The “Dimduke” and the Duchess of Chandos: Gender and Power in Jamaican Plantation Management—A Case Study or, A Different Story of “A Man [and his wife] from a Place Called Hope”

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In her novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys tells the story of Antoinette (Cosway) Rochester, the woman who becomes the “madwoman in the attic” in Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*. As a white creole in nineteenth-century society in the Caribbean, Antoinette lives outside the bounds of either European or Afro-Caribbean society. Her Afro-Caribbean childhood playmate dubs Antoinette a “white cockroach” and in European society she is equally an outsider. Through this twentieth-century fictional story, Rhys constructs the problematic situation of the white woman in plantation and post-plantation societies: in a world where the triumvirate of race, class and gender ordered society, the white woman simultaneously occupied position power based on race, class, and condition of freedom yet one of subordination based on gender.

Analyzing the roles of women who lived in the margins of idealized gender constructions allows us to grasp the nature of the constructions themselves. Too often, we have seen gender as an “either-or” with, on the one hand, feminists positing that women’s subordination emerges from patriarchal power relationships in which older men dominate both women and younger men, or, on the other hand, the Marxian view that female powerlessness stems from unequal property relationships in which men control women’s productive and

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1 *Wide Sargasso Sea* (Norton, 1966) has become a fixture for post-colonial scholars searching for a symbol of the alienated individual in a world where the old boundaries and categories of identity no longer work. Not surprisingly, the man of color may also function as the displaced individual in contemporary film and fiction. For example, *The Lover* juxtaposes a downwardly mobile French white girl and a prosperous Chinese man in French colonial Vietnam. The British film *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* focuses on Afghan, Indian, and Black men from the former empire, but on a white British woman as protagonist.

reproductive capacities. For the Caribbean, Barbara Bush and Hilary Beckles have called for a sustained analysis of gender in history by investigating white women as one category within plantation economies. Bush points out that power networks provided women with “diverse points of resistance which may even involve a temporary inversion of power relations.” Fissures in the social order demonstrate the complexity of race and class systems. White women, Bush argues, were ‘outsiders’ whose situation was the “most paradoxical…in terms of power wielded both by them and over them.”

Bush, along with Bridget Brereton, has challenged historians to look at documents women themselves wrote to understand the history of the Caribbean. This task requires delving into published sources, including those by Mary Prince, Mary Seacole, Maria Nugent, and Janet Schaw as well as researching in manuscript sources, as Trevor Burnard did in his analysis of Jamaican wills.

3Mary Murray, *The Law of the Father: Patriarchy in the Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (Routledge, 1995), 6-24. Murray, in her proposal of a “class-patriarchy relationship” as a means of understanding the development of European capitalism in the late medieval and early modern periods, argues that class and patriarchy “contained each other” but that patriarchy changed with the development of capitalism. However, in focusing on the exploitation of “free” wage laborers in capitalism, Murray does not overtly address the problem of slavery in her analysis of the commodification of labor (see, for example, 42).


5Ibid., 247. Bush focuses on resident white women in her article.


7Trevor Burnard focused on church and legal records, especially wills, to demonstrate the relative powerlessness of Jamaica white widows when compared to women in the first generation of colonists to the Chesapeake region despite their demographic similarities. Burnard found that Jamaican widows received little power over family property from their husbands’ wills. Burnard’s quantitative evidence is convincing and he challenges us to figure out the reason for the distinction, posing a few hypotheses himself in the final pages of his article.

Burnard pointed out that white men formed coerced or consensual sexual relationships with black and colored women as a reason why marriage to white women seemed less compelling to Jamaican white men. While this was no doubt true, I believe that the dynastic, rather than physical, desires of men are reflected in wills, though they overlapped occasionally. What may be more significant about the differences Burnard found was that in the Chesapeake white men were more concerned with maintaining property in the white family than Jamaican white men were. In addition, the goal of white men in Jamaica to acquire wealth rapidly and become absentee owners persisted longer than in the Chesapeake, making the presence of a permanent class of mobile Scots merchants and overseers more common. Trevor Burnard, “Inheritance and
I do not claim to have completed the undertaking Bush and Brereton propose, but merely offer one contribution to the discussion of the significance of women’s place in plantation economies by studying the letters of Anna Eliza (Gamon) Elletson Brydges—an absentee white female planter. I find Elletson’s letters particularly intriguing for the insights she offers into the mindset of the planter, in this case an absentee planter at the end of the eighteenth century. She occupies a seemingly contradictory position as a woman, and therefore subordinate, but also white, wealthy, and prominently placed in society, granting her a great deal of power over her Jamaican plantation. In my previous work, I concentrated on the roles and activities of women further north, in the plantation colony of Virginia from the seventeenth century through to the period of the American War for Independence. In contrast to Virginia plantation owners, Elletson represented the figure of an absentee plantation owner, a common enough occurrence in Caribbean plantation society, but distinct from the position of resident women in plantation power structures elsewhere.

