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► **To cite this version:**

Emmeline Gros. ”Hiding in Plain Sight: The Vanishing Male Figure in Gone With the Wind.”. Dixie Matters: New Perspectives on Southern Femininities and Masculinities. Ed. Urszula Niewiadomska-Flis. Studies in Literature and Culture. Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL (KUL Publishers) 10 (2013): 173-95., 2013. <hal-01816142>

**HAL Id: hal-01816142**

**<https://hal.science/hal-01816142v1>**

Submitted on 12 Sep 2018

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# HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT: THE VANISHING MALE FIGURE IN *GONE WITH THE WIND*

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*“It is precisely because the Southern aristocracy (was) at the end of  
the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth,  
[a] dying culture that (its) members were held to  
increasingly rigid definitions of gentility.  
The codes that governed their social worlds had to be laid bare  
so that they could be more easily adhered to and enforced.  
However, when such codes are so clearly articulated,  
aristocratic power becomes demystified and therefore vulnerable;  
class-and/or race-based ascendancy, when exposed as artifice,  
can no longer claim its power is a product of natural or moral order.  
In short, when you make a social code hard and fast,  
social roles become command performances.  
The script becomes both more readable and more reproducible—  
and a greater temptation for rule-breakers and rebels”*

—(CROWELL 19).

While Judith Butler’s observation that “gender is an identity tenuously constructed in time ... through a stylized repetition of acts” (2501) has been widely discussed, the extent to which the performative nature of gender identities may be addressed in a “masculine” context has received less attention. In the field of southern studies in particular, representations of masculinity have, it seems, (until the last few years or so), attracted far less commentary than studies dealing with slaves or free blacks or with representations of rebel(le)s and jezebels, perhaps because, as the editors of *Constructing Masculinity* put it, “[w]hite heterosexual masculinity has traditionally been structured as the normative gender and thus taken for granted” (Berger, Wallis, and Watson 2). It is in this sense, John Mayfield suggests, that “we know

quite a bit about [southern] women by looking at how they defined themselves in relation to men [and] we know much about slaves and free blacks based upon how they defined themselves in relation to white men,” while deploring that “patriarchy serves almost as a mathematical constant here, something by which other points can be calculated” (xiv).<sup>1</sup>

Not surprisingly maybe, much work on theorizing and analyzing white hegemonic masculinity takes it as a starting point that hegemonic masculinity and whiteness have retained their powers as signifiers and normative practices because they are *invisible*. As Sally Robinson explains, the argument goes “one cannot question, let alone dismantle, what remains invisible from view” (1). Such a theoretical approach, of course, not only naturalizes men, but also contributes to the replication of a specific ideology of gender; one that relies on clearly-established (if not always stable) gender roles, differences and binaries and that allows for the markedness—and thus scrutinization—of some categories (women, blacks, black rapists, etc.) while encouraging the crystallization of others. In the plantation South, “beaux,” “cavaliers,” “patriarchs,” planters, or gentlemen came to be emulated as the ideal of manhood. The assumption that a white man represented a universal, ahistorical, and disembodied model of manhood obviously froze the meaning of southern white masculinity; in turn enshrining, as McPherson notes, “certain Souths and certain southerners while forgetting others” (5). Southern men (like so many men elsewhere), to use Kimmel’s formulation, have thus remained the “invisible gender. Ubiquitous in positions of power, men are invisible to themselves” (*The History of Men* 5).

Of course, “(race and gender) invisibility is ... a luxury. Only white people in our society have the luxury not to have to think about race every minute of their lives. And only men have the luxury to pretend that gender does not matter” (Kimmel, *Gendered* 7). As David Savran notes, far from being universal, “masculinity and femininity are always historically contingent, always in the process of being reimagined and redefined according to changing material conditions” (8). Accordingly, he adds, gendered identity, precisely because it is so susceptible to change, is “of all identifications the one most subject to intensive social pressures, the most anxiety-ridden, the most consistently imbricated in social, political, and economic negotiations, and thus the most sensitive barometer of culture” (8). Gender, in other words, matters and it is thus necessary to observe masculinity—like femininity—in action as performance, for “gender, like time and space, is continually negotiated, continually in the act of becoming ...” (Cohen & Wheeler xiii).<sup>2</sup>

Heeding Kimmel's caution, my line of argument will attempt to problematize this doxa of invisible/visible masculinity, using the Civil War in the South as an identity-shattering "marker" that, I believe, can make masculinity "visible" in ways that can be both progressive and reactionary. In other words, and rather than approaching masculinity as the norm that "goes unanalyzed and therefore, operates implicitly and oppressively" (Dinshaw 72), the present study will set out to revisit southern men's experiences from a gendered perspective and to offer a discussion of gender that will proceed to a (de)construction of white, invisible, normative masculinities, trying to uncover what Michael Kimmel has called "invisible," or "genderless," masculinity, and study men "as men."

Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* provides a particularly fruitful ground for gender analysis, especially as both the time of the narrative (pre-Civil War times) and the time of composition (1936) appealed to strong imageries of masculinity, i.e. the effective display of "visible" masculine qualities, such as honor, courage, self-control, mastery, etc. Of course, to wonder why Southern plantations emerged as the regretted lost Garden of Eden or to ask why the confederate hero of the South was translated into such mythic status is to enter vexed territory. The simplest explanation, however, may involve the collective response to the new rugged individualism and capitalism of the era. With the "shifting cultural and intellectual climate of the 1890s" and later, the transition to an urban economy and the pressures of a newly modernized society—which Nina Silber described in terms of a "masculinity crisis in America" (166) and Amy Kaplan defined as the reconstruction of masculinity that took place at the turn of the century and beyond—the allure of a more stable patriarchal order is not hard to imagine, perhaps especially since the South had been defeated and had come to seem forever lost. The Civil War veteran in particular fitted the role perfectly. As critic Maurice Thompson explains, "the return to romance is simply a young, strong, virile generation pushing aside a flabby one. The little war we had with Spain did not do so much for us; the thing was already done by our schools, churches, gymnasiums, out-door sports; the war acted simply as a faucet through which our vigor began to act ... a return to a healthier, more authentic American past" (1920).

It is thus not too difficult to imagine why such figures of masculinity (the veteran, the chivalric hero, or the gentleman) would unconsciously or consciously present vectors of optimism by proposing a reassuring worldview when circumstances on the home front (and abroad) were not so clement. Such tales, by depicting an illusory time when manners were seen as being more refined and more civilized linked the

private psyche of the listener/reader to the public enthusiasm for tales of heroism and virile manhood in an age that offered little possibility for heroism, honor, and respectability.<sup>3</sup> Predictably, critics have attributed the immense success of the novel to *GW*'s assistance in the maintenance and endurance of the Old South's ideological structure, encouraging readers and viewers alike to look away from the changes of the South and to find refuge in the fantasy of "fair ladies and cavaliers" as the introductory lines to the film adaptation would put it. Emulating the hegemonic ideal of manhood and eschewing the ambiguity that is to be found in the narrative, critics have therefore often posited men (like women)—Ashley and Rhett in particular—on either side of a masculine spectrum, pitting the Confederate soldier against the Carpetbagger, the rascal against the queer, the new order against the old order, or as Nina Silber puts it, categorizing men along the lines of asexuality or bestial sexuality. Soft vs. hard masculinity, home vs. battlefield, here are some of the divisions that maintain the rightful order of southern society—or so it seems.

Yet, this order did not prevail—Mitchell suggests—because God created everything in its right place. There were, on the contrary, obvious ways of being accepted or validated as a "gentleman": becoming a member of the Ku Klux Klan, protecting women from black rapists, dueling, owning slaves, etc.; such were some of the imaginary characteristics conventionally associated with hegemonic masculinity; an ideal that became incredibly "public" and publicized during the reconstruction years when the region found itself at cross purposes (Connell 185). Writers and movie-makers alike served up their share of nostalgia. As Ann J. Bailey remarks,

today, we visualize the Confederate soldier in a certain way, for it is the one that Hollywood has reinforced in cinema for the last nine decades. It is the one that emerged when Southerners espoused the Lost Cause in the years following defeat. In spite of the revisionist histories of recent years, our image of the Confederate soldier still resembles Margaret Mitchell's famous fictional character of Ashley Wilkes. Men like Ashley Wilkes who bore defeat with honor and dignity, came to symbolize the gallant cavalier of the defeated South. (xii)

Rita Felski contends that nostalgia is a typically masculine affliction. If such is the case, we may better understand why the longing for the gallant cavalier of the South appealed to Hollywood-film makers. For Margaret Mitchell, however, the treatment of southern manhood seems far more complicated than this. When reading the novel, one may indeed assume that Ashley (of Southern aristocratic origin) would be recognized as the evident (seemingly natural) bearer of true masculinity. This is not

the case, though, as Ashley's identity (and the formulation of an ideal of hegemonic masculinity) becomes highly problematized. Of course, from the very first chapter (actually from the very first line of the novel), the novel seems incredibly concerned with Scarlett's problematic womanhood; for, after all, how could readers reconcile the traditional southern Belle with the vision that Scarlett "was not beautiful"? Yet, the center of attention quickly shifts and the Tarleton twins' opening remarks soon provide Mitchell's readers with masculine looking-glasses through which one can also observe masculinity in action and performance in Clayton County, Georgia: "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" (5). And the twins who "excel" in these "accomplishments" (5) both think in terms of gender, thus giving evidence to some of the values held in high esteem for southern gentlemen (honor, strength, duty, among others).

