The Beguiled (Focus Features, 2017)

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1 In the opening sequence of Sofia Coppola's *The Beguiled*, the camera pans slowly down through the top of a canopy of oak trees, their branches dripping with Spanish moss. When it reaches the trunks, the camera zooms out to gradually reveal the dirt path they line and down which a young girl saunters. A child of about twelve or so, she hums a melody that hovers hauntingly in this secluded, bucolic space. The persistent, pulsing buzz of cicadas fills the air, and the faint but distinctive sounds of rifle fire echo in the background, a distant and vaguely ominous metronome that measures the rhythm of her song. Mist—presumably smoke from those distant rifles—rolls through the trunks of the oaks. The scene is incredibly atmospheric, yet it also serves as a very pointed metaphor for what is really the film's central concern: the diffuse and sometimes impalpable ways that men's actions can seep into the everyday lives of women.

2 This metaphor comes into sharper focus as the scene continues. A flash of text at the bottom of the screen tells us that the setting is 1864 Virginia, three years into the Civil War. The young girl, Amy (Oona Laurence), is foraging for mushrooms when she discovers an injured Union soldier named Corporal John McBurney (Colin Farrell), whom she reluctantly agrees to bring back to the Farnsworth Seminary for Young Ladies. There are no men about, Amy tells McBurney, and "the slaves left"; now, all that remain are headmistress Martha Farnsworth (Nicole Kidman), teacher Edwina Morrow (Kirsten Dunst), and five students. Though Martha's initial instinct is to tie a blue cloth to the gate to alert Confederate soldiers of a captured enemy in their midst, the students agree that "the Christian thing to do" is to at least make sure he does not die first. Instead, they nurse his leg wound and let him convalesce. At first, McBurney is to the girls a mere curiosity, an unfamiliar masculine energy that permeates their wholly feminine space. Martha reminds McBurney, "You are not a guest here. You're but a most unwelcome visitor, and we do not propose to entertain you." However, as his stay at the Farnsworth Seminary carries on, McBurney's masculine energy proves insidious, stirring the girls' erotic desires, enflaming jealousies, and wreaking havoc on the school's previously peaceful, all-female dynamic.

3 A.O. Scott's review of *The Beguiled* for *The New York Times* calls the film "in part an essay on the nuances and paradoxes of femininity," and certainly, as in many of her other films

(*The Virgin Suicides*, 1999; *Lost in Translation*, 2003; *Marie Antoinette*, 2006), it is a very specific kind of femininity that interests Coppola—willowy, porcelain, and blonde. *The Beguiled*'s extant, Southern Gothic source material gives Coppola a notable stock image by which to further explore what Angelica Jade Bastién calls her "obsession" with "the beauty and fragility of white women": the Southern Belle. As Bastién writes in a review for *Vulture*, "Overwrought, opulent, and obsessed with their own lineage, they are an easy archetype to romanticize […] With their delicate disposition and ritualistic approach to beauty, they embody the decadence and sense of tradition that the South likes to believe about itself." This, of course, is assuming "you maintain a blinkered perspective on America's history with race"; as Bastién also points out, "Southern belles are cinema's clearest and most evocative demonstration of the ways white women's status is built upon the subjugation of black women." Sam Biddle similarly writes that, despite the "cheery name," Southern Belles were "a few very specific things: white, bourgeois, and almost certainly beneficiaries of the slave trade, married to the plantation owners whose wealth was secured through black chattel."

4 Since its premiere, *The Beguiled* has been criticized for its racial politics, lambasted as yet another instance of Hollywood whitewashing. To be sure, for a "narrative that relies on the existence of slavery as an institution" and that claims to interrogate "the gender-based power dynamics of the Confederacy," as Sonia Rao of *The Washington Post* observes, the conspicuous absence of any characters of color is significant. As Rao writes, many critics have remarked that *The Beguiled* "doesn't tell the whole story if black women are left out of the narrative altogether, considering the role their labor played in the Southern social hierarchy at the time." Others, however, disagree. Bastién wonders if *The Beguiled* could have offered a more thorough examination of Civil War history and "its lingering scars that affected black people most acutely," but recognizes that Coppola "isn't the filmmaker to do so." Rather, as critic Ira Madison has argued for *The Daily Beast*, we should be giving that platform to black filmmakers instead of "white people who don't fully grasp our stories and will portray them horribly." What's more, Bastién suggests, in purposely erasing the stories of black characters, "Coppola has also accidentally created a film that acts as an indictment of the very brand of womanhood she's been enamored with throughout her career—white, privileged, and unable to see the world beyond their own desires." Bastién cites an instance from the film in which Alicia (Elle Fanning) sluggishly works in the garden—petulantly dragging a hoe through the dirt and whining about

the difficulty of the task—and sees in this scene "the posturing of a young girl only recently aware of the labor black people were forced to do and the privilege she used to enjoy."