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In the late eighteenth century, Anna Eliza Elletson, a prominent English woman, inherited a Jamaican sugar estate from her husband, Roger Hope Elletson. Roger Elletson had been educated in England, but returned to Jamaica where he served as Member of the House of Assembly, on the council, and finally as Lieutenant Governor from 1766 to 1768. In 1770, he married Anna Eliza, then Gamon, his second wife, but he left no children when he died in 1775. In his will he left Jamaican property, including his plantation “Hope” to his widow. Hope is familiar enough to contemporary visitors and residents of Kingston as the site of Hope Gardens; and the Old Hope Road, now a major thoroughfare, once served as the road to the plantation from the coast.

Anna Elletson chose to administer the estate as an absentee planter and landlord, maintaining a long-standing interest in the details of plantation management and corresponding with her attorneys and agents. Copies of her incoming and out-going correspondence are preserved in a letter book at the National Library of Jamaica, allowing me the opportunity to probe the prejudices and concerns of a prosperous English woman regarding the West Indies, a subject that would provide the basis for women’s fiction in the next century. Elletson became embroiled in the disputes that arose from her holdings. The National Library also holds manuscript material on a lawsuit she

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fought concerning the plantation, a lawsuit introduced by the legally fictitious “Dimduke” of the title.

It is difficult to claim that Elletson represents a large group of white women. Quite the contrary, since white women with control of family property were in the minority, between 1667 and 1734, according to Trevor Burnard, Jamaican testators were “very unwilling to give their wives absolute control over even part of their property.”

When looking at a later period, however, Kathleen Butler found that white women served as executors and administrators to Caribbean estates as well as outright owners of property in the early nineteenth century and that “[t]hroughout the slavery era, white women played a vital role in the economic life of the colonies. As creditors, slave holders, and property owners, they helped to sustain the plantation system, yet their contribution has passed virtually unnoticed.” Butler estimated that by the time of emancipation, women “owned or controlled” about five percent of the estates, including some of the great estates exceeding 1000 acres in size. Women also accounted for 37 percent of the Barbados claimants to compensation for slaves freed at emancipation.

Anna Elletson’s role and class-position contrasted with that of the women Trevor Burnard documented in his work. Most obviously, she differed because she had been left sole executrix to her husband’s estate. She also lived a rarified life at the pinnacle of Anglo-American power elite as an absentee planter. After being widowed from Governor Elletson, Anna Elletson married Henry Brydges, Duke of Chandos, and as a result of that marriage, she became “Her Grace,” Duchess of Chandos. Her personal connections then extended to King George III and Queen Charlotte who attended the baptism of Chandos’s daughter, Georgiana Charlotte, and served as sponsors at the baptism. Anna Eliza Elletson, later the Duchess, was not the stock-figure of the short-tempered, indolent white creole woman who spoke in dialect and was the object of ridicule in literature and non-fiction works about the Caribbean. Instead, Anna Eliza Elletson’s wealth allowed her to enjoy the fruits of the plantation from a

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10Burnard, op. cit., 105.
11Kathleen Mary Butler, The Economics of Emancipation, Jamaica & Barbados, 1823-1843 (University of North Carolina, 1995), 92-5.
12Letter, 7 December 1775, Anna Eliza Elletson to Messrs. Pool & East.
13The Chandoses had two children, Georgiana Charlotte and Anna Elizabeth, but only Anna survived infancy. Anna, Jr., born in October 1779, was heiress to her parents’ estates. In 1796, Anna, Jr. married Richard Grenville, who became first Duke of Buckingham and Chandos. By this route, the Jamaican estates along with her other property came into the Grenville family. Henry Rumsey Forster, The Stowe Catalogue, Priced and Annotated (London, 1848), xx-xxii. As late as the 1848 sale, the family owned “some curious old Rum” which the sale catalogue attributed to “Mr. Henry Grenville, brother of Earl Temple who was Governor of Barbadoes in 1754-5.” One wonders if any of the rum was the Hope Estate rum Brydges requested sent to him instead. For a multi-generational family history, see John Beckett, Rise and Fall of the Grenvilles: Dukes of Buckingham and Chandos, 1710-1921 (Manchester University Press, 1994).
distance. The existence of a class of absentee planters, which included women, may help account for the distinctive system of gender and property that Burnard discovered for eighteenth-century Jamaica.¹⁴

