

# Zorro and the Southern Tradition

By Earl Starbuck on Oct 26, 2020

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Through the centuries since Jamestown was founded, the South has held certain values, virtues, and ideals in high esteem: **Courage, duty, humility, integrity, courtesy, chivalry, gallantry, self-control, reverence, selflessness, strength, wisdom, and a willingness to defend what was right, no matter the odds.** To be noble, to be a gentleman, was to exemplify those ideals. Sir Walter Scott's novels were the most popular fiction in the antebellum South for a reason: his protagonists embodied (or learned to embody) those Southern Virtues. Captain John Smith, George Washington, Light Horse Harry Lee, Francis Marion, Sam Houston, Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, Jeb Stuart, John S. Mosby, Nathan Bedford Forrest – these men are all Southern heroes because, to some extent or other, they possessed those Southern Virtues. [1] If we intend to preserve these Southern Virtues, we must do we everything we can to pass them on to posterity. The best way of doing that is by telling our children the right stories.

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Stories are a highly effective means, perhaps even the principal means, by which human beings teach one another. In this, we take after the Great Storyteller whose tale we inhabit. Jesus did not give lectures; He told parables. As G.K. Chesterton put it in chapter XVII of his *Tremendous Trifles*:

**“The timidity of the child or the savage is entirely reasonable; they are alarmed at this world, because this world is a very alarming place. They dislike being alone because it is verily and indeed an awful idea to be alone. Barbarians fear the unknown for the same reason that Agnostics worship it—because it is a fact. Fairy tales, then, are not responsible for producing in children fear, or any of the shapes of fear; fairy tales do not give the child the idea of the evil or the ugly; that is in the child already, because it is in the world already. Fairy tales do not give the child his first idea of bogey. What fairy tales give the child is his first clear idea of the possible defeat of bogey. The baby has known the dragon intimately ever since he had an imagination. What the fairy tale provides for him is a St. George to kill the dragon. Exactly what the fairy tale does is this: it accustoms him for a series of clear pictures to the idea that these limitless terrors had a limit, that these shapeless enemies have enemies in the knights of God, that there is something in the universe more mystical than darkness, and stronger than strong fear.”[2]**

Children (and grown-ups) learn by emulation. **“Monkey see, monkey do”** is a truism for a reason. This being the case, they must be given worthy heroes to emulate. It is not enough for the stories of their youth merely to be harmless, mindless entertainment – they must build the child up, morally, emotionally, and mentally. It’s not enough merely to *know* what is right; one must learn to *love* what is right, to cherish, treasure, guard, nourish, value, and protect it, to claim it as one’s own. As C.S. Lewis once put it: “The right defence against false sentiments is to inculcate just sentiments. By starving the sensibility of our pupils we only make them easier prey to the propagandist when he comes. For

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famished nature will be avenged, and a hard heart is no infallible protection against a soft head.”[3]

All of which brings us back to the problem of passing on Southern Virtues to Southern children. In this task, the Southern storyteller has one advantage: so long as they teach the right lessons and espouse the right ideals, the stories themselves don't necessarily need to be in or about the South. Sir Walter's novels weren't. Baroness Orczy's *Scarlet Pimpernel*, C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, and J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* aren't either, yet I defy anyone to find a single Southerner who, having read them, doesn't love them, or at least appreciate the skill with which they were written and the messages they convey.

Macaulay's *Horatius at the Bridge* teaches several Southern Virtues, despite being authored by an Englishman about an ancient Roman.[4]

This brings us to another difficulty. Like it, hate it, feel ambivalent about it, the simple fact is that TV long ago supplanted books as the primary medium of children's entertainment. (Whether or not video games will in turn supplant television is yet to be seen). Books are still valuable, still relevant, but television is king. This being the case, I have a great deal of sympathy for parents in modern America, both Southern and otherwise. **Anyone who pays the least amount of attention to current children's media knows that it's a mine-field of progressivism, feminism, postmodernism, secular humanism, Critical Race Theory, the LGBTQAAIP+ Movement, and Cultural Marxism. No show, absolutely none, is friendly to the Old South.** There are comparatively few male lead characters. Fathers, if they appear at all, are portrayed as out-of-touch bumbling idiots. Perhaps one example will suffice to illustrate the point: Disney's new show, *Owl House*. The main character is a 14-year-old multicultural Dominican-American girl named Luz Noceda. She somehow winds up stuck in the Demon Realm and

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apprentices herself to a witch in order to fight evil.[5] She's also bisexual.[6] Oh, what a time to be alive.

