

Business Ethos and Gender in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*

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Abstract

After the American Civil War, in the Southern agricultural states the rise of capitalist culture and the emergence of a peculiar business ethos in the wake of Reconstruction did not take place without conflicts. Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* dramatizes the outsets of these economic changes which were intertwined with gender aspects, all the more so, since the antebellum Southern system was built on the ideology of radical sexual differences. Scarlett O'Hara emerges as a successful businesswoman whose career mirrors the development of Atlanta to an industrial center. This aspect of the novel, however, is mostly silenced or marginalized in criticism. Now, with the help of the economic and social theories of Max Weber, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Jessica Benjamin, I am reading business and financial success in terms of rationality, irrationality, masculinity, femininity, and violence versus aggressiveness to sketch a portrait of a businessman.

Keywords: Gender, Economics, Binary Oppositions, Separate Spheres

"If [*Gone with the Wind*] is indeed propaganda, it is not for a return to plantation life and economy, but for the very marketplace, laissez-faire ethic which made Margaret Mitchell so popular" (Adams 59). This comment by Amanda Adams highlights the curious fact that the story of Scarlett O'Hara as she is becoming a successful business(woman) in Atlanta, which indeed constitutes the larger part of the narrative, has been always marginalized in academic and popular criticism. From 1936 on, when the novel was published, critical texts have been mostly preoccupied with the novel's disturbing female perspective, with the huge commercial success it has made, and later with its possible racist overtones.¹ A half-sentence by Malcolm Cowley, an early influential critic, which degrades the novel into "an encyclopedia of the plantation legend" (19), together with the film version of *Gone with the Wind* have obscured other possible readings and interpretations of the thousand-page long novel.

In my reading the Civil War and Reconstruction years split the narrative of *Gone with the Wind* into two parts, yet the story of the second half has been subjected to neglect and silence, while the interpretations of the first part eagerly determined the novel to be a compendium of the plantation myth. Accordingly, images and narratives of splits, doubles, and dichotomies are haunting *Gone with the Wind*. The novel is playing with binary oppositions and shows how their meanings are floating, how they are creating new images and myths, thus offering potential alternatives to rigid social and cultural conventions. The novel is as deeply embedded in the social and cultural context of the interwar years in America, as it represents and reflects—as a simulacrum—the social conditions of the Civil War and Reconstruction years.

Elaine Showalter's famous sentence according to which "the 1920s were feminism's awkward age" (105) well describes the social and political climate of the years after women gained the suffrage in the United States. The 19th Amendment of the Constitution which

¹ The questions of race emerged mostly in the wake of the civil and human rights movements in the 1960s, which raised a new consciousness about the depiction of blacks in the novel.

ratified the universal suffrage for women indicated the end of a long struggle. The suffragettes and their supporters were looking forward to the future of women's political participation with a frantic optimism. Apart from some early experiences, when some women could enter into political life and exert some influence, by the middle of the 1920s a deep disappointment came. Besides a conservative turn in the American political environment, it turned out that most women were simply indifferent to the vote, either because they did not look at it as a solution, or they simply voted according to the political preferences of their husbands and fathers, so the foretold world of common consciousness and loyalty among women did not follow.

One of the most ironic sentences in *Gone with the Wind* reflects women's deeply ambiguous attitudes toward their own social roles: "Of course, there were unfortunate women who drank, to the eternal disgrace of their families, just as there were women who were insane or divorced or who believed, with Miss Susan B. Anthony, that women should have the vote" (Mitchell 670). Also, Rhett Butler's rhetorical question about "how closely women clutch the very chains that bind them" (180) might have been raised by the suffragettes themselves, since the question was really this: what is much more deeply embedded in culture, than a simple political gesture, like the vote, could change it?