Seen through the lens of the twins, hegemonic masculinity is in crisis (to say the least): the pure-blooded gentleman Ashley Wilkes, the young man living at Twelve Oaks, is to marry his cousin Melanie Hamilton, a plain and gentle belle from Atlanta, but Wilkes is too feminine and does not fit the twins' definition of masculinity, because he is "kind of queer about music and books and scenery" (22). By contrast, Able (as his first name suggests) is regarded as a "real man [because] the best shot in the Troop" (24). "Shooting straight" and "riding well", we understand, become linchpins to an ideological structure linking gender construction with class and masculine performance. More than offering a simple comment on Ashley's queer performance—one that clearly disavows an heteronormative masculinity predicated on phallic mastery—the opening of the novel here purposefully confuses the definition of the gentleman: Able Wynder, while not a gentleman, rises to honor; by contrast, Ashley Wilkes, who is from gentleman-stock, fails at being recognized as a "real" man. In so problematizing the "norm" and the validation of masculinity in the Civil War South, the twins' definition moves away from genteel masculinity as being a "universal" innate quality granted by blood inheritance. Masculinity is, in the twins' perception, "abled", constructed or confirmed, showing how the gentleman figure in *Gone with the Wind*—much like the not-so "beautiful" Scarlett who, from the very first line, has made gender visible as a cultural category—has become a highly problematic figure itself.

Perhaps even more symptomatic of Mitchell's dismantling of traditional masculinity is the fact that ideal manhood seems to cultivate a rather hazardous invisibility in the novel. The trope of the southern gentleman does indeed show signs of fading

out: Ashley, “in his faded, patched uniform, his blond hair bleached by summer suns” (365) and with his “long golden moustache drooping about his mouth, cavalry style, that was the last touch needed to make him the perfect picture of a soldier” pales in contrast to Rhett who is “dark of face, swarthy as a pirate . . . [whose] eyes were as bold and black as any pirate’s appraising a galleon to be scuttled or a maiden to be ravished” (135). Just as important is the fact that, in its momentary visibility, it is whiteness—not Rhett’s blackness—which shows itself to be unfinished and unformed. As Elizabeth Young suggests, Rhett’s body seems indeed more natural than Ashley’s, and it also comes to suggest that it has more life, emotion, sensuality and spirituality: “Ashley—or ‘Ashtray’— offers only the burned out cinders of whiteness. Ashley’s pallid skin literalizes the Confederate death in the presence of emancipated black vitality” (Young 254). Obviously enough, the fact that white bodies cannot hold up to black suggests that what has been the traditional privilege of white masculinity—its closeness to a disembodied “invisible” norm—has now become a liability.

It could also be that this ideal is in constant struggle with duties, pressures, personal desires and societal expectations, and has itself become an abstraction. By fitting into the suit (that Rhett Butler disavows), Ashley’s performance supports and reassures long-established ideas about what and who is “gentlemanly” in southern culture, and thus the uniformed Ashley is a figure at the core of a static cultural system based on the assumption of reliable patterns of signification. Ashley, in Scarlett’s eyes, becomes the romantic exaggeration of the Old South, “the perfect knight, the living embodiment of stability” (Silber 345). Scarlett’s infatuation for Ashley is, on that note, clearly linked to his departure for war and his wearing of the uniform, as she sees him “dressed in gray broadcloth with a wide black cravat setting off his frilled shirt to perfection” (34). Later, when he comes home during the war, Scarlett has spent weeks searching for “incidents to remember . . . from which she could extract every morsel of comfort . . . dance, sing, laugh, fetch and . . . follow [Ashley] with [her] eyes so that each line of his erect body . . . will be indelibly printed on [her] mind” (374-5).

Supported by an adoring and objectifying female gaze, Ashley has thus become a shadowy (but paradoxically iconic) presence on the southern scene: at once invisible in the “pretty suit of clothes” that Scarlett, as she admits later, “fell in love with [and] made him wear . . . whether it fitted him or not” (1419) and newly visible, in his uniform of the Confederate army, as the “enemy” of change and political annexation. Because he has joined the army, Ashley communicates not only the

male-dominated institution of the army, thus contributing to a homogenized masculine gender identity, but also an image of traditional masculinity, which requires, as Nathan Joseph has noted, the same suppression of self to exist within its narrowly-defined boundaries (65).

