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A Subversive Subplot in Kate Chopin's "Ma'tame Pélagie"

Placed side by side with Kate Chopin's renowned short stories such as "The Story of an Hour," "Désirée's Baby" and "The Storm," "Ma'me Pélagie," just like its protagonist, seems to dwell in the shadow, largely ignored popularly and critically. Bernard Koloski's 1994 study has proven this is not a mere impression. He conducted a survey of Chopin's short stories collected in the anthologies published in the seventy years between 1921 and 1991, and chronologically listed nineteen titles; "Ma'me Pélagie" is nowhere in this list ("Anthologized" 19-26). Koloski then examined the short stories included in the paperback collections of Chopin that were brought out between 1970 and 1992, and the title "Ma'me Pélagie" finally appears—but only in two out of eight ("Anthologized" 27).

What the reader expects from Chopin's work seems to account for the relative obscurity of this story. Set in Côte Joyeuse, Louisiana, thirty years after the Civil War, "Ma'me Pélagie" tells a story of a woman who refuses to bid farewell to the antebellum past. Pélagie has devoted her postwar life solely to the rebuilding of the family mansion and, as the story closes, finally and nobly gives up that lifelong dream for the sake of her beloved younger sister Pauline. The story revolves around Pélagie's heroic self-sacrifice; there is no sign of Edna Pontellier with her persistent resistance to patriarchy, or of Louise Mallard who revels and whispers, "Body and soul free!" (354) at the false news of her husband's sudden death. To the reader who regards women's revolt and self-searching Chopin's most striking properties, "Ma'me Pélagie" must appear traditionalistic, predictable, even disappointing.

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The fact that many of Chopin's stories have some kind of against-the-grain elements, however, calls for a further examination of this work. Emily Toth argues that the "distant, unusual locale . . . deflected criticism" even when Chopin "was saying very frank things about the power of men to limit and punish women" (*Unveiling* 150), and thus points to the writer's possible use of the local color as a mask. Mary E. Papke considers Chopin one of the female writers whose work "straddles in unladylike fashion the gap between sentimental and social fiction," and counsels, "it is necessary to pay attention both to what Chopin explicitly says and to what she cannot or will not yet say but which she embeds in her text" (36). "Ma'ame Pélagie" seems to be one of such works that have an "embedded" feminist critique. Uncovering of it has been delayed likely because this work introduces such critique in a way that is quite unfamiliar in Chopin's work. Instead of a blatantly rebellious protagonist like Edna or Louise, "Ma'ame Pélagie" seems to develop a hidden subplot that criticizes and eventually subverts the social and cultural values the work, at first glance, endorses.

Two critics from early days of Chopin studies coincidentally open their discussions of this work with practically identical observations. Per Seyersted, illustrating how seldom Chopin wrote about hot political topics of the day, comments on this work: "Even to the plantation legend, the most popular Southern theme at that time, Kate Chopin devoted only one story, 'Ma'ame Pélagie'" (94). Barbara C. Ewell, likewise, refers to this work as "Chopin's only explicit treatment of the popular Southern mythology of the golden days 'befo' de wa' and its consequences" (65). Although their terms vary, "plantation legend" or "Southern mythology," they agree that the myth of the Old South is the major reference of the work.

As manifest in section III, Pélagie represents the values upheld by this myth. Narrated in the present tense to stress that she lives in the mythical days, this section portrays her at twenty years of age, a doted daughter of the planter Philippe Valmêt whose mansion "cost [him] sixty thousand dollars to build, away back in 1840" (232), a Southern belle excitedly awaiting to be married to Félix. Since in the narrative present all the other named characters, Léandre, Pauline and La Petite, are either indifferent to or ignorant of the pre-war grandeur of the family or the region, Pélagie is virtually the only location where the myth manifests itself. According to Nina Baym, the central evidence for the relevance of the old system in literature was the stereotypically obedient and content black slave in the
immediate postbellum years, "but by the turn of the century Southerners . . . increasingly configured the myth around the image of the white Southern belle" (192). In accordance with Baym’s observation that the Southern woman comes to be presented in literature as “what the South as a whole has cultivated” (193), Chopin in this work delineates the myth through the presentation of a female character.

