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Ellen Glasgow's "Jordan's End": Antigone in the South

Inès Casas

- 1 Like the generation of Southern writers who followed her, most notably Thomas Wolfe and William Faulkner, Ellen Glasgow was “complexly ambivalent” in her attitude toward the South (D. Holman 87). “I had grown up in the yet lingering fragrance of the old South,” she wrote in *A Certain Measure*, “and I loved its imperishable charm, even while I revolted from its stranglehold on the intellect. Like the new South, I had inherited the tragic conflict of types” (12). She was, after all, born eight years after the Civil War in the heart of the former Confederacy: in a large house in Richmond, Virginia—the town where she was to spend most of her life. Glasgow’s mother, Anne Jane Gholson Glasgow, came from a family of jurists claiming descent from the early English settlers of Virginia. The evident contrast between her progenitors led Glasgow to experience what she called “a conflict of types,” in her autobiography *The Woman Within* (16). While her mother was the embodiment of the Southern lady, her father, Francis Thomas Glasgow, a successful businessman who operated the Tredegar Iron Works in Richmond from 1849 to 1912, was a living embodiment of all those forces in the postwar South that were steadily transforming its economic and social structures. A descendant of Scottish Calvinists, he represented unbending authority and male power, mainly malevolent, as he combined Calvinist devotion with numerous sexual liaisons—often with the black servants of the house.¹ Certainly, the daughter learned from her mother about ancestral pride, the burden of the past and tradition—and, not least, about the sad story of decline. And what is more essential for the purposes of this article, in Ellen Glasgow’s eyes her mother represented the “curious fate of trying to be a Southern lady” (Gray 37): she had lived too much in terms of the burdens she had had to carry, and too little in terms of her own personal needs.
- 2 Glasgow was aware that in the same instant that the Old South’s extinction after the Civil War was being lamented upon, a mythical South, which had died proudly at Appomattox without ever having been “smirched by the wear and tear of existence” (Gray 42), was being created. So if she became more interested than most other Southern writers in

people who were, as she herself put it in *The Woman Within*, “unaware of the changes about them, clinging with passionate fidelity to the empty ceremonial forms of tradition” (193), it is hardly surprising. Those forms, and the conflicts they generated, were felt everywhere in postwar Virginia and the South in general: but they were felt with unusual intensity in the streets of the state and the region where she lived. As a spectator of the disintegration of the Old South, Glasgow’s first instinct was to quarrel with the myths of Southern romanticism, especially those revealing the patriarchal indoctrination of the South.²

- 3 Structural anthropology, in the tradition of Levi-Strauss or Barthes, reads myths as the expression of a narrative system, designating a level of symbolic or cultural connotation. Glasgow was one of the first Southern writers to challenge extensively the authenticity of the myth of the South and the ensuing patriarchal paradigm. She saw this myth as a collective effort of white male Southerners in power to establish and solidify a societal structure for their apparent benefit, by means of manipulating the other gender, race and classes into believing in the myth. This is in keeping with Roland Barthes’s notion of myth as a form of signification conditioned by ideology which can control and oppress (*Mythologies*). Against the public yearning, she wished for a different and better South, “not just the simple restoration of past values and mores some of her contemporaries wanted to undertake” (Niewiadowska-Flis 20), and so she bitterly criticized the values of the past.³ As Elizabeth Ammons puts it, Glasgow would write “unpretty, complicated, fierce fiction—not the delicate imaginings of a Lady, which she as the daughter of solid upper-middle-class Virginia parents had been raised to epitomize” (169). Along this line, all the archetypes of the classic story of decay of Southern culture, from Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” to Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* are compacted in “Jordan’s End” (1923): the big house, the inbreeding, the madness, the Gothic quality. Glasgow, who was the first Southern writer to use the phrase “Southern gothic” in 1936 in an address she made to a group of librarians at the University of Virginia, uses such elements in “Jordan’s End” to suggest the harsh reality of life in the South, and to convey the idea that danger comes from within, as if, as Brigitte Zaugg has put it, “some invisible canker were gnawing at the South’s entrails and killing it by degrees” (134).⁴ And such danger, she acknowledged, was especially threatening to women. As one of the leading feminists of that era in the South, she wished to represent female experience in her novels. The “tenaciousness of Glasgow’s wish to free women from bondage and her frustration with male supremacy” cannot be denied (Niewiadowska-Flis 14)—she herself claimed: “I was always a feminist, for I liked intellectual revolt as much as I disliked physical violence” (*Woman* 163); yet often her feminism became, however unwillingly, tinted with romanticism and sentimentalism.
- 4 The patriarchal indoctrination of the South created an image of the lady as a “submissive wife, whose reason for being [was] to love, honor, obey, and occasionally amuse her husband, to bring up his children and manage his household” (Scott 4). The cardinal virtues of Victorian women—“piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity” (Welter 152)—well defined Southern white elite women. To force ladies to be a static symbol of the South, patriarchs invented crippling myths of inferiority, innocence and influence, so as to vindicate their hegemony: it was a “conscious male conspiracy” (Frazee 169). Ellen Glasgow penetrated the web of pretences and illusions surrounding the Southern lady’s existence; as Pamela Matthews has put it, she believed that, “whatever the permutations, the male-created ‘woman myths’ ... defined women solely from masculine viewpoints”