In such instances, the focus on parts of Ashley's uniform or body (his blond hair, his blue eyes) contributes here to equating male representation with a sort of fetishism, to what Laura Mulvey reads as "the part of a fragmented body [that] destroys ... the illusion of depth demanded by the narrative," or by the natural conditions of human perception. "It gives," she adds, "flatness, the quality of a cut-out or icon rather than verisimilitude" (34). Ashley's uniformed body, we understand, is one that cannot be escaped. As Melanie reminds Scarlett: "Betray his [Ashley's] own Confederacy by taking that vile oath and then betray his word to the Yankees! I would rather know he was dead at Rock Island than hear he had taken that oath. I'd be proud of him if he died in prison. But if he did that, I would never look on his face again. Never! Of course, he refused" (396). And when Scarlett asks Rhett: "If it were you, wouldn't you enlist with the Yankees to keep from dying in that place and then desert?" Rhett answers "Of course," and explains that a man like Ashley would never do it, precisely because "He's a gentleman" (396). As Melanie and Rhett say, Ashley's deeds must match his promise and the ideal of the South. Sacrificing his own doubts for the cause, Ashley is, in this sense, a failed Rhett because he seems frozen in an image of "perfect" manhood that he cannot and will not compromise. The hero (in the purely structural sense of the "major role") is a monomaniac who is seen valuing honesty, forthrightness and integrity over the deceitful pretense of compromising oneself through play-acting. As such, the visualization of Ashley, the Civil War soldier, not only testifies to the apotheosis of heroic masculinity, but also the illusion of a manhood made hyperbolic by the Civil War.

If true genteel masculinity is here thought to proceed from Ashley's visible body, in such cases, however, Connell warns us that "with so much emphasis on the signifier, the signified [often] tends to vanish" (46). Condemned to appearances and surfaces, Ashley, we soon realize, can never be pinned down to a single identity. One reads that "[h]e was courteous always, but aloof, remote. No one could ever tell what he was thinking about, Scarlett least of all" (35). Ashley, to borrow an image from physics, has become fully translucent, allowing "light" to shine through. His, however, is not a truly detailed image. In this liminal space of in-betweenness, or as an interval between what is seen and what remains inaccessible, translucence is, by definition, the site of a certain tension between transparency and opacity. In

the South's faith in transparency/authenticity arising from an anxious desire for the immediate (and unquestioned) understanding of Ashley, such a belief relies on a problematic model of lucidity itself. Perfect transparency, Mitchell suggests, remains a utopian illusion. Ashley is thus found hiding in plain sight, "so handsomely blond, so courteously aloof, so maddeningly boring with his talk about Europe and books and music and poetry and things ... —and yet so desirable" (35).

Perhaps even more troubling is the fact that the ideal Ashley appears as the ultimate invisible man, covering himself with personae, as if refusing to own or inhabit his own "sexed" body, as if ready to suspend his own masculinity. When Scarlett, for instance, begs him to leave with her, Ashley rejects her invitation:

"let's run away—leave them all! I'm tired of working for the folks. Somebody will take care of them. There's always somebody who takes care of people who can't take care of themselves. Oh, Ashley, let's run away, you and I. We could go to Mexico—they want officers in the Mexican Army and we could be so happy there. I'd work for you, Ashley. I'd do anything for you. You know you don't love Melanie—" ...

"There's only one way you can help me," she said dully, "and that's to take me away from here and give us a new start somewhere, with a chance for happiness. There's nothing to keep us here."

"Nothing," he said quietly, "nothing—except honor." (738)

In rejecting Scarlett's proposal, Ashley rejects one masculine role (that of lover or husband to Melanie) to play another (the widower and bachelor). In both roles—that of the husband and that of the bachelor/widower—Ashley aligns himself with depersonalized icons in history. Actually, as a married man, he has already embraced the status of bachelor—at least "technically" or sexually since Melanie should never get pregnant. After Melanie's death, the end of the novel reveals that Ashley seems likely to play the widower-bachelor for the rest of his life. The text opens here a space of alternative masculinity, in which Ashley rewrites masculinity in non-phallic terms: refusing or unable to engage in his work, refusing to engage sexually in emotional relationships, refusing to engage in society or to accept responsibilities, Ashley is thus portrayed as putting off the business of being a man.

