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An Impossible Standard: The Virgin Mary and the Construction of Southern Womanhood

“When Scarlett was a child,
she had confused her mother
with the Virgin Mary, and now
that she was older she saw no reason
for changing her opinion.”

– *Gone With the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell

“It is impossible to understand the history of Western spirituality and devotion without paying attention to the Virgin Mary,” writes religion historian Jaroslav Pelikan in the last chapter of his book, *Mary Through the Centuries* (215). Similarly, it’s impossible to understand culture in the American South without paying attention to religion: as Holly F. Mathews writes in *Women in the South: An Anthropological Perspective*, the South is “a diverse geographical region encompassing eleven states and some seventy-five million people,” and part of what distinguishes Southern identity is “this shared religious orientation (Christianity) [that] permeates day-to-day life,” (1). Vital to the maintenance of the Southern identity, from the antebellum period to the 21st century, is womanhood, particularly as a constructed “Other” against which men can define themselves in opposition (Mathews 2, Robins 275, Shaw 52). This paper aligns with theorist Judith Butler’s definition of gender as a non-essential social construction comprised of a life-long series of regulative discourses (i.e., repeated stylized acts like maintaining long hair, sitting with one’s legs crossed, or wearing lipstick) (Butler 23). In other words, Southern-

ness is a construction, womanhood is a construction, and Southern womanhood is a construction, all of which are defined and influenced by culture, particularly religion.

As a central (and arguably overstated, in the Protestant point of view) Biblical figure, a saint in her own right, and as highly exalted as to earn the epithet Queen of Heaven, the Virgin Mary holds an indelible place in the Christian consciousness, as Eleanor Heartney declares in her article “Thinking Through the Body: Women Artists and the Catholic Imagination:” “The figure of the Virgin Mary, with all her contradictory connotations of strength, submission, motherhood, and virginity, will serve as the touchstone around which the artists under discussion seek to define their roles and desires,” (4).

This paper explores a similar concept as Heartney’s article: by examining Southern literature about white women in its religious and cultural contexts, I illuminate the deeply embedded connections between the figure of the Virgin Mary and the archetypes of the white Southern Belle and Dixie Madonna, in order to reveal both a complex web of cultural constructions designed to control, critique, and constrain Southern women, and how women use those constructions to free themselves.

“For, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed,” declaims Mary herself in the *Magnificat*, one of the few direct mentions of her in either the Old or New Testament (*King James Bible*, Luke 1:48). In this hymn, Mary reflects upon the honor God has bestowed upon her by making her the mother of Jesus Christ, and how rather than contradicting her humble beginnings as an unmarried poor Jewish teenage girl, this honor proves that God loves the lowly and the common. Her humility, obedience to God (as Maryland native Baptist pastor Mark Adams notes, Mary’s response to Gabriel’s announcement was, “‘How can this happen?’ In other words, she didn’t question God could do this; she just wondered how,”), her

purity (although mostly Catholics believe in the Immaculate Conception, all Christians recognize the virgin birth), and her trust in God and by extension her Son are all virtues she personifies (“Mary’s Song”). Even in the Biblical era, she acted as a symbol: “Mary is not merely an individual young girl. She is a representative of Israel, the true daughter of Zion,” (Graef 17). Once we consider the Bible in its current rich historical context, Mary’s capacity for symbolism expands to encompass all of womanhood. As Pelikan writes, “Mary has provided the content of the definition of the feminine in a way that Christ has not done for the masculine,” (1).

Since, as Caroline Matheny Dillman says in her essay “Southern Women: In Continuity or Change,” “Both church and family are... much more important in the South than in other regions [of the United States],” it’s difficult to understate the importance Christianity plays in shaping cultural constructions like gender. With enormous Baptist and Catholic populations in the South using Mary as a template for ideal Southern womanhood (often in contrast with Eve, earning Mary the title “Second Eve”), it’s important to examine the specifics of how each sect treats Mary, keeping in mind specific doctrines vary from church to church.