(12). In her essay "Some Literary Woman Myths," Glasgow stated the following: "It is the peculiar distinction of all woman myths that they were not only sanctioned but invented by man. Into their creation has entered many of the major prejudices and a few of the minor prerogatives of the male sex" (36). She effectively realized the menace that the myth of white Southern womanhood posed to female integrity.

- 5 But on the mythologizing of traditional materials Glasgow said the following: "It was not that I disliked legend. On the contrary, I still believe that legend is the noblest creation of man. But I believe also that legend to be a blessing must be recreated not in funeral wreaths, but in dynamic tradition, and in the living character of a race" (*Measure* 12). Accordingly, in "Jordan's End" (1923) Glasgow makes use of the classical myth of Antigone to penetrate the male-created, crippling myths of inferiority and innocence which tied Southern women to their pedestal, as according to Julius Raper, it is a story "about setting the self free of its past" (*Sunken* 74)—the "female" self, I would specify, as I argue in this article.
- 6 According to Sophocles, who makes use of the most common form of the legend in his play (442-441 BC), Antigone was the product of the incestuous marriage between King Oedipus of Thebes and his mother Jocasta. In his version, Oedipus's sons, Eteocles and Polynices, agreed to alternate rule each year, but when Eteocles decided not to share power with his brother after his tenure was expired, Polynices gathered an army and attacked the city of Thebes in a conflict called the "Seven against Thebes." The Thebans won the war, but both sons of Oedipus were killed, leaving their uncle Creon as ruler once more, serving as regent for Laodamas, the son of Eteocles. Creon gives Eteocles a full and honorable burial, but orders (under penalty of death) that Polynices's corpse be left to rot on the battlefield as punishment for his treason. Antigone, who is betrothed to Creon's son, Haemon, determines this to be unjust, immoral and against the laws of the gods, and defies him by burying her brother. After being found out, she is brought before Creon, to whom she declares that she knew the royal law but chose to break it, expounding upon the superiority of 'divine law' to that made by man, and is condemned to be entombed alive in her ancestors's mausoleum as punishment. Sophocles's "Antigone" ends in utter disaster, even though Creon finally relents after Tiresias tells him to bury the body. When Creon arrives at the tomb, Antigone has already hanged herself, and his son, Haemon, ends up taking his own life. Queen Eurydice, King Creon's wife, also kills herself at the end of the story due to seeing such actions allowed by her husband; significantly, she had been forced to weave throughout the entire story and therefore, her death alludes to the Fates.⁵ Sophocles's play directly alludes to the subjected position of women in patriarchy, as Antigone's sister, Ismene, states toward the end of her opening intervention (at this point, Antigone is trying to convince her to bury their brother):

Now there are only the two of us, left behind,
 And see how miserable our end shall be
 If in the teeth of law we shall transgress
 Against the sovereign's decree and power.
 You ought to realize we are only women,
 Not meant in nature to fight against men,
 And that we are ruled, by those who are stronger,
 To obedience in this and even more painful matters. (Sophocles 141)