The myth of the Old South thus concerns the creation and celebration of womanhood, and the writer’s illustration of Southern womanhood as such is indeed thoroughgoing. In the course of her discussion Ewell briefly comments, “Pélagie is, in some ways, one of Chopin’s strongest characters” (65), connoting her impression that the signs of Pélagie’s strength are somehow incongruous with the rest of her presentation as a Southern woman. Anne Goodwyn Jones, however, maintains that the image of Southern woman as pure and fragile was challenged during the Civil War, when women went out of their traditional sphere to exert their skills and power in managing plantations and slaves as well as in nursing the wounded (13). Responding to these changes, “the concept of southern womanhood simply incorporated the new strength to create the oxymoronic ideal of the woman made of steel yet masked in fragility,” and, Jones proceeds, it “retained its patriarchal character, for such strength was to be exerted only within the home and only to serve the husband, the family, and the South” (13).

Pélagie has been managing the plantation singlehandedly for thirty years, and in the past she fiercely defied the enemy soldiers who set fire to the mansion. What can be surmised from Jones’s argument, however, is that these behaviors do not constitute Pélagie as a willful, independent woman. Her seemingly sovereign and determined actions are sheer obedience to the memory of her father and her beloved Félix, who are both lost to the war and, for her, the embodiment of the pre-war South. Along with her momentary temptation to kill the black slave La Ricaneuse, who was soon to be freed and heartened enough to throw “a volley of vile abuse and of brazen impudence” (237) at her young mistress, these acts of Pélagie’s indicate that she is a woman deeply entrenched in the system that operates on the division of race, class and gender. Although becoming anachronistic thirty years after the war, she is an ideal woman of such a system, as shown by the respect the neighbors pay by addressing her “Ma’am Pélagie” (232) rather than the rightful “Mam’ selle Pélagie.” The narrator, likewise, shows the same kind
of respect to the protagonist, likening her pompadour to a “silver diadem” (239), reminiscent of Dixie’s diadem, at the close of the story.

Although the sisterly bond between Pélagie and Pauline, with its strength and depth, appears to be a powerful critique of Pélagie’s male-centered world, Southern womanhood eventually assimilates even this bond. For the elder sister, Pauline is “a child of thirty-five” (232), and as Tonette Bond Inge and John Wegner contend, Pélagie assigns herself the role of mother to her sister who is fifteen years younger than she (Inge 96; Wegner 6). As her incessant “talking of the old times and planning for the new” (232–33) in the company of Pauline suggests, her self-assigned motherhood becomes the device to orient the other woman to the Southern womanhood she herself embodies. Even the final abandonment of her dream does not escape the connotations of this ideal womanhood; the act is still for the family, the other daughter of Philippe Valmêt. As if to trace Jones’s observation that “the idea of southern womanhood specifically denies the self” (4), the nucleus of Pélagie’s life lies in self-negation, whether it is for her father or her sister.

Baym sums up the location of womanhood in the Southern myth when she writes:

The recorded behavior and privilege of the great planters is masked by the fictional charade of their devotion to the flower of Southern womanhood. Rehabilitation of the image of the antebellum Southern patriarch, therefore, is another important element of this postbellum myth. The myth of Southern womanhood, thus read, is really a myth of Southern manhood. (193)

As long as “Ma’am Pélagie” is framed by the myth of the Old South, the myth eventually absorbs all the signs of Pélagie’s independence and strength. This assimilating power of the myth confronts Wegner in his attempt at uncovering feminist elements in this work. He begins his discussion premising that this work is one of Chopin’s efforts to portray an independent woman; Pélagie is a female plantation manager who strives for a sense of self in a male-dominated world where “a woman’s control of her very being almost always necessitate[s] rejecting motherhood” (6). The rejection necessarily involves a violation of the social norm but, in his view, Pélagie “manages to remain true to what she imagines is the southern myth by becoming a surrogate mother” (6). While his interpretation that
the existence of a surrogate daughter masks the protagonist's autonomy is interesting, his premise of her independence is precarious as discussed above. Consequently, he has to conclude that Pélagie, after all, ends up merely constructing "an ancillary myth that collapses under the weight of progress and time" (6).