Catholic opinion of Mary is famously reverent: a product of Immaculate Conception, a perfectly sinless woman who when she dies ascends to Heaven body and all, a Queen, a mother, and a saint, Medieval European devotees went so far as to assign her the Holy Spirit’s place in the Trinity (Newman 254). Eleanor Heartney calls Mary “the most powerful of Catholicism’s female role models,” whom devotees recognize as “the embodiment of perfect motherhood, the compassionate intermediary with God..., champion of the oppressed, protector of the church, and worker of miracles,” (5). For young girls, conceived normally and so born at a disadvantage, this role model can seem daunting, as novelist Mary Gordon demonstrates by saying, “In my day, Mary was a stick to beat smart girls with. Her example was held up constantly, an example

of silence, of subordination, of the pleasure of taking the back seat,” (qtd. in Heartney 6).

Historian Marina Warner calls Mary “the instrument of a dynamic argument from the Catholic Church about the structure of society,” i.e., a male-created and male-approved standard designed to perpetuate patriarchy, and academic Susan Sered says, “Mary, as the Virgin Mother of God, is essentially inimitable... Mary is an impossible model for Catholic women,” (qtd. in Heartney 6, Sered 18). By holding every woman to this “impossible model,” Christian patriarchy ensures that women earn their perpetual punishments, i.e., institutionalized sexism.

While Baptist women might breathe a little easier—“Despite the fact that she was the mother of Jesus, Mary wasn’t perfect!” writes Georgian Pastor Andy Cook in a sermon on motherhood—Mary’s example is still a difficult one to follow, even excluding the Immaculate Conception, the Assumption, and the rulership of Heaven (“Sermon: A Mother Called by God”). Still at work is a cultural scourge which Patrice DiQuinzio terms “essential motherhood,” i.e., “All women want to be and should be mothers and... women who do not manifest the qualities required by mothering and/or refuse mothering are deviant or deficient as women,” (xiii). Even if we disregard Mary as only a marginal influence on the Southern Baptist construction of womanhood, Susan M. Shaw proves in her article “Gracious Submission: Southern Baptist Fundamentalists and Women” that the Southern Baptist Convention’s current rhetoric defines womanhood as motherhood and wifeness, condemns abortion in any case as a way to control women’s bodies, threatens women with the label of lesbian if they don’t conform to heterosexual feminine ideals, and idealizes the nuclear family wherein the Christ-stand in husband rules over his church-stand in wife (56, 60, 65). However, it would be a mistake to assume Mary’s impact on the Baptist construction of womanhood is negligible: to them, she’s still a virgin, still the mother of the Savior, and still a model woman whom God honored. As Pastor Adams writes,

“You know, we Baptists are often critical of other Christians whom we say pay Mary *too much* honor... But if we are to criticize *all* believers who err in their beliefs about Mary we must include ourselves, because we tend to err in the *other* extreme in that we honor Mary too *lightly*. I mean, this brave, Godly young girl deserves our admiration!” (“Mary’s Song”).

Translating the Christian ideal of womanhood, Mary, into the Southern ideal of white womanhood is then very simple. This paper discusses two archetypes about Southern women that emerged in the literature of the Southern Renaissance (the 1930s) and beyond: the Belle and the Dixie Madonna. I borrow the term Dixie Madonna from Diane Roberts’s book *Faulkner and Southern Womanhood*. The two perpetuate each other, as the young Belle marries and becomes the Dixie Madonna, and raises Belles of her own. Among other impossible things, Belles are expected to be experts in coy flirtation, “as alluring as the Dark Lady, yet as pure as the White Maiden,” absolutely obsessed with attracting a husband while embodying ladylike virtues like humility, obedience, and fragility, whereas “the matron’s role is to serve as wife, mother, and moral guide” and to represent the South like the Virgin Mary represents all of Zion (Entzminger 11). As Diane Roberts says, “The southern mother becomes a saint on earth through sacrifice,” (190). Both these roles confine white women to pretty, submissive boxes, while punishing them for not achieving Mary’s perfection. Roberts’s use of the word “Madonna” in her term for the ideal white Southern mother suggests how deeply embedded Mary is in the construction of Southern womanhood. This paper examines both these archetypes and their obverses as utilized in the literature of William Faulkner, Margaret Mitchell, and Flannery O’Connor.