- 7 Like the Greek tragic figure, who defied King Creon by piteously burying Polynices, Judith Jordan questions the Southern moral order by her pious act of euthanasia toward her husband, who like previous generations, suffers from mysterious mental and physical

ailments which are the result of inbreeding—a notion also present in Antigone's myth, since she herself is the product of incest.⁶ It is essential to consider that, thrown back on the defensive after the Civil War, Virginia became a society living perpetually in the shadow of the Civil War, a society oppressively fanatical when dealing with contemporary problems, obsessed by principle, and rapidly suspicious of ideas other than its own. "Jordan's End" broaches an ethical question, that of euthanasia or beneficent death, which is one of those intolerable themes that runs like an unmentionable current through much writing—it is suggested, for instance, in the ending of *Absalom, Absalom!* And by associating such an act to the character of Judith, Glasgow defines the new Southern woman as she sees her: independent, self-willed, with the virtues of fortitude and endurance, with that Calvinist "vein of iron" that Glasgow would emphasize in the character of her later female protagonists—especially Dorinda Oakley in *Barren Ground* (1925) and Ada Fincastle in *Vein of Iron* (1935). Judith's act of euthanasia responds to her wish to liberate her husband—death becomes a positive alternative to a life of suffering, which recalls Antigone's words when facing her punishment:

How can such as I, that live among such troubles, not find a profit in death?
So for such as me, to face such a fate as this is pain that does not count.
(Sophocles 156)

- 8 But ultimately Judith, like her Biblical namesake, kills the man who had a claim on her. In the Old Testament, Judith saved the city of Bethulia from the Assyrians besieging it by beheading their chief, Holofernes. He had invited her to share his meal and he drank the strong wine she had brought; once he had fallen into a stupor she drew his sword and cut off his head. In Glasgow's story, Judith presumably kills her husband by making him drink too strong a dose of the opiate—actually the whole phial—the doctor had given her. The subtext is complexly ambivalent, as biblical Judith functions as an instrument of the patriarchal system who eventually kills the man who was bound to subject her.⁷
- 9 So, if like Judith, the Southern lady and her adolescent counterpart, the southern belle, rebelliously challenged the assumptions of patriarchy and departed from the domestic ideal, her defiance would have implications extending beyond her own existence: women who "asked for greater scope for [their] gifts [than domesticity] ... were tampering with society, undermining civilization" (Welter 172). Thus, women apparently had two options: either accept the myth as a viable option for their lives, and in so doing deface their real selves, or reject deference to the patriarch, which translated into social oblivion. But in fact, there is a third option: silence, and no less effective: rebellion. In "Jordan's End," Glasgow appears to defy genteel traditions and subvert the situation in which Southern women are unable to redefine their roles, for she knew that if Southern women continued to acquiesce in having their lives shaped, limited and crippled by patriarchs, "they would never find the strength and courage to free themselves from the shackles of patriarchal oppression" (Niewiadowska-Flis 107).⁸
- 10 However, even though Judith defies this patriarchal order by not adhering to the alleged morality expected of a Southern lady, at the very same time that she is likened to the Greek heroine, she is forced into the oppressive mythical ideal of the Angel in the House.⁹ She appears distanced, idealized, on a pedestal to the eyes of the narrator:

Against the gray sky and the black intersecting branches of the cedar, her head, with its austere perfection, was surrounded by that visionary air of legend. So Antigone might have looked on the day of her sacrifice, I reflected. I had never seen a creature who appeared so withdrawn, so detached, from all human associations. It was as if some spiritual isolation divided her from her kind. [...] Her step was so

slow, so unhurried, that I remember thinking she moved like one who had all eternity before her. (214)

- 11 As in "Dare's Gift" (1917), Glasgow uses a male narrator as a reminder of women's entrapment in male narratives that endorse male entitlement within the patriarchal system.¹⁰ Judith, despite her "unconventional", transgressing acts, is placed on the pedestal by a male narrative voice that idealizes her from their very first encounter, with echoes of Platonism—regarding her utter perfection—and Renaissance canons of beauty:

That was thirty years ago; I am not young any longer; I have been in many countries since then, and looked on many women; but her face, with that wan light on it, is the last one I shall forget in my life. Beauty! Why, that woman will be beautiful when she is a skeleton, was the thought that flashed into my mind. She was very tall, and so thin that her flesh seemed faintly luminous, as if an inward light pierced the transparent substance. It was the beauty, not of earth, but of triumphant spirit. Perfection, I suppose, is the rarest thing we achieve in this world of incessant compromise with inferior forms; yet the woman who stood there in that ruined place appeared to me to have stepped straight out of legend or allegory. The contour of her face was Italian in its pure oval; her hair swept in wings of dusk above her clear forehead; and from the faintly shadowed hollows beneath her brows, the eyes that looked at me were purple-black, like pansies. (207)¹¹

- 12 In the tradition of the Female Gothic, the result is twofold. On the one hand, Judith is literally imprisoned within a Poesque house functioning as patriarchal metonym. Houses of Gothic fiction are both literal places of residence and metaphoric descriptions of the family called by its patriarchal name. The name Jordan's End has its origin both in the geographical location of the house, at the end of a rough country road, and in the family who erected the house and have been living there for several generations; as the story unfolds it becomes clear that it also stands for the fate awaiting all its members, including Judith—the influence of Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" is clear in the dual symbolism of this name. As in Poe's story, in "Jordan's End" the analogy between place and the Jordans is made explicit in the narrator's comparison: "A fine old place once, but repulsive now in its abject decay, like some young blood of former days who has grown senile" (208). But on the other hand, the result is also structural imprisonment. Despite her final rejection of deference to myth, Judith is silenced and caged just as Antigone is condemned to be entombed alive, for the narrator's idealization of her denies her the right to redefine her heritage in her own terms and free herself from the shackles of patriarchal oppression. The house is a place restricting language and free expression; this is mainly due to its oppressive atmosphere, but there are other elements that contribute to such a depiction. For instance, the presence of the three old Jordan women, who are dressed in mourning even though their respective husbands are not dead but locked up in an asylum, serves as a reminder of the past and the family history and they simultaneously fulfil a proleptic function, showing what Judith is bound to become if she remains in the place:

But the dread was there at that moment, and it was not lessened by the glimpse I caught, at the foot of the spiral staircase, of a scantily furnished room, where three lean black-robed figures, as impassive as the Fates, were grouped in front of a wood fire. They were doing something with their hands. Knitting, crocheting, or plaiting straw? (210)

- 13 Their black garments, together with their leanness, make them figures of death—an image reinforced by their being in front of the fire. Their exact activity remains unclear to the narrator, but he understands that they are "doing something with their hands.

Knitting, crocheting, or plaiting straw." This fits in with their being compared to the Fates, the three women in Greek mythology who control the metaphorical thread of life—again, Glasgow makes effective use of mythical intertextuality. In such an environment, Judith is not only a prisoner of the walls but seems also to be held under a spell, tonguetied, and denied the possibility of voicing her fears, especially when indoors. Pamela Mathews sees this as part of the female heritage at *Jordan's End*: "stay in the house, shoulder domestic responsibility, protect the men, and do not tell your own story" (145). The house, therefore, is an instrument of oppression and imprisonment because as the symbol of domesticity it provides Judith's only sphere.

- 14 In her rewriting of the myth of Antigone, Glasgow exposes, via Judith, the psychological injuries imposed by such a rigid society, as her most positive, life-affirming action remains an act of rebellion.¹² The patriarchal paradigm still silences and imprisons women within male-created models of femininity that do not allow for self-definition and independence; and transgressing such models is out of the question, as the story suggests. There is no room for rebellious Antigones in the old South of moonlight and magnolias: they threaten the stability of the oppressive myth created by white male Southerners to solidify a societal structure for their apparent benefit. Nevertheless, I cannot but think that in Judith is the sketch of the woman that Glasgow casts in her masterpiece *Barren Ground* (1925) as the figure best able to assuage the anxieties of the developing New South. If life is difficult to endure, Ellen Glasgow insisted that the pioneers and their descendants had the "vein of iron" she described in *Dorinda Oakley* to meet its sometimes unexpected and inexplicable demands; they possessed "moral integrity, self-reliance, devotion to a cause of their own or of God's formulation, endurance, and fortitude" (McDowell 205). At the end of "Jordan's End," before bidding farewell to the narrator, Judith acknowledges that she will remain where she has suffered and endured. She is tied to the land and what it represents, but like *Dorinda*, she will face her plight with stoic endurance:

"As long as the old people live, I am tied here. I must bear it out to the end. When they die, I shall go away and find work. [...] While my boy needs me, there is no release." (215)

- 15 The very last passage of the short story presents a *Dorinda*-like figure, unattainable, beyond the reach and comprehension of the narrator, who still keeps forcing her into his subjective idealized models of feminine virtue and misinterprets her refusal to take his hand:

I held out my hand, but she did not take it; and I felt that she meant me to understand, by her refusal, that she was beyond all consolation and all companionship. She was nearer to the bleak sky and the deserted fields than she was to her kind. (216)

- 16 Despite the bleak and ambiguous ending, subject to heated critical debate, I believe that there is still a subtle glimmer of hope, as Judith intrinsically represents renewal. Benjamin, her nine-year old boy, is not the product of inbreeding, as Judith is only a *Jordan* by marriage; above all, the fact that she is an outsider to that family in a state of "abject decay" who can question the mores and models of such a society presents a possible alternative. All in all, Judith, like *Dorinda*, seems in many ways an archetypal female martyr of the New South; a Southern Antigone who, by her selfless sacrifice and her fortitude, questions oppressive male-created myths and brings the past into a dynamically creative, rather than destructive, relationship with the present.

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NOTES

1. As Richard Gray puts it, "the conflict is so fundamental, in fact, that it seems almost too pat, too neat" (37): the female emblem of the Old South and the male emblem of the New South, the romance of the past and the reality of the present, the fluid, yielding, feminine and the rigid, authoritative masculine. What Glasgow's self-analyses in *The Woman Within* tend to leave out of account, however, are elements in herself that for whatever reason she wanted to deny or suppress and her double-edged relationship with the inheritances of her family and her region. Her fiction is a compelling hybrid, because it not only diagnoses historical tensions in her native Virginia, but also offers an analysis of the symptoms of those tensions; it explains what it was like to live in difficult place during times of turmoil.
2. The myths of Southern romanticism as Glasgow interprets them are those male-created notions that aim to control women by subjecting them to an idealized set of expectations, in order to consolidate a societal structure for the benefit of patriarchy (e.g. the *Southern belle*, the *Southern lady*).
3. Lucinda MacKethan describes Glasgow's use and revision of the past as the idea of the "prodigal daughter": her homecoming is marked "not with repentance nor with a request to return to the old order," but with the assertion to rewrite patriarchal definitions (38). Glasgow returns through memory to her daughterhood home, but assesses that home "with writer's eyes" (40).
4. Glasgow's novels are permeated with a sense of evil. Hugh Holman indicates that this sense of the blackness at the center of life is certainly not uniquely Southern, "but it is a portion of the Southern vision of experience to a greater extent than it is of that of any other region in America" (113). The sense of evil in Glasgow's work is coupled with pessimism about human potential—an awareness of man's imperfectability and inadequacy. The world for her is not and probably will never be civilized (*Measure* 38-39). Humans—especially women—are subject to hopeless oppression. As Glasgow puts it, "people who have tradition are oppressed by tradition, and people who are without it are oppressed by the lack of it—or by whatever else they have put in its place" (*Sheltered* 295). She could never recall a time when "the pattern of society, as well as the scheme of things in general, had not seemed to [her] false and even malignant" (*Woman* 42).
5. The Fates are usually conceived as three female deities who supervise fate rather than determine it. To Hesiod the Fates were three in number, the daughters of Nyx ('night'): Clotho

(‘the spinner’), Lachesis (‘the drawing of lots’) and Atropos (‘inevitable’). In Greek tradition, the name Clotho with its reference to spinning gave rise to the picture of the Fates as three old women, spinning out men’s destinies like thread: one drew them out, one measured them, and one cut them off (Grant and Hazel 137-38).