Anna Eliza Elletson’s family and its official position both in England and Jamaica have been documented in various histories; however, the specifics of her interest in and management of a plantation need further examination. The English histories tend to simply tally up the family’s West Indian profits and acreage, ignoring the role the plantation played in the family’s construction of its identity. Furthermore, the letter book reveals her concerns regarding technological innovation, the exploitation of the environment, gender relations, and interactions between individuals within the plantation economy, including employees, tenants, overseers, and slaves. The letter book covers the period of the U.S. War for Independence, so it also provides insights into the impact of wartime disruption on the population of a Jamaican estate.

Anna Elletson took a condescending, paternalistic position in delineating her relationship to the plantation hierarchy, of which the slaves were a significant part. She described her taking control of Hope in royal terms of the beginning of her “reign” as planter.¹⁵ She wrote her overseer, Mr. Ballard, that she wanted her slaves to know that she held “affection toward them” and informed Ballard that she depended on his “goodness & humanity to comply with my wishes for their welfare.”¹⁶

Nor was this all. She fine-tuned her depiction of the slaves and distinguished among groups of slaves, proposing different treatments for them according to their positions. She gave special attention to the slaves she refers to as “old Negroes.” She called only a few by name—even then they are called only by first name—and, with the exception of a boy named “Roger,” all of the slaves called by name were “old Negroes” who had been Gov. Elletson’s


¹⁵Letter, 23 January 1777, Anna Elletson to “Gentlemen.”

¹⁶Letter, 13 January 1776, Anna Elletson to Mr. Ballard.
particular concern.\textsuperscript{17} Anna gives the “old Negros” special consideration. For example, she discussed the allowance of sugar and rum to be allocated to “Diana” who had lived with Anna Elletson for a time. Diana and other slaves referred to as the “old Negros” seem to have been granted their freedom, but Anna Elletson said her husband’s will invalidated their emancipation. Anna Elletson seemed particularly concerned that these “old Negros” be treated with “tenderness.”\textsuperscript{18}

Elletson categorized another group of slaves as “pen Negros” who had been leased out for a number of years to another planter. The “pen Negros” she considered less useful to her own estate and “not equal, to the more laborious part of cultivation.” Still, she preferred to have them returned to Hope even if they only worked as weeders.\textsuperscript{19} She attempted to regain one group of leased slaves after their term to Mr. Collard was up because she believed that slaves were treated better on an owner’s plantation than they would be on a lessor’s. Still, she considered some of these leased slaves less useful workers even if they could still be useful at Hope. She thought there was “always light work as heavy” on sugar estates and they would be better employed in light work at Hope than leased out to Collard. In a cryptic passage, she suggested that the leased slaves might be put to heavy work at Hope if the agents were willing to “risque their dispositions” by putting them to heavy work.\textsuperscript{20} I am unable to determine how the leased or pen slaves managed to convince Elletson that their dispositions would be risked if they were forced to do heavy labor, but this tactic seemed to have been at least occasionally successful in avoiding some of the worst work on the plantation.

Anna Elletson considered it important to her public persona, at least, to be seen as a paternalistic mistress, and her overseer knew this. In her instructions to her representative on the plantation, Elletson described her view of her relationship to the slaves. In June of 1776, she wrote:

> “I am Extremely happy to find that the Negroes are satisfied with the Disposition made of them, it is a matter of the greatest Consequence to me, that they shou’d be Content, and I as earnestly wish to have them so as Ever their late Master did—I well know that your sentiments of those people are very similar to mine, you treat your own with humanity and tenderness, therefore you will not permit mine to be treated otherwise tis

\textsuperscript{17}Letters, 13 January 1776, Anna Elletson to Mr. Ballard; 6 October 1777, Anna Elletson Brydges to “Gentlemen.”

\textsuperscript{18}Letter, 6 October 1777, Anna Elletson Chandos to “Gentlemen.” Colonial legislatures increasingly looked askance at the manumission of elderly slaves who were simply kicked off of plantations to prevent their being a drain on plantation supplies. B.W. Higman, \textit{Slave Populations of the British Caribbean} (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 385.

