

**On Eros Crossing the Color-Line in  
William Faulkner and Margaret Mitchell**

Peter Schmidt

Swarthmore College

Carolyn Porter's recent essay comparing Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* and Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*, while excellent, contains some curious contradictions at its core. Basically Porter argues that despite many elements in *Gone With the Wind* that critique romanticized views of the ante- and post-bellum U.S. South, both Rhett Butler and Scarlett O'Hara eventually decide to believe in all the myths. "[I]n the end," Porter says, Mitchell "would have us believe that what Scarlett and Rhett have in common is no longer their critical vision but their renewed devotion to the South, reborn in Rhett's fantasies about Charleston and Scarlett's fantasies about Tara" (708). Porter concludes by stressing an absolute difference between Faulkner's vision and Mitchell's: "Whereas Mitchell's popularity reflects how she turned her story of the South into an American romance, Faulkner's novel turned the American success story of Sutpen into a racial tragedy that few foresaw in 1936 as a national dilemma" (710).

Such a reading sharply contrasting *Gone With the Wind* with *Absalom* is in many ways right—as is Porter's more obvious but correct analysis of how the movie version of Mitchell's novel pushes the story even further toward the sentimental end of the tonal spectrum. Yet many questions remain unanswered: how does Mitchell's characterization of her two protagonists survive or pull off

the about-face from critical vision to protective fantasy that Porter claims occurs? How are Scarlett's and Rhett's rebellions registered in the text itself, particularly the narrative voice as well as the dialogue? Does such a critical register marking complexity and irony entirely disappear by the novel's end, as Porter implies that it does?

Here is a different set of possible hypotheses or generative questions. Could it be that at the level of eros—both how the text represents Scarlett's and Rhett's sexual attraction to each other, *and* how it depicts the causes of Scarlett's resistance to Rhett—Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* eroticizes the color-line? If so, what figures of speech are particularly involved in causing such trouble, and how should they be understood?

To put it in a slightly different way, consider the tensions at the heart of the novel. One tension at the novel's core is obvious: the rift between its romanticism and respect for tradition versus Rhett's and Scarlett's creative-destructive capitalist drive to succeed at any cost. But a second tension proves fundamentally even more dangerous: using Scarlett's point of view, Mitchell explores the eros of miscegenation—and in a way brilliantly different from Faulkner. (Such an erotic fascination with the Other is also key to Mitchell's first attempt at fiction, the colonial romance *Lost Laysen* [1916], to be discussed in a moment.) This racialized eros in *Gone With the Wind*'s critique of the romantic South has received little attention, though the tropes are there in the novel for us to decode. Admittedly such features in the text were probably willfully ignored or repressed by most of Mitchell's millions of white readers—including David O. Selznick, the film's producer, its director Victor Fleming, and the MGM production's many writers—for there's no hint of an eroticized color-line in the

movie, unlike the book.<sup>1</sup> But, as James Baldwin might quip, since when are repression and denial *not* constituent components in the construction of whiteness? Yet what are such elements even doing in *Gone With the Wind* in the first place, given Scarlett's, Rhett's, and Mitchell's explicitly expressed disgust with race mixing, not to mention changing economic and social roles for blacks?

Here, then, is my approach: let us look more closely at how Rhett's sexuality is described when the narrator gives us access to Scarlett's erotic imagination. Such moments do not counter the book's inherent racism, but they certainly complicate it. Unlike Faulkner, Mitchell subscribed to the view that miscegenation was one of many threats introduced by the chaos of war, emancipation, and particularly Reconstruction. She pointedly has Rhett go unjustly but proudly to jail for killing a "nigger" who was "uppity" to a white lady (623). *Gone With the Wind* not only revised and synthesized key themes from earlier white New South plantation fiction, but it was the most influential instance in twentieth-century U.S. popular culture of how white southerners could be transformed into national, not regional, heroes. Scarlett O'Hara's and Rhett Butler's survival skills during war and poverty—and their self-conscious defenses of the virtues of whiteness—became models for many readers in 1936 and thereafter as they struggled to survive the Depression and then World War II; in the process *Gone With the Wind* became the most popular novel ever published in the United States. If Mitchell's epic has been rightly studied as a

