The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism in "True Grit"

The Lovelorn Character of Mattie Ross

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Readers of *True Grit* must find the character of Mattie Ross "cute" or at least amusing. An adolescent girl with the gumption to ride into a world of outlaws, hanging judges, and obscene and drunken ex-marauders draws our admiration. She shows spunk or "sand" (Portis 32) as the beleaguered stock merchant Stonehill observes. Sporting the oversized hat and coat of her murdered father and wielding the long Colt Dragoon cap-and-ball revolver that antedates Frank Ross's service in the Confederate cavalry, Mattie is charmingly "bad" in the modern subcultural meaning of the term. In her insistence upon accompanying Marshal Rooster Cogburn and Texas Ranger LaBoeuf into the Cherokee and Choctaw Nations and in her frank confrontation of authority figures and outlaws alike—she twice does not hesitate to shoot her father's murderer—Mattie herself may be said to attain to "true grit" as John M. Ditsky explains the significance of the title; Mattie transcends *sand* or *spunk* in that she reveals a remarkable determination to prevail in an overwhelmingly hostile frontier environment (18–19, 29–30). For Thomas Doherty (discussing both film versions as well as the novel) the story presents a "sly feminist joke" in that "it is the 14-year-old girl, armed with a righteous certainty about her errand into the wilderness, who best fits the title" (B17). Mattie's occasional lapses into girlish naivete and moralizing (as when she lectures Rooster on his drinking: "I would not put a thief in my mouth to steal my brains" [61]) only enhance the tale's irony and with the irony the charm. Despite her righteous Presbyterian rigidity, Mattie tells lies as spontaneously as Huckleberry Finn and as frequently—that is, throughout the novel. Her intimidation and manipulation of Stonehill—insisting that he buy back the mustangs sold to her father and assume responsibility for the loss of Judy, her fathers mare, all the while threatening to invoke the assistance of the supposedly notorious "Lawyer Daggett" who forced the Great Arkansas River, Vicksburg, and Gulf Steamship Company into "receivership"—prompts the poor man to exclaim in desperation, "You are an unnatural child" (34–35).

Poor Stonehills assessment advances upon the complete truth, however. For once we see beyond Matties spunk and sand, a character emerges as full of moral ugliness as that of Mrs. Turpin in Flannery O'Connor s "Revelation." Like Mrs. Turpin, Mattie Ross is hierarchical and bigoted in her thinking—tending to refer to the lower classes of whites as "trash" and to Native Americans as "heathens" (19).[1] To her the guilt and moral perverseness of Odus Wharton are physically and racially apparent: "He was a half-breed with eyes that were mean and close set and that stayed open all the time like snake eyes. It was a face hardened in sin. Creeks are good Indians, they say, but a Creek-white like him or a Creek-Negro is something else again" (56). And (as will be shown) Mattie predicates her bigotry and her sense of her own superiority upon a form of materialism, self-righteousness, and respectability derived, ironically enough, from religious ideology.

[1] Mattie even refers to Rooster Cogburn as a "sorry piece of trash" (98) when they disagree over LaBoeuf's offer of partnership, and, noting that Frank James neither rises nor removes his hat when she visits him and Cole Younger in Memphis, she thanks Younger and then says to James, "Keep your seat, trash!" (222).

In divining this aspect of Mattie's character it may be helpful, first of all, to recall and clarify the author's use of point of view. The story of fourteen-year-old Mattie's vengeance takes place near 1880; a clear reference is made to a possible pardon of Odus Wharton by President Hayes (82). Readers also see a middle-aged Mattie learning of Rooster's death from Cole Younger in 1903. However, the narrator also clearly mentions the Volstead Act, the death of Woodrow Wilson (1924), and the presidential campaign of Governor Al Smith (1928).[2] So the teller of this tale of true grit is an unmarried woman in her mid-sixties, in her own words a "woman with brains and a frank tongue and one sleeve pinned up and an invalid mother to care for" (223). She feels that the people of Dardanelle, Arkansas, regard her as "a cranky old maid" (223), and there is evident bitterness and defensiveness in her tone as she herself reverts repeatedly to the subject of marriage (see Millard 476), revealing the true sources of her so-called disadvantage to be essentially the causes of her incredible mean-spiritedness:

