In the lively and original selection that follows, Paula A. Treckel concludes "that the men and women of the past were, after all, only human." That is an eloquent statement of the entire approach of Portrait of America. All too often students of history, confronted with a vast array of names in their textbooks, view them as people who were devoid of personality or passion. Few of you will continue to believe that after meeting the beautiful and impressionable Lucy Parke Byrd and her unforgettable husband.

Before we meet the Byrds of Virginia, it is necessary to place them in a proper historical context. By the eighteenth century, a farming and artisan society had emerged in the North, where slaves were few and most men were free and could boast of owning at least a fifty-acre farm. The abundance of available land allowed quite ordinary people to acquire property and aspire to fortunes and higher stations in life. Here the Protestant work ethic, which celebrated hard work, thrift, and individual economic enterprise, took hold.

In the South, by contrast, a slave-based, planter-dominated society had emerged. Only a relative few, about 5 percent, of southern white landowners were planters, that is, men who owned twenty slaves or more. Nonetheless, the ownership of slaves was a potent status symbol that made the planter a role model and an ideal that other white men sought to emulate. The eighteenth-century South, Treckel states, created a "hierarchy of race, class, and gender." At the top were the planters, who "wielded great authority over all in their domain—their wives, their servants, and their slaves." As in a play, all of them were required to know their parts. If someone forgot or chose not to remember his or her role, it could result in a chaotic situation that affected the entire production.

That sets the stage for the drama of William and Lucy Byrd. Lucy Parke, her maiden name, certainly looked the part of an English gentlewoman. She was graceful and elegant, the kind of woman an important politician or planter would naturally select for the first dance at a fancy ball in colonial Williamsburg. The problem was that Lucy had spirit and a sense of her own worth; she did not want to repeat the role of her poor mother, who was so dutiful to her philandering husband that she raised his bastard son. According to Treckel, "Lucy was unwilling to yield to her husband's authority, and her desire for true intimacy within their marriage was in direct conflict with her husband's need for power and control."

As you have doubtless guessed, there are fireworks in the following story. William and Lucy use their defenseless slaves to release their anger at each other. There are even marital confrontations over William's library. Like most women of her day, Lucy had only a limited education, and she realized that the books that her husband treasured
might help her gain access to the male-dominated world beyond the Byrd plantation. The story of the Byrds is replete with arguments, jealousies, love-making, and competition for power. As you profit from reading about the Byrd's fascinating, dysfunctional marriage, you will learn a great deal about race, class, and gender in early eighteenth-century America.

GLOSSARY

ALLESTRÉE, RICHARD He wrote Whole Duty of Man and The Ladies Calling. These guidebooks instructed women to be modest, meek, compassionate, affable, and pious. Men were rational creatures who had an obligation to control the emotions of the women under their care. Elite southern men like William Byrd took these roles seriously and were not accustomed to challenges to their authority from independent women like Lucy.

DOWRY Financial settlements, anything from money to cattle, that a woman's family would contribute to a new marriage. In the colonial period, people usually married within their own class, and the business arrangements sometimes meant more than true affection. “William was interested in Lucy’s dowry as well as her beauty.”

PATRIARCHAL FAMILY A family structure in which the man dominated and made all of the important decisions. A firmly rooted concept in eighteenth-century England, it worked less effectively in the colonies, where labor shortages made wives and children a vital element in a family’s survival.

SPOTSWOOD, ALEXANDER The lieutenant governor of the Virginia colony who asked Lucy to dance with him at a Williamsburg ball. William was proud of his wife’s beauty and the attention she received; after all, he thought of his wife as a mere extension of himself.

WESTOVER This was the Byrd’s estate on Virginia’s James River. After spending most of his early years in England, William found his colonial home lonely and isolated compared to the intellectual and social stimuli of Europe.

The month was unusually cold, noted William Byrd II in his diary on 30 July 1710, “indeed the coldest that ever was known in [Virginia].” Could the weather, he wondered, have caused the fever and headaches suffered by his people? Thank God none had died. On that chilly day he also “read a sermon in Dr. Tillotson and then took a little [nap].” In the afternoon Byrd had a “little quarrel” with his wife, Lucy, but “reconciled” their dispute “with a flourish. Then she read a sermon in Dr. Tillotson to me. It is to be observed,” he recorded, “that the flourish was performed on the billiard table.” After eating fish for dinner and reading a little Latin, Byrd and his wife “took a walk about the plantation.” That evening, although he “neglected to say [his] prayers,” he enjoyed “good health, good thoughts, and good humor, thanks be to God.”

Most students of early American history are familiar with William Byrd II, the “great American gentleman,” whose secret, coded diaries reveal the daily life of a member of Virginia’s eighteenth-century planter elite. These journals have given generations of historians insights into the Chesapeake’s changing economy, master-slave relations on early Tidewater plantations, and the development of plantation society and culture in the colonial South.