---

<sup>1</sup> For a full list of those involved in the film of *Gone With the Wind*, see the Internet Movie Database:  
[http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0031381/fullcredits?ref=tt\\_ov\\_st\\_sm#cast](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0031381/fullcredits?ref=tt_ov_st_sm#cast)

key example of the “invented South” in the U.S. popular imagination,<sup>2</sup> we should also not neglect powerful elements throughout the novel that cause difficulty for such romantic myth-making. Mitchell’s masterpiece should definitely *not* be read just as the anti-*Absalom*, even though the gods of literary history, who have a wry sense of humor, saw fit that *Gone With the Wind* and *Absalom Absalom!* were published in the same year. In its own way Mitchell’s epic also subverted racial, class, and gender hierarchies central to the myth of the New South.

Unlike Faulkner, who staged his subversions of romanticism at both the micro-levels of metaphor and syntax and the macro-level of plot, Mitchell’s revisionism functions most strongly at the micro-level, via the figures of speech that her characters and narrator use. As Porter emphasizes, at the level of characterization and plot *Gone With the Wind* is unevenly innovative. It’s full of racist clichés borrowed from the white New South’s rewriting of its own history, particularly when it came to demonizing black identity and Reconstruction and making heroic the postwar deeds of the Ku Klux Klan. (At this level, the influence of figures like Thomas Dixon and D. W. Griffith on Mitchell’s world-view is quite commanding; she works firmly within most of their narrative and ideological assumptions rather than going against the grain.) Mitchell’s characterization of Scarlett, however, does indeed break or bend many conventions in romance fiction, not just with the novel’s first sentence—“Scarlett O’Hara was not beautiful” (3) — but also via Scarlett’s repeated challenges to conventions of femininity. She’s a ruthless entrepreneur embodying the creative-

---

<sup>2</sup> For astute broader assessments of the “invented South” in American memory, see Kreyling, McPherson, Duck, Railton, Greeson, Romine, and Ring.

destructive energies of capitalism itself, willing to do whatever it takes—including hiring convict labor—to survive and prosper. Even Scarlett's retroactive nostalgia for the old ways functions well within her capitalist paradigm—it is a form of legitimation giving venerable cultural status to her new money (and, in the process, also honoring her father's original pioneering spirit).

One prominent way in which Mitchell follows rather than bucks sentimental romance novel conventions is by making her heroine pay a price for success in the public sphere, so that her love life becomes full of confusion, wrong choices, and pain.<sup>3</sup> Yet it is precisely here, in her representation of Scarlett's sexuality, that Mitchell was also most dangerously radical. Scarlett is romantically attracted to her sister's husband, Ashley Wilkes, a person whom she thinks represents all the beautiful refinement of the lost Old South, yet she is sexually aroused, in a way she often finds unsettling and disgusting, by Rhett Butler's passionate modernity and unpredictability. But not only those qualities in Rhett attract and repel Scarlett: Rhett also looms in her erotic imagination as non-white. Representing the heroine's erotic drive in such a way is heretical to white southern orthodoxies and its plantation fiction tradition. Dixon and Griffith, for instance, made an arch-villain out of Thaddeus Stevens, the abolitionist Pennsylvania Radical Republican representative who played a major role in shaping federal Reconstruction policies for the defeated South. In both *The Clansman* and *Birth of a Nation* their Stevens-like character reveals his villainy not just by the Reconstruction policies he promotes but because he secretly keeps

a “mulatta” mistress who secretly inspires his public radicalism. Mitchell’s exploration of eros across the color-line works in quite the opposite way.