5 If *The Beguiled* offers a commentary on the cloistered egoism of privileged white women, then it is especially critical of toxic white masculinity. From the first moment Amy encounters McBurney in the woods, the threat of rape looms heavy. As she bends down to pluck a mushroom from the ground, she is startled when she catches a glimpse of McBurney, slumped against a neighboring oak, out of the corner of her eye. McBurney asks Amy if she is frightened. Of course she is; she now finds herself alone with a strange older man—a Union soldier, no less—in a remote part of the woods, too far removed from anyone who could hear her cries for help, should she need it. The other girls feel similarly threatened when Amy somehow manages to carry the now nearly unconscious McBurney back to the Farnsworth house. "He could be dangerous, Miss Martha," cautions one of the girls. "You know they rape every Southern woman they come across," says another, finally vocalizing Amy's earlier unspoken fear. Despite his seeming kindness, there is still a suggestion of his violent potential, seen when the camera cuts between a shot of Alicia and a shot of McBurney, sprawled prostrate on the porch and delirious in his agony, that shows his hand grabbing under the hem of her dress, subtly foreshadowing how that threat will continue to circulate for the duration of McBurney's stay.

6 It takes McBurney no time during his recovery to launch a one-man charm campaign on every single inhabitant of the Farnsworth Seminary, cleverly stoking the fires of romantic design in each one of them. He makes Amy feel important by telling her she is his best friend, plays the part of the helpless patient to Martha's ministering angel, and nurtures Edwina's vain fantasies of starting a new life. He knows fully well what he is doing, too. When invited to dine with Martha, Edwina, and the girls at the dinner table for the first time, he praises the apple pie they serve for dessert and all of them take this opportunity to clamor, and not delicately, for his attention: "I hope you like apple pie," Alicia demures, batting her eyelashes at McBurney. Edwina follows up by asking Alicia, "Is that my recipe?" "I picked the apples," Amy interjects. McBurney smirks, clearly amused by the display, but in that expression is also a show of smug accomplishment, like he is proud of himself for pitting these women against one another. Perhaps he believes his actions are innocuous or, more likely, if he knows the potential harm in what he is doing, he certainly does not care. To McBurney, the women of the Farnsworth Seminary are not people,

but objects, playthings, bodies to which he feels entitled while he passes the time during his recuperation.

7 Things change when Edwina—angry at discovering McBurney has visited Alicia one night instead of her—pushes him down the stairs, which knocks him unconscious and ruptures his wound. The commotion wakes everyone, and Martha (also anticipating a nighttime visit from McBurney) insists that McBurney will die unless they immediately amputate his leg. When he comes to and discovers his missing limb, the quiet threat that had been simmering under the surface explodes; McBurney becomes violent, accusing the women of punishing him out of spite because he chose Alicia over them. Yet even Alicia is not safe from McBurney's wrath, as she learns when he grabs her forcefully by the hair and demands she help him escape his locked room. In another scene, the women—now terrified of McBurney—sit around the table and discuss his intent to harm them when he comes loudly crashing into the kitchen on his crutches, shouting at them and threatening them with a revolver. Here is perhaps the best example of how Coppola's film takes on a decidedly female gaze, telling the story "through the filter of women's frustrated desires" (Coppola qtd. in Rickey). Through this perspective, Coppola's film then offers a careful meditation on the damages, both subtle and overt, that patriarchal society inflicts on the lives of women. McBurney and the ways in which he insinuates himself into the lives of Martha, Edwina, and their students, manipulating each one with cunning precision, embodies this concept on a small scale. The Civil War, hovering in the periphery, provides another example writ large, a symbol of the global systems that fight to maintain institutional hierarchies of race and gender that victimize and oppress women.

8 As I watched the conclusion of Coppola's film, wherein Martha and her students agree that their best recourse is to poison McBurney by feeding him some mushrooms—"some especially for him"—I could not help but be reminded of another notorious Southern Gothic cautionary tale of the gender-based power structures of the South, William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" (1930). I see in Coppola's film what feminist critic Judith Fetterly memorably saw in Faulkner's story: "a story of the patriarchy North and South . . . and of the sexual conflict within it" (35). Like Faulkner's story, Coppola's *The Beguiled* "is an analysis of how men's attitudes toward women turn back upon themselves; it is a demonstration of the thesis that it is impossible to oppress without in turn being oppressed" (35). Surely, in limiting her subject to white women, Coppola missed a great opportunity to explore how gender and race intersect and shape the

different ways individuals experience oppression. In one way or another, however, Coppola's *The Beguiled*—and the conversation it has provoked regarding gender, race, and representation—proves to be an important story for our current time.

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Kirsten Dunst, Elle Fanning, and Oona Laurence, Focus Features, 2017.