\textsuperscript{19}Letter, 17 January 1776, Anna Elletson to Messrs. Pool & East.

\textsuperscript{20}Letter, 23 January 1777, Anna Elletson to “Gentlemen.”
true they are born to labour in a manner peculiar to their colour; but we who reap the fruits of that labor, ought to soften it to them, as much as possible, by every proper indulgence towards them.”

Her conception of her authority as a mistress required her to be humane in her treatment of them, but her understanding of their position was grounded firmly on the racist view that “their colour” made them “born to labour” on the plantation. This type of condescension consistently permeated her letters and may explain her reluctance to emancipate any of the slaves with the exception of “mulatto” children of white male employees and “Roger,” quite possibly the child of a white man, whom I will discuss later.

In 1779, the overseer, Mr. Concannon, understood her wish to be seen in benevolent terms, and he adopted similar language when discussing slaves in his letter to her. He assured her the slaves were “healthy, satisfied & in good Spirits” and that he would do everything he could to encourage “the Comfort & Satisfaction of your Negroes” and to provide “lenient kind treatment” to them. Mr. Concannon’s views are interesting in light of the fact that he seemed to have fathered a child named John with one of the slave women and sought to free John when the child was about four years old.

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21 Letter, 13 June 1776, Anna Elletson to “Sir.”
22 Letter, 6 May 1779, Mr. Concannon to Anna Elletson Brydges.
23 The Duchess referred to the child Concannon wished to purchase as “his Mulatto child.” Letter, 12 March 1780. Letter, 6 May 1779, Mr. Concannon to Anna Brydges. Mr. Concannon only called John “a Mulatto child” whom Concannon believed to be “nearly related to me” without claiming paternity.

The reader wonders how he could bear to wait until John was four before he sought to obtain title to him, though at four, John was on the edge of being inducted into labor. Richard Dunn found that on Mesopotamia Plantation, children began to work in the third or “grass” gang between the ages of six and sixteen. For the first decades of the nineteenth century, Barry Higman found that children began working in agriculture at about those ages, with children beginning to work in St. John, Barbados at relatively earlier ages. Concannon’s John may not have been destined for field work, though.

The emancipation of John is consistent with the pattern that Higman found in early nineteenth-century manumissions which were often for children, especially girls, under ten, whose freedom was obtained by their white fathers. Richard Dunn, “Sugar Production and Slave Women in Jamaica,” Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Black Life in the Americas, ed. Ira Berlin and Philip Morgan (University of Virginia Press, 1993), 58-61; Richard Dunn, “The Story of Two Jamaican Slaves: Sarah Affir and Robert McAlpine of Mesopotamia Estate,” in Roderick A. McDonald, ed., West Indies Accounts. Essays on the History of the British Caribbean and the Atlantic Economy in Honour of Richard Sheridan (The Press, University of the West Indies, 1996), 190-1; Higman, op. cit., 190-7, 384-5.
Elletson thought that whites engaged in agriculture in England and completely unfamiliar to sugar cultivation would still be better suited to introduce new techniques for farming Hope, further demonstrating her condescending attitude toward her slaves who, after all, at least had some experience in growing sugar. She considered “negroes” to be ill-suited to adapting to new farming methods or innovation in general. She cited the “well known obstinacy of the Negroes” as an impediment to having them learn new cultivation techniques and thought they “will not do any thing out of their usual track of business, unless they have a white person to Direct them, who by being absolute over them obliges them to submit.” As a result, when she wanted to introduce new farming technology, she sent English farmers to begin the process, though she still expected the slaves to dig the actual irrigation ditches she planned for the estate.

The plantation provided a hierarchy that placed the overseer and white immigrant workmen, including a ploughman, in positions of authority over the slaves, but in writing about these white workmen, Anna Elletson did not reveal the type of ethnocentrism that her kinswoman, Maria Nugent, adopted in describing the Scots in Jamaica. Nugent, on her visit to Hope in 1801, described the overseer as a “civil, vulgar, Scotch officer, on half-pay” who was an “ugly Scotch Sultan,… about fifty, clumsy, ill made, and dirty. He had a dingy, sallow-brown complexion, and only two yellow discolored tusks by way of teeth.” She conceded that he had a reputation for being a good overseer “so at least his brother Scotchman told me, and there is no one here to contradict him as almost all the agents, attorneys, merchants and shop-keepers, are of that country, and really do deserve to thrive in this, they are so industrious.” Nugent was extremely conscious of the Scots as a different ethnicity and, by contrast, praised the overseer’s beautiful black “chere amie.”

