitable subordinacy upon their charges. Jane Randolph wrote from North Carolina to her son Johnny, begging him to behave toward his guardians "with gratitude and respect." James Habersham deliberately declined to put his youngest boy in his oldest son's mercantile house because he believed "submission to a stranger" would be "more eligible and easy" for the lad, though for all his sons alike the Savannah merchant insisted that "submission . . . and a punctual and cheerful obedience to all orders" were an "indispensable duty."³³

But young people accustomed from their formative years to independence did not defer so dutifully. They resisted the demands of their

³¹ "Letters of the Rev. Jonathan Boucher," *Maryland Historical Magazine* 8 (1913): 253-54.

³² "Broughton Letters," this *Magazine* 15 (1914): 173, 175-76; Griffith, ed., "Ambler Family Letters," p. 15; Henry Tucker to St. George Tucker, [1770], and *passim* through Nathaniel Tucker to St. George Tucker, Dec. 22, 1771, in Tucker-Coleman Papers; Charles Carter to Molly, Jan. 25, 1764, in Armistead-Cocke Papers, Swem Library, William and Mary.

³³ Henry Tucker to St. George Tucker, [1770], in Tucker-Coleman Papers; Jane Randolph to Johnny, May 29, 1765, in Nicholas Trist Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Univ. of N. C., Chapel Hill, box 1, folder 1; *Letters of Hon. James Habersham*, pp. 63-64, 66.

elders by gambling away their inheritances.³⁴ They rebelled against requirements of subordination by dissipating their good names in drink and debauchery. And they defied their parents and masters more directly as well.

More than that, their parents and masters understood that they would. Some, like Landon Carter, resented such self-assertion. Others, like James Habersham, promoted it. Carter railed against a daughter-in-law who could not “see her all, already rising out of” him and would not “be satisfied” unless he “part[ed] with his all.” Habersham dedicated his declining years to advancing his sons’ “happiness in every respect” as his “grand object.” Carter withheld his bounty and believed he would be “turned a-grazing” if he did not. Habersham “willingly sacrifice[d]” his health and “every farthing” of his income to establish his sons in business and believed it made them “really love and respect” him rather than “wish [his] death.” But neither believed for a moment that his authority was irresistible. Neither supposed that his power as patriarch extended much beyond the interest his offspring had in his property.³⁵

Indeed, few southern gentry parents really meant to have it any other way. Habersham himself, in the very letter to Laurens in which he hailed submission and obedience as indispensable, also revealed that he did not “mean to lay any unreasonable restraint on [his] children” and actually begged his Carolina correspondent to “provide and pay for everything necessary for him, in which I desire you will not be too sparing.” And Elias Ball expressed the ambivalence of planter parents, and their resolution of that ambivalence, even more plainly, in a letter to his son John in Charleston. Hearing that his boy had had a “bruising bout” with another youngster and come out of it with a black eye, the father paid his respects to the values of docility and deference — “I would not have you to be quarrelsome or litigious” — and then disclosed his deeper expectations — “at the same time I would not have you be pissed upon by no lad of your match.”³⁶

In other words, it was not simply that provincial southern parents could not have done differently, not simply that a father such as Natt Hedgman “lived a loose, rebelling life” and had a son who was likewise “a wild young lad,” not simply that contemporaries saw, with some chagrin, that “even children just clothing are instructing their parents; and what

³⁴ Greene, ed., *Diary of Landon Carter*, p. 505 for Landon Carter’s recognition of the deliberate resistance at work in his son’s inveterate gambling, and its resonance for Virginians more generally.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 485; *Letters of Hon. James Habersham*, pp. 195-96.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 66, 68; Elias Ball to John Ball, July 10, 1775, in Ball Family Papers, South Carolina Historical Society.

is worse, those parents who practiced this when children themselves know not how to curb their children now they attempt it."³⁷ It was also that provincial southern parents would not have done differently even if they could have. For such parents ultimately valued wilfulness too profoundly. They might demand submissiveness, in letters and lectures, but they modeled autonomy, in life. They appreciated "spirit" far more than subordination.

