

Chivalry and Sexism

by **Red Crowley**

I reached for the door, swung it open with a bit of flare, and waved the woman behind me into the department store. I awaited the requisite smile and "thank you". Instead, the hair on the back of my neck stood on end when the woman responded with a terse, "Go ahead. I can get the door for myself." I felt insulted, resentful, and embarrassed. I was raised in the Deep South and opening doors for women was a sign of respect—a characteristic of a gentleman and a benchmark of the chivalrous. With a growing sense of resentment I spent the day trying to figure out what was wrong with her. However, by day's end, I also found myself pushing back a persistent, uneasy sense that my behavior was inappropriate.

Some years later, I came across an essay that helped me decode the event. I read with fascination that many slaveowners in the pre-Civil War south coped with the conflict between their pride in a democratic government on the one hand, and their enthusiastic support of slavery on the other by declaring the latter a "Domestic Institution". Their tactic served to unscramble the true meaning of chivalry for me: a gracious way to frame a harsh reality. The contention was that the Old South had developed a form of slavery based on the family model: a "mutually beneficial" arrangement between the patriarch and those in his custody. And so, I began to probe the connection between the institution of slavery and that of family.

In the well-established "Domestic Institution" of Christian marriage and family life, wives and children ostensibly agreed that the husband rightfully ruled the home. At the same time, those patriarchs relied on dependent wives and children to validate their generosity and honor by a demeanor of respect, gratitude and obedience. This system of paternalism served as the model for the social institution of slavery. In both cases, supposedly appreciative wards were showcased as models of deportment and as testaments to the benevolence of the patriarch at public gatherings. However, as Paula Giddings points out in her discussion of the "domestication" of slavery, "Along with the 'benefits' of obedience came the no-holds-barred response to disobedience." For, like the woman who did not ingratiate herself to her husband, the slave's failure to comply with the master brought with it intimidation and punishment. In turn, the social acceptance of that punishment signaled to all parties—husbands and masters, wives and slaves—their prescribed roles within the "Domestic Institution".

While southern slavery is no longer endorsed, the "Domestic Institution" of marriage and family on which it was based endures today. In patriarchal marriage, wives and children remain wards of the man as head of the household. But this highlights an apparent contradiction: on the one hand, reports by women of their ever-growing freedom and independence and, on the other, research data indicating that men are attacking women in intimate relationships at alarming rates. Perhaps stories from men in our classes can shed some light on this paradox.

Most men, not just those in our classes, can dredge up a litany of societal messages that reveal how women are viewed as inferior: women are gold diggers, women can't be trusted, women can't handle money, women are too emotional to make sound decisions, etc. These messages are clear. There is nothing gracious, protective or respectful about them. However, while interviewing a batterer at Domestic Violence Court, I asked him to acknowledge his violence to his partner and he responded, "I was taught to never hit a woman. I would never hit a woman!" I realized I too had been given the very same message. Although I had examined many negative messages given to me about how to treat women, I had not reckoned with this apparently benign shaper of my beliefs and attitudes about women. As we continued the interview, a number of ancillary behaviors that typically accompany this message came out: Protect the honor of my mother and sister, give up my seat on a bus for a woman, don't use vulgar language in front of ladies, always walk on the street side when accompanying a woman, "lady" is the

respectful title for a woman, etc. These chivalrous messages seem to fly in the face of the previous litany of overtly hostile and degrading messages about women. On the one hand, I was taught never to hit a woman. My role was to protect them. On the other hand, I was taught that women were there to serve me and are, in fact, inferior to me.

That evening I was teaching a class for batterers and discussing men's justification for their violence. When I asked men why they hit their partners, one of the answers was, "If she acts like a man, treat her like a man. Sometimes women just want to be hit!" The class went on to give the attributes of "real" women and how they should act. As the discussion continued it became apparent that true women, by men's definitions, are: Supportive, attractive, vivacious, suppliers of sex on demand, caretakers of the home, kids and the emotional lives of their partners, and in general, laborers to advance men's careers. True women do not challenge nor disagree with their partners, do not appear competitive nor act independently of them, do not get angry except on behalf of someone else, do not confront their partners and do not "act irresponsibly" in matters of childcare and finances. To disagree, compete, challenge, get angry, or be independent is to act like a man.

The pieces of the puzzle offered by the men in class completed the picture for me and in that moment the function of paternalism became clear. Chivalry does not remove barriers as it purports to do. Rather, it symbolically signals women's inadequacy, frailty, and dependency on men. Chivalry's sinister function is confirmed by the violence and abuse directed at women when they reject these "helpful" gestures. A woman's failure to accept the gentrified bondage of these gallant gestures is the justification used by men for our violence and abuse. So, of course, I would never hit a "true woman" but if she acts like a man by being capable, willful and independent, then I cannot possibly treat her as if she were a woman. I must punish her to keep her in her "place." In this way chivalry and violence serve as the mainstays of male dominance.

If, then, chivalry serves as a vehicle for creating dependency and is, in fact, the complement to punishment, what exactly is the meaning of holding a door open for a woman? What beliefs about women are required by that gesture? If she is able-bodied and unburdened, I think it is an expression that defines my domain and protectorate just as opening the door to one's home would be. What does it mean for me to give up my seat to an able-bodied woman? I think this act of chivalry calls into question her ability to be in the world on the same footing as I. It infantilizes her while ennobling me. It is a gesture that establishes my authority and my domain. While parading as kindness and gentility, the subtext of the gesture is, "If I open doors to the resources of the world and protect you from its dangers, you'd better be grateful in ways that I define." If women do not appreciate my patronage and protection, I have the institutional right and obligation to make the necessary corrections.

As I write, I have a growing fear that readers may be feeling a sense of loss for genuine civility and fundamental decency. I am not calling for an end to gentility and common kindness: quite the opposite. We all find legitimate pleasure both in giving and receiving authentic gestures of support and assistance. They are, of course, an essential element of wholesome human connection. We understandably take great pleasure in aiding others regardless of their gender. I, quite frankly, take pleasure in acts of chivalry as well. But because I have learned to feel pleasure and pride in chivalrous acts, I must keep a sharp eye on my motivation. When acts of "kindness" serve to highlight and reinforce gender disparity, these gestures are misnamed as gracious or helpful.

The covert partnership between sexism and chivalry can express itself in a number of subtle ways. With campus escort services, men can use the societal threat of men's violence to promote flattering alliances with individual women. If all we do is escort women without challenging each other to end sexual abuse and violence against women, then this "service" is in fact another tool for creating dependency of women on men.

Similarly, is paying for a woman's meal an expression of generosity or an establishment of one's domain? Is changing a flat tire for a woman an expression of human kindness or a means of creating dependency? Is being responsible for family finances an expression of respect or a form of bondage? Are these

chivalrous gestures undertaken in lieu of working for equal pay for equal work or breaking the stereotypes defining women's limited domain?

In a male supremacist society, chivalry's function is paternalistic. It serves as a tool for the subjugation of women rather than a vehicle for their freedom. Perhaps the model of human relationships based on the concept of this "Domestic Institution" is not only inappropriate between whites and people of color; it is inappropriate for any human relationship, especially one between beloveds. If chivalry does not insist on justice, perhaps common decency should.