Soon after William Byrd II posed for this portrait in London, he returned to his Virginia plantation. Thoroughly enamored with the beautiful Lucy Parke, he married her with the promise that she possessed "the empire of my heart." But William was an insecure and controlling husband, and frequent quarrels over power and finances marred this volatile yet sometimes loving relationship. (© Colonial Williamsburg Foundation)

Byrd’s remarkable candor in recording his most personal activities—the most infamous is his account of giving his wife a “flourish” on the billiard table—also provides a glimpse into the private world of a Virginia gentleman. In recent years, biographer Kenneth A. Lockridge used the diaries to psychoanalyze Byrd and trace his self-conscious struggle to construct an independent identity as a man and as an American. Historians Michael Zuckerman and Daniel Blake Smith also studied the diaries to shed light on familial mores in the eighteenth-century South. They argue that Byrd blurred the distinction between his public and domestic worlds and created a community, a web of relationships, in the region he ruled.

In addition to providing insights into individual development and the establishment of community in the Chesapeake, William Byrd’s diaries give the modern reader an interior view of marriage and gender relations among the Virginia gentry during an important transitional period in American history. The journal entries illuminate Byrd’s tempestuous relationship with his first wife, Lucy Parke Byrd, and reveal how at least one gentry couple struggled to reconcile their often conflicting notions of men’s and women’s proper roles in the colony’s emerging plantation economy. The Byrd’s stormy marriage was filled with tensions over power and intimacy, authority and love, reason and passion. The couple’s slaves often found themselves the innocent victims of the Byrd’s battles in the eighteenth-century war between the sexes.

The transformation of the Chesapeake economy from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century prompted modifications in the region’s social structure. Although the concept of the patriarchal family was one that most English colonists brought with them to North America in the seventeenth century, harsh reality prevented them from realizing their ideal in Virginia. Because mortality was high and life expectancy low, family life was extremely fragile there. Men seldom lived long enough to assert their accustomed authority over their wives and children; labor shortages throughout most of the century meant that women often helped their husbands supply their families’ basic needs. Wives who outlived their spouses were, of necessity, granted greater legal rights and responsibilities than their counterparts in northern colonies, where family life was more stable.

By the end of the century, demographic conditions improved, however, and it was possible for men and women to organize their families’ lives in more familiar ways. Because men lived longer, they were able to assume their traditional role as household heads, di-
recting the lives and organizing the labor of their wives and children. As the planter prospered, they began to invest in slave labor. Women whose husbands could afford slaves to work in their tobacco fields were free to devote themselves to bearing and rearing children and to their domestic tasks. A hierarchy based on race, class, and gender emerged in the early eighteenth century, and Virginia's affluent and aspiring planters looked to the mother country for refined models of behavior and family organization.

Yet, even as Chesapeake planters were finally able to replicate the patriarchal family that had long been their ideal, a new paradigm of family life emerged in England with the potential for softening the severity of men's authority and tempering its extremes. This new family model emphasized the complementary nature of women's and men's roles and encouraged affection between husband and wife, parents, and children. Although the man was still the head of the family, the woman, it was asserted, was the heart of the home; women's selfless love had the power to tame men's harsh passions and bring harmony to the domestic sphere.

This new ideal of family was a paradox for Englishwomen, however. They were told their real "freedom" rested in their subjugation to their husbands; their authority came through submission to their husbands' will. Only by completely subordinating themselves to their spouses did women have "power" to control them. The reward for their submission, obedience, and humility was security, protection, and happiness. These ideas about families, marriage, and men's and women's proper behavior provide the background for understanding the clash of will between William and Lucy Byrd in early eighteenth-century Virginia.

William Byrd II was the son of Indian trader, public official, and planter William Byrd and his wife, Mary Horsmanden Filmer Byrd. Born in 1674, he was seven years old when his ambitious father sent him to England to receive a gentleman's education and learn firsthand the ways of the aristocracy. After attending Felsted Grammar School in Essex, he served an apprenticeship in the Netherlands with his father's commercial agents and later entered the Middle Temple to study law. The young William also developed friendships with members of the aristocracy, who elected him to membership in the Royal Society in 1696. Although Byrd spent most of his formative years in England and considered himself an Englishman, his colonial birth marked him as an outsider and both thwarted his efforts to marry into the aristocracy and limited his political potential. Finally, in 1705 he returned to Virginia to claim his sizable inheritance after his father's death.

The Chesapeake Byrd confronted when he returned to Westover, his estate on the James River in Charles City County, was a far cry from the England he had left behind, and he found it difficult to adjust to the isolation of his colonial home. To assuage his loneliness and increase his prospects, he began courting Lucy Parke. The beautiful younger daughter of Colonel Daniel Parke II and his wife, Jane Ludwell Parke, Lucy lived with her mother and her sister, Frances, at Queen's Creek in York County, near Williamsburg. Lucy's mother was the daughter of a prominent Virginia family. Her father was an ambitious, unscrupulous planter who had served in the House of Burgesses and on the governor's council. Parke's violent temper and reputation as a womanizer humiliated his wife and quite likely embarrassed his daughters; he lived openly with his mistress and fathered a son who was reared, at his insistence, by his wife. In 1697 Parke left his wife in charge of his estates and traveled back to England, where he joined the army, became aide-de-camp to the duke of Marlborough, and brought Queen Anne pew of the Allied victory at Blenheim. On 29 March 1705, as reward for his military exploits, Parke was appointed governor of the Leeward Islands.