> They say I love nothing but money and the Presbyterian Church and that is why I never married. They think everybody is dying to get married. It is true that I love my church and my bank. What is wrong with that? ... Those same people talk mighty nice when they come in to get a crop loan or beg a mortgage extension. (223)

Writing within a year or so of the stock-market crash of 1929 and the onset of the Great Depression—when families like the Joads in Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* will be reduced to penury and homelessness by the banking system—Mattie's defensiveness here combined with her smugness on the subject of mortgages and loans is suggestive. She "is a straitlaced Presbyterian, prim as a poker ... completely lacking in qualities like pity and self-doubt, and her implacable stoniness—while very, very funny—is formidable, too" (Tartt 231–32).

Mattie Ross *is* mean-spirited, and her meanness is a reflection of her devotion to her own affluence and to her sense of herself as one of God's chosen. Mattie's meanness is self-admitted from the beginning. Her father, she tells us, was a knightly man of "kindly disposition," who had been easily victimized because (unlike Mattie) he lacked a "mean streak" (10–11). Of the three marshals recommended by the sheriff at Fort Smith, Mattie picks Rooster Cogburn because he is described as the "meanest... He is a pitiless man, double-tough, and fear don't enter into his thinking" (23). A telling gauge of *her* thinking here is that she ignores the sheriff's praise of another marshal, L. T. Quinn, who "brings his prisoners in alive ... [and] believes even the worst of men is entitled to a fair shake. He will not plant evidence or abuse a prisoner" (23). Cogburn, who by implication takes no such interest in the rights of alleged criminals,

[2] In an otherwise excellent article, Millard avers several times that the narrator is thirty-nine-year-old Mattie, the same who near the end of the novel converses with Cole Younger in 1903, but the mention of the Volstead Act, President Wilson, and Al Smith's candidacy for the presidency definitely places the narrator near the end of the 1920s and therefore in her mid-sixties; see Portis 66–67.

is the avatar of Mattie's baleful resolve, a meanness insinuated into her story's title when she says to Rooster, "They tell me you are a man with true grit" (57).[3]

It is very likely that many readers find no fault in Mattie's dire hatred of her father's murderer nor in her desire for untempered vengeance. Her feelings are natural, understandable, even human, we may say. It is really understandable that she wants at the very least *to see* Tom Chaney hanged in Fort Smith, and we may stand with her as she violently opposes the proposal of LaBoeuf to have Chaney brought to justice in Texas for the sake of a larger reward. If Chaney cannot be killed on the trail (her seeming preference), she desires the certainty of "Hanging Judge" Isaac Parker's guilty verdict and sentence of death. She seeks revenge—*personal* vengeance rather than mere justice: "I want him to know he is being punished for killing my father. It is nothing to me how many dogs and fat men he killed in Texas" (96). But in this novel of great verbal and narrative irony, neither fourteen-year-old Mattie Ross nor the novel's aging narrator seems cognizant of the incongruity of Mattie's devout Christian demeanor and the egotism, materialism, bigotry, and violence of her story.

Perhaps the reason for this lack of a sense of irony or at least self-awareness on Mattie's part can be found in the heritage of Calvinism which Charles Portis has very evidently woven into her character and her narrative. Mattie and her family represent that strain of Calvinism spreading in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries into the Middle Atlantic and Southern regions of the budding American nation. Its English, Irish, and Scottish proponents—especially through the influence of the Presbyterian Church—called upon and embraced the moral and spiritual rigor of Calvinism to overcome the natural tendency toward license and disorder on the wild frontier and in its "new and unformed communities" (Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier* 54–65; *Story of Religion* 208, 259). Discipline, moral rigor—these are certainly sources of the spunk that informs Mattie's character, but as well Mattie Ross illustrates how certain aspects of Calvinism—in particular the doctrine of election and the so-called Protestant work ethic—became for the Puritans and their "Cumberland" descendants the basis of an egotism and materialism seemingly justified by heaven, bestowing upon them a manifest destiny of victory and dominion. The doctrine of election or "salvation by faith only" implied the ultimate authority of God in determining human salvation, but its inclusion of the certainty of "limited atonement" created in the view of the "chosen" a dichotomy within the human population, a dichotomy of saints and sinners, the elect and the damned. Nor was this dichotomy without social implications: the chosen as opposed to papists and Anglicans; good Christian whites as opposed to "trash" and nonwhite "heathens."