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Elletson believed that improving the technology for cultivating Hope would reduce the demand for slave labor and, like other members of the English and Anglo-American elite of the late eighteenth century, she thought that introducing new technology and methods of cultivating the plantation would increase profits. Her hopes for improving the sugarcane output in early 1776

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24 Letter, 23 January 1777, Anna Elletson to “Gentlemen.” Slave refusal to learn new farming techniques may constitute the type of resistance to slavery that Eugene Genovese describes in North American slavery.

25 Frank Cundall, ed., Lady Nugent’s Journal: Jamaica One Hundred Years Ago (London: Institute of Jamaica, 1907), 39-40; 1 October 1801 for the visit to Hope. I am grateful to Dr. Blouet for bringing this reference to my attention.

26 For the mainland colonies, see Joyce E. Chaplin, An Anxious Pursuit: Agricultural Innovation & Modernity in the Lower South, 1730-1815 (University of North Carolina Press, 1993). Transfer of agriculture seemed to flow from the West
focused on several changes in the methods of raising cane. In light of the frequent droughts which plagued Jamaica, irrigation, or as she called it, the “watering scheme,” was her primary concern. She understood that frequent watering would deplete the fertility of the soil and asked her managers on the island to take special care in laying out the fields to keep damage to a minimum. She was particularly interested that the irrigation ditches on the hillsides be dug on the contour of the hills and that the sides of the trenches be carefully banked to prevent run-off and excessive erosion.

All this seems quite sensible, given the topography of Jamaica, but her proposal for introducing a technology to water the hillside cane fields appalls the modern reader who lives in an agricultural state concerned with soil erosion rates. Elletson suggested that:

“...if there is any part of the Land, that cannot be watered in that manner [by trenches cut along the contour lines], do you think it feasible to water it by fire engines, to explain myself I mean that kind of machine which is used in the Country to extinguish fire.”

One can only imagine the environmental degradation which would have accompanied this plan had it been adopted on a large scale. The hillsides of Jamaica might resemble those of California washed away in the gold rush of 1849, or those of modern Haiti.

Another improvement Anna Elletson planned was to introduce plow agriculture to sugar cultivation and importing a skilled English plowman to plan the new project. She admitted she knew that her deceased husband had not thought that putting the plantation under the direction of a plowman was a good idea because plowmen had destroyed the canes they were meant to cultivate. Still, she thought the idea might work and sent over an experienced English plowman and appropriate tools, including “new invented wheel plows and harrows.” This particular project met with ill fortune when her plowman ran off after arriving in Jamaica.

What does seem distinctive about Elletson’s interest in technological improvements was the impact she believed they would have on slavery as a labor system. Joyce Chaplin has argued that in the second half of the eighteenth century, planters on the Southern mainland introduced technological improvements at the same time they argued for the preservation of slave labor.

Indies to the mainland in the examples Chaplin cites (152-5). The literature on English agricultural improvements is extensive.

27Letter, 13 January 1776, Anna Elletson to Mr. Ballard.
28Letter, 23 January 1777, Anna Elletson to “Gentlemen.”
albeit in the “paternalistic” or “domestic” mode of the period.\textsuperscript{29} Elletson, on the other hand, thought that by modifying the method of cultivating sugar on her plantation through the judicious use of plow and harrow, she could reduce the number of slaves engaged in sugar production.\textsuperscript{30}

Although some of Elletson-Chandos’s plans failed, her irrigation project and her unyielding protection of her valuable water rights continued to make Hope one of the more prosperous plantations into the nineteenth century. Reporting on a visit to Hope in 1801, Maria Nugent wrote:

“The Hope estate is very interesting for me, as belonging to dearest Lady Temple, [a relative] and I examined every thing very particularly. It is situated at the bottom of a mountain, and as the Hope river runs through it, the produce is more certain than on estates in general, which often suffer from the great droughts in this part of the world.

“A severe hurricane alone can affect it. It is said to be an old estate, and not further improvable than yielding, as it does now, 320 hogsheads of sugar. –They say that, though it is incapable of yielding more, it is better, as being a sure produce, than most estates in the island, which are liable to great vicissitudes.”\textsuperscript{31}

Anna Elletson’s plans for irrigation along with her political and legal battles to protect her valuable water resources paid off in the long run, making it a fairly reliable plantation.