6. As many critics before have noted, charges of incest have historically been aimed at marginal or underprivileged groups or areas as a way of demonizing them (Barnes 4). Minrose Gwin has observed that incest narratives “have long circulated in Southern popular culture and in popular culture about the South” (416). Gwin argues that Southern women’s fictional stories of father-daughter incest create a space for actual survival and resistance by questioning the ideological construction of the Southern patriarchal home and the identity that “home” and “place” impose upon Southern daughters, a notion relevant to the reading of “Jordan’s End” presented in this article. Such stories rebel against the Southern patriarch’s ownership of female bodies and insist upon the necessity for Southern women, like Judith, to write their own cultural scripts.

7. Many thanks to Dr. Emmanuel Verdanakis for pointing this out during the presentation of a version of this paper at the conference *Southern Short Fiction: Representation and Rewriting of Myth* (Lille Catholic University, June 20-22, 2013).

8. Pamela Matthews explains Glasgow’s defiance of the patriarchal order in terms of writing: “To write women’s lives, whether actual or fictional [...] requires outright defiance, a quietly rebellious subversion, or, less productively for the woman writer, deception that often comes dangerously near self-delusion and loss of identity” (10).

9. The expression *Angel in the House* is taken from the title of a 1854 narrative poem by Coventry Patmore, in which he provides an idealized account of his first wife, Emily, whom he believed to be the perfect woman. Although largely ignored upon publication, it became enormously popular during the later 19th century. Following the publication of Patmore’s poem, the term *Angel in the House* came to be used in reference to women who embodied the Victorian feminine ideal: a wife and mother who was selflessly devoted to her children and submissive to her husband.

10. Both “Dare’s Gift” and “Jordan’s End” are set in symbolic country houses that exert a moral influence over their inhabitants, and in each the unnamed narrator’s gender, although obscure, is detected by their activities—male professions at the time the story is set. In “Jordan’s End” the narrator is a doctor, and “Dare’s Gift” begins with the narrator describing himself as leading “the ordinary life of a corporation lawyer in Washington” (90).

11. The canon of beauty in the Renaissance period was derived from those prevalent in Ancient Greek and Roman art, highlighting the importance of mathematical proportion and order. Beautiful feminine features were pale skin, strawberry blond hair, a sharply-defined chin, high delicate eyebrows, a strong nose and full lips.

12. As Peggy Prenshaw notes, Glasgow would create characters who exposed “the psychological injuries imposed by a rigid, often reactionary society and whose most positive, life-affirming actions would be rebellions” (218).

ABSTRACTS

En tant que spectatrice de la désintégration du vieux Sud, Ellen Glasgow vécut de si près ce qu’elle appela « le triomphe de l’idéologie sur l’actualité en Virginie » que sa première réaction fut d’affronter les mythes faciles du Sud romantique, en particulier ceux révélant de l’endoctrinement patriarcal. Dans « Jordan’s End » (1923), elle a recours au mythe classique

d'Antigone afin d'élucider les mythes écrasants de l'infériorité et de l'innocence créés par le patriarcat et qui maintiennent les femmes attachées à leur piédestal. Tout comme le personnage de la tragédie grecque qui défia le roi Créon en enterrant pieusement Polynice, Judith Jordan remet en question l'ordre moral du Sud en commettant, par pitié, l'acte de l'euthanasie. Malgré son ultime refus de se soumettre au mythe, Judith est réduite au silence structurel et piégée, tout comme Antigone fut condamnée à être ensevelie vivante, car l'idéalisation que fait le narrateur d'elle lui nie le droit de redéfinir son héritage dans ses propres mots et de se libérer du carcan de l'oppression patriarcale.

AUTHORS

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Inés Casas is a postgraduate researcher at the University of Santiago de Compostela, where she is a member of the research group "Literature and Culture of the US." Her PhD traces the regional elements present in the work of Southern women writers such as Ellen Glasgow, Elizabeth Madox Roberts or Caroline Gordon. She has recently completed articles on Ellen Glasgow's representation of her conflicted Southern identity in her novel *Barren Ground* and on the intersections of natural imagery and space in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.