Rhett Butler is an unconventional romance hero in many ways, of course, not just in how his sexuality is depicted. In fact, Mitchell’s portrait of Rhett contains many the standard elements associated with the dark-haired villains of sentimental novels, those alluring but dangerous sexual libertines with whom the heroine must spar. But he’s far wittier and more quotable than his rakish rivals in U.S. fiction, such as Major Peter Sanford in Hannah Foster’s *The Coquette* (1797) or the Le Noirs in E. D. E. N. Southworth’s *The Hidden Hand* (1859; 1888), the latter a best-selling nineteenth-century romance about the South. “Marry for convenience and love for pleasure” is Rhett’s motto, shocking even Scarlett (622). Certainly Rhett’s own wealthy Charleston family, which disinherited him, thinks of him as incorrigible. Mitchell’s revolutionary move with Rhett was to merge character traits usually associated with the male villain—including overpowering libido, ambition, pride, lying, and a delight in mocking social and moral proprieties—with the conventional gentleman-hero’s nobility, self-sacrifice, honesty, and desire for a family. It’s true there are some precedents for such a mix in fictional heroes, most notably Darcy in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (though Wickham, not Darcy, ultimately proves to be true possessor of the romance villain’s character flaws). But if one searches for a clear predecessor for Rhett in U.S. fiction he is hard to find—one reason why Mitchell’s vast female readership was so fervently fascinated with the novel’s dangerous hero.

---

<sup>3</sup> For more on this plot pattern for heroines within nineteenth-century sentimental romance fiction, see Baym.

