

Olivia Oliver-Hopkins

Sophia Coppola (dir.),
The Beguiled (2017)

THOUGH AN EXCEEDINGLY successful director, Sofia Coppola has something of a reputation for making aesthetically beautiful films strangely devoid of substance.¹ Coppola's most recent offering, *The Beguiled*, is in much the same vein, which is disappointing, as the plot promised to contribute to current discourses relating to intersectional feminism. Despite Coppola's efforts to distance her film from the 1971 Donald Siegel film of the same name—a film that was adapted from the same source material as Coppola's film, namely Thomas P. Cullinan's 1966 novel also titled *The Beguiled*—the similarities are such that it is difficult to avoid comparisons, much to the detriment of Coppola's version.²

The Beguiled takes place in a remote part of Virginia toward the end of the Civil War, where the five remaining students at a girls' school are attempting to continue their education under stern headmistress Miss Martha (somewhat overplayed by Nicole Kidman) and gentle French teacher Edwina (Kirsten Dunst), while their world collapses around them. One afternoon, one of the younger and more adventurous students, Amy (Oona Lawrence), discovers an injured Union deserter, John McBurney (played by a moody Colin Farrell), in a nearby forest. The women (with varying enthusiasm) decide to nurse the man back to health before reporting his presence to the local Confederate guard.

However, the wily McBurney attempts to seduce his way out of his predicament, focusing his attentions upon Edwina and the sexually precocious Alicia (Elle Fanning), while Martha battles with her own feelings for the soldier. But McBurney's plan ends in campy disaster, with the film seeming to attempt to suggest the complex nature of human relationships but succeeding only in producing a darkly comic revenge tale reminiscent of urban legends.

One of the most disappointing and obvious differences from Siegel's film is the omission of the sole character of colour, a slave named Hallie (Mae Mercer), an important reminder of both the central cause of the war and the human cost of the Confederates' genteel lifestyles. While Coppola has argued that she excluded Hallie because she did not wish to treat a subject so serious as slavery lightly, in so doing she has cut a much-needed complex role from an actor of colour, and has ignored an opportunity to explore the way that race affected—and continues to affect—constructions of gender, especially in the American South.³ The omission recalls the words of Southern studies scholar Tara McPherson, who writes, "the South cannot be understood apart from the history of cross-racial intimacy that has so shaped the region, even as that intimacy has been both brutally enforced and resisted."⁴ As such, a Southern film—especially a Civil War-set Southern Gothic film, which has at its heart a conflict between Northern and Southern characters—must either engage with slavery's legacy directly, or be haunted by it, as this film is.

Coppola's film could have been a feminist tale of revenge and an ironic subversion of the strict gender expectations of the antebellum South, especially feminine passivity and chastity. The film could have united women across racial lines against a male aggressor who seeks to divide them through sexual jealousy and competition, much like the 1971 version. However, it is instead easily read as an indictment of white Southern women, who are made to seem responsible for the atrocities of slavery and exploitation, and depicted as only thinly hidden behind their false claims to feminine passivity and Christian virtue. The women's continual insistence on obeying the dictates of Southern hos-

pitality speaks to a deeper unease about the role of upper-class (white) women in the subjugation of lower-class men (of all races) throughout history, both in the United States in general and the South in particular. Particularly disturbing are Martha, Edwina, and Alicia's efforts to disguise their lust behind their insistence that allowing McBurney to continue to convalesce in their music room (despite his hale-and hearty ability to undertake considerable physical gardening work in their overgrown yard) is the only "Christian thing" to do.

All of this said, the film is beautifully shot. Coppola takes full advantage of the stunning rural Virginian setting to create an atmospheric melange, imposing old oak trees standing silent vigil in the empty forests against spectacular Southern sunsets. The lighting is also impressive, shifting effortlessly between the open grandeur of the forests during the day and the claustrophobic atmosphere inside the school at night, especially during the fevered evening prayers. Among the cast, Kirsten Dunst stands out as the quiet, sad-eyed Edwina, and manages to steal many scenes with her beautifully understated performance and lingering, meaningful looks. However, the film seems hollow or even campy at points (resulting in frequent titters from the audience at the Sydney Film Festival screening I attended). This is in part due to the inexplicable choice of Farrell for the lead role, whose casting seems to have led to the decidedly odd recharacterisation of McBurney as an Irish mercenary—although, admittedly, Clint Eastwood's performance in the 1971 version was particularly excellent and thus difficult to follow.

Overall, the film is lovely but empty, especially when compared to the vitality of Don Siegel's version and, with the sole exception of Edwina, it was difficult to care much about any of the characters or to discern any deeper meaning within the film. *The Beguiled* will likely please Coppola devotees and cinematography enthusiasts, but it is likely to leave others cold. I am delighted that a female director finally won the Cannes Film Festival Best Director award again—but why this film was so awarded seems somewhat inexplicable.⁵

Notes

1. Claire White, "Too Feminine, Too Pretty, and the Gendered Bias in the Critique of Sofia Coppola's Films," *Bitch Flicks*, May 1, 2015, <http://www.bitchflicks.com/2017/05/sofia-coppola-and-gendered-bias-in-critique-of-her-films.html#.WVCFfeuGPIU/>.
2. Rebecca Ford, "The Beguiled: Sofia Coppola on Taking on a Genre Movie and Why It's Not a Remake," *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 16, 2017, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/beguiled-sofia-coppola-taking-a-genre-movie-why-not-a-remake-q-a-1004173/>; see Thomas P. Cullinan, *The Beguiled* (New York: Horizon Press, 1966).
3. Alanna Bennet, "Sofia Coppola Says *The Beguiled* is About the Gender Dynamics of the Confederacy, not the Racial Ones," *BuzzFeed*, June 17, 2017, https://www.buzzfeed.com/alannabennett/sofia-coppola-beguiled-power-dynamics?utm_term=.sc5rLqbEo#.jeJ2XzG3v/.
4. Tara McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 114.
5. Clarisse Loughrey, "Cannes 2017: Sofia Coppola Becomes Second Woman Ever to Win Best Director Prize," *The Independent*, May 29, 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/cannes-film-festival-2017-sofia-coppola-the-beguiled-best-director-prize-lynn-ramsay-nicole-kidman-a7761081.html/>.