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'Riding Well and Shooting Straight': The Ideal Southern Man in Literature

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> The twins lounged easily in their chairs, squinting at the sunlight through tall mint-garnished glasses as they laughed and talked, their long legs, booted to the knee and thick with saddle muscles, crossed negligently. Nineteen years old, six feet two inches tall, long of bone and hard of muscle, with sunburned faces and deep auburn hair, their eyes merry and arrogant…they were as much alike as two bolls of cotton… Raising good cotton, riding well, shooting straight, dancing lightly, squiring the ladies with elegance and carrying one's liquor like a gentleman were the things that mattered…[1]

Margaret Mitchell, in the opening pages of her epic tale, *Gone With the Wind*, introduces readers to the southern manhood ideal that shaped much of southern history. In the Tarleton twins, Mitchell encapsulates the physical specifications and value system essential to defining manhood in the South throughout much of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Though an oft-parodied stereotype today, the treasured expectations of manliness were intractable and concrete in the South and impacted every stratum of society. Fully developed before the advent of the Civil War, these masculine ideals did not disappear with the Confederate States of America—they lingered and even grew in tenacity, shaping nearly every facet of southern life.

Given its deep entrenchment in southern thought and life, the complexity of what Richard Yarborough calls the "mythology of masculinity" occupies much modern southern historical research.[2] Relying heavily on both personal and public documents, southern historians provide a valuable framework for understanding the mindset of southern men and those who occupied their world. However, non-historians have also sought to consider possible answers to questions about ideal manhood through fictional exploration. From its Old South roots through the fallout caused by the loss of the Civil War, three novels by Octavia Butler, Margaret Mitchell, and Charles W. Chesnutt each use literary license to more fully explore the real-world implications of the southern system of masculinity and the complications contained therein.

When considering masculine ideals, the logical place to start is with the originators and propagators of this value system—in the South, the powerful and elite white planter class. Their cultural shaping power was not due to greater legitimacy or more fully developed logical reasons, but rather to the enormous power they wielded over their world. This dominance meant that their idea of manhood came to largely define that of the rest of society. This small segment of the population represented what many scholars now term the "ideal body," and as such, they viewed their values and precedents as evident mandate for the rest of society and from this lofty view sprouted the deep roots of many masculine ideals.

For the planter class, definitions of manhood depended largely upon the possession of power. Wealthy white men assumed that their dominion would include control of politics, their wives, their families, and their slaves. Susan Tracy posits in her book, *In the Master's Eye: Representations of Women, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Antebellum Southern Literature*, that the implicit question concerning masculinity among this class was "who would be 'man enough' to govern society?" thus linking governing with the full attainment of manhood.[3] Though custom and law dictated that a man was responsible for providing his dependents with "protection and economic security," the expected return for his beneficence was "submission, respect, and grateful love."[4] Tracy also points out that this patriarchal system

was perpetuated with "iron rule" and that "planter class superiority was imagined to be readily acknowledged and accepted by all except imbeciles or criminals."[5] Furthermore, though laws existed to ostensibly prevent unusual cruelty to dependents, especially slaves, Tracy concludes that most "didn't interfere with the planter's government of his slaves as they didn't interfere with his government of his wife and children. Planters enjoyed virtual unimpeded dominion…"[6]

Beyond issues of authority and power, ideal manhood was also defined by the mind—though the emphasis on this facet of masculinity varied over time and by location far more than did the perception of the need for total rule. In the South's formative years, intellectual capacity and educational attainment were requisites of a great man. These early Southerners used intellect as an important distinction between themselves and their subordinates and as a difference which resulted in a clear hierarchy. Thomas Jefferson wrote in *Notes on the State of Virginia* of the perceived superiority of white male intellect as a justification of slavery. "Comparing them [slaves]," he wrote, "by their faculties of memory, reason, and imagination, it appears to me that in memory they are equal to the whites; in reason much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid…"[7] With such theories of superior white intellect combined with the conviction of the "intellectual feebleness" of blacks firmly entrenched long before the Civil War, intellectual superiority was an assumed tenet of complete masculinity for much of southern history.[8]