If the unmanned Ashley does indeed convert his manhood into a mythic and disembodied status—that of the untouched, uncorrupted, and even unsexed gentleman (Ashley is already, as his feminine/masculine name suggests, androgynous)—*Gone with the Wind* obviously interrogates the assumption that the "dominant," as Sally Robinson names it, only has interest in remaining non-performative, unmarked

and invisible. For indeed if no one can actually enter Ashley's consciousness, readers, however, do enter the consciousness of Melanie or Scarlett, who capture the vulnerability of "ideal" manhood and take for granted Ashley's centrality. As readers realize, it is the women who often act the chivalrous, even masculine, part of guarding Ashley's reputation or defending their lover's mythical stature. Melanie, for instance, plans to have Scarlett protect Ashley while keeping him ignorant of the protection, for the sake of his "masculine pride." Melanie and Scarlett, indeed, "sealed the bargain that the protection of Ashley Wilkes from a too harsh world was passing from one woman to another and that Ashley's masculine pride should never be humbled by this knowledge" (1411). Silber concludes that "because the code insists that manliness is a product and result of woman's weaknesses and childishness, men are excruciatingly vulnerable to women who are strong" (349). Scarlett, perhaps more than any other women in the novel, indirectly acknowledges Ashley's fragility as she almost convincingly argues:

Of course, he wasn't any good as a farmer. Ashley was bred for better things, she thought proudly. He was born to rule, to live in a large house, ride fine horses, read books of poetry and tell negroes what to do. That there were no more mansions and horses and negroes and few books did not alter matters. Ashley wasn't bred to plow and split rails. No wonder he wanted to leave Tara. (969)

The repetition of "of course" (found in Melanie's, Rhett's and Scarlett's discourses whenever they mention Ashley) resonates throughout the text, suggesting a need to mobilize a discourse resisting the apparent inessentiality of the masculine model while at the same time reinforcing this inessentiality. As seen through the lens of J. L. Austin's discussion of performative utterance, Ashley becomes a gentleman because of the "secure" discourse of those who view him and describe him as such. Sentences about Ashley's centrality make themselves true, bringing about their own truths. These do not simply assert a pre-existing identity or essence; rather, they create an entirely new social reality. In other words, speaking the "gentleman" (through the voices of Melanie, Rhett, or even Scarlett) does not only passively describe a given reality, but the words used to talk about Ashley change the reality they are describing: "of course," in these instances, does not simply validate the gentleman but performs it (and brings it to life) at the same time. The focus, in this case, is not simply on the illusion of a masculine performance but on the feminine attempts to use this illusion of consensus—masculine pride—as a strategy of

masculine representation that depends on a fable, a counterfeiting of manliness. And so we have two sides of Ashley's character apparently saying the opposite (but showing well the fabricated character of masculinity in the novel): Ashley performing a socially instituted masculinity—by wearing the uniform of the confederate forces and thus dissimulating masculine doubts, dependence and weakness—while being paradoxically utterly divorced from the ideas of pretense, faking, hypocrisy, and ultimately with associations of weakness and fragility.

The result is not just a portrait of a strong matriarchal world but a truly inverted heroic narrative, one with which Mitchell rewrites the script of southern chivalric masculinity. Discussing Teresa de Lauretis' *Alice Doesn't*, Sally Robinson comments that, in traditional narrative, the hero is indeed almost inevitably constructed as masculine whereas the objects and/or obstacles marking heroic quests, and even the backdrop itself, for that matter, are more often than not defined as female. It is the Sphinx, after all, that lies in Oedipus' way on the road to Thebes, just as the Medusa is presented as the antagonist of Perseus (3). In Mitchell's novel, the male hero of history—Ashley—retreats to the back of the stage, while those figures who would ordinarily serve as his supporting players—his wife, Scarlett, etc.—step to the front. In bringing about this reversal between hero and supporting players and/or backdrop, the narrative highlights and problematizes the relationship between public and private, the world of historical action and the world of domesticity, or, one might say, the frontlines and the home front. Ultimately, and while being pushed into an increasingly male world (that of the army), Ashley is pushed into a “no man's world,” both as an icon (the gentleman) and as a “man/farmer/patriarch” who must learn how to live as a man and express maleness when his traditional models of manly being have lost their validity (Parker 89). Simultaneously, female agency, Mitchell suggests—because it constructs itself as passive and dependent on masculine control—might in turn gain autonomy and expose masculine prowess as a sham. One thus risks reifying the formula in which the subject is always male and the object/other necessarily female, a gendered dyad which, as the novel exemplifies, may reveal a deeper suspicion that the model itself may be merely functional rather than descriptive of inherent truth. After all, if men, like Ashley, were indeed falling from grace and did lose their influence, the narrative here shows well how masculinity is captured, re-constructed and re-appropriated by women; in turn revealing how the crisis of manhood entails a restorative impulse to safeguard male privilege, even against male's will!