William Byrd thought a connection with Daniel Parke, one of the few native-born Americans ever appointed governor of a British colony, could further his own political ambitions. To that end,
Virginia’s most eligible bachelor sought permission to court Parke’s daughter, Lucy. “Since my arrival in this country I have had the honour to be acquainted with your daughters,” he wrote his prospective father-in-law, “and was infinitely surpriz’d: to find young ladies with their accomplishments in Virginia. This surprize was soon improv’d into a passion for the youngest for whom I have all the respect and tenderness in the world.” William was interested in Lucy’s dowry as well as her beauty. He discussed his financial status, because marriage was first and foremost an economic proposition in this era, and remarked, “I dont question but my fortune may be sufficient to make her happy, especially after it has been assisted by your bounty.” Impressed, Parke agreed to the match and promised £1,000 as a marriage settlement.

William used the refined language and sophisticated manner of an English gentleman to woo Lucy. Recycling words he had employed before in his failed courtship of an Irish heiress and aping the literary conceits of the learned men he admired, he addressed Lucy as his “Fidelia” and styled himself “Veramour.” Was she faithful to him? Was his love for her true? Or was William simply giving lip service to the new notion that affection should exist between husband and wife? “May angels guard my dearest Fidelia and deliver her safe to my arms at our next meeting,” he wrote, “and sure they wont refuse their protection to a creature so pure and charming, that it would be easy for them to mistake her for one of themselves.” “Fidelia,” he swore, “possessed[ed] the empire of my heart,” and he longed to be hers forever.

What did nineteen-year-old Lucy Parke think of these effusive letters from her thirty-two-year-old suitor? Surely she was flattered, perhaps even awed, by the attentions of this mature, wealthy man, but did she respond in kind? Was she seduced by his attentiveness and urbane language or confused by his use of classical imagery and his flights of romantic allegory? Did she believe his profession that she had conquered the empire of his heart? Certainly Lucy’s upbringing and education were provincial, far removed from the customs of the sophisticated English aristocrats whom William emulated. But her father’s exploits and the Parke family’s public humiliation may well have made her wise beyond her years, more knowledgeable than most young women her age of the ways of men and the world.

William Byrd had much to offer his “Fidelia.” Undeniably the home he could provide was more stable and financially secure than the one in which she was reared. Was she seeking a strong, assertive, older man to care for her as her father had not? A
gentleman of property and standing, respected and esteemed by his peers? A man ruled by cool reason rather than the hot passions and violence that governed her father's behavior? A man she could trust to be discreet in his indiscretions? Undoubtedly Lucy considered all of these things when she accepted William's proposal of marriage.

Did Lucy Parke love William Byrd, this man who vowed his eternal love for her? Did she believe that theirs would be a union bound by love, intimacy, and mutual esteem, a far cry from that of her parents? Although mutual affection became more important in mate selection as the century progressed, many elite couples in England and the colonies continued to base their marriages primarily on economic considerations. "I know it is the desire of all young people to be married," Daniel Parke dryly commented to his daughter, "and though very few are as happy after marriage as before, yet every one is willing to make the experiment at their own expense." Certainly Lucy and her sister knew that the choice of a husband was the most important decision in their lives; their father counseled them to "Consider who you marry is the greatest concern to you in the world."

On 4 May 1706, at the Parkes' Queen's Creek plantation, William Byrd wed Lucy Parke on the same day Frances Parke married John Custis IV. The Byrds' marriage, which lasted a decade, was a volatile, yet loving, union. The couple's quarrels and passionate reconciliations are recounted in the first extant volume of William's diary, which begins in 1709, three years after they wed and nearly two years after their daughter Evelyn's birth. The Byrds' marital difficulties were the consequence of their differing views of men's and women's proper roles. Their conflicts were also exaggerated by William's insecurities and exacerbated by the difference in their ages. A mature man, set in his ways, he envisioned himself as the patriarch of Westover, benevolently ruling over his lands and his household of family members, servants, and slaves. Clearly he thought he could mold his young wife—her thoughts, her actions, her appearance—to his liking. But Lucy had other ideas. As William struggled self-consciously to construct his identity as an English planter-patriarch, Lucy resisted his authoritarian, arbitrary ways. She demanded greater closeness and affection in their marriage and found it difficult to submit to his will. Her desire for intimacy threatened his need for authority and control. Could he surrender the "empire of [his] heart" to her and still be master of all in his domain? Could he share his deepest thoughts and fears with her, yet demand her submission to his will? In other words, the Byrds' marital difficulties centered on the age-old conundrum: Does loving someone place you in his or her power, or give you power over him or her? It is also possible that the Byrds' battle of wills and their attempts to resolve their problems reflected some of the fundamental conflicts inherent in the new model of English family life so eagerly embraced by the gentry in the eighteenth-century Chesapeake.