However, while the ruling class assumed intellectual superiority, using this intelligence in a constructive manner was not equally valued as a masculine ideal by all members of the planter class. One southerner of the time dryly noted that "being a southern intellectual was as rewarding as 'drawing water in a sieve," and that one gained much more respect from "cockfighting than from poem-writing."[9] Robert Pace's book, *Halls of Honor: College Men in the Old South*, includes numerous anecdotes about more scholarly-minded students being ridiculed or the victims of fellow students' pranks for their scholastic efforts. But Pace also refutes fellow scholar Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz's claim that "scholastic rank carried no prestige"

for college men.[10] Instead, he counters that those who entered higher education did so because they valued education, though he admits that this attitude was certainly not uniform across the South or even within the same family.[11] Pace provides a telling excerpt from a letter from one man to his younger brother who had just failed out of the University of Alabama. Though the brothers' family only asked that the younger son "behave himself," the elder brother took a different view: "I want you, however," he urged his brother, "to have a *good education* and will do all in my power to assist you (and so would they all [their family members] if you would study)."[12] Far from disparaging education, the older brother solemnly closes his letter by reminding his delinquent brother that "the mind is the measure of the man."[13] Though actual educational attainment did not always make or break a man, the assumed capacity for such education if he chose to pursue it was an important facet of ideal masculinity.

Also central to the southern gentleman's concept of manliness was his honor. Of the ideal gentleman, Susan Tracy writes that "his primary mission…is to defend his family, country, and honor."[14] Southern historian Edward Ayers defines this key concept as "a system of values within which you have exactly as much worth as others confer upon you."[15] One of the primary ways a southern man could lose his honor was to have his masculinity impugned. A perceived usurpation of another man's right to rule marked a grievous transgression against honor. Many pro-secessionist "fire-eaters'" arguments in favor of southern autonomy leading up to the Civil War revolved around the premise that the Northern government infringed upon the South's right to rule itself, thus insulting its collective honor. Since planters comprised the politically empowered segment of society, they reacted as though the North's actions were individual offenses and sought retaliation to preserve their masculine society.

The loss of honor directly correlated with a lack of manhood—a figurative emasculation. Anything less than meeting the standards of manhood meant that one was like those he supposedly ruled over—weak and compliant, and therefore devoid of honor. Perceived unmanliness met with swift disapproval from peers. One southerner

recorded in his diary extreme contempt for a preacher he perceived as overstepping the prescribed roles of manhood: "Crying in the pulpit! Crying in the pulpit! A man ought to be a man even if he does wear a cloth."[16] Exhibiting such "effeminate" behavior signified weakness according to conventional wisdom and was therefore eminently unmanly. Robert Pace emphasizes that the *appearance* of possessing honor was a paramount consideration, more so than actually *being* a man of honor.[17] Pace writes:

> Southern men had to exhibit behavior that held them to be dutiful to their responsibilities, respectful of their peers, and…honest in their public declarations. This ethic, however, did not say that one actually had to *be* dutiful, respectful, or honest; one simply had to appear [as such]. Any public hint that a southern man was anything contrary to this definition had to be challenged rapidly and publicly in order to maintain the identity of a man of honor.[18]

Defined by the ruling class, these aspects of manhood set the standard which judged the manliness of all others. To perpetuate these ideals, imbuing young men with their culture's masculine standards began early in life. By the time most young men in the antebellum South entered college around age 15, they already sufficiently grasped the basic expectations of the honor code and were in the process of developing fully into what their society would recognize as proper men.[19] During adolescence, a young southern man either "made it" as a man among his own generation—or earned scorn and condemnation by breaching expectations. Colleges often formed the testing grounds for young men's masculinity and Robert Pace writes that "conflict arose not through power struggles alone, but through perceived breaches of the [masculine] code…the code that maintained their very existence in southern society."[20] College served as a baptismal fire into "real" manhood that impressed the importance of masculinity into each successive generation of southern men.

While the planter class and its sons formed the most influential element of southern masculinity, they did not make up the majority of southern men. Among the less-privileged classes were poorer

whites—mostly subsistence farmers or poorer. Because of the necessity of working in order to survive, many white men of this class valued hard work as the hallmark of true masculinity. Stephen V. Ash writes that "any farmer who was not at work by five in the morning, when the sun was already over the horizon, and not still working fourteen hours later, was considered no-account."[21] The more physically demanding a job, the more respected the man who carried it out. Ted Ownby notes that the necessary task of hog killing was "not merely a hot, ugly responsibility but a tough, manly act performed in public."[22] Thus, for the majority of non-genteel white men, physical strength and capability provided the important and visible marks of manhood.