Even from the beginnings feminism was far from unified. Basically, two main approaches crystallized from the middle of the nineteenth century in America. Equality feminists claimed that the two sexes are equal, thus should be given the same opportunities and realities, so their claims reflected the context of the nineteenth century, when women were deprived of most of their political, economic, and legal rights. The proponents of sexual differences, however, argued for better provisions for women to fulfill their duties and aspirations within the private sphere, in their homes as wives and mothers, as the guards of the home's sanctity. The two viewpoints were not void of conflicts, as the main questions on the feminist agenda showed, and which conflicts formed many women's lives as well.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who found problematic to live a traditionally prescribed feminine life, wrote *Women and Economics* in 1898. Both then and in the interwar years the connection between women's economic dependence and marriage was a hot issue. Gilman's evolutionist, angry, yet optimistic manifesto for the individual subjectivity of women fitted into this trend. For her, marriage was a bargain in which women offered and sold their sexuality and reproductive powers in order to be cared and provided for. She highlighted the connection between women's sexuality, their reduction to reproductive functions and their economic dependency, and she advocated not for giving more power for them in the private sphere, but for women's rights to step out to the public sphere to earn their livings and fulfill their aspirations. Since then, her critics have pointed to some flaws in her arguments, for instance about her simplification of and rage on the questions of domesticity, since she argued for its total elimination by introducing scientific and industrialized housework and childrearing. Her claims fitted into the tendency of the arguments of the Home Economists, who worked for better and more effective conditions regarding home-making, cooking, and child care, yet their critics pointed out that this would not change those social conditions which fix men and women into well-defined roles, it only displaces the problem (Matthews 153). Apart from her proposed solutions, Gilman's system would embrace the tenets of rationality to improve women's social conditions. For William Chafe "Gilman's arguments represented the full elaboration of the feminist impulse" (9) by claiming that women could and had to work for their economic independence.

Gilman's essay proves to be only one example of the debates taking place both in the nineteenth century and in the interwar years about the position of women in society, about their biological "fate," and about their changing economic roles. These conflicts also touched the self-definition of writing women, who, to a growing extent, overwhelmed the literary market. Many of them found themselves in a paradoxical situation, since many women, who stepped out to the public sphere to earn their livings with their pens, realized that to get published at all, they had to conform to certain rules and rhetorics of writing, so many of them became the fiercest proponents of women's proper roles as wives and mothers. In other cases, women writers created a mask for themselves and operated with ambiguous themes and metaphors to express their anxieties. Betina Entzminger's *The Belle Gone Bad* is an excellent study about how such old cultural images as vampires, femmes fatales, or Southern belles were parodied, subverted, and abused by Southern women writers from the nineteenth century on. Some writers keenly felt on their skins how paradoxical a writing woman's situation was.

Gone with the Wind was published in 1936, yet Margaret Mitchell wrote most the text during a long convalescence in 1928-29. In Mitchell's collection of letters some symptomatic remarks refer to how she could write:

The truth is that I could have written it in a fairly short while, had I had uninterrupted time, but during the years when I was trying to finish it, there was so much illness in my family and all my friend had babies or divorces, and there would be months when I would not have a minute to call my own...(qtd. in Harwell 61-62).²

Uninterrupted time and a possibility to focus on one project—this is the main concern of Virginia Woolf's long essay, *A Room of one's Own* (1928)—yet, most women could not enjoy this luxury. Even if there was a room and a door to close, due to cultural impacts and internalizations, it was often impossible to turn the key.

Why voluntary submission? asks Jessica Benjamin in *The Bonds of Love*. From a psychoanalytical point of view, she claims that intersubjectivity, that is, a mutual and value-free recognition between two subjects is based on "sustaining the essential tension of both asserting the self and recognizing the other" (53). Domination and submission enter when this tension breaks down and the psyche splits the tension into two manageable, clear-cut parts, and embraces only one part of it, while distancing itself from the other half, for instance it identifies with independence and rejects dependence. The rejected part is projected into the Other, which embodies everything the subject wants to distance itself from. Benjamin finds it easier to understand why one dominates, as "[d]omination begins with the attempt to deny dependency" (52); yet a more interesting question for her is why one submits and obeys. She claims that the deeply internalized ability of obedience is connected to our most essential and earliest bonds, "the bonds of love," since our parents teach us to obey via the pleasurable connection of parental love and care (5).

For Benjamin, the dynamism of split surpasses individual psychology and manifests itself in the dualist discourses in Western culture and philosophy, and the dichotomies like rational and irrational, public and private, autonomy and dependency are indeed gendered

² Richard Harwell collected and edited the letters written by Margaret Mitchell between 1936, the publication of her novel, and 1949, her death. Many critics called the attention that the incoming letters are missing, thus they distort the image of Mitchell's correspondence; moreover, as Darden Asbury Pyron points out, Mitchell created a persona of herself in her letters and she played with it considerably. Nevertheless, the thick collection of letters reveals much about Mitchell's attitudes toward her book, family, and her Southern ties.

discourses, as they are culturally connected to femininity and masculinity (184-86). The intricate connection between the psychodynamics of family and society reproduces and perpetuates domination and submission. Benjamin argues that not the actual mother and father inspire and evoke the feelings and desires of obedience and domination but the cultural images of father, mother, man, women, along which the child learns to oppress his inclination toward dependence and care, embodied by the mother, in order to identify with the paternal freedom, independence, and self-representation to connect himself to the outside world. This dynamics greatly depends on to what extent the actual mother and father identify with the distilled cultural images of femininity and masculinity. The process becomes problematic in the case of daughters whose identification with the mother is too strong to break with. This way, independent subjectivity is culturally connected to masculinity while dependence is devalued as private, maternal, feminine.