Lucy Parke Byrd's attitudes toward her role as a woman, a wife, and a plantation mistress, and her ideas about marriage as revealed in her husband's diary, also illuminate white women's role in the emerging plantation culture of the region. A charming, passionate woman who appears to have cared deeply for her husband, Lucy expressed her feelings openly; her laughter and sparkling personality enlivened and enriched William's life. Lucy's laughter, however, could quickly change to tears of sorrow. Her frustration with her husband, a consequence of her desire for greater intimacy and an unwillingness to submit to his will, sometimes resulted in expressions of rage. Sadly, she vented her anger not only on him but also on those doubly marked by their race and gender—the female slaves who served her family.

Was Lucy emotionally unstable, as many historians have concluded? Was she a "willful woman" of "Bad Disposition" or merely "fiery and free spirited"? Was she "spoiled and temperamental," or a loving, affectionate woman who simply refused to yield to her
husband’s authority, who balked at his despotic administration of their household and challenged his decisions? Or was her passionate expression of her feelings simply a reflection of the belief that women were naturally more emotional than men—a view held by most in the early eighteenth century? 

The daughter of a tyrannical man who humiliated his obedient, compliant wife, Lucy often refused to emulate her mother and passively acquiesce to her demanding husband. Instead, she fought back. In doing so, she both embraced and violated notions of womanhood espoused by English family reformers and admired by William; although her actions were often ruled by her heart, not her head, Lucy refused to submit to her husband as women were instructed to do. What did William make of his passionate young wife who challenged his decisions, disagreed with his pronouncements, and refused to behave in the manner of a genteel Englishwoman? It must not have taken him long to see that his hope of creating a domestic patriarchy at Westover would never be realized.

To William, Lucy’s emotional nature was emblematic of feminine weakness. His belief that men were naturally superior to women was typical of his day. . . . Men were rational beings, ruled by reason; women were governed by their emotions. “Female passions,” wrote William Byrd, “require to be managed sometimes, to confine them within bounds and keep them, like a high-mettled horse, from running away with their owner.” Like most Enlightenment thinkers, he believed it was men’s responsibility to rein in women’s passions: The head must always rule the heart. Extremes in behavior must always be avoided; moderation, balance, and restraint were the edicts that governed Byrd’s life. These were values expressed in John Tillotson’s Sermons Preach’d Upon Several Occasions and Richard Allestree’s Whole Duty of Man, works in the library at Westover.

Just as Byrd derived his model of gentlemanly behavior from these prescriptive works, he also probably read such guides as The Ladies Calling, also by Allestree, to provide insight into the behavior of women and their appropriate roles. The “final authority on the nature and duties of women” for more than a century, The Ladies Calling extolled the distinctly “feminine” virtues of modesty, meekness, compassion, affability, and piety.

“Modesty,” Allestree proclaimed, “. . . is the most indispensable requisite of a woman; a thing so essential and natural to the Sex, that every the least declination from it, is a proporitional receding from Womanhood.” Meekness, too, was required because God had placed women in a position inferior to men. Women, however, were more compassionate than men, for, it was asserted, they had more tender natures. Affability was always expected of them because they were spared, by virtue of their sex, the cares and worries assumed by men.

A wife’s chief responsibility was obedience to her husband—by virtue of her marriage vows and because it was ordained by God. She must protect her husband’s reputation as her own and guard against jealousy. If her husband proved unfaithful, she should, according to Allestree, view this infidelity as a trial by God for some sin she might have committed. She must submit to it and not reproach her husband for his actions. “[T]he breaches of Wedlock will never be cemented by Storms and loud Outcries,” Allestree warned. “Many men have bin made worse, but scarce any better by it: for guilt covets nothing more then an opportunity of recriminating; and where the Husband can accuse the Wife’s bitterness, he thinks he needs no other apology for his own Lust.”

Certainly Lucy’s mother, silently submitting to her husband’s flagrant infidelity, was the model of this philosophy. When Daniel Parke returned from England in 1692 with his mistress—he introduced her to the countryside as his “Cousin Brown”—Jane Parke welcomed her into their home. When “Cousin Brown” gave birth to a son shortly after her arrival in the colony, Jane quietly assumed responsibility for raising her husband’s illegitimate child.
christened Julius Caesar Parke. What did Lucy and her sister think of their father’s blatant adultery? Did they witness any “Storms and loud Out-cries” in the privacy of their home or share their mother’s bitterness at their father’s behavior? Perhaps Lucy learned firsthand the value of Allestree’s advice. Turning a blind eye to a husband’s unfaithfulness was a way of dulling the pain of his betrayal.

Allestree also urged his female reader to be a good “huswife,” skilled in all domestic tasks. As manager of her husband’s household, she must “not . . . wast and embezle [his] Estate, but . . . confine her Ex- pences within such limits as that can easily admit.” She must be expert in “the well-guiding of the House” and must demand truth, fidelity, diligence, and industry of her servants. While overseeing the household, however, she must always remember that her authority was subordinate to her husband’s.