And here appears the paradox of invisibility in *Gone with the Wind*: on the one hand, (and to use Wan-Chu Kao's phrasing here), it confers cultural privileges and mystique on certain performances of gender (*Medieval Review*). Yet, on the other hand, invisibility (or translucence), Mitchell emphasizes, may also signify powerlessness and erasure. At the same time, and because visibility also involves the self and the community, its meanings are subject to appropriation and debate. In this fluid space, therefore, the visible does not necessarily signify the powerful. As a consequence, if there is an "ocular" logic to gender, Mitchell suggests, it is one that awards the most talented manipulator of (in)visibility. Read in this light, dominant masculinity might well pass itself off as universal and invisible, precisely because it is what everyone already knows.

When Ashley is departing for the battlefield, Scarlett, for instance, recalls "each detail of his dress, how brightly his boots shone, the head of a Medusa in cameo in his cravat pin" (34). In her realization of Ashley, however, Scarlett fails to recognize that the mythical reference to the Medusa is here akin to a masculine fear of castration and to the shield of Perseus, which was a mirror in which he could safely regard the face that otherwise turned men to stone. That it is Scarlett who notes this is significant, especially since the opening words of the novel are "Scarlett O'Hara was not beautiful" (3). According to the legend, the Medusa, a devotee to Athene and serving in her temple, was raped by Poseidon. For this reason, the angered Athene made this beautiful maiden into the strange figure with the snakes for hair whose gaze turned men to stone. The ensuing result is positive, since Ashley—turned into Perseus through reference to the Medusa—could be seen attempting to recuperate his own image—one that could resist Scarlett's (or even Melanie's) imprisoning gaze. Reduced to an icon-figure (and as the reference to the Medusa emphasizes), Ashley is defined in terms of the feminine gaze. Yet, here, the woman's gaze envisages nothing: Ashley is both highly visible as an object of fantasy and doubly invisible, since protected from the gaze through the cameo he is carrying and because his presence in the narrative is more ideological than substantial. His is a personal imagining of manhood rather than a truly human and substantial presence. In this case, Ashley has fully become both "visible" and "invisible". The invisibility gained through the guise of the taken-for-granted ideal of the southern knight lets Ashley escape women's punitive surveillance and explore the full performative potential of hiding in plain sight.

Such seems to be the lesson learnt by Rhett. This "deviant" other is not anchored to the soil—be it Tara, the plantation, or the culture and manners attached

to life as a plantation owner. Cast out without a penny and with his name “even stricken . . . from the family Bible,” Rhett “wandered to California in the gold rush of 1849 and thence to South America and Cuba” (311). If “the reports of his activities in these parts were none too savory,” (311) Rhett travels freely across the world, and seemingly appears and disappears at will, as his first appearance at Tara reveals: secretly listening to Scarlett’s profession of love to Ashley Wilkes in the library of the plantation, Rhett is seen hiding, then rising from the sofa. Although at first she believes he is a specter, Scarlett is forced to recognize that “he was real. He wasn’t a ghost” (15). As the third invisible person in the room and trained, as he willingly acknowledges, “from a long experience in eavesdropping,” Rhett can listen secretly while remaining unseen (15). Because she later portrays Rhett as the son of a landed aristocrat but also grandson of a sea captain who deserves the title of “pirate,” Mitchell even transforms the uncertainty of his being and origin into the source of his unrestrained autonomy.

And so we understand that the negotiation and play of (in)visibility emerge as crucial to the lives of the male characters that Mitchell depicts. In a system that has made gentlemen visible and visibly lacking, even Rhett, the self-proclaimed “deviant” rascal can play the part. This trickster figure is indeed perfectly able to fashion himself as a gentleman when needed, if only for his daughter Bonnie’s interest. As he tells Scarlett:

The O’Haras might have been kings of Ireland once but your father was nothing but a smart Mick on the make. And you are no better—But then, I’m at fault too. I’ve gone through life like a bat out of hell, never caring what I did, because nothing ever mattered to me. But Bonnie matters . . . . If I have to crawl on my belly to every fat old cat who hates me, I’ll do it. I’ll be meek under their coldness and repentant of my evil ways. I’ll contribute to their damned charities and I’ll go to their damned churches. I’ll admit and brag about my services to the Confederacy and, if worst comes to worst, I’ll join their damned Klan—though a merciful God could hardly lay so heavy a penance on my shoulders as that. And I shall not hesitate to remind the fools whose necks I saved that they owe me a debt. (1258)