Benjamin emphasises the influence of Max Weber, as a great theoretician of rationality, yet she talks about the tradition of liberal humanism where “the idea of the individual [. . .] is tacitly defined as masculine even when women are included” (184) and it is rationalization which negates the sociality, that is, mutual recognition, of social life (185). This seemingly gender-neutral classification obscures the question of gender, but gender can be mobilized at any time when women threaten the status quo by rejecting their proper place. Yet rational and irrational, private and public, masculine and feminine, as the basic binary oppositions of Western philosophy, cannot be defined unambiguously. Even Max Weber mentions that the seemingly rational feeling of calling, the main incentive of capitalist culture, can become, at the same time, a largely irrational drive (Weber 77).

Gone with the Wind plays with the permeability of binary oppositions by means of splits which organize the novel’s structure. The main split in the world of the novel is the secession of the seven Southern slave states from the Union, and consequently, a civil war, a war within a nation, where neither part is willing to recognize the other one, broken out with the first shots at Fort Sumter. The story of the novel starts in April 1861, with the frantic expectations and hopes deposited in the coming war, yet Scarlett O’Hara distances herself from war, war memories, and later from the Ku Klux Klan, labelling them both as masculine business and sheer foolishness which prevents life from going on normally. For her, masculine violence represents a totally irrational drive, going against all common sense. So when her friend, Tony Fontaine, is forced to leave home because he killed a black, Scarlett says “that this situation of violence was men’s business in which a woman had no part” (Mitchell 630). She, by the same token, feels the narrow world of women equally distant and incomprehensible: “If she knew little about men’s mind, she knew even less about the minds of women, for they interested her less” (62). As she cannot find a place either in the traditionally male realms or in femininity, she must seek a sphere for herself. Business life with its common sense ethics and predictability proves to be such a sphere. In contrast to irrational violence and war-fever, aggressiveness and assertiveness in business life that Scarlett exhibits are portrayed in the novel as rational decisions, consequences of cold, calculating behaviour, traditionally regarded as masculine values. For Max Weber, rationality distinguishes capitalist culture as it evolved in its true form in the West, from other economies and political systems (10-11), and rationality is based on the moderation and repression of irrational instincts, yet his study in fact discloses the versatility and relativity of the concept.

Scarlett enters a playground defined by men where she operates with the unpredictable use of both masculine and feminine rules, thus her own creed and practice of

rationality reveal that the concept is not so well-defined, and which reflects Weber's own conjectures about the elusive nature of rational capitalism. First, hunger and necessity are the basic incentives for Scarlett to start working, and by her skills in mathematics she can enter the field of business and trade. For Max Weber, hunger and greed are irrational, pre-capitalist drives, because the essence of Western capitalism is to curb these desires (11). Culturally, on the other hand, necessity was the only force which legitimized female work, since women were not supposed to work to pursue their own ambitions. As long as women work out of sheer necessity together with and under the guidance of their men, or for their pin-money, which cannot considerably contribute to the budget of the family, therefore does not threaten the male breadwinning position, female work has been always accepted (Chafe 89-111).

Scarlett needs only little time to realize that work can be the true source of pleasure, a real calling: "With the idea that she was as capable as a man came a sudden rush of pride and a violent longing to prove it, to make money for herself as men made money" (Mitchell 605). Soon, she proves to be so successful in money-making that she is forced to decide between her "career" and family when she becomes pregnant with her second child: "What a mess it was to try to run a business and have a baby too! 'I'll never have another one,' she decided firmly" (728). Her decision is not unproblematic. Frank Kennedy, her otherwise placid husband, seeing that motherhood did not change Scarlett, takes her money and buggy away so she cannot go freely after her business. In the light of this, it is not surprising that the compulsion to choose between creativity, professional independence and family had been dramatized in so many fictions and articles by women writers both in the nineteenth century and in the interwar years, as the two often proved to be mutually exclusive (Showalter 106, Woloch 394).

