

*The Beguiled*, dir. by Sophia Coppola (Focus Features, 2017)

Sunlight rarely breaks through the canopy of Southern live oak in Sophia Coppola's *The Beguiled*. The girl's boarding school at the heart of the story is often in shadow, sometimes bathed in a golden half-light and, briefly at dawn and dusk, fixed in the glare of a distant sun that creeps around the edge of the trees to strain the eyes of those accustomed to the shade. The visual tropes of the Southern gothic are captured in every shot — the close, drooping trees, the subtropical haze, and the grandiose classical styling of the 'big house'. The school is its own world, isolated by its difference from its surroundings (traditionally characterised by gentility amidst suffering, here by femininity in wartime) rather than physical separation. The 'real' world of the American Civil War exists only distantly on the periphery. When the world intrudes, always in masculine form, it invariably presents a threat to the order that exists within the school's gates.

Coppola's film is the second adaptation of Thomas P. Cullinan's novel of the same title. The 1971 film, directed by Don Siegel and starring Clint Eastwood, is a lurid but now well-regarded psychological thriller that plays heavily on its Freudian elements: the director claimed to have based it on 'the basic desire of women to castrate men'.<sup>1</sup> Despite critical acclaim, the Siegel/Eastwood film was a box-office flop and faded into relative obscurity for some years. The 2017 film has received greater plaudits, with Coppola herself winning Best Director at the Cannes Film Festival. The film seems also to have found its audience, performing respectably in cinemas for a piece focused on undeniably adult subject matter.

Colin Farrell plays John McBurney, a wounded Union soldier taken in by the girls at Miss Martha Farnsworth's Seminary for Young Ladies. During his convalescence, McBurney ingratiates himself with the women of the household — presenting hard-working honesty to the headmistress (Nicole Kidman), while making romantic overtures to the quiet governess, Edwina Morrow (Kirsten Dunst), and indulging the sexual curiosity of the eldest girl (Elle Fanning). The women are persuaded to hide him from Confederate searchers, but the hothouse atmosphere quickly leads to suspicion, jealousy, and a tragic end. The film closes with a shot suggesting that the school's internal order has been reasserted and that its boundary with the outside world has been restored.

*The Beguiled* is a dreamlike film, punctuated with flashes of violence. The different varieties of half-light (under canopy, through curtain, from candle) give the school a hazy and

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Patrick McGilligan, *Clint: The Life and Legend of Clint Eastwood* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), p. 186.

unreal quality that persists from the first shot to the last. Kidman and Dunst both give enigmatic performances that maintain a careful balance between mystery and realistic understatement — their characters understand one another, and it is left to the audience to interpret the details of their relationship (perhaps in deliberate contrast with Siegel's version where the headmistress's back-story was made explicit via flashback). Dunst makes Miss Morrow a study in internal conflict — torn between her duties and her desires — and in doing so seems to reflect the overall schema of the film. The characters, and the world conjured by the film, exist in a variety of liminal states: between girl and woman, prisoner and guest, war and peace, light and shadow. It takes only the smallest leap of imagination to place the film on the cusp between sleeping and wakefulness, with its moments of trauma acting to wrench the viewer fully awake to confront the reality forcibly intruding on the school's golden twilight world.

Coppola's film is artful, intelligent, and discomfiting. It seems almost churlish to complain that it lacks ambition: it leans heavily on familiar Southern-gothic tropes (in particular on the sexual dynamics of class and age, and the closed world of the — in this case metaphorical — plantation house) though it renders them with skill. The casting is strong, but each of the principals is playing a role they have practiced in other films. Farrell's roguish charm is always a reliable feature, Kidman always excels in the role of an icy authority figure, and Dunst seems to reprise elements of the performances she gave in Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011) and last year's *Midnight Special*. Much has been made of former child star Elle Fanning's breakthrough adult performance, but this too recalls Fanning's part in *The Neon Demon* (2016). It is both sad and predictable that Fanning should have first gathered notice in the role of a sexually forward teen, and her part here displays less complexity than she was able to display in the otherwise unremarkable *Live By Night* (2016). Furthermore, elements of the source material that might have complicated the clarity of Coppola's gender conflict have been excised, notably the slaves and bi-racial characters that appeared in both the novel and the 1971 film.

The piece limits its goals so as better to hit them, and does so in a concise 94 minutes, but the viewer is left with the sense that they have not been challenged. *The Beguiled* is an excellent piece of craft — a technically perfect gothic thriller — but it lacks the spikey interest of the comparable *Lady Macbeth* (2017) or the innovation of Coppola's earlier works.

*Richard Gough Thomas*