As a matter of fact, the performance of deviant masculinity (i.e. the rules and patterns of expectations that are reproduced to structure meaningful social relationships) seems just as complicated as that of “genteel” masculinity. Indeed portrayed as one of these “scoundrels who masquerade under the cloak of the blockader for their own selfish gains,” as one of “these human vultures who bring in satins and

laces when [Confederate] men are dying for want of quinine,” or as one of these very “vampires who are sucking the lifeblood of the men who follow Robert Lee” (327-8), Rhett is also portrayed as a protecting and loving father, by the very “women who had heretofore believed that no woman was safe with him . . . . Even the strictest old ladies felt that a man who could discuss the ailments and problems of childhood as well as he did could not be altogether bad” (1276). Melanie suggests as much, when feeling “indignation at what she fancied was a gross injustice done to [Rhett]” (307).

The painting of the masculine body in this case suggests a sort of protean mutation, endlessly adapting to new circumstances and changing social environments. Of course, Rhett’s precarious position in between all fronts, the savaged and the civilized, the gentleman and the rascal, the feminized dandy and the womanizer, is also a prerequisite for his role as the founder of a new society that fuses old oppositions into a new vision. And while the novel narrates the contradictions involved in what it means to be (perceived as) a gentleman and reveals how versions of southern manhood are posited as hegemonic, contested or (re)negotiated, the novel does not seem committed to resolving these incompatible, anxiety-generating tensions. The conflict in the representation of gender (and ultimately of who is who in southern society) and what it means to be “hegemonic” or “other” is indeed never truly satisfactorily resolved. As a result, our concern when reading *Gone with the Wind* should be less with the confusion implicit in these scenes than with the possibilities of masculinity that these scenes of gender performance open up and close off.

Most importantly, the plurality of gender identification—Rhett is at the same time pirate, rascal, father, husband—may allow men, Mitchell suggests, to suspend traditional masculinity in favor of an improvisational freedom to (re)construct a male self from a range of possibilities, thus escaping and possibly subverting prescribed identity constructions. Rhett, for example, deliberately chooses to embrace the self-proclaimed identity of a “rascal.” He tells Scarlett: “[c]ertainly I’m a rascal, and why not? It’s a free country and a man may be a rascal if he chooses” (309). In claiming to invent himself so, Rhett is seen asserting his self-created identity and assimilating new critiques while taking the weapons of his enemies and making them his own. In the Foucauldian sense, the body as a site of sociocultural inscription is not only made readable, but also rewritable according to Rhett’s own terms. Read in the light of Naomi Schor’s approach to male representation, Rhett’s strategy of proliferating images not only sets out “to ruin the foundation of man’s relationship to his own image” (123), but also, in attacking male representation and in refusing to follow the model of the noble warrior fighting for a cause he does not believe in, proceeds

to “attack patriarchy and its distributions of power” (126). The cumulative effect of such expressions as “I’m a rascal,” “I’m not,” and “he (Ashley) is a gentleman” is to point very clearly to Rhett’s wish to sever his self from the “universal.” Rhett also points to the need to rewrite masculinity’s assumed universality and inclusiveness, severing its complicities from all forms of power, especially the patriarchal.

Later, when Rhett’s daughter, Bonnie, falls off a pony and dies, Rhett mourns and cries, and is overcome with emotion, thus challenging the common sense notion that what is “masculine or normal” and what is “not masculine” are opposites. In this scene, Rhett Butler projects his conscious struggle with the “other” – generally gender-coded as the “feminine” – within himself, i.e. the father who is not afraid of showing his love and pain when his loved one dies. Multiplication, misrecognition, proliferation, and disguise are some of the operations to which manhood is subjected in the novel; operations that assist in the denaturalization of gender by revealing binary notions of gender to be artificial and contrived.

The fragmented (and deviant) body is also a site, Mitchell suggests, where you can recover the autonomy denied by increasing domestication and feminization. Indeed, the visualization of Rhett’s “morselized body” (to use Diane Sadoff’s phrase) obviously contributes to his remaining mostly unsupported by an adoring female gaze—the traditional supporting female gaze signaling, as we have seen, the containment of the feminine voice within the androcentric love narrative of patriarchy (Kucich and Sadoff 290). Melanie, for instance, stepping in the room of Rhett’s little girl, Bonnie, registers Rhett’s hairy and muscular arms in the following fashion:

The afternoon sun streamed in through the open window and suddenly she saw, as for the first time, how large and brown and strong his hands were and how thickly the black hairs grew along the backs of them. Involuntarily, she recoiled from them. They seemed so predatory, so ruthless and yet, twined in her skirt, so broken, so helpless . . . . He was so very large and male, and excessively male creatures always discomposed her. They seem to radiate a force and vitality that made her feel smaller and weaker even than she was. He looked so swarthy and formidable and the heavy muscles in his shoulders swelled against his white linen coat in a way that frightened her. It seemed impossible that she had seen all this strength and insolence brought low. And she had held that black head in her lap! (1347-51)