Papke undertakes to locate Chopin's signature in "Ma'ame Pélagie" from a different angle. Declaring that "Chopin presents nothing positive in Pélagie's past, present, or future" (50), she finds the significance of this work in its exposure of "the ruin effected by adherence to" (47) the true womanhood ideology. In her view, Pélagie has "ruled and ruined her sister's life... in her attempt to train her to be 'a true Valmèt'" (Papke 48; "Ma'ame Pélagie" 233), and even her ultimate decision to build a new house is a scheme to create an "equally romantic... vision of total self-martyrdom with which to replace her primal dream" (50). Papke considers that Chopin created Pélagie solely to condemn the womanhood she represents, and sees the author's hope for the future in the plot where "the new world is born through the influence of a new woman" (50). Papke's reaction to the protagonist, though, is far from general, even a little far-fetched. Seystersted, for example, thinks that Chopin presents Pélagie in the way that makes "the reader admire the older woman" (94), and Toth shares his view when she calls this work one of Chopin's "most elegaic [sic] tales of the past" (Kate 214).

As discussed so far, the work's reference to the Southern myth and its ideal womanhood hinders attempts at uncovering unconventional elements in Pélagie and her story. This essay, however, argues that the preceding discussion only concerns the main plot. The clue to the subplot seems to lie in the last scene. Pélagie, "dressed in black" and "grown very old" (239), stands alone on the veranda, purposefully distancing herself from the merry atmosphere created by the people gathered and the music played. Referring to this scene, Ewell notes that the "purpose of the past... is to nourish the present, even at its own expense" (66), pointing to the essential plot drive through the story, the conflict between the past and the present. Needless to say, Pélagie and La Petite respectively represent each of these time frames, and Pauline's choice of the latter over the former brings an end to the conflict. The text, therefore, inevitably emphasizes not only the clash between the past and the present, but also the split among the three women. The story ends with the vision of the utterly divided women—La Petite at the piano, Pauline "enraptured near her" (238), and Pélagie away from all the others.
Yet it paradoxically brings out the visions of their strong bonds the text describes in the midsection, probably because of the sheer incongruousness. In the last paragraph, the narrator laments, “Poor Ma’mé Pélagie! How could it be different!” (239). The structure of the latter sentence is actually identical with an interrogation, only lacking the question mark; it starts to sound as if the narrator is challenging the reader to find a different story in which the protagonist is not poor.

As mentioned earlier, Wegner and Inge see a pseudo mother-daughter relationship between Pélagie and Pauline. The female romantic friendship, prevalent in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America, was abundant in such relationships. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, describing the pain of the first separation felt by mothers at home and daughters at boarding school, points to the roles the mothers’ friends and relatives played in such crises. Women often arranged with their friends from school days to send their daughters to the same school and pulled their daughters into their network of female bonds (66). In a case Smith-Rosenberg portrays, a woman “virtually adopted the daughters of her school chum” and the adopted daughters soon started to address her as “Mama” (66). The supportive ties the girls formed at school followed the same model, where “[o]lder girls in boarding school ‘adopted’ younger ones, who called them ‘Mother’” (67). The pseudo-familial relationship evinced in romantic friendship, obviously, did not derive from an actual blood relation; the familial address functioned as a metaphor to communicate the emotional closeness the women felt for each other.