Despite such innovations on Mitchell's part, though, Porter is right to stress that in certain ways her novel's dénouement does indeed contain Rhett's and Scarlett's threat to the South's romantic views of itself. One other commentator, Ben Railton, goes so far as to argue that Rhett's decision late in the novel to rejoin the aristocracy and uphold its values is largely spurred by his disgust at the threat of miscegenation and class conflict after the War. Yet of all the characters in the book it is only *Rhett* whose erotic essence is figured by the narrator via tropes of race-mixing, as Joel Williamson noticed several decades ago. It's by exploring this antinomy in the text more closely that we can discover an additional reason for *Gone With the Wind's* historical importance, not to mention a point where Mitchell's and Faulkner's epics "telling about the South" surprisingly converge.

~~~

Before turning to this sexual conundrum in *Gone With the Wind*, however, a brief consideration of Mitchell's *Lost Laysen* text from 1916 will be productive. As a recovered piece of "Peggy" Mitchell juvenilia, *Lost Laysen* reveals that her first attempt at a romance plot got into trouble because of her inability to control both the narrative voice and the novel's erotic imagination. That textual turbulence precisely prophesies similar issues of control that bedevil the narrative Mitchell published two decades later.

Fans of *Gone With the Wind* long worried that no other manuscripts of Mitchell's would be found, especially after learning that after Mitchell's death in 1949 executors had followed her will's instructions and burned her letters, journals, and other writings (Freer 7). When it was announced in the early 1990s that a story Mitchell had written as a teenager and given to a friend had

survived, interest was feverish. Upon reading this lost romance after it was published in 1996, most admirers of *Gone With the Wind* had to admit that it was, well, juvenile—what we might expect from a fifteen-year-old. *Gone With the Wind* does indeed exist in a whole other dimension in terms of its cultural influence and textual control. But perhaps we should not be so quick to make their worlds entirely separate.

At the heart of Mitchell's first long narrative is not just a tale of unrequited love (as its editor, Debra Freer, emphasizes), but a race-panic plot borrowed straight from Thomas Dixon and D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). Which is no surprise, since Mitchell as a teenager was an ardent admirer of both. In her text, white heroes defend the honor of white womanhood against rape by men of color—in this case, the “fiend out of hell” Juan Mardo (half Spanish and half “Jap”) and his minions (79). But aside from setting her narrative in the South Pacific, not the U.S. South, Mitchell made several changes in the plot central to *The Clansman* and *Birth of a Nation* that in fascinating ways undermine or at least complicate white supremacist ideology. In *Lost Laysen*, unlike in Dixon, the key white protagonist and narrator of much of the tale, Bill Duncan, is lower class and significantly *unstable* in racial terms—even though he vociferously proclaims himself a defender of the white race. Mitchell's first novel should also claim our attention because although it is firmly within the popular genre of colonial romance, it appears to trouble the twin dichotomies—



civilization versus barbarism and the female's "natural" subordination to the male—that colonial romances aspire to affirm (Kaplan; Greeson).<sup>4</sup>

*Lost Laysen* was written in student composition books that include the young author's address on Peachtree Street, Atlanta. It features two men, Bill Duncan and Douglas Steele, who are in love with the same independent aristocratic lady, Courtenay Ross. Steele is high-born and famous, the athletic "son of D. G. Steele, the arms manufacturer" (74), while Duncan is near the bottom of any social hierarchy of whites either at home and abroad; he makes his living as a common sailor and meets and falls in love with Miss Courtenay merely by chance. Because of his low status, Duncan is particularly sensitive to racial divisions and class position. He well understands that his best strategy for gaining stature among whites is by defending the honor of white womanhood. Courtenay, like Scarlett O'Hara, frequently endangers herself by acting too independently and too brazenly: "'She wants excitement'" in the South Pacific, another character comments, then adds grimly, "'believe me, she'll get it'" (71).

Mitchell's plot brings together class and race in a predictable but still telling way: though they are both in love with Miss Courtney, Steele and Duncan collaborate in defending her. Duncan earnestly explains to the heroine that he will risk his life to kill Mardo so that her fiancé Steele won't have to do it

---

<sup>4</sup> Before trying her hand at fiction, Mitchell wrote a short play called *The Traitor* based on a compilation of Dixon's and Griffith's works. Freer's edition of *Lost Laysen* includes a photograph of Mitchell cross-dressing as the hero Steve Hoyle from Dixon's *The Traitor* (1907), while noting that Mitchell's friend Courtenay was cast as that novel's main female role (14-15). In *Lost Laysen* Mitchell may be said to have once again given the main female "role" to her friend, but instead of choosing the aristocratic hero Steele to be her narrator, Mitchell "cross-dressed" narratively, so to speak, as Bill Duncan, the ambiguous and troubled figure who narrates most of the tale.