Just as insidious was the Calvinistic distortion of Luther's teaching on the calling. Originally intended as the laymans alternative to a corrupt priesthood's manipulation of the lowly, Luther's injunction to serve God in the honest and diligent devotion to

[3] For a discussion of the "unheroic" and even criminal aspects of Rooster's character, see Cleary 74–78.

ones vocation or calling became in Puritan culture fetishistic and self-aggrandizing. In the later seventeenth century the calling became virtually indistinguishable from faith. In the anxiety over humans' ultimate helplessness in the matter of election, Puritans, unable to count on good works in and of themselves, did begin to look to the products of their diligence—status, material possessions, and capital—as signs of favor in Gods eyes. And these too readily became the virtual equivalent of grace in the Puritan way of seeing things (Weber 49–58; Michaelsen 334–35). Furthermore, the dichotomy of saints and sinners might be meaningfully expanded to include on one side the industrious, the thrifty, and the affluent and respectable, and on the other hand the lazy, the fallen, the lowly, the poor, the sick, and the disabled. The latter become not objects of compassion—and certainly not objects of charity—but rather are held responsible for their condition as evident sinners; the "poor were condemned for their lack of ambition, lack of industry, and it might also be assumed, for their indulgence of the flesh—otherwise how could one account for their failures?" (Michaelsen 329)[4]

Even a cursory analysis of Mattie's character reveals Portis's very evident determination to portray the influence of Calvinism in precisely such terms as have here been described. To begin with, Mattie tells us that her father was a "Cumberland Presbyterian" (11), identifying her family with the very Scotch and Irish immigrants heretofore mentioned. She understands the doctrine of Election rather clearly and has chosen the Southern Presbyterian Church over her father's because the Cumberlands, she says, "are not sound on Election. They do not fully accept it" (113). God's grace of salvation is neither earned nor deserved, she further maintains (38), acknowledging that the belief that many are predestined for damnation "is a hard doctrine, running contrary to our earthly ideas of fair play." But, citing four Bible passages in support of the doctrine, she concludes with a degree of insouciance, "It was good for Paul and Silas and it is good enough for me. It is good enough for you too" (112–13).

With nearly 500 acres on the Arkansas River near Dardanelle in Yell County, Arkansas, the Rosses are evidently among the chosen in Matties view. The connection in her mind between property and righteousness is clearly shown when she tells Lucky Ned Pepper, "I am Mattie Ross of near Dardanelle, Arkansas. My family has property and I don't know why I am being treated like this" (181). Like the Puritan diarist Samuel Sewell, Mattie unself-consciously associates property and finance with intimate and moral concerns. As one critic has observed, "her mission to find Chaney is an entry in a ledger, as it were, of crime and recompense" (Fletcher 249). Tom Chaney's crime, Mattie avers, is that he has *"robbed* [her father] of his life and his horse and $150 in cash money plus two California gold pieces that he carried in his trouser band" (Portis 9, emphasis added). Like Samuel Sewell, she is given to noting minutely the costs

[4] In addition to Max Weber and Robert S. Michaelsen, interested readers may also consult R. H. Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (1926) and Michael Walzer's *The Revolution of the Saints* (1965), both of which expand upon the so-called Weber thesis. Tawney observes that Calvinists elevate "mundane toil" into "a kind of sacrament" (166) while Walzer seems to regard the Reformation as more of a social revolution than a religious one, unleashing forces as much political and secular as spiritual.