However, poor white men represented a significant problem for the planter class who defined manhood as everything they were and that everyone else was not. Susan Tracy sums up their dilemma succinctly: "Because the poor white male implicitly shared the planter's racial and gender power, planters had a more difficult time rationalizing their domination of him…thus, on some level the poor white male was more threatening to the planter male than women and blacks."[23] After all, if control of their families and whatever property they had allowed poor white men to assert full masculinity, there existed logical rational for claims to equality, an unacceptable proposition for most planters. Therefore, wealthy whites worked to perpetuate a view of poor whites which lessened their manhood and cleared the way for their own continued domination. A.J.N. Hollander, a wealthy white planter and author, wrote of the "typical" poor white man in his treatise "The Tradition of the Poor Whites:"

> [The poor white] is a densely ignorant, morally degraded lawless being, despised alike by planter and slave. He lives in a dilapidated log cabin and ekes out a wretched existence by the half-hearted cultivation of a few corn rows, by hunting squirrels in the pine woods, and by fishing for catfish around the cypress stumps of sluggish streams. There is something wrong with him, something inferior, possibly in his blood."[24]

If the planter class convinced themselves that, though white, the poor farmer was lazy and intellectually inferior—and was this way irreversibly and genetically—their continued reign of the South could carry on without raising any troubling questions of equality.

While poor whites posed a potential quandary for the planter class, one large segment of the southern population was unquestionably unmanly to nearly every white southerner. Blacks, as slaves, occupied the lowest rung of the manliness ladder—if they were considered to be men at all, which was not at all a given assumption. Robert Pace notes that "in a culture guided by a code of honor, slaves could have no honor…if they had honor, then how could they be slaves?"[25] For every white man, no matter how poor, slaves provided one segment of society over which all felt themselves superior. Northern slavery critic Frederick Law Olmsted observed during his tour of the South that "the one thing in their condition which has made life valuable to the mass of whites has been the niggers are yet their inferiors."[26] The planter elite understood how crucial the denial of masculinity to black men was. The writings of former slave men often reveal the slave's concept of his own masculinity—and the essential role this sense of manhood played for him. In the late 1800s, African-American poet Albery A. Whitman wrote that he never considered himself a slave, but rather, a man; telling his readers that "many a man has lost all he had, except his manhood."[27] Explaining the importance of this self-concept, Richard Yarborough explains that the "term *manhood* comes to stand for the crucial spiritual commodity that one must maintain in the face of oppression in order to avoid losing a sense of self-worth."[28] As long as a black man retained consciousness of his manhood, he could never be entirely enslaved. Whitman strongly endorsed this view, telling his readers that "I was in bondage—I was never a slave."[29] This psychological awareness of underlying humanity and masculinity enabled Whitman to draw a sharp line between slavehood and manhood. Whitman wrote a poem called "Not a Man, and Yet a Man" which underscored this point; while Fredrick Douglass famously summarized his journey from slavery by telling his readers that they "have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man."[30]

From this viewpoint, blacks urged fellow slaves to fight to defend their manhood. For many slaves, any act of rebellion "represented the assertion of their humanity, and, if male, of black masculinity."[31]

Rebellion collided directly with the white masculine value of controlling those in one's power; therefore, it is not difficult to see why the South's reigning masters took deliberate steps to destroy any sense of manhood a black slave possessed. Physical brutality not only encouraged compliance through negative reinforcement; it also emphasized the slave male's submission to another man. Submission, an action associated with women and children, was humiliating and painful for all slaves, but especially to black men who saw their manhood denied in this forced surrender. Another tool in the emasculation process denied a slave's patriarchal responsibilities as a husband and father. Though the white planter's main goal in life was to fight to defend his family, a black slave was denied this right. Henry Bibb, a former slave, wrote that "he [the slave] is liable to be sold off to a distant land from his family…his sufferings are aggravated a hundred fold, by the terrible thought, that he is not allowed to struggle against misfortune, corporal punishment, insults and outrages committed upon himself and family…"[32] Making examples of women and children with physical violence or "unfeminine" labor was another common method of breaking down masculinity; one that meant "all planters tolerated a certain level of brutality toward slave women and children, because psychologically they knew its impact on black men."[33]

The aftermath of the Civil War made the need for control and dominance especially important to the white planter class. Having just been defeated on a grand scale, former Confederate soldiers returned home with their honor unavenged and their masculinity severely bruised. The fact that their former slaves gained their freedom in the conflict only exacerbated the situation in their eyes. The sight of an entire people group they had once bought, sold, beaten, and lived off of now appeared to be free from their subjugation—a grievous disruption to the planter's treasured patriarchal system. During Reconstruction, the embittered segments of society took matters into their own hands to "correct" the male hierarchy. The Ku Klux Klan is only the best known of numerous vigilante organizations that sprang up in the South in the years following the conclusion of the war. Quickly escalating into full-scale terrorist activity, lynching and shooting hundreds of mostly black victims, the white elite were well on their way to resurrecting the old social order of their own supremacy by the time the federal government intervened to stop these groups.