and may “come to you with clean hands.” The low-caste Duncan’s descriptions of Steele obsessively associate him with the purity and privileges not just of whiteness but of the plantation-owning aristocracy: Steele and “a gay party of white planters” tour the South Pacific in “a pretty, little, white sailboat.... Douglas Steele was at the wheel, all cool in his white suit and she [Courtenay] stood near him in a white middy and skirt” (93). Despite (or perhaps because of) Duncan’s wounded sense of being a perpetual outsider, he cannot acknowledge how resentful as well as respectful he is toward his “superiors.” To Steele, Duncan says ““You are the little lady’s kind and someday—you’ll—marry her,”” causing Steele to “flash a quick glance at him” as if checking for a threat (109).

Duncan’s descriptions of his motives are sometimes more ambiguous than the novel’s many clichés might lead us to expect. When our heroine in a pink kimono surprises Duncan in his bedroom late one night (itself a huge transgression), she begs Duncan to stop her fiancé from attacking Mardo. Duncan’s manhood and white pride are clearly flattered. But in retelling these events, Duncan cannot help but focus on eros: “as my eyes ran over the little figure in the clinging pink garment, a deadly chill came into my heart for I knew that her life hereafter would be hell if anyone had seen her” (102). The supposed defender of white virtue leers at Miss Courtenay in precisely the same way that Mardo does, then immediately becomes all chilled and selfless virtue worrying for the lady’s reputation.

In Bill Duncan’s imagination, Miss Courtenay’s sexuality is orientalized while her honor is colored white. Like some northern do-gooder during Reconstruction, Miss Courtenay has gone South—in this case, the South Pacific—to be a missionary and a teacher. But she decides she is not interested in “psalm

singing” (71). Inheriting all the privileges of the upper class, she decides to rebel against these and explore new possibilities in one of the United States’ new colonial frontier zones, transgressing accepted boundaries of what is proper for a lady. As the narrator Duncan rather ambiguously puts it, “She’s of the best America has and she’s over here because she’s tired of the life over there” (71). Mardo voices his plans to kidnap and rape the heroine in Japanese, a language our narrator Duncan just happens to understand, and when Mardo’s plot is made known to Miss Courtenay in her kimono her response is excitement rather than indignation (99). Mitchell’s narrative may have borrowed from Dixon, but her heroine expresses attraction for a racial Other in ways Dixon would never have allowed.

Other scenes destabilize not just our sense of Miss Courtenay’s or Duncan’s motives, but white racial status itself. Hunting for Mardo on the waterfront, Steele briefly mistakes Duncan for Mardo (108). And Mitchell chose to call Duncan’s ship *Caliban*, thus hinting that Duncan, like Caliban, may not wholly accept his servant status; he may want to curse as well as praise Steele and rape as well as protect Miss Courtenay, this tale’s Miranda. Furthermore, to protect Courtenay against Mardo, Duncan gives her his favorite weapon, his knife “Amigo Mio”; it is exchanged during the bedroom scene along with their one brief kiss (106). As Duncan later remembers this moment, its sexual innuendo becomes more prominent: he recalls the knife “held to her breast” (115), a detail not in the original passage (106).

To move the action forward, the young author chose a very subtle device: a volcano suddenly erupts on Edenic Laysen isle. Wearing only his pajama bottoms, Steele carries his Miss Courtenay to their waiting sailboat through

smoke and falling fire, but before they can escape their boat is also boarded by Mardo and his bad guys. As Laysen sinks into the Pacific like a lurid stage set, our heroes and villains are marooned together on the same boat. What happens next is reconstructed for us the next day, when Duncan and others coming from another island find the “Merry Maid” now not so merry, but drifting silently at sea. Boarding her, they find Mardo and his cohorts dead on deck, and Steele and Miss Courtenay expired below. Steele apparently had to get blood on his hands after all, not to mention ashes on his pajamas—but the lady’s honor was defended unto death. Still wearing her pink kimono, Miss Courtenay committed suicide to save herself from the ravages of Mardo and his crew—shades of the most famous threatened rape scene in *The Clansman* and *Birth of a Nation*—using, of course, the special knife Duncan gave her: “buried to the hilt in her white breast was ‘Amigo Mio’” (121). The sexual subtext of this passage is so close to the surface that what was probably intended by its creator to be high tragedy threatens continually to collapse into unintended farce.