The relationship between Pélagie and Pauline deserves to be explored from this perspective. When Pauline is devastated by La Petite’s declaration to leave the plantation, Pélagie, jealous, remarks: “Then she is dearer to you than I. . . . Than I, who held you and warmed you in my arms the day you were born; than I, your mother, father, sister, everything that could cherish you” (235). There is no familial relation that can be “mother, father, sister” at the same time. What Pélagie attempts to convey to her sister here is the part that follows: “everything that could cherish you.” The impossible combination of familial addresses suggests that Pélagie, as female romantic friends would, is using them as metaphors. Thus another reference point of this work comes to the surface. Behind the main plot that centers on Pélagie’s faith to her father and his world, there materializes a decidedly female-centered subplot.

The other pseudo mother-daughter relationship deserves scrutiny as well. Wegner contends that Pauline, with La Petite around, experiences “what appears
to be love for a younger daughter figure” and that her later distress is due to the “possibility of losing her new-found child” (7). Koloski observes that La Petite “awakens powerful feelings in the two women” (Kate 17), but does not discuss what she does to her younger aunt other than simply stating that she “reveals alternatives” (Kate 18). The romantic friendship, Smith-Rosenberg notes, actually encompassed a vast range of female relationships from “the supportive love of sisters, through the enthusiasms of adolescent girls, to sensual avowals of love by mature women” (53). Then, it seems appropriate to discuss both these relationships—that between Pélagie and Pauline and that between Pauline and La Petite—under the same framework.

The text describes how Pauline, meeting the niece for the first time, “kissed her and trembled” (234), indicating the extremely strong impact she receives at this moment. La Petite favors Pauline over Pélagie, and stays “oftener . . . with her aunt Pauline, assisting in household offices, chattering of her brief past”—and, showing her affection physically as well—“walking with the older woman arm-in-arm under the trailing moss of the giant oaks” (234). La Petite’s existence brings out significant changes in the other: “Pauline’s steps grew very buoyant . . . , and her eyes were sometimes as bright as a bird’s, unless La Petite were away from her side, when they would lose all other light but one of uneasy expectancy” (234). Coincidentally, one of Chopin’s later works, “Fedora,” has an expression similar to the last phrase. In “Fedora,” the title character suddenly falls in love with a younger man and feels highly troubled in his presence; at the same time, though, she is filled with “uncasiness, restlessness, expectation when he was not there within sight or sound” (468). Although whom Fedora falls in love with is actually quite an issue,3 the emotions Pauline experiences with La Petite are clearly compared to those experienced in a budding heterosexual love. Moreover, her feelings are intense enough to make her say, “if La Petite goes away I shall die” (235). Pauline is hardly a mature woman, having lived almost all her life in isolation with her sister, but her passion at least seems to equal what Smith-Rosenberg calls “the enthusiasms of adolescent girls” in the quotation above.

The revision Chopin made on “Ma’ame Pélagie,” furthermore, suggests she may have consciously emphasized the female bonds in this work. She wrote this story in 1892, and it was first published in the New Orleans Times-Democrat on December 24th, 1893. Bayou Folk was brought out exactly three months later, and she revised the story quite extensively before she included it in her first short
story collection. Out of the twenty-nine corrections she made, two are very relevant to the discussion here.\(^4\) The part where the narrator describes La Petite staying by Pauline in the plantation, “walking with the older woman arm-in-arm” (234) was, in the original Times-Democrat version, “walking with her arm-in-arm.” Pélagie, later in the story, “smoothed down the woman’s soft brown hair” (235) to console her desolate sister, but in the original version she “smoothed down the soft brown hair.” In both cases, the word “woman” is added, appearing to emphasize that the affectionate physical contacts are between two women, rather than between a niece and her aunt or between sisters.

An experience in the female world where, in Smith-Rosenberg’s words, “men made only a shadowy appearance” (28), romantic friendship relegates the familial relationship to a mere metaphor. The subplot thus removes Philippe Valmêt from the position to define the three women’s relationship and shifts the focus to the direct bond among them. Pélagie ceases to be the embodiment of Southern womanhood, deterred from her faith to her father, the family he created, and the South he represented. The subplot thus unsettles the main plot to a great extent.