Lucy Paxke was probably familiar with this genteel idea of a gentlewoman’s proper role. Her sphere, she had been taught, was the household, and she was responsible for its management. Lucy and her sister, Frances, were trained in needlework and cookery and had been taught all manner of housewifely accomplishments by their mother. It was considered unnecessary for them to receive a formal education; women who desired the same education as men were seen as defying their femininity. The Paxke sisters most likely received only the most rudimentary schooling in reading, writing, and mathematics, although Jane Paxke thought it important that her daughters receive tutoring in French and dancing to render them agreeable to prospective mates. Having watched her mother struggle to administer her father’s estates and make them profitable, Lucy was probably content to leave such matters to her husband and turn all of her attention to her domestic tasks.

William, on the other hand, was loathe to delegate management of their household to his wife. Jealous of his authority, he did not even trust Lucy to “guide the house,” and this interference was a cause of many quarrels in their marriage. Many of the couple’s most violent arguments erupted not when she challenged his authority in his sphere but when he trespassed into what she clearly deemed her arena—the day-to-day operation of their home. All who dwelled on William’s plantations, he believed, were his to command; all were members of his “family”—his wife, his children, his servants, his slaves . . . Viewing all the residents of his plantations as his subordinates, Byrd blurred the distinctions among them—distinctions based on race, gender, and class. Indeed, within the universe of his household he rarely conferred higher rank or priority of place on his wife and children. In his diaries he referred to Lucy as “my wife” and his children as “my son” and “my daughter.” He seldom identified them by their given names, as he often did his house slaves. The words he used in reference to them underscored their relationship to him; William’s choice of terms betrayed his belief that all at Westover revolved around him. In viewing his wife as his possession, subordinate to him, he jeopardized her position within their household.

Although in theory the planter-patriarch reigned supreme over his entire plantation, most Chesapeake planters delegated the day-to-day operation of the “great house” and supervision of household servants or slaves to their wives. William Byrd, however, was clearly reluctant to do so. Resentful of any encroachment on what he deemed his purview, he repeatedly criticized Lucy “for not minding her business,” and his diary is a veritable litany of complaints. He reproached her for serving “new beef” before the old, “contrary to good management”; she improperly mended his shoes; he complained that she did not prepare his dish of stewed cherries correctly; he found fault with the cleanliness of their daughter’s nursery; she did not govern her servants well.

William was especially angry when Lucy spent his money unwisely. Women’s emergence as conspicuous consumers of their husbands’ wealth was, ironically, a consequence of the new conception of the
gentee! English family. Charged with making houses into homes, women embellished the domestic sphere in which they were increasingly confined. In doing so they helped fuel the commercial revolution that transformed England into a nation of shopkeepers. Women also became avid consumers of fashion as a means of self-expression and a way of demonstrating their husbands' ability to pay. William Byrd, however, clearly shared Aisestree's belief that a good wife should live within her husband's means, and a major quarrel ensued when William received "an invoice of things sent [for from England] by my wife which are enough to make a man mad." When the ship's captain delivered goods ordered by Lucy "to an extravagant value," William was "out of humor very much." In the end, he "made an invoice of the things my wife could spare to be sold." Lucy, understandably, "was in tears about her cargo," but a year later the argument was renewed. "[My] wife and I had a terrible quarrel about the things she had come in but at length she submitted because she was in the wrong," he noted. "For my part I kept my temper very well."

Rear in a household where money was tight and deprived of fine things during her childhood, Lucy probably hoped her wealthy husband would indulge her taste for silks and satins. Did she resent William's management of their finances? Were her self-indulgent shopping sprees a form of rebellion against his tightfistedness? Money was another emblem of a husband's power, and William controlled the purse strings at Westover. Lucy, on the other hand, had witnessed her mother's management of the family's accounts and knew such oversight was something women could do. Although Lucy's extravagance challenged her husband's authority, in the end she submitted to his will.

In criticizing Lucy for her spendthrift ways and domestic failings, William demonstrated his rule not only over the plantation as a whole, but over her as well. His standards, and only his, prevailed at Westover. One major source of contention was the couple's control of the labor and behavior of their chattels. Lucy had been well instructed by her parents in the treatment of her slaves. Daniel Parke taught his daughters to "Be Calm and Obliging to all the servants, and when you speak do it mildly Even to the poorest slave." He also warned them that "if any of the Servants commit small faults yt are of no consequence, doe you hide them. If you understand of any great faults they commit, acquaint yr mother, but doe not aggravate the fault." When William reproved Lucy in front of their servants and slaves, however, he undermined her authority over them and made it more difficult for her to control them. Lucy's problems managing her house slaves illustrate the damaging effect of her husband's relentless criticism.

Lucy could be a cruel mistress. William disapprovingly recorded in 1710 that the "caused little Jenny to be burned with a hot iron." Later he reported a more disturbing incident. "In the evening my wife and little Jenny had a great quarrel in which my wife got the worst but at last by the help of the family Jenny was overcome and soundly whipped." Clearly Jenny refused to obey her mistress and fought back. That Lucy "got the worst" of their battle and had to be rescued by other slaves did not bode well for her. Although Jenny was overcome and soundly whipped."