As if to compensate for the lurid sexual coloring of the death scene—where the sun’s “red beam shot into the cabin full on her face, sending a flush of color into her white cheek” (121)—Mitchell’s narrative concludes with a long round of solemn “Thank You’s” to Steele’s and Miss Courtenay’s virtues, ending by calling them “a man who was a man—and a woman who placed her honor far—far higher than her life” (123; Mitchell’s underlining). The conclusion’s encomiums safely separating mixed-race villains and white heroes inadvertently heighten the illicit mixing that occurred at all stages of the previous narrative, not just when a volcano stirred things up. The illusory dichotomies of race, class,

and gender governing Mitchell's colonial romance, like the volcanic isle of Laysen itself, reside precariously atop all they repress.

Debra Freer's introduction to *Lost Laysen* reveals that well before Mitchell wrote this text she and her two best friends, Courtenay Ross and Henry Love Angel (their real names!), enjoyed staging scenes from Thomas Dixon novels and D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, which they saw soon after it made its controversial and sensational debut in Atlanta in December 1915. But Mitchell found her first fictional voice via the role of Duncan, whose point of view involuntarily complicates white supremacy and class privilege even as Duncan does the dirty work of defending them. Mitchell's first fictional persona, in other words, was born in a double moment of transgression: first, she imagined herself as male, and then her male narrator in some of his actions and in his retelling of the events transgressed (or imagined transgressing) the very class and race boundaries he claimed he revered.

Boundary-crossing need not necessarily threaten white supremacy. In the colonialist narratives popular in Mitchell's day, border-zones were in fact attractive precisely because they provided the best setting wherein whites might test and prove themselves superior. Temporary racial crossings, or "going native," only reaffirmed the power of whiteness after it was once again assumed. These narratives are double romances: attracted first to frontier boundaries and the allure of mixture, then to a return to whiteness and all its privileges. Similar paradoxical back-and-forth movements across the color-line were one of the attractions of blackface minstrelsy for whites, as Eric Lott and others have shown. Another set of examples, as Philip J. DeLoria has reminded us in *Playing Indian*, may be found in the history of the many initiation or protest events in

U.S. cultural history that featured whites dressing and acting as Indians—sometimes as part of a coming-of-age ceremony, as in the Order of the Arrow in Boy Scouts, or (most famously in the Boston Tea Party) as a mask for expressing rebellious feelings that could not yet be publicly acknowledged. Nathaniel Hawthorne’s tale “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” is a brilliant invention based on this latter theme. Mitchell herself was notorious for scandalizing the Atlanta aristocracy into which she was born, such as when she wore a provocative “Apache” costume at a debutante ball while reenacting a dance ending in a long kiss that had been featured in the 1921 hit film *Four Horseman of the Apocalypse* starring Rudolph Valentino. The scandal eventually caused the rejection of Mitchell’s application to the Junior League, but hardly endangered her overall place in Atlanta high society.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> For information on Mitchell’s “Apache” dance and its consequences, along with a photo of Mitchell in costume, see Freer, “Introduction” 42-45. Why Mitchell’s costume was considered “Apache” is a mystery to me. The skirt Mitchell wore is illustrated in Freer’s edition (43), whereas the dress in the movie’s dance scene looks rather early Roaring Twenties, and the costume of Valentino’s character either Spanish or Argentinian “gaucho,” as a “lobby card” promoting the movie reveals:

Yet surely not all forms of racial masking or gender confusion merely test white privilege or gender difference in order to reinforce these as being divinely right. Duncan's suppressed identification with Mardo and Caliban threatens the race and class hierarchies that colonialist romances were intended to enforce. The more he professes to be defending white purity, the more he calls his performance into question, a Caliban-like mimic-man who, as Homi Bhabha has shown, can never in the colonial encounter fully become the person he thinks he aspires to be.

Regardless of what its fifteen-year-old author may have "intended," then, *Lost Laysen* proves that the basic white rescue or martyr narratives at the heart of many colonial romances and New South fictions expressed more ambivalence about white power than they could admit. If we label *Lost Laysen* simply as being white supremacist, we erase how it *labors* to be so. In its own devious way,



source: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0012190/>

Freer's *Lost Laysen* edition provides fascinating autobiographical materials on Mitchell, but Freer herself is an idolater more than an interpreter.

Mitchell's textual fling of 1916 supports Amy Kaplan's thesis that a "double perspective" is necessary to trace the workings of fictions of race, nation, and empire: first, to emphasize "the creative force of empire in the making of national culture," and second, "to trace the anarchic workings of empire in unraveling the coherence of this culture and opening it to the outside" (*Anarchy of Empire* 212). Margaret Mitchell's explosive little South Sea parable is nothing if not anarchic.<sup>6</sup>