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But we are still left with the question of how we define the gender component in the Elletson-Chandos plantation administration. The most overtly gendered aspect of Elletson’s correspondence is her constant invocation of her role as widow or invalid to apologize for her lack of communication with her representatives in Jamaica. In this regard, her language resembles that of elite women on plantations in Virginia who apologized profusely for their incapacities as women as a preface to giving specific orders to men about how they wanted affairs managed.\textsuperscript{32} Shortly after Gov. Elletson died, Anna cited as her reason for not writing that her “present state of mind and Constitution” kept her from the eventual task of being “plung[ed]… into a scene of Business.”\textsuperscript{33} She requested assistance from Edward East of Pool & East in managing her

\textsuperscript{29}Chaplin, \textit{op. cit.}, 54-6, 65.
\textsuperscript{30}Letter, 13 January 1776, Anna Elletson to Mr. Ballard.
\textsuperscript{31}Cundall, ed., \textit{op. cit.}, 39, entry for 1 October 1801.
\textsuperscript{32}See Sturtz, \textit{op. cit.}, for the constant apologies Virginia women used to assert their will.
\textsuperscript{33}Letter, 11 December 1775, Anna Elletson to Mrs. Stanker.
business while her mind remained in “such a State of stupification” in her grief.\textsuperscript{34} In 1777, she continued to play on her position as a widow and, therefore, one of the “Defenceless” in society when requesting assistance, but, in the same letter, discussing her legal rights to the water supply that the City of Kingston had attempted to wrest from her, she planned to use her contacts to convince the English Board of Trade to protect those interests.\textsuperscript{35} In one letter she deferred diffidently to Pool & East in claiming she did not know much about planting, in part because “few people can have a Just Idea, cultivating any Country with which they are unacquainted” but also because planting “seldom happens to be the subject of Contemplation with Women—our mode of Education does not qualify us for such employments.” In this same letter, however, after claiming she did not “presume to direct you,” she proceeded to do just that, discussing the operation of the still on the plantation, the sale of a slave woman, and the annual accounting of the estate’s returns.\textsuperscript{36} Several years later, she explained that her pregnancy and “ill state of Health” during it and her lying-in prevented her from attending to plantation affairs. Nevertheless, she jumped immediately into the management of Hope, directing the purchase of an adjacent estate, the sale of some other land, the construction of a new wharf (contrary to the advice of her agents) and the conclusion of a dispute with another woman over the payment of an annuity.\textsuperscript{37}

Perhaps the incidents where we might find gender solidarity between Anna Elletson and the plantation women would be in letters directing the affairs of women at Hope. This does not seem to be the case. Instead, she directed the conveyance of a title to the slave named Maria and “her mulatto Daughter” to Mr. Coe, the distiller at Hope, presumably an attempt to reunite the family. However, Elletson admitted that she did so according to the directions in her deceased husband’s papers, that she expected to receive 130 pounds Jamaica currency for the transaction, and she “hope[d] that Black Lady will not engross too much of [Coe’s] attention from his business.”\textsuperscript{38} Elletson was willing to accept the significance of family ties among white men, their mulatto children, and women of color, but she was unwilling to formalize those relationships at a cost to herself. A later letter demonstrates the same—She said she was willing to grant the request of her overseer, Mr. Concannon, to obtain “a Title to his Mulatto Child,” but only if Concannon provided “an able Negro” to take the child’s place.\textsuperscript{39} Edward East, her agent, had assured her that this exchange was in her best interest anyway both because she would gain an adult “able Negro”

\textsuperscript{34}Letter, 7 December 1775, Anna Elletson to Edward East, Esq.
\textsuperscript{35}Letter, 23 January 1777, Anna Elletson to “Gentlemen.”
\textsuperscript{36}Letter, 7 January 1776, Anna Elletson to Messrs. Pool & East.
\textsuperscript{37}Letter, 12 March 1780, Anna Elletson to Messrs. Pool & East, written, perhaps tellingly, from Bath.
\textsuperscript{38}Letter, 17 January 1776, Anna Elletson to Messrs. Pool & East.
\textsuperscript{39}Letter, 12 March 1780, Anna Elletson to Messrs. Pool & East.
in the exchange, and because she would rid the plantation of the burden of the mulatto child. According to East, “such Children proved little use to estates because of the Indulgence they get when young,” presumably from their overseer fathers. Incidentally, in this particular example, Mr. Concannon requested only the freedom of the child, not of the child’s mother.\(^{40}\)