I start with Faulkner’s Southern Renaissance novel *The Sound of the Fury* in order to establish the mainstream (thus, patriarchal) use of these archetypes. Split into four sections with four different narrators, the novel interrogates absences: the absence of the formerly wealthy

Compson family's fortune (i.e., money earned while operating a slave-dependent plantation), the absence of Old Southern values in this reluctantly New Southern environment, and most importantly the absence of only daughter Caddy Compson, whose exile following her illegitimate pregnancy and refusal to marry affects each member of the family in different but equally impactful ways. Each Compson sibling (there are four; in order of descending age: Quentin I, Caddy, Jason IV, and Benjy) gets a section except for Caddy; we only see her through her brothers' and Mammy-figure Dilsey's eyes, and each brother needs different things from her. Mentally disabled Benjy needs her as a perfect, compassionate, sexless mother; although he understands very little, he seems to intuitively connect Caddy's absence with the birth of her sexuality, clinging to her wedding slipper and panicking when he sees her daughter Quentin II kissing a boy on the same swing where Caddy kissed Quentin II's father seventeen years ago (47). Codependent, sexually anxious, possibly homosexual Quentin I needs Caddy to be a pure, defenseless virgin who requires his manly, Southern protection, and when she reveals her pregnancy to him he anticipates her exile and tells their father, "I have committed incest I said Father it was I it was not Dalton Ames [Caddy's beau]," in an attempt to provoke their father to exile both children, so Quentin wouldn't have to live without her (79). Unlike his brothers, Jason IV needs Caddy to be a scapegoat, a target for his bitterness at his family's failures, a Bad Belle as Entzinger terms it: he opens his section with, "Once a bitch always a bitch, what I say," referring to both Caddy and her daughter, who's now under his charge (180). That Caddy fails to fulfill Quentin I's and Benjy's roles—Quentin's Belle, Benjy's Madonna Dixie—is complicated by her failure to fulfill Jason IV's role for her, too. Caddy Compson, a teenage mother who's barred from caring for her daughter but intervenes on her half from afar during the second half of the book, defies the good/bad woman (otherwise, Mary/Eve) binary that Faulkner establishes by

use of these archetypes. However, I must stress that Faulkner's subversion of these archetypes is not an act of feminist reclamation but instead a complex, dehumanizing analogy for the fall of the moralistic, white-dominated, romanticized Old South and the rise of the topsy-turvy, chaotic New South. Caddy's defiance of the Mary/Eve binary doesn't demonstrate her resilience or her ability to rise above the patriarchal South's constraining gender roles, but symbolizes the idealized, traditional gender roles of the Old South crumbling as the 20th century rambles on. Tearing down the pedestal upon which the Old South perched white women only to make a point about the chaos of the New South, instead of treating female characters as humans with intricate psychologies and enough agency to tell their own stories, is as problematic as building that pedestal in the first place.

Margaret Mitchell does something similar in her iconic novel *Gone With the Wind*. Whereas Faulkner subverts the Belle/Madonna Dixie archetypes to make a statement about the ruination of society, Mitchell offers a more complex, humanized, and relatable viewpoint by creating Bad Belle heroine and narrator Scarlett O'Hara. Strong-willed, charismatic, and pointedly more like her wild Irish father than her mother figures Ellen and Mammy would prefer ("There was something earth and vital and coarse about [Scarlett's] father that appealed to her... She did not realize that this was because she possessed these same [masculine] qualities, despite sixteen years of effort on the part of Ellen and Mammy to obliterate them,"), Scarlett's blend of her natural masculine personality with the feminine wiles of the Southern Belle—what patriarchal opinion would term "[her] worst qualities" like ambition, ruthlessness, and prioritizing material security over moralism—"enable her to survive in the fallen south," as Roberts says, rebuilding her family's wealth out of the ashes of her beloved Tara and

manipulating Frank Kennedy and later Rhett Butler into marrying her and supporting her endeavors (Mitchell 31, Roberts 106).