~~~

One unexpected benefit of the discovery of the lost *Laysen* manuscript is that it allows us to see complexities that we might not otherwise notice in the perpetually self-assured Rhett Butler of *Gone With the Wind*. True, Bill Duncan was an insecure social outsider to the sphere of the novel's heroine and hero, whereas Rhett, though a social pariah, has unassailable aristocratic credentials and none of Duncan's clumsiness or ignorance. What Rhett, surprisingly, does share with Duncan—though in an infinitely more complex way—is an unstable racial identity in moments of crisis, plus dangerously mixed emotions toward the southern ideals he feels his class is supposed to uphold.

In the famous staircase scene where Rhett seduces Scarlett (Chapter LIV), for example, Calibanesque elements in Rhett's character emerge as he tries to displace the wan, aristocratic Ashley Wilkes from Scarlett's fantasies. Eros is

---

<sup>6</sup> As Williamson relates, before beginning *Gone With the Wind* Mitchell in 1926 quickly wrote a novella set in the postwar South that also featured a white heroine erotically drawn to transgress the color-line. Europa (!) has sex with a mulatto man who very well may have received his white blood from her own family; he is eventually murdered and Europa loses her plantation. This manuscript was apparently destroyed on Mitchell's orders after the success of *Gone With the Wind*, though notes survive (Williamson 102-03).



here figured in Scarlett's imagination as a colonial border war, a captivity narrative in which a "civilized" white woman is both attracted to and repulsed by the "savage" lover who carries her off: "Rhett, running lightly as an Indian, was beside her in the dark. His breath was hot on her face and his hands went round her roughly, under the wrapper, against her bare skin" (939; see also 621). Eros is aroused by forbidden power reversals for both Rhett and Scarlett, but because of Scarlett's ideals of proper womanhood she later renounces being attracted to such fantasies: "He had humbled her, hurt her, used her brutally through a wild mad night and she had gloried in it. Oh, she should be ashamed, should shrink from the very memory of the hot swirling darkness!" (940). When Scarlett envisions overpowering Rhett, rather than being manhandled by him, her imagination uses a different racial scenario, this time drawn from an overseer's (or mistress's?) punishment of a slave: "She had almost forgotten her early desire to entrap him into loving her, so she could hold the whip over his insolent black head..." (941). For Scarlett, Rhett's erotic charge is defined by a racialized darkness in him that she simultaneously seeks to succumb to and to dominate.

Later in the novel fatherhood, the loss of a child, and disillusionment with Scarlett cause a shift in Rhett, fueling a desire finally to rise fully into respectability. But even then Rhett understands his behavior largely to be a pose: "I never intend to change more than my spots. But I want the outer semblance of the things I used to know" (1034). Given the history of the "leopard's spots" trope in southern literary history—first, signifying the Jewish outsider in Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1820); then, black blood in Dixon's 1902 best-seller using the phrase as its title—Rhett's self-description of himself has unavoidable racial

content: he is boasting that being on his best behavior will allow him to *pass* for white, not just pose as a gentleman. Such a statement is typically Rhett-orical in its mix of paradox and provocation.

Of course, when it comes to racial politics Rhett in no way distances himself from any of the tactics used by white supremacists during Reconstruction and the New South. Rhett's "actual" or "biological" racial identity (as these things were understood then) is never in question. But if Rhett is disgusted because Scarlett can never really accept him as being in the same class as Ashley Wilkes, Rhett hates even more fiercely that what makes him sexually attractive to Scarlett is understood by her to be something non-white, even non-human.

Although Scarlett and Rhett appear headed in separate directions at the novel's end, how different really are their trajectories? *Gone With the Wind* gave Mitchell's readers a romantic offer most could not refuse—the chance to pass as tragic but resilient white aristocrats and, like Rhett and Scarlett, to "parrot" "fragments of words" that somehow miraculously transformed a mere "outer semblance" or "picture" of the South into a heroic past and future for the nation itself (1034-35). Resolving to shed his role as the novel's satiric muse and racial borderland renegade, Rhett in the final third or so of *Gone With the Wind* appears to become a late convert to compensatory nostalgia for the "genial grace" of the Old South's plantation past. As Porter argues, Rhett does indeed change his spots—or at least disguise them.

A skepticism whirls in Scarlett's, Rhett's, and Mitchell's figures of speech, however—one that doesn't give a damn for the white New South's respectable lies, that keeps whispering how "broken fragments" should never give the

comforting illusion of a “mended whole” (1035). “Parrot” means a faulty mimicry, and “outer semblance” means just that. At such moments—moments of dissonance that are most frequent during the famously open *ending* of *Gone With the Wind*, rather than earlier—Mitchell is not Faulkner’s opposite but in some ways his half-sister. Although Mitchell most successfully translated into twentieth-century pop cultural idioms the memes of white nostalgia that made nineteenth-century plantation fiction so marketable in its era, she couldn’t help but here and there in *Gone With the Wind* marking decisively that her gorgeous “pictures” of the South were scored and mazed by multiple denials, or at least were tinged with an ironic sense that such visions were false.