Anna Elletson circuitously raised another issue in this letter to Messrs. Pool & East when she asked “to have yr. Opinion relative to the other Mulatto Children on the Estate.” The Duchess of Chandos provides no further details on the parentage of the “other Mulatto Children” so we have no way of knowing if they were the children of her deceased husband, his relatives, former white employees or other men in the vicinity. Anna Elletson certainly did not openly discuss the possibility of her husband’s having children or relatives among the children on the estate. Nevertheless, she fondly discussed the future of a boy named Roger with her correspondents. She wrote, “I was glad to find that Roger was safe arrived, if he can be made a useful Tradesman he may have his choice, but I wou’d not have him employ’d in any laborious work, as I mean to give him his freedom, if he behaves well and you approve of it.”\(^{41}\) We will probably never know if Roger was her step-son, the son of Roger Elletson, but she seems to have taken a special interest in this namesake’s future and expected him to become free and grow up to be a tradesman who was above laborious field work.

At best, Elletson musters a bit of sympathy for the plantation women, rather than any sense of solidarity with them. She does not seem to relate their experiences to her own difficult pregnancy and delivery, and the death of her first Chandos child shortly after its baptism. She asked that “particular care” may be taken of those she called the “breeding Women,” and their children, including giving them regular allocations of food despite the short supply of provisions in 1777, during the American war.\(^{42}\) Even then, she was asking for the reinstatement of only one meal a day for the children and “breeding women,” indicating they had not been receiving even that much in the latter part of 1776.\(^{43}\) Elletson’s public reason, at least, for this care was that she considered

\(^{40}\)Letter, 24 May 1779, from Edward East Esq. At Liguanea to Anna Elletson.

Douglas Hall traces the negotiation of Thomas Thistlewood, another overseer, for his slave “wife,” Phibbah, and their child in In Miserable Slavery: Thomas Thistlewood in Jamaica, 1750-86 (Macmillan Caribbean, 1989), 79, 123, 313-4. Thistlewood encountered more resistance from the white mistress of Phibbah than from the master. I “begged hard of Mrs. Cope to sell or hire Phibbah to me, but she would not; he was willing.” The child was manumitted in Thistlewood’s lifetime, Phibbah only in Thistlewood’s will, when she also inherited a slave and house of her own.

\(^{41}\)Letter, 5 August 1778, Anna Elletson to ? [presumably Pool & East].

\(^{42}\)Letter, 23 January 1777, Anna Elletson to “Gentlemen,” [presumably Pool & East].

\(^{43}\)This may indicate the slaves were expected to cultivate their own provision grounds. There is an extensive debate on the issue of provision grounds, but for Hilary McD. Beckles’s discussion on the mid-eighteenth century elsewhere in the British
the success of her plantation dependent on the health and the number of “Negroes” on the plantation. She did not express her plans for regular rations in terms of her empathy with pregnant and nursing women based on her own experiences as a mother.

If we see the Duchess of Chandos implicitly attacking “patriarchy” at all in her letters, it is over the political issue of control of the Hope water supply, a longstanding issue in her letters. She acknowledged that Roger Elletson had, as an active politician, conveyed the water rights in his lifetime to certain petitioners in Jamaica, but she insisted that Kingston’s claim to the Hope water supply was no longer valid. She argued that Roger had granted away the water only after changing his mind because of his personal ties to the petitioners. She was further willing to battle the official power structure in contesting the Jamaican Legislature’s Bill requisitioning the water supply for the use of Kingston and as a source of revenue when the City resold the water to neighboring plantations.  44

Clearly, differences exist in the lives of white women proprietors in colonial plantation economies. In contrast to West Indian white women, white women in Virginia did tend to live on or near plantation “quarters” and had a sense, if only a filtered sense, of what happened on the plantations. Widows on Virginia plantations might live as absentee, but could be more intimately involved in affairs, if only from the coast. They did not have the same sense of “sojourning” temporarily in a plantation society in the way that Maria Nugent, a slightly later Jamaican governor’s wife, could or in managing the plantation from a distance as one investment in a portfolio, as Anna Elletson could.