Actually, Rhett is the only man who sees beneath Scarlett's veneer of perfect Bellehood, and he points out her deceit in their first encounter after she accuses him of acting ungentlemanly: "'An apt observation,' he answered airily. 'And you, Miss, are no lady,'" (Mitchell 120). He repeats this claim several times throughout the novel, notably prefacing a speech where he links the disintegration of her Bellehood with his own machinations, which the narration then confirms ("The change had been so gradual... [Scarlett] did not realize that, with [Rhett's] encouragement, she had disregarded many of the sternest injunctions of her mother concerning proprieties, forgotten the difficult lessons in being a lady,") (Mitchell 247). The culmination of this motif occurs when, upon returning to Tara after the Civil War ends and finding her home barely standing and her mother dead, Scarlett reaches for whisky despite its masculine connotations: "'I know no lady drinks spirits... But today I'm no lady, Pa, and there is work to do tonight,'" (Mitchell 412). This bittersweet homecoming represents a precipice, a transitional space for Tara in terms of morphing from a peaceful homestead to a site of war, for the South in terms of coping with their defeat, and for Scarlett in terms of giving in to her natural masculinity, taking charge of her economic and material future in ways prohibited to good Belles, and dealing with her mother Ellen's death.

Scarlett's relationship with her mother is vital to understanding Mitchell's commentary on the fall of the Dixie Madonna and, on a metaphorical level, the fall of the Old South and the birth of the New South. At the beginning of the novel, Scarlett reveals through her narration that she depends upon and idolizes her mother as the guardian of traditional values, as an invincible doctor who stands in the way of the Angel of Death, and as the Virgin Mary herself, as the

epigraph of this paper demonstrates (Mitchell 60). Scarlett's faith—determinedly Catholic, thanks to her Irish father and French mother—hinges on Ellen's presence: Ellen leads the first rosary of the novel in the fourth chapter, while Scarlett reflects, "It was not the lifting up of [Scarlett's] heart to God that [calmed her], for religion went no more than lip deep in her. It was the sight of her mother's serene face upturned to the throne of God..." (Mitchell 68). Each subsequent time Scarlett prays to the Virgin Mary—or to anyone else—it's for her mother or by her mother's request, such as when Ellen asks Scarlett to pray for her younger sisters, sick with typhoid, and "Scarlett's conscience [smites] her this at last, for it had been months since she had been to church," (Mitchell 335). Once Ellen herself dies of typhoid, Scarlett abandons her faith both in Mary and in the Old South, which the Belle and Dixie Madonna figures emblemize; the last time Scarlett prays is immediately before learning of Ellen's death.

Perhaps the greatest evidence of Scarlett abandoning ideal Southern womanhood for good is her strained relationship with her own children. Far from embracing her new role of the Dixie Madonna, Scarlett resents her first two children as living evidence of her empty, intolerable marriages to Charles Hamilton and Frank Kennedy, and she primarily attends to her third child, Bonnie, as part of a rivalry between herself and Rhett to earn more of Bonnie's affection (Mitchell 891). She only realizes she cared for Bonnie all along after her death at age five—a death which, along with the miscarriage of her and Rhett's second child and the first pregnancy Scarlett actively wants, epitomizes Scarlett's failure as a Dixie Madonna (Mitchell 1022, 961). Unlike with Faulkner, this failure isn't necessarily a righteous punishment inflicted upon the scapegoat Dixie Madonna whose fall coincides with the collapse of the Old South; it's certainly a harbinger of change, but Scarlett's character development near the end of the novel, when she realizes she truly loves Rhett more than she needs him and determines to win him back

any way she can, portrays her looking toward the times to come. As Diane Roberts says, Ellen belongs to the past, and “the entrepreneurial, selfish, antimaterial Scarlett, unwilling to define herself through a husband or through children, represents the future,” (Roberts 191). Ironically, or perhaps fittingly, Scarlett resembles Mary more than Ellen does in terms of a transformative figure: Pelikan points out that Marian mystics value Mary for her metamorphosis from a poor Jewish girl into Queen of Heaven, and wish to recreate it for themselves (Pelikan 217). Scarlett does not win in the end, like Caddy, but unlike Caddy the reader senses that victory for Scarlett is around the corner.