In their own children and in others, planter parents preferred the tacit morality of indiscipline to the official one of obedience. So far from setting a penalty on "spirit," they actually put a premium upon it. As a South Carolina writer reported in 1738, even "professed friends to religion and virtue" did not hesitate, in the marriage market and in proper society more generally, to "make choice of an abandoned fellow, who has been overrun with a polite disorder, debauched two or three innocent virgins, or kept half a dozen Negro wenches in the face of the sun." As another Carolina journalist confirmed, a generation later, parents accepted young men of notorious profligacy as appropriate matches for their daughters: unless a lad had killed his man and deflowered his woman, he was considered "a spiritless, ignorant milk-sop."³⁸

Insistence on such spirit shaped the individual upbringing of sons and the collective training of the southern gentry as well, in the only southern colonial seat of higher learning, the College of William and Mary. The records of the College in the eighteenth century are almost entirely records of its difficulties in maintaining discipline among the students, and the difficulties are almost entirely traceable to the faculty's adamant affirmation of official values of subordination and self-control, in the teeth of youthful and parental preference for spirit.

The annals of the school are studded with tales of disorder and disrespect, but one will suffice to suggest their savor. It appeals to me not merely because it is nearly as amusing as it is revealing but also because it brings me full circle to the Byrds, with whom I began thinking of the colonial southern family.

Thomas Byrd was the son of William Byrd III and the grandson of William Byrd II, the great Virginia gentleman and diarist. In the spring of 1769, young Byrd was called before the president and masters of William and Mary "to answer some allegations against him for disorderly behavior." He had been charged with breaking plates and windows,

³⁷ Wright, ed., *Letters of Robert Carter*, pp. 102-3; Greene, ed., *Diary of Landon Carter*, vol. 2, p. 997.

³⁸ Julia Spruill, *Woman's Life and Work*, pp. 174.

"in a rude and riotous manner," and it seems safe to say he was guilty as charged. In any case, his mentors determined that he "should submit to a whipping" for the damage he had done.³⁹

On "being made acquainted with this resolution," Byrd bristled. "He positively declared that he would never submit" to such punishment. Sooner than humble himself as the masters demanded, he "concluded with many violent and threatening expressions against the president."

Since it was the young man's pride that the president and masters meant to curb even more than his "violent and outrageous behavior," those worthies called on him again the next day "to make the submission required." Again he "obstinately refused," and this time, as if to prove his utter unrepentance, he added that he had "no genius to be a scholar" and was "incapable of receiving any improvement in the college." They suggested that his father "must send him thither for improvement." He retorted that "his father did not expect him to receive any improvement at the college." They insisted that, even so, his father would be disturbed to hear of his "disorderly behavior." He replied that his father "would believe him concerning any complaints of his conduct."

Then the masters played their trump card: it would not be merely their word against the young man's own, they informed him, because they had "evidence against him in relation to what he denied." But Byrd had resources of his own, and he was quite unflustered. Coolly he demanded "to know who [these surprise witnesses] were," so that he could "call them to account." When the masters wondered what he meant by calling them to account, he explained "by saying that he would knock them down."

Seeing that they had failed to daunt him, the masters retreated, reiterating as they did that they would whip him or expel him. He responded once more, "with great rudeness," that he would "never submit to be whipped" and so would go. But before he left, he proclaimed himself "unjustly . . . punished" and informed the assemblage that "he was a capable judge and would be the judge himself when he deserved to be punished." Lest any of them doubt that he understood that he was making himself a law unto himself, he promised, in an ominous parting shot, that "the president would be sorry" for his expulsion.

So far from honoring the president as a patriarch, young Byrd said he would "consider the president as any other person." So far from exhibiting a duly deferential submission to the dominion of his elders, he

³⁹ These and all subsequent quotations from "Journal of the Meetings of the President and Masters of William and Mary College," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 1st ser., 13 (1904-5): 21-22, 133-34.

epitomized the unruly pride of the spirited sons of the south. He could not capitulate, and he did not have to capitulate because he could be confident of his father's indulgence and his peers' approval. Having been held to no abiding authority but his own through his youth, he was finally his own judge, and his only judge.