In this portrayal of a male body, it is no longer the visual that is registered here but the tactile, making it impossible for this male figure to remain fixed in a static

image, a stereotype or even a cliché. Naomi Schor explains that “the promotion of the tactile in the arts leads inevitably to an end of mastery,” since the male figure, in this case, appears as “its un-or-de idealized form, in its all-too human contingency” (129). The body here fosters resistance to the beauty/ugliness imposed by the scripts, ideals and imperatives of patriarchal manhood. In this sense, Rhett is thus found hiding in plain sight.

If Ashley’s body did carry a specific meaning—being imagined as a sort of blank slate for imprinting dominant social and cultural scripts—the status of the male body as a cultural product is very much at stake with Rhett as well. The problem, however, is not so much that such an approach ignores the body but that such an approach, as we have seen, functions as a totalizing process that operates on and through a material plane that is taken for granted. Rhett’s darkness, for instance, is etched on the deviant body. Rhett, of course, is not black but “his character embodies the image of black masculinity as primitive and sexually potent that framed much of white Southerners’ ideas about black Southern men” (Friend xviii). In this dynamic of racial borrowing, Rhett Butler thus functions as a racially marked subject in a white supremacist culture. In this functioning, however, Mitchell offers a radically new conception of white (thought to be unmarked) masculinity, for it is a masculinity that breaks away from discourses of manhood that were constructed in explicit opposition to the figure of the black savage. Marginalized masculinities here do not denigrate white heterosexual masculinity, but rather, coalesce with it. As a result, Rhett’s performance points to the demise of the reign of “exclusive” gender identities. Gender, it is suggested, is multiple and malleable.

In this way also, Mitchell’s depiction of the male body openly subverts traditional notions of (hetero)sexuality, which often reduce male sexuality to the penis and neglect the relevance of other bodily parts as well as the worlds of feelings to sexual/sensual intercourse (Brod 253). Since masculinity has traditionally been related to reason and the mind, and because the world of the body—as well as its sensations—has long been regarded as feminine (Seidler 11-12), man has remained largely estranged from his own body and sexuality, which he often reduces to the phallus. Rhett’s body—like Ashley’s—articulates the alternative of inhabiting morphologically masculine bodies, ones “which absent themselves from the line of paternal succession and ... in one way or another occupy the domain of femininity” (Silverman 389). Ultimately, then, male sexuality moves away from its traditional patriarchal function of reaffirming male subjectivity and Mitchell’s re-vision of phallocentric conceptions of sexuality, corporeality and (in)visibility/(un)markedness

might also be seen to contribute to the ongoing redefinition of patriarchal concepts of masculinity.

While Mitchell clearly offers a critical exploration of masculinity, she draws attention to the art of one's management of visibility within and without the household. Unmarked, hegemonic masculinity is always in danger of being exposed as a sham, and so, not only does *Gone with the Wind* point to the limits and inadequacy of ideal manhood, but it debunks the very category of "man" by privileging a metaphorical "no man's land"—in between the visible and the invisible, the gentleman and the deviant other, the feminine and the masculine. Of course, queering the binary oppositions that have structured traditional thinking about identity reaps a number of rewards: masculinity thus ceases to be patriarchy's in(di)visible monolith of unequivocal meaning (Brod and Kaufman). Secondly, turning a "sharp" eye to the notion of hegemonic masculinity, viewed (and defined by Raewyn Connell in *Gender and Power*) as the visible/invisible authority within, against, and from which all significant identities and identifications are made, also heralds a promising post-invisible, post-patriarchal gender order in which one can fully explore the styles and poses of masculinities in the changing South.

## E N D N O T E S

1. Such an approach is echoed by many other critics.
2. Using Watson's formulation here, "masculinity is not a solid, immovable construction. An individual does not guard one definitive gender position: from moment to moment, forces redictate, replace, and reimagine its reconstructing" (*Performing American Masculinities* 1).
3. On the shift in the meaning of masculinity, see Joseph Kett, *Rites of Passage:*

*Adolescence in America, 1790 to the Present* (New York: Basic, 1977); Joe Dubbert, *A Man's Place: Masculinity in Transition* (Eaglewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1979); Edward Anthony Rotundo, "Body and Soul: Changing Ideals of American Middle-Class Manhood, 1770-1920." *Journal of Social History* 16 (1983): 28-33; and Elliott Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1986).

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