If *Gone With the Wind* exists in a world of transition—Old South to New South, Belle to Bad Belle—then Flannery O’Connor’s stories exist firmly in the messy aftermath. Her women barely resemble the ghost of a Belle or Dixie Madonna, and moreover strip the Virgin Mary-esque righteousness from these archetypes in order to reveal them as the tools of sexist oppression men created them to be, instead investing divinity in alternative places, as this paper demonstrates by examining a short story, “Greenleaf.” While this story is plenty meaningful on its own, it’s useful and often enlightening to examine O’Connor’s relationship with religion and how her work reflects that. As a lifelong Catholic born in Georgia, it’s inevitable that her beliefs would impact her work, but O’Connor goes beyond simple subconscious allusions to the Biblical stories that shaped her character in her youth, and imbues her writing with enough religious symbolism that if one stripped away every element of a story that didn’t somehow relate to God, Christ, or Mary, one would have a complete parable. Reading her personal prayer journal hammers home the significance of Catholicism to all aspects of her life: she petitions God often, asking Him to augment her devotion (“Dear Lord please make me want You... to want You all the time, to think about You all the time...”) or give her a clearer mind when thinking about God

("I do not know You God because I am in the way. Please help me push myself aside,"), but many times throughout the prayer journal when she addresses God, she invokes the Virgin Mary, too (*A Prayer Journal*, O'Connor 36, 3). "Lord help me. Mother help me," "I ask God for a greater love for my Holy Mother and I ask her for a greater love for You," and "Thank you to my dear Mother whom I do love, Our Lady of Perpetual Help," are all examples of O'Connor connecting Mary with the divine and requesting her intercession, a common Catholic ritual (*A Prayer Journal*, O'Connor 36, 3, 12). O'Connor's relationship with Mary is interesting in that the expectations the Holy Mother's figure heaps upon girls and women don't crush O'Connor, but instead inspire reverence and penitence.

As Heartney demonstrated, the Virgin Mary's relevance to Catholic women's art is difficult to overstate. Although "Greenleaf" doesn't have an obvious Mary figure, it's perhaps her absence that communicates O'Connor's point best. O'Connor riddles her narrator, Mrs. May, with several fatal flaws: she envies and resents her neighbors the Greenleafs, the patriarch of whom has worked for her for fifteen years, for their success despite their perceived lack of effort or class; she's an ineffective matriarch, whose two sons' refusal to get married and take their legacy seriously frustrates her to the point of tears ("I work and I slave to keep this place [a cattle farm] for them and soon as I'm dead, [my sons will] marry trash and bring it in here and ruin everything,"); and she clings to Old Southern values, most notably the classist idea that the rich are God's favorites and the poor are leeches who refuse to work hard enough to be worthy of God's attention, until the end (*Collected Works*, O'Connor 551, 505). O'Connor makes this last flaw the crux of the story: Mrs. May, elitist and atheist (in response to witnessing Mrs. Greenleaf's passionate prayers while kneeling on the forest floor, "Mrs. May thought the word, Jesus, should be kept inside the church building... She was a good Christian woman with a large

respect for religion, though she did not, of course, believe any of it was true,”), clashes with Mr. Greenleaf, humble and godly, about killing his sons’ bull which had wandered onto her property (*Collected Works*, O’Connor 506). The bull’s best understood as a Christ figure. The harbinger of mystery, violence, and superstition as well as for Mrs. May a symbol of Old Southern gentility giving way to New Southern trashiness (she worries about the bull breeding her cows and damaging their pedigrees), O’Connor positions the bull as the inciting incident as well as the center of the plot line into order to privilege him as a special symbol; O’Connor draws as much attention to him as if she’d painted him red (*Collected Works*, O’Connor 504). She encodes this symbol with Christ-like imagery in the following ways: she describes him in his first appearance as wearing a wreath around his horns “where it looked like a menacing prickly crown;” Mrs. May’s first reaction to Mrs. Greenleaf’s “guttural agonized voice” calling for Jesus is, “The sound was so piercing that she felt as if some violent unleashed force had broken out of the ground and was charging toward her,” which is excellent foreshadowing for my next point; and, by far most significantly, the last two images of the story both invoke religious imagery seen in visual art such as the *pietà* motif (Mary cradling post-crucifixion Christ in her lap) and Mary whispering in Christ’s/God’s ear as an intercessor between the human and the divine, respectively (*Collected Works*, O’Connor 502, 506, 523, 524). First is:

“[Mrs. May] looked back and saw that the bull, his head lowered, was racing toward her... and the bull had buried his head in her lap, like a wild tormented lover, before her expression changed. One of his horns sank until it pierced her heart... She had the look of a person whose sight has been suddenly restored but who finds the light unbearable,” (*Collected Works*, O’Connor 523).