Again and again Jenny was the object of Lucy's wrath. Why? It was unusual for Lucy, or William for that matter, personally to correct the servants; ordinarily the Byrds ordered their punishment by others. Did Lucy believe that Jenny was her husband's mistress? Although William gives no evidence that she
was, we cannot know what Lucy suspected. Was a clash of personalities between Jenny and Lucy perhaps to blame for their friction? Did Jenny’s saucy behavior provoke her mistress’s persecution? Or did Lucy project her rage against her husband onto her slave, a convenient, ever-present scapegoat? Female slaves, doubly marked by their race and gender as inferiors in a world ruled by white men, were especially vulnerable to abuse. In William’s chilling account of their battle, Lucy wanted to strike him but directed her anger against herself instead. Because of this graphic expression of frustration, William called her “mad”—a word describing someone either angry (which Lucy clearly was) or mentally unbalanced. Eventually Lucy regained her composure and, as William says, “was passive again,” a woman’s proper state, in his view.

William understood that Lucy’s ill-treatment of their slaves was her way of flouting his authority and an attempt to demonstrate her own. “My wife and I had a terrible quarrel about whipping Eugene while Mr. [Robert] Mumford was there,” he recalled. “... I have a mind to show her authority before company but I would not suffer it, which she took very ill.” Not only did Lucy trespass on her husband’s prerogative by publicly punishing his personal slave, but she also abused those in her command in a futile attempt to win recognition of her authority over them. She and her slaves knew that William was the ultimate ruler of the household, and her mistreatment of them further proved her powerlessness.

Lucy also had her favorites among the Byrd family slaves. Anaka, her maid, probably came to Westover with Lucy when she married. Fond of drink, Anaka often stole from her master’s supply. Lucy was more forgiving than her husband, who related he was “out of humor with my wife for trusting Anaka with rum to steal when she was so given to drinking.” He whipped the slave for stealing his ale but later “forgave Anaka, on my wife’s and sister’s persuasion.”

Both William and his wife vented their anger with each other on their defenseless slaves. William recorded that “my wife caused Prue to be whipped volently notwithstanding I desired not, which provoked me to have Anaka whipped likewise who had deserved it much more, on which my wife flew into such a passion that she hoped she would be revenged of me.” William saw Anaka as Lucy’s surrogate; whipping her was his way of punishing Lucy for her disobedience. He was so angered by his wife that even when she “came to ask my pardon and I forgave her in my heart,” he “resent[ed], that she might be the more sorry for her folly.”

Only rarely did Lucy invade William’s sphere at Westover, but when she did, she felt his wrath. In the rambling house he inherited from his father, the intensely private man found sanctuary in the library, filled with books he imported from England and the Continent. There he retreated each morning to read works in French, Dutch, Hebrew, Latin, and Greek, settle accounts, and write in his diary. Behind his library’s locked doors, William was transported from the cultural wilderness, the “silent country” of the Chesapeake, to other, far richer worlds. There he explored ancient Greece and Rome and toured the great cultures of Europe, Asia, and Africa. His exceptional library included books on travel, medicine, agriculture, and the arts, as well as classical works on law and politics. A connoisseur of books, William Byrd over the course of his lifetime amassed the largest and finest private library in colonial America.

In this private space Lucy was an unwelcome intruder. William often refused to let her borrow his books and was angry when she moved his personal papers. In locking Lucy out of his library, William shut her out of an important part of his life and revealed his fears of the emotional intimacy of marriage.

Lucy was persistent. Again and again she reached out to her husband. William, however, insisted on limiting and controlling his wife’s access to the world of ideas that so delighted him. Although he owned a copy of Mary Astell’s *Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, in which the author championed women’s intellect, it is doubtful that William supported
Westover, the plantation on the banks of the James River, proved too isolated for William after he had experienced the cultural opportunities of England. Lucy also often felt lonely and unloved there. The luckless slaves felt the couple's wrath. William rebuilt the frame structure that his father constructed into the Georgian brick mansion seen in the above photograph and that still stands today. (Virginia Historical Society)

Astell's radical goal of equal education for women. More likely he agreed with Astell's argument that women's education made them better wives and mothers. To that end, he would decide what it was his young wife should know; he would mold her mind so that she would be his ideal companion. William quite likely applauded Richard Steele when the latter admonished his female readers to "learn in silence of your Husbands and spiritual Guides, read good Books, pray often, and speak little." Even as he controlled Lucy's access to the written word, William mocked his wife's lack of education. He laughed at her when she chastised him for speaking Latin with a visiting minister and excluded her from their conversation. It was bad manners, she cried. But it was more than that. He was just as furious when he caught her on the stairs listening to his conversations.

William understood knowledge was a source of his superiority and would not, could not, share its
riches, or his innermost thoughts, with his wife who loved him. What did he fear? That she would discover he was not the man she thought him to be?

William Byrd's obsessive need to control his wife even extended to Lucy's appearance. As the couple prepared to travel to Williamsburg for the lieutenant governor's ball, William took issue with her decision to pluck her eyebrows. Proud of Lucy's beauty and aware of the impression she made on Virginia's powerful elite, he wanted her appearance to be exactly right. Her beauty and refined behavior were emblems of his position in the colony; she was an extension of him. "My wife and I quarreled about her pulling her brows. She threatened she would not go to Williamsburg if she might not pull them; I refused, however, and got the better of her," he smugly noted, "and maintained my authority."