The delicate balance between "her conscious independence and less conscious dependence" causes Scarlett's deepest conflicts (Jones 110). She willingly takes responsibility of her family and provides for them economically, but she dreads giving emotional support, this role is taken by Melanie Wilkes, by Frank Kennedy, and even by the extremely masculine Rhett Butler. Yet Scarlett struggles with dependence in her business, as she depends on her customers, on her incompetent managers, and on workforce, these relations are rational and mutual, thus less frightening. Scarlett is contemptuous of and hates Melanie Wilkes, the only person who most extremely reminds her of her unconscious desires to be emotionally dependent. Melanie embodies asexual femininity, motherhood, and home, yet in the novel's "virile and evil" world (Jones 112) she has no place, so it is her desire for motherhood—"the crowning glory of the southern lady, during which her potential for womanly devotion and self-sacrifice reaches its height—that destroys her" (Entzminger 113).

This kind of femininity is punished, yet Scarlett's ambitions to distance herself from being a pure, moral creature also deserve punishment in the novel.³ Scarlett goes out to do business "in the rough world of men" (Mitchell 621). The result is the attack in Shantytown, the representation of irrational male desires, which is followed by a similarly irrational revenge in which Scarlett's husband dies. The unforgivable sin of Scarlett in the eyes of her environment was to "unsex herself" (625), this is the most serious transgression she could

³ Ellen, Scarlett's mother, dies of typhoid which she caught by nursing the daughter of the poor neighbours, thus her self-sacrifice causes her death. She, as the epitome of Southern ladyhood, who would be probably unable to change (Melanie is more capable of adapting to the new conditions), has to die, this way she cannot actively reproach her daughter, yet her image is frozen in Scarlett as her conscience.

commit. Rhett Butler is the only one who calls her a rogue because of her unscrupulous business activities, yet Scarlett claims that the categories of proper masculinity and femininity do not matter when survival is at stake. "What else could I have done? What would have happened to me, to Wade, to Tara and all of us if I'd been—gentle when that Yankee came to Tara? [. . .] And if I'd been sweet and simple-minded and not nagged Frank about bad debts we'd—oh, well" (758).

She does not understand why Frank, her second husband, is horrified by her conduct, "her constantly renewed exasperation [was] growing out of the many incidents which showed that Frank was neither a good business man nor did he wanted her to be a good business man" (626). Frank Kennedy is an old-fashioned businessman who let the emotions of honesty and friendship intrude into his work, thus he becomes wholly irrational and unsuccessful. This echoes Benjamin Franklin's tips for businessmen, according to which where the appearances of credibility and honesty are enough, it is wasteful to be really credible and honest, so his ideas evoke a pragmatic and utilitarian ethos (Weber 49). If Frank infringes the laws of rational business, Scarlett does the same both in her professional and private life: "now her reactions were all masculine. Despite her pink cheeks and dimples and pretty smiles, she talked and acted like a man" (Mitchell 624). Yet when masculine attitudes fail to get results she easily switches to feminine tricks to personify the helpless Southern lady in distress to abuse men's desire to protect women. She lies about her business competitors freely, knowing that "she was perfectly safe in lying about them. Southern chivalry protected her" (647). Scarlett feels at home in the network of myths and metaphors governing Southern social life and she calculates her steps with cold head.

Scarlett violates the boundaries of public and private by playing the games of love and religion with rational rules. For her, religion is a bargain and those prayers that do not get results are simply wasteful. Early in her girlhood she finds "the road to ladyhood hard" (60) because it means suppressing the joys of life, yet she learns that appearances of ladyhood are enough to get results (61). Scarlett uses calculation in her relations with men: "She knew only that if she did or said thus-and-so, men would unerringly respond with the complementary thus-and-so. It was like a mathematical formula" (61-2).

For Max Weber, real capitalist attitude means the control and check of irrational acquisitiveness, yet Scarlett cannot help being greedy of money, because she lives in a world from where all security is gone and predictable rules and laws are missing. The conflicts inherent in *Gone with the Wind* are to a great extent about Mitchell's own age, as Louis Rubin says, Scarlett O'Hara is a "very modern heroine in lace and crinoline" (102). As Amanda Adams claims, the novel was written in a turbulent period when the South tried to redefine itself and its roles within the United States of America. The two main intellectual groups, the Nashville Agrarians and the Chapel Hill Regionalists conducted the social debates about the new roles, values, and ways of life the Southern states should follow (Adams 58, King 170).

In this milieu, Margaret Mitchell created the inspiring and liberating portrait of a woman embodying all these conflicts, who dares to express things unsayable, who ridicules tenets of morality by the means of her pragmatism, who personally has no desire to live according to the cult of true womanhood of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity (Welter 152), who has a "good head for figures" (Mitchell 601), who nourishes personal aspirations apart from being a wife and a mother, and who "had done a man's work and done it well" (604).

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