Following immediately on the tails of that image is the second, which is the very last sentence of the story: “[Mrs. May] did not hear the shots [which killed the bull] but she felt the quake in the huge body as it sank, pulling her forward on its head, so that she seemed... to be bent over whispering some last discovery into the animal’s ear,” (*Collected Works*, O’Connor 524). Although one could form a secular interpretation of “Greenleaf” about class and the New South, O’Connor’s purposeful evocation of Marian imagery lends the story a whole new dimension of meaning. With this motif, O’Connor comments upon faith and motherhood in the New South in a new way, while communicating with foundational texts like the ones this paper analyzed previously. Although O’Connor punishes Mrs. May for failing to align with the ideal of Southern motherhood much like Faulkner punishes Caddy Compson, O’Connor’s commentary transcends Faulkner’s misogyny by emphasizing that Mrs. May’s sin wasn’t rejecting the role of Dixie Madonna, but was embracing it as a way to perpetuate in some small way the extinct culture of the Old South, most notably its secular purpose of reinforcing Southern patriarchy and classism. In other words, while Faulkner condemns Caddy for refusing to align with the Old Southern standard of motherhood, O’Connor kills Mrs. May for clinging to that standard and assuming divinity lies in money, land, stoicism, etc., instead of in prayer, penitence, humility, and passion. In this way, O’Connor creates a new standard, a more literal Dixie Madonna who honors the legacy of the Virgin Mary more than it exploits her image to maintain patriarchy—for, as O’Connor illustrates by ending her story with reversed Marian images (especially the reverse *pietà*, wherein the Mary figure dies and the Christ figure survives), Mrs. May’s fatal flaw was being so unlike Mary that her Christ figure had to kill her to make her a worthy Mother. Fittingly, O’Connor’s new standard frames Mary as a tool of empowerment, a way to access God and dwell in divinity regardless of social status.

“Greenleaf” is just one of O’Connor’s many stories in which she explores this new Southern womanhood ideal; of interest is “Revelation,” wherein a brusque, pimpled girls’ college student throws a book at the narrator (who, like Mrs. May, parodies the Old Southern Dixie Madonna) and commands, “Go back to hell where you came from, you old warthog,” after the narrator verbally thanks Jesus for making her a middle class woman instead of lower class (*Collected Works*, O’Connor 646). The girl’s name is Mary Grace, as in, “Mary, full of Grace...”

Faulkner’s other novels also contain more commentary on failed Dixie Madonnas. Although *Gone With the Wind* is Margaret Mitchell’s only published book, its criticism of the Belle—especially its ironic status as the foundational text from which contemporary Southern culture understands Bellehood—and the Dixie Madonna is more complex than this paper could concisely express. Similarly, the topic of Black Southern womanhood and slavery’s relationship with the idolization of the white woman deserves such consideration as to comprise its own paper. While Mitchell canonized the Bad Belle, Faulkner set the standard for the fallen Dixie Madonna (Roberts describes Faulkner as part of the “mass culture and literature that suggested white southern womanhood had fallen very far from the pedestal,”), and O’Connor defied them both in her brutal explorations of the difference between respectable women and holy women, god-studied women and godly women, defined not by their relationships with men but by the authenticity of their connection to the Virgin Mary, and thus God (Roberts 190). O’Connor frankly discusses what Faulkner buried beneath misogyny and Mitchell hid behind Scarlett’s fluttering eyelashes and velvet dresses: if one fails to change according to a new environment, in this case citizens of the Old South struggling to comprehend the New South, one dies, literally and spiritually.

That Southern authors used and continue to use the Virgin Mary—well known for adapting to one of the most drastic upheavals in Christian history, being a virgin mother—as a tool of sexist oppression, a figure of empowerment, and in both cases a standard for ideal womanhood wouldn't surprise her, as the Daughter of Zion, accustomed to her role as humanity's representative and the bridge between the mundane and the divine. Her role won't diminish any time soon, and even if Southerners eventually choose a different figure against which to judge women, Mary's impact on the South's history of religion and culture is impossible to erase. We can only hope, as she would have hoped, that as time progresses and the New South becomes just the South, she symbolizes less patriarchal tradition and more women's strength and resilience in the fight for liberation.

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