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The tone of William's diaries is one of cool detachment, curiously devoid of emotion. His entries on his infant son's death, his daughter's near-fatal illness, and Lucy's miscarriages seem almost cruelly indifferent to the modern reader. It may well be, however, that William's journal was his way of taming his turbulent feelings; through writing he acquired the emotional detachment he longed for and struggled to achieve.

Like many men of his time, William was unfaithful to his wife. He occasionally "committed uncleanness" while in Williamsburg and recorded his transgressions with servants or prostitutes in his diary. He sometimes stole a kiss from a "Negro girl" or "made . . . good sport" with an Indian, but on most occasions he expressed remorse for his actions. Although Lucy suspected his infidelity, it is likely that she followed Allestree's advice and her mother's example and did not directly reproach her husband for his faithlessness. Growing up with her father's adultery
and reared with her illegitimate brother, Lucy probably expected such behavior from men. Perhaps she had observed that in the calculus of marriage “a philandering husband abroad means greater wifely power at home.”

When William flirted with a neighbor’s wife in Lucy’s presence, however, she was justifiably upset. “I played at [r-m] with Mrs. [Mary] Chiswell and kissed her on the bed till she was angry and my wife also was uneasy about it, and cried as soon as the company was gone,” William recalled. Later, he “neglected to say my prayers, which I should not have done, because I ought to beg pardon for the lust I had for another man’s wife.” What made this episode so disturbing to Lucy was its public nature; her husband humiliated her before their friends. Although William regretted his actions, it was not because he had embarrassed his wife. Rather, he had stepped over the line of acceptable behavior for a gentleman. His public flirtation challenged Charles Chiswell’s authority over his wife and jeopardized a friendship.

When William rebuffed Lucy’s attempts at marital intimacy and asserted his authority over her, she turned to her sister, Frances, and a network of other women for support. The separation of men’s and women’s worlds, a consequence of their changing economic and social roles, led to the emotional estrangement of the sexes in the eighteenth-century Chesapeake, even as spousal affection was idealized. Women’s domestic duties bound them to their homes, while men’s responsibilities often took them into the larger world. Relatively isolated on plantations, mothers and daughters enjoyed close relationships, and sisters were often best friends. After her mother’s death in 1708, Lucy confided in her sister and enjoyed the company of her female neighbors. The opportunity to visit their circle of friends was a much-anticipated break from plantation routine for southern women. Women’s friendships were also reinforced by their domesticity and strengthened by the shared experiences of pregnancy and childbirth. Female friends and neighbors assisted Lucy during her confinements and comforted her when she suffered miscarriages.

In an age when a woman’s worth was measured by her ability to bear and rear children, Lucy’s difficult pregnancies were a source of worry and self-doubt. When she shared her fears with her husband, however, he did not know how to console her. “[M]y wife . . . was melancholy for her misfortunes and wished herself a freak,” he recalled, “for which I rebuked her.” But a rebuke was not what Lucy sought from her husband; William was emotionally incapable of providing her with the loving reassurance that she required. Consequently, Lucy turned to those with whom she shared the common bond of gender to meet her emotional needs.

Lucy’s closest friend was Mary Jeffreys Dunn, the wife of a local minister. When Dunn’s husband beat her and threatened to kill her, William offered her refuge at Westover. During her year-long residence there she became Lucy’s confidante and constant companion. Although initially William welcomed her into his family, he soon regretted his hospitality. He came to view Dunn as a “Devil” whose purpose was to “infect” his wife with her ill humor. William feared that “if [she] tarry with us much longer my wife and I, who us’d to be envy’d for a happy couple, shall very probably come to extremities . . . . She encouraged Lucy’s defiance and “bred very unpleasant controversys betwixt me & my wife.” In addition to usurping his authority over his wife, Dunn appropriated William’s command of his servants and slaves. “I will be master of my family,” he thundered, “in spight of all the weak politiques practic’d to abuse my good nature.”

Was Mary Dunn so evil, or did William exaggerate the threat she posed to his marriage? Always uncomfortable with his emotions and insecure in his command, he was jealous of this rival for his wife’s affection. Lucy no longer confided in him or joined
him in long, private walks around the plantation. Instead, she entrusted Dunn with her confidences and strolled with her. He blamed Dunn for his wife’s defection and wanted Lucy to choose—him or Dunn. William voyaged to England at the height of their marital difficulties, either to jolt his wife into realizing their marriage was at risk or to flee a problem he was emotionally unable to resolve. Although Dunn’s support gave Lucy comfort and the strength to defy her authoritarian husband, Lucy’s love of William won out over their friendship, and the Byrds reconciled. But the couple’s entanglement with Mary Dunn shows just how complex and competitive marital vows and the bonds of female friendship could be in the eighteenth-century South.