The importance of these conceptions of manhood in southern culture is part of historical record; however, fiction has allowed many authors to explore how these conceptions may have looked in practice through a variety of works. *Kindred*, by Octavia Butler; *Gone With the Wind*, by Margaret Mitchell; and *The Marrow of Tradition* by Charles W. Chesnutt all offer valuable glimpses of the everyday implications of the Southern masculine ideal.

Kindred, written over a century after the end of the Civil War by an African-American woman seems particularly attuned to the creeping and intractable hold of Southern masculinity. Octavia Butler is particularly adept at showing the gradual indoctrination of successive generations of the planter class. Rufus Weylin is first introduced as a nine-year-old in the year 1815 confused about why he should address Dana, the novel's female protagonist, as "black" instead of the more derogatory terms that everyone around him uses. Through time travel, which transports Dana from 1976 California to Rufus' plantation world every time he finds himself in mortal danger, Dana witnesses Rufus' development into a violent and cruel replica of his father. Dana, unprepared for the incredible pull of an entire culture devoted to the patriarchal order of the planter class, first believes she can prevent Rufus' culture from rubbing off on him. Later, as she begins to grasp the situation more clearly, she realizes that "his [Rufus'] environment will be influencing him every day…"[34] A key part of this environment, Rufus' father, Tom Weylin, embodies many of the traits valued by the planter class, including a "proper" detachment and complete control over his slaves. On one occasion, when Dana makes a return visit to Rufus' world, she questions him about the disappearance of one of the slaves she had befriended. Rufus explains to her that "[Luke] worked all right.

But sometimes he didn't show much sense…he would just go ahead and do what he wanted to no matter what Daddy said. Daddy always said he thought he was white. One day…Daddy got tired of it. New Orleans trader came through and Daddy said it would be better to sell Luke than to whip him until he ran away."[35] Dana later concludes that "[Weylin] wasn't a monster at all. Just an ordinary man who sometimes did the monstrous things his society said were legal and proper," once again demonstrating the complete permeation of the male ideal in southern culture.[36] Another slave, Isaac, was also sold further south by the Weylin men after he attempted to escape with his wife. Dana is later told that "they cut off [Isaac's] ears…cut them both off" as punishment.[37] Isaac's attempt to assert his masculinity and humanity resulted in the figurative emasculation of separation from his wife, as well as the more literal emasculation of losing a part of his physical person.

Gone With the Wind offers a look at the Southern male's value of education and the lack of impact that it apparently had in ultimately determining manhood. On this point, Margaret Mitchell again used the Tarleton boys as a prime example of this idea. Her opening description of them informs the reader that "here in north Georgia, a lack of the niceties of classical education carried no shame, provided a man was smart in the things that mattered…the family had more money, more horses, more slaves than any one else in the County, but the boys had less grammar than most of their poor Cracker neighbors."[38] The depth of the Tarleton's apathy toward education is further exposed as the narrative further reveals that "they had just been expelled form the University of Georgia, the fourth university that had thrown them out in two years…[they] considered their latest expulsion a fine joke."[39] Mitchell's characters show an example of white men so convinced of their inherent worth and masculinity that formal education is inconsequential.

The faith in their own masculinity of the planter class at the outset of the Civil War is also fully on display in *Gone With the Wind*. Used to owning their world, the wealthy men discussing the impending war at a neighborhood barbeque can think only of the glory and acclaim they will attain once they unleash their manliness against

the Union army. The conversation gives voice to a number of distinctly upper-class southern viewpoints, such as "The South should show by arms that she cannot be insulted and that she is not leaving the Union by the Union's kindness but by her own strength!" "Why, one Southerner can lick twenty Yankees!" "Gentlemen always fight better than rabble," and "States' rights, by God!"[40] These confident pronouncements appear consistent with the masculine assumption of complete power to do whatever they wish. They also reveal the class prejudice that the elite class felt for men "below" them. Because the opposition was mere "rabble," their inherently weaker manhood doomed them to fighting more poorly than the noble and able southern pseudo-aristocracy.

Conceptions of honor are also prevalent throughout the novel. When Ashley Wilkes expresses hope for a peaceful secession and avoidance of war, one of the other men corrects him in disbelief, stating incredulously, "Why Ashley, they've insulted our honor!"[41] The perceived insult to the South's honor by the North could not go unchallenged according to the masculine code adopted and held dear by southern gentlemen.