First of all, the foundation of Pélagie’s acts shakes. In her visualization of the glorious past, Pélagie herself makes the motivation of her actions clear: “Il ne faut pas faire mal à Pauline [one cannot hurt Pauline]” (237, 238). Repeating this phrase to herself, she suppresses her impulse “to show [the soldiers] how a daughter of Louisiana can perish before her conquerors” (237) and, in the narrative present, gives up rebuilding the family mansion. She swerves from the patriarchal dictate and forsakes the symbol of her father doubtless for Pauline, but the subplot opens up a question—do these actions come from her duty to the younger sister of the same lineage, or from her emotional tie to the woman who is central to her life? If the latter is the case, Pélagie, then, has been prioritizing her faith to a woman over that to any man, at least thirty years of her fifty-year-long life.

The subplot also sheds a different light on the final vision of the irrevocably divided women. Pauline seems to have chosen La Petite and driven her sister to isolation, but in the midsection of the text she confesses to her sister: “I love you as I have always loved you; next to God” (235). Taking her sole company away from Pélagie, La Petite bears a semblance of the protagonist’s mortal enemy, but, on announcing her resolve to leave them, the niece pleads with both of her aunts, “I love you both,—please remember that I love you both” (234). Although Pélagie is quite reticent about her affections toward La Petite, the renouncement
of her dream and the subsequent construction of a new house are surely for the niece as well as Pauline. When seen through the subplot, the bond of the three women is not as severed as the last scene suggests. Pélagie does distance herself from the others, but her preferred isolation is possibly a reaction to the choice she herself has made after a long period, indicating the impact such a change should have on a person. The narrator makes it clear, after all, that the new house is a "pied à terre" (238) for Léandre; the Valmèt plantation is promised to remain an exclusively female residence, where two women avow their love to Pélagie. If their generations are considered, it can be said that Pélagie has now obtained the "daughter" Pauline and the "granddaughter" La Petite through the female bonds.

As referred to earlier in this essay, multiple critics see mother-daughter relationships between Pélagie and Pauline and between Pauline and La Petite. When reexamined through the subplot, however, these mother-daughter relationships come to foreground motherhood as political praxis. In Of Woman Born, Adrienne Rich concisely traces the girl’s re-orientation of her object of affection, and identifies the two forces complicit in this process:

Institutionalized heterosexuality and institutionalized motherhood demand that the girl-child transfer [the] first feelings of dependency, eroticism, mutuality, from her first woman to a man, if she is to become what is defined as a "normal" woman—that is, a woman whose most intense psychic and physical energies are directed towards men. (218-19)

In "Ma'ame Pélagie," the transition from a mothered girl to a mothering woman is traceable only in Pauline. Pélagie is the “first woman” for her and she becomes a mother without being re-oriented toward men as her avowal of love to her sister clearly indicates. As it has been discussed, female centrality is also evident in Pélagie’s life although her mother is conspicuously absent from the story. The moment Pauline was born, her life revolves around her sister regardless of the presence or the absence of her father or her fiancé. Her single status after the war can denote her choice of a female life partner over a male one. The reference to romantic friendship thus unravels the conspiring knot of compulsory heterosexuality and motherhood.

In his discussion of this work and Ellen Glasgow’s "Ideals," Wegner argues as follows:
motherhood [in the South] becomes a form of social control, institutionalized and managed by men (husbands, fathers, older brothers). In essence, the southern belle is the centerpiece of southern resistance. The dream of a "Southern Country" rests on/in the womb of its protected women. (6)

Here he exposes the superficiality of the woman's central location and points to the male appropriation of the womb for the continuance of the Southern culture and society. The female family the subplot delineates releases motherhood from heterosexuality and from its position as the breeding device of patriarchal society. The subplot shows Pélagie and Pauline re-appropriating their wombs into their own hands. By depicting two women's refusal to breed for men, the subplot shakes the basis of the myth of the Old South, thus subverting the main plot based on that myth.