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The Duchess of Chandos’s life resembles that of Wide Sargasso Sea’s fictional Antoinette Cosway in one final, tragic way—Anna also spent the final years of her life as a “madwoman,” though not locked in the attic. She and the Duke had enjoyed twelve years of marriage after their 1777 wedding, but she again faced the sorrow of widowhood. The Duke died, according to one account, from complications from a fall resulting from the Duchess’s inadvertently pulling away a chair just as he was about to sit on it. In grief or guilt after the event, the Duchess went mad and, two years later, in 1791, the court certified her as a lunatic, leaving her surviving daughter’s upbringing and

Caribbean, see his Natural Rebels: A Social History of Enslaved Black Women in Barbados (Rutgers, 1989), 45. Beckles also found that working conditions for pregnant women improved toward the end of the eighteenth century.

Thistlewood describes the starvation of slaves during the war as a result of hurricanes and wartime interruptions in grain shipments: “18 September 1778: We shall nearly have a famine.” Hall, ed., op. cit., 248-9, 259.

marriage arrangements to guardians. Young Lady Anne Eliza, as an heiress to land and title, made an attractive catch and, at the age of sixteen, she married twenty-year-old Richard Grenville, later Duke of Buckingham. The elder Anna lived until 1813, and technically retained her property until her death when she passed it to her daughter.  

The outcome of the Duchess of Chandos’s plans for Hope are apparent in Maria Nugent’s description of the estate in 1801. Maria Nugent, a kinswoman, visited Hope Plantation and described it in rather pastoral terms which conformed to the Duchess’s idea of a proper estate:

“As you enter the gates, [at Hope estate] there is a long range of negro houses, like thatched cottages, and a row of cocoa-nut trees and clumps of cotton trees. The sugar-house, and all the buildings, are thought to be more than usually good, and well taken care of.”

Nugent’s description makes Hope seem almost like a rural village in England, with her references to “thatched cottages” that would appeal to a European reader.

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I do not claim that the history of Hope in the second half of the eighteenth century provides a conclusive model as to how gender was constructed in that period; rather, it demonstrates a key population—absentee plantation owners—who must be drawn into the discussion of gender and our understanding of power and oppression in a comparative analysis of plantation societies in the history of the Americas. To date, historians have stressed the low rate of biological reproduction of the European and Afro-Caribbean women as fundamental to an understanding of the gendered differences in plantation societies. Perhaps expanding our analysis of gender in this period to include the limited success of European white women in social as well as biological

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45 The Duchess of Chandos wrote a will in 1789, before she was certified insane, but her estate was not settled until 1816. Excluding the colonial lands, young Lady Anna’s property brought her about £6500 per year from English and Irish estates. Beckett, op. cit., 102-3, 129.

46 Nugent, op. cit., 39; 1 October 1801.

47 For recent discussions of low rates of reproduction in the early history of the Caribbean, see Barbara Bush, Slave Women in Caribbean Society, 1650-1838 (James Currey, 1990), 120-50; Dunn, “Sugar Production and Slave Women in Jamaica,” 49-72; Beckles, Natural Rebels, 90-2. Beckles provides an overview of recent historiography (90-2) and discusses Barbados’s exceptional position as a colony with a female majority. Successful reproduction became politicized when abolitionists and apologists took up the issue as an indicator of inhumane treatment of slaves in the second half of the eighteenth century and the period of “amelioration.” Beckles, Natural Rebels, 97-9.
reproduction better serves our comparisons of North American and Caribbean English colonies. More work needs to be done on the roles of women in social reproduction (and cultural innovation) in this period before we may make comparative claims, but the state of gender history in the Caribbean setting is already beginning to allow us to begin this stage of analysis. Anna Eliza Elletson may have complained about the second-rate education open to her as a woman in British society of her time, but unlike many Afro-Caribbean and Creole white women, she clearly had access to the strategies of the strong more than the “weapons of the weak” in pursuing her goals.

The expansion of this field in the past decade should allow for more comparisons of this sort as the literature begins to make more geographically specific analyses of women’s lives under slavery. In addition to monograph-length literature, see Claire Robertson, “Africa into the Americas? Slavery and Women, the Family, and the Gender Division of Labor,” and other articles in David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine, eds., More than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996); articles in Patricia Morton, ed., Discovering the Women in Slavery: Emancipating Perspectives on the American Past (University of Georgia Press, 1996); and articles in Verene Shepherd, Bridget Brereton, and Barbara Bailey, eds., Engendering History: Caribbean Women in Historical Perspective (Kingston: Ian Randle Press, 1995).

For an anthropologist’s discussion of “the weapons of the weak,” see James C. Scott, Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance (New Haven, CT: Yale, 1985). Much of the subversion action of slaves and free women of color and Creole white women in the Caribbean seems to fall into this category.