That’s very much Faulkner’s approach too, particularly in masterpieces like *The Sound and the Fury*, *Light in August*, *Absalom, Absalom!*, and *Go Down, Moses*. Legions of Mitchell’s readers would gloss over her hints that Scarlett was turned on by miscegenation, or pretend to avert their gaze when Rhett self-consciously stresses that he’s performing white aristocratic respectability to legitimate his rise. Faulkner in his best texts allows his readers no such license. He thrusts them into a briar-patch thick with the South’s (and America’s) repressions. Yet Faulkner sometimes too thought *like* Mitchell at her most conventional. Although written mostly between 1934 and 1936, Faulkner’s *The Unvanquished* (1938), for instance, definitely also romances the War and Reconstruction. It sold decently well—for a Faulkner novel. Indeed, MGM in Hollywood even briefly considered making a movie of *The Unvanquished* starring Clark Gable, until those plans were vanquished by a deal falling into place

allowing Gable to receive over a million dollars in Depression-era money to play a certain other southern male protagonist (Railton 62n17).<sup>7</sup>

## Bibliography

- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Deloria, Philip Joseph. *Playing Indian*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.
- Dixon, Thomas. *The Leopard's Spots; A Romance of the White Man's Burden, 1865-1900*. New York: Doubleday Page, 1902.
- Dixon, Thomas. *The Clansman; An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*. New York: Doubleday Page, 1905.
- Dunning, William Archibald. *Essays on the civil war and reconstruction and related topics*. 1897; 2nd ed. 1904. New York: Harper & Row, 1965.
- Faulkner, William. *The Sound and the Fury*. New York: Jonathan Cape and Harrison Smith, 1929.
- Faulkner, William. *Absalom, Absalom!* New York: Modern Library, 1936.
- Faulkner, William. *The Unvanquished*. New York: Random House, 1938.
- Faulkner, Williams. *Go Down, Moses*. New York: Modern Library, 1942.
- Foster, Hannah. *The Coquette*. 1797. Rpt. Ed. Cathy N. Davidson. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.

---

<sup>7</sup> For more on Faulkner, particularly *Absalom* and *Go Down, Moses*, see my complementary essay to this one: “‘Truth so mazed’: Faulkner and U.S. Plantation Fiction.”

- Freer, Debra. "Introduction: Margaret Mitchell and Henry Love Angel—A Lost Love." *Lost Laysen*. Debra Freer, ed. New York: Scribner, 1996. 13-63.
- Greeson, Jennifer Rae. *Our South: Geographic Fantasy and the Rise of National Literature*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010.
- Griffith, D. W., director. *The Birth of a Nation*. 1915. Motion picture.
- Kaplan, Amy. "Romancing the Empire: The Embodiment of American Masculinity in the Popular Historical Novel of the 1890s." In *Postcolonial Theory and the U.S.: Race, Ethnicity, and Literature*, Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt (eds.). Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000. 220-43.
- Kaplan, Amy. *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002.
- Kreyling, Michael. *Inventing Southern Literature*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998.
- Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- McPherson, Tara. *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.
- Mitchell, Margaret. *Gone With the Wind*. New York: Scribner, 1936.
- Mitchell, Margaret. *Lost Laysen*. [1916.] Debra Freer (ed.) New York: Scribner, 1996.
- Porter, Carolyn. "Gone With the Wind and Absalom, Absalom!" *A New Literary History of America*. Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors, eds. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009. 705-10.

- Railton, Ben. "What Else Could a Southern Gentleman Do?": Quentin Compson, Rhett Butler, and Miscegenation." *The Southern Literary Journal* 35.2 (Spring, 2003). 41-63.
- Ring, Natalie J. *The Problem South: Region, Empire, and the New Liberal State, 1880-1930*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012.
- Romine, Scott. *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction*. Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2008.
- Scott, Walter. *Ivanhoe*. London: A. Constable, 1820.
- Southworth, E. D. E. N. *The Hidden Hand; or, Capitola the Madcap*. 1859. Rpt. Ed. Joanne Dobson. Rutgers University Press, 1988.
- Williamson, Joel. "How Black was Rhett Butler?" *The Evolution of Southern Culture*. Ed. Numan V. Bartley. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988. 87-107.