Ewell sees the significance of the Venus symbol at the end of section III in the fact that "the star of love, not the romantic moon, guides Pélagie back to her sister and the present" (66). This symbol, however, matches the interpretation brought through the subplot even more. Pélagie turns her back to the mansion that is "shaped like the Pantheon" (232) for the last time. Her decision is to discard the temple and all the mythic gods enshrined there except for Venus, the female god of love. And importantly, right at the moment Venus appears as the guiding star of her life, the ruin, the symbol of Pélagie's faith in the main plot, suddenly turns into "a huge monster—a black spot in the darkness that enveloped it" (238). On the symbolic level, too, "Ma'ame Pélagie" seems to invite the reader to center on female love and to view the story differently.

Lucinda MacKethan points out that local colorists of the South in Chopin's time "were encouraged by northern markets to make plantation and village southern settings into the 'good lost land' of pastoral." Chopin, still aspiring for a national fame as she wrote "Ma'ame Pélagie," most likely tailored it to the demands of the time. The result is an overly conservative story that sorrowfully and beautifully depicts a woman who held fast to the doctrine of self-sacrifice in the age of the new woman. The seemingly traditionalistic work, however, contains a set of self-referential criticisms as a subplot. The attribute of cultural and social criticism found in this work differs from what Toth perceives as Chopin's frankness or what Papke calls the writer's embedding technique—it is not, needless to say, the writer's conscious critical act. Without overtly referring to then taboo issues like
divorce, alcoholism, domestic violence or even extramarital sexual intercourse, without even inventing an explicitly defiant woman, "Ma'ame Pélagie" still successfully develops an acute criticism of patriarchal culture. "Ma'ame Pélagie" seems to be a unique work of Chopin in this sense. At the same time, though, this work seems to open interpretive possibilities of her other stories, suggesting that her edge may be located at a deeper, nearly undetectable level, where she is not even trying to exercise her authorial control.

Notes

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1 Nevertheless, in her discussion of "Ma'ame Pélagie," Toth focuses on the historical and biographical facts surrounding the work and does not explore the text in depth. According to her, the Valmêt plantation is modeled on the actual Magnolia Plantation on the Côte Joyeuse, part of the vast area to which Union soldiers set fire after the Battle of Mansfield in 1864 (Kate 142). Reminiscent of the Valmêt plantation in the story, Magnolia remained "burned-out ruins," within a walking distance from the Chopin residence in Cloutierville, Natchitoches Parish, until it was rebuilt and regained its former magnificence six years after the publication of "Ma'ame Pélagie" (Kate 214).

2 Papke discusses from the perspective of true womanhood rather than Southern womanhood. The two concepts are strongly interrelated as Emily Powers Wright's succinct definition of the latter indicates: "a hyperstated version of American 'true' womanhood" (133).

3 When "Fedora" was first published in the St. Louis Criterion on February 20th, 1897, it was titled "The Falling in Love of Fedora. A Sketch." It is certain, therefore, that Fedora falls in love, but the story, after detailing her infatuation for Young Malthers, concludes with her ardent kiss on the lips of his sister. See Bucher and Utsu for full discussions.

4 Seyersted includes the revision records in the Appendix of The Complete Works of Kate Chopin. See pages 1013–14 for the revisions made on "Ma'ame Pélagie." This paper relies on the edition included in The Complete Works, which is identical with the Bayou Folk edition.
5 Chopin's account book shows that she sent the manuscript of "Ma'ame Pélagie" to *Century, Harper's, Atlantic, Scribner's* and then to *Vogue* before its final acceptance by the New Orleans *Times-Democrat* (*Private Papers* 154–55).

**Works Cited**


———. "Fedora." *Complete* 467–69.