and financial bargaining of even her most personal concerns. She deems it necessary to inform the reader that at Fort Smith the "charge for [her father's] coffin was something over sixty dollars. The shipping charge to Dardanelle was $9.50" (21). It is similarly important to her to tell the reader that in having Rooster Cogburn's remains moved from Memphis to Dardanelle she "got around paying the premium rate by having [her] correspondent bank in Memphis work the deed ... through a grocery wholesaler that did a volume freight business" (222). In approaching the end of her story (in which she loses her arm and both Rooster and LaBoeuf depart from her forever), she finds it appropriate to add, "I will say here that Judy was never recovered, nor was the second California gold piece" (218). As to the two gold pieces—wedding gifts to her parents from Grandfather Spurling, a prosperous California merchant—Mattie's persistence is understandable, yet as coins—and coins made of gold—they evidently reflect the family's preoccupation with wealth and the status wealth brings. Why, we may ask, did Frank Ross wear these sentimental tokens in his belt on a venture to Fort Smith, and how (as Mattie wonders) did Tom Chaney find out about them? How indeed!

On her mission, Mattie quite self-righteously sees herself in Bunyanesque terms. "The good Christian does not flinch from difficulties" (90), she tells Stonehill. Moreover, her vision places her vengeance within a providential context. Of Tom Chaney, she proclaims, "I would not rest easy until that Louisiana cur was roasting and screaming in hell!" (21). Matties descriptions of Chaney and other evildoers are often couched in terms suggesting the association of perverseness and crime with poverty, physical unattractiveness, laziness, and race. Chaney is a "short devil," a "squat assassin"; he is from the morally lax state of Louisiana and presents an ugly face marred by powder burns—he looks devilish. His horse wears "a rope halter instead of a bridle" (9–10, 14, 176). Departing with Matties father he rides a "gray horse that was better suited to pulling a middlebuster than carrying a rider. He had no handgun but he carried his rifle slung across his back on a piece of cotton plough line. There is trash for you. He could have taken an old piece of harness and made a nice leather strap for it. That would have been too much trouble" (12–13). Given his origins, poverty, and appearance, Chaney's drunkenness and murderous behavior in Fort Smith are hardly to be wondered at—predestined, one might say.

In so focusing on the outward manifestations of evil in others, Mattie remains seemingly blind to the way that her own character— her meanness and her arrogance—engenders much of the evil in her story. As a good Presbyterian, Mattie necessarily objects to Rooster's constant drunkenness. "He drank even as he rode" (170), she observes with wonder and disapproval. She remains provocatively reticent at LaBoeuf's insinuation that a marauding Rooster participated in atrocities such as the infamous massacre at Lawrence, Kansas. And readers may wonder at the banker-narrator's restraint in recounting Rooster's former association with the Jameses and the Youngers and his rather self-justifying admission of having robbed "one of them little high-interest banks" (143) in New Mexico. To his confessions, she responds with typical straitlaced moralizing: "It is all stealing" (143). But the reality is that her vengeance,

however righteous and sanctioned she may deem it, absorbs and depends upon the ruthless determination (meanness) of Rooster Cogburn to render deadly justice as he sees fit. Predestined for heaven, Mattie may, through Rooster Cogburn, wreak judgment and vengeance freely—that is, without Marshal L. T. Quinn's fastidious regard for the rights of alleged criminals. She hires Rooster because—in this endeavor—she is willing to ignore the demands of law and order, convinced of her own righteousness nonetheless. She thus embodies, in Thomas Doherty's words, "the contradiction at the core of the Puritan strain in the American bloodstream: a fierce will to power that coexists with a surrender to Gods plan" (B17).

It is of course rather obviously a "fierce will to power" that propels Mattie. Of her father's Colt Dragoon pistol, she tells Rooster, "I intend to kill Tom Chaney with it if the law fails to do so" (58). She insists on joining the pursuers, defying the two lawmen who want her to stay behind, crossing the Arkansas River on her own, following Rooster and LaBoeuf until they relent, insisting upon an active role in the pursuit of the outlaws, and unhesitatingly firing upon Tom Chaney when he refuses to be her prisoner. Moreover, her actions precipitate deadly consequences. Her capture necessitates Rooster's violent confrontation of four outlaws, in which his horse, Bo, is killed and he himself is nearly murdered by Ned Pepper. Her second attempt to kill Chaney causes her symbolic fall into the pit beneath the outlaws' campsite, where she becomes dangerously pinned, facing a decaying corpse and a nest of rattlesnakes. She has willfully moved beyond the pale of innocence to satisfy her passion for revenge, and she slips more deeply into a Dante-esque realm that is symbolic of death and evil, joined fittingly by the corpse of hell-bound Tom Chaney when Rooster finally kills him.[5] The evil seems unabated as she is snakebitten, and her noble mustang, Little Blackie, must pull her forth only to die of exhaustion in the attempt to speed her back to Fort Smith. The amputation of her left arm thus becomes Mattie; an intelligent and virtuous adolescent girl, she has nonetheless done her part in the series of events that have led to her disfigurement and determined her destiny. Her "pinned sleeve/' like the patch over Rooster's blind left eye, is the telling emblem of true grit.