The marriage of Lucy Parke Byrd and William Byrd II survived their many battles and passionate reconciliations, and William anticipated a long and happy life with his engaging wife. Colonial matters required that he travel to England in 1715, but he urged his wife to join him when he realized his return to Westover would be delayed. Following the birth of their daughter Wilhelmina, Lucy set sail for England. Their loving reunion was tragically cut short by Lucy’s sudden death from smallpox in November 1716. William was overwhelmed with grief and blamed himself for her death. “I little expected that I should be forced to tell you the very melancholy news of my dear Lucy’s death,” he wrote his brother-in-law, John Custis. “... Gracious God what pains did she take to make a voyage hither to seek a grave.” Her death was punishment, he thought, for his pride in her beauty and accomplishments. “No stranger ever met with more respect in a strange country than she had done here, from many persons of distinction, who all pronounced her an honor to Virginia.”

Lucy’s death stunned William. He had never permitted himself to acknowledge how much he loved and depended on his infuriating, passionate, spirited wife. Just as her reception in England was a reflection on him, he saw her death as punishment for his faults—his pride in her, his vanity. She was an extension of him in death as in life. Her death was a form of abandonment, and in mourning her, he grieved for a lost part of himself.

Although William eventually remarried, his second wife, Maria Taylor Byrd, was far more conventional than his first. An English heiress, she understood the rules that governed English society and the relationship between husbands and wives and was comfortable with them. Unlike Lucy, she did not trespass on William’s prerogative, challenge his authority, or defy his will. An excellent housewife, a successful mother, Maria was the epitome of the genteel, submissive English lady William had always wanted Lucy to emulate. Her manners were impeccable: she could be relied upon not to listen in on his private conversations or borrow books from his library. But Maria was not a woman he gave a “flourish” to on the billiard table or “rogered” in the library. She lacked the passion and emotion of Lucy, the light and love of William’s life. Instead, the placid Maria was the model mistress to complement William’s ideal gentleman-planter. She brought calm, order, and discipline to his household and his life.

One has to wonder if William Byrd, having finally gotten what he wanted—a docile, compliant, obedient wife to suit his cultivated estates—was happy. Or did he miss free-spirited, defiant, exciting Lucy who never gave up her efforts to defy his authority and achieve true intimacy with him? In their ongoing battle of wills, was she finally the victor? Did she, in the end, truly conquer the “empire of [his] heart”?

Lucy Parke Byrd’s marriage to William Byrd II occurred during a transitional moment in the history of Virginia. As the Chesapeake was transformed into a plantation-based economy dependent on slave labor, women’s and men’s roles began to change. Aspiring gentlemen-planter such as Byrd tried to
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create a hierarchy of race, class, and gender in the region. These self-styled gentlemen-planters wielded great authority over all in their domain—their wives, their children, their servants, and their slaves. During the earliest years, however, their domestic patriarchies were sometimes imperfectly wrought, and the planters' power and authority was challenged by the women with whom they shared their lives.

The plantation mistress, modeled after the English gentlewoman, had a particular role to play within the region. Neither master nor slave, she was dependent on both for her status. Her authority was derived from the men of her household yet required her willingness to submit to their will. Some planters' wives, such as Lucy Parke Byrd, uneasily embraced the new ideal of conformable womanhood emerging in the Chesapeake and the corresponding separation of spheres, and alienation of affections, that it engendered. Lucy was unwilling to yield to her husband's authority, and her desire for true intimacy within their marriage was in direct conflict with her husband's need for power and control. These issues were central to the couple's marital difficulties and their battle for the empire of William Byrd's heart.

Although played out in the setting of the eighteenth-century Chesapeake, the drama of the Byrds' marriage—their struggle to reconcile their emotional needs with their conflicting ideals of family life—is curiously contemporary. It provides us with a poignant reminder that the men and women of the past were, after all, only human.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Were you surprised to read about such personal revelations, sometimes humorous and at times a bit bawdy, in the diary of William Byrd? Like many couples, William and Lucy quarreled, reconciled, made love, and took long walks. Even though they lived almost two hundred years ago, did they have some of the same problems and joys that we see in contemporary marriages?

2. Both Lucy and William make for tempting psychological studies. In what ways did Lucy's philandering father and her humiliated mother influence Lucy and her expectations of marital bliss? Why was William so protective of his library and intent on controlling every aspect of his wife's life, even her appearance? Finally, why couldn't William give his young wife the intimacy she so desired?

3. What were the roles and attitudes that governed gender relationships among the plantation elite? How did William and Lucy fit that model, and in what ways did they break the mold? Although it was tumultuous, do you think that they had a good marriage? Do you think that William was happier with his more proper (and boring) second wife?

4. What does Treckel mean when she states that the "couple's slaves often found themselves the innocent victims of the Byrds' battles in the eighteenth-century war between the sexes"? Why did William's criticism of his wife, with the slaves present, undermine Lucy's authority on this Virginia plantation? Does this help us understand Lucy's occasional violent bouts with the helpless labor force?

5. How were sexual relationships between a husband and wife symbolic of the greater roles that they were to play within Virginia's plantation society? Do you agree with Treckel that "William was a selfish lover" who had "anxieties about authority" and a sense of inadequacy about his own masculinity?

6. Men and women lived in separate worlds in the eighteenth-century Chesapeake, and this often compromised intimacy between husbands and wives. Who did Lucy turn to for friendship, and how did William react? Does Treckel's essay help you understand why women forged such close bonds with each other, a topic that will be explored further, in selection 12?