In contrast to *Kindred* and *Gone With the Wind*, which address antebellum attitudes toward masculinity, Charles W. Chesnutt's historical novel *The Marrow of Tradition* focuses on the manifestations of masculine ideals decades after the emancipation of southern slaves. Chesnutt, a northern black man who witnessed the Civil War and its aftermath uses his novel to complicate the conventions of southern manhood, attributing characteristics traditionally associated exclusively with the white elite to black characters and openly questioning the actual masculinity of the upper class. Set in a North Carolina city near the turn of the 20th century, the book's setting is based on the Wilmington, North Carolina Massacre of 1898 and offers enough nuanced portrayals of men of across class and race spectrums to thoroughly confuse the issue of true masculinity.

First printed in 1901, Chesnutt's representation of the novel's ostensible protagonist, Dr. Miller, a black physician, caused a stir upon publication. The first description of Dr. Miller is a direct comparison with a counterpart white physician. The book's narrator notes

that the two "represented very different and yet very similar types of manhood."[42] At the end of the description, the reader realizes that the only difference he describes between the two is that of their ages and race—the latter, of course, having the greater bearing in the novel. Dr. Miller's accomplishments are brought up early and repeated often—his northern medical training, his large and beautiful home, and his educated speech—and all of which are contrasted with the limited usefulness and knowledge of the main white male characters in the book. When Major Carteret, one of the more despicable characters of the novel, bars Dr. Miller from attending a surgery on a white woman and a white doctor in attendance objects, stating "I am a gentleman, sir, before I am a white man," Carteret retorts that "the terms should be synonymous."[43] Though Dr. Miller possesses the education, refinement, and wealth necessary in the southern view of masculinity; he will never be considered manly because of his race.

Chesnutt also questions the manhood of men who merely appear to uphold the standards of masculinity. Tom Delamere, described as "easily the handsomest young man in Wellington," added to his distinction by virtue of his pedigree as the grandson of the distinguished and saintly elder Delamere.[44] However, Chesnutt cast doubt on Tom's manliness early on, writing that "no discrimination observer would have characterized his beauty as manly. It conveyed no impression of strength, but did possess a certain element, feline rather than feminine, which subtly negatived the idea of manliness."[45] This is the first hint Chesnutt gives that this would-be epitome of southern masculinity is anything but. In fact, Tom Delamere is an alcoholic, indebted louse who by the middle of the story has murdered his elderly aunt as well. Chesnutt seizes upon the hypocrisy and self-delusion the masculine ideals of the south created, and uses the elder Mr. Delemere's defense of his black servant, Sandy, as a vehicle for the irony. Framed by Tom for the murder, Sandy is innocent; but his only advocate is Mr. Delamere whose best defense of him to Major Carteret is that "he would no more be capable of this [murder] than you would, or my grandson Tom."[46] Of course, the two characters in the book who *are* actually responsible for murder

are Major Carteret and Tom Delamere. This scoffing at hypocritical manhood was a radical move by Chesnutt and one that cost him his literary career. Through ostensible fiction, Chesnutt was able to make a drastic claim against the biases and dark realities of masculine ideals.

The roots of the treasured ideals of manhood in the South run deep and manifest themselves in nearly every remnant of the region's history and still reverberate today. From the white southern planter class who established the concept of ultimate manhood on his own rules and patriarchal system of control; to the young men who grew up to be like their fathers, the cycle of violent and repressive masculine ideals based on honor repeated itself continuously. Left out of the definition of manhood but not unaffected by its classifications and standards were the poor whites and black slaves who could never hope to achieve full masculinity as southern culture demanded. Firmly entrenched before the Civil War, the concepts of power, innate intelligence, and honor only grew stronger and fought harder to survive following the South's defeat. Since that time, fiction has allowed writers to probe the assumptions and theories of southern manhood and its implications for all members of society, ultimately causing readers to deeply question the implications of "riding well and shooting straight."

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Notes

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3. Susan J. Tracy, *In the Master's Eye: Representations of Women, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Antebellum Southern Literature*. (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 155.
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17. Pace, *Halls of Honor*, 5.
18. Ibid.
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20. Ibid., 6-7
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22. Tracy, *Master's Eye*, 17.
23. Ibid., 176.
24. Pace, *Halls of Honor*, 50.
25. Tracy, *Master's Eye*, 176.
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27. Ibid., 160.
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30. Tracy, *Master's Eye*, 147.
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33. Octavia E. Butler, *Kindred*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), 83.
34. Ibid., 138.
35. Ibid., 134.
36. Ibid., 149.
37. Mitchell, *Gone With the Wind*, 4.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid., 110.
40. Ibid., 115.
41. Charles W. Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*. (New York: Penguin, 1993), 49.
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43. Ibid., 16.
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45. Ibid., 210.