In a compelling study, Judith Fletcher interprets *True Grit* "as a rite-of-passage narrative that constructs Mattie's initiation into maturity as a series of trials" (237).[6] Focusing on the Coen Brothers' film version of 2010, Fletcher views Mattie's journey to Fort Smith, her defiant river crossing into the Choctaw Nation, and her climactic fall into the pit at the outlaws' camp all as stages of *catabasis,* a retreat or initiation in which the hero or heroine descends (literally or symbolically) into the underworld to face mysteries or challenges that prepare one for maturity. Numerous comparisons may be made, but Fletcher recurs to the myth of Persephone as an archetypal context of Matties "psychic individuation" (243) from her parents' protection and passage into

[5] For a somewhat detailed analysis of the symbolism of this scene, see Ditsky 28.

[6] Fletcher's study is to an extent founded upon that of Shuman, who views the novel as an *entwicklungsroman* or a story about leaving childhood and reaching maturity.

adult responsibility and independence. Her "budding sexuality" (shown in her flirtation with LaBoeuf) necessarily forms a part of this transformation so that, as in the mythic paradigm, she must return from her "underworld" adventure as a bride:

> In the final scene of Mattie's reminiscence, Rooster carries the unconscious girl in his arms, as a groom might carry a bride... Although Mattie lives out her life as a spinster, she experiences a symbolic marriage to Rooster that will bind him to her for eternity. And, like Persephone, she bears no children. (253)

But Fletcher's rather fascinating interpretation ultimately fails in its attempt to discover genuine meaning in Mattie's return. Trying to make the best of Mattie's essentially forlorn existence following her life's one real adventure, Fletcher rather weakly insists that "she has become the prosperous owner of a bank. Her reintegration into society has not been as a wife and mother, but as a financier, a role for which she is well suited" (253). In an ironic sense, this rather weak rationalization does invoke the actual meaning of Mattie Ross's lonely and somewhat bitter life. Unlike either Odysseus or Aeneas—both of whom surface from the underworld to realize fulfilling destinies—Mattie can make only a banker's settlement with the future once her vengeance is attained. There is poignant desperation in her decision to have Rooster's remains placed in her own family cemetery.

Nowhere are Mattie's failure and disappointment better depicted than in her final disposition concerning the young Texas Ranger LaBoeuf. Though nearly thirty years old (Portis 68), LaBoeuf clearly displays a younger suitor's awkwardness and anxiety in his self-conscious displays of Ranger discipline and in his very resentful insistence on two occasions that Rooster's insults are intended to "make me out foolish in this girl's eyes" (157). And for her part, Mattie betrays a very normal physical attraction to and interest in the young Ranger, meagerly disguised (in her adolescent self-consciousness) as contempt. When she first meets LaBoeuf in Mrs. Floyd's dining room, she shows undeniable attraction, describing him as "nice-looking" with "pale blue eyes and auburn hair" and a provocative "cowlick' at the crown of his head." He "looked to be a man of good family," she observes revealingly. With his spurs and pearl-handled revolvers, he also appears "stuck up" to the self-conscious girl, with a "smug grin that made you nervous when he turned it on you." Suffering from a cold, Mattie confesses, "I must own too that he made me worry a little about my straggly hair and red nose" (68–69). Seeing LaBoeuf again at breakfast, she notes with satisfaction that he now appears "shaved and clean" but that apparently "he could do nothing with the cowlick.'" "It is likely that he cultivated it," she observes; "He was a vain and cocky devil" (78).

Throughout the rest of her story, adolescent Maggie can barely conceal her attraction, even after discovering LaBoeuf's intention of taking Chaney back to Texas. Vying for dominance she and LaBoeuf engage in antagonistic flirtation. He admits to wanting to steal a kiss—even though Mattie, he says, is "very young and sick and unattractive

to boot" so that he now considers giving her a spanking for her sauciness. To this she adroitly replies, "One would be as unpleasant as the other" and then dramatically reprimands him for his threats as well as his "great brutal spurs" (73–74). Later, when LaBoeuf's rifle and arm are hit during the ambush of the Pepper Gang, Mattie insists upon tending to his wounds despite Rooster's objections. LaBoeuf's virility is suggested in his carrying a "big-bore Sharps carbine" (93), and when he uses this weapon to save Rooster Cogburn's life, Mattie is moved to exclaim, "Hurrah for the man from Texas! Some bully shot!" (202).

Probably little more than adolescent infatuation, Mattie's interest in the young Ranger is given significant development by Portis, enough to tell readers that hers is a nature that would find love—but for her self-righteous devotion to revenge. Significantly, LaBoeuf mirrors Mattie's preoccupation with Tom Chaney in the story's conclusion, less concerned with the snakebit girl than with the reward for Chaney's corpse, which he "rescues" from the pit of snakes at great danger to himself—never to call upon Mattie Ross in the aftermath. Her very natural girlish infatuation will never find mature expression, and her attraction to LaBoeuf merely underscores the personal loss inherent in her vengeance. She may insist as narrator that marriage means nothing to her, but her repeated denials suggest otherwise as does her cynical statement that those who would marry her would do so only for her wealth (223). In her tale's very last paragraph she wonders if LaBoeuf is still alive and declares that she would be pleased to hear from him. She judges that "he is in his seventies now, and nearer eighty than seventy" and she wonders, suggestively, if "some of the starch has gone out of that cowlick'" (224). Thus, the telling of this story itself is a testament of her loneliness, of her human need for love which her own character and decisions—her grit or meanness—have tragically obviated. The word *avenge* appears in the first sentence of the novel and in its last. And Mattie's missing arm is as much a mark of the quest for vengeance as Ahab's missing leg. For like Ahab she has forsaken much of human comfort and compassion for the sake of vengeance and a self-righteous spirit. Yes, Mattie has her bank and her church, and she has avenged the murder of her father, but the price of these is a rigid character mired in its own supposed sanctity and defiant of its own human yearning.

On the surface most Westerns present conflicts between good and evil that hardly seem to undermine conservative and traditional values. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, Peter A. French insists that the typical Western actually presents resolutions to such conflicts at odds with "the Judeo-Christian conceptions on which much of our traditional ethical understandings are based" (14). Taking the Sermon on the Mount as expressive of the most central of these conceptions, French finds the Western "anti-Christian" (16) in its inevitable rejection of the principles that "the meek shall inherit the earth" and that they shall for the most part do so through forgiveness. By contrast these enormously popular stories present heroes for whom "the call to forgive is the call to forswear resentment, and that is the call to relinquish one's self-respect" (21). Focusing primarily on films such as *Stagecoach, Shane, The Searchers, Once Upon a Time in*

the West, The Shootist, and *Unforgiven,* French discovers repeated instances of heroic identity based upon an uncompromising pride (neither arrogant nor conceited) rather than notions of humility and forgiveness, traits nominally espoused by the townspeople and farmers whom the gunfighters serve as well as by the audience.

In *True Grit* Portis magnifies the Westerns paradoxical appeal as described by French. For Mattie is a straitlaced proponent of the morality and respectability so lacking in the frontier environment of her young adulthood. Yet her particular brand of Protestant theology enables her to discover within that harsh environment beings for whom Jesus Christs message of humility and forgiveness does not apply and heroes for whom "vengeance [is] a morally appropriate goal" (French 115). In the elder Matties bitterness and loneliness the audience discovers its own paradoxical relationship to a society supposedly based upon Judeo-Christian values yet from its inception dependent upon hatred and violence.

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