And yet, unless the Southern storyteller wishes to concede the field and leave the most popular form of children's entertainment in the hands of the enemy, he must either find or produce wholesome TV stories with which to regale and instruct Southern children. As an alternative to *Owl House* and other such wicked absurdity, let me suggest a classic: Walt Disney's *Zorro*.

You see, when I was a young lad, before I knew anything more about Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and Jeb Stuart than that their portraits adorned the walls of my home, I knew what courage, courtesy, chivalry, reverence, and gallantry looked like. This understanding was thanks in no small part to an outlaw who called himself Zorro. Originally airing on ABC from 1957 to 1959 and based on the book series by Johnston McCulley, the show made a modest come-back through re-runs in the late 1990's and early 2000's, when it aired late at night on the Disney Channel. My mother used to tape the episodes for me on VHS. The main character, played by Guy Williams, is the handsome and dashing Don Diego de la Vega. The pilot episode, "Presenting Senor Zorro" begins in 1820 with our hero returning home to Spanish California. Diego has cut short his senior year at university in Spain because his father, Don Alejandro, has summoned him home to their hacienda near the Pueblo de Los Angeles. Diego doesn't know why his father wishes him to return until the captain of his ship explains that a dictator, Comandante Enrique Sánchez Monastario, has seized control of the Pueblo and its environs, looting and abusing its people. Diego then realizes that Alejandro wants his help in putting an end to Monastario's tyranny.

Diego explains to his faithful manservant Bernardo that his father's temper is liable to get him into trouble. Monastario must be stopped, but

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attempting openly to overthrow him would be a hopeless enterprise which might even be used by the villain as justification for his previous tyrannies. Cunning and wit must be employed to win the day. Despite being a trophy-winning swordsman, Diego decides to take on the persona of a pacifistic man of letters, a wealthy lay-about interested only in books and music. Of course, the man of letters will also secretly be a man of action, using a mask and the cover of night to conceal his identity as he works to thwart Monastario's ambitions: **"You know the old proverb. When you cannot clothe yourself in the skin of the lion, put on that of the fox!"**

Bernardo, who is mute, then suggests that he can also play a part. In order to act as Diego's eyes and ears, he will pretend to be deaf as well as dumb, thus turning his greatest weakness into a strength. Bernardo is a wonderful character, brave and loyal despite often serving as the comic relief, he is the utterly indispensable Sam to Diego's Frodo, the Watson to his Holmes.

These first few scenes explain a great deal about our protagonists and the themes of the show itself. Diego returns home early from university because his father asks him to; it is the action of a loving and obedient son – it is his *duty*. Learning that his home and people are suffering under the heel of a tyrant, Diego resolves to do something about it, because, having the ability to take action, he possesses the responsibility to take action – it is his *duty*. Hearing of Diego's plan, Bernardo volunteers to take part in the Zorro scheme out of affection for his master – it is his *duty*. Apart from the blessings of liberty, they have nothing to gain if they win and everything to lose if they fail. It would be easier and safer to just pay their taxes, put their heads down, and go-along-to-get-along, but they don't, because ease and success have nothing to do with the rightness of their cause. The Old South, to a man, would have

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agreed. To quote the Reverend Colonel Dabney: "Only the atheist judges success as the criterion of right." [7]

Upon reaching Los Angeles, Diego is forced to stop to have his baggage inspected by Monastario's soldiers, and our hero meets his nemesis for the first time. Captain Monastario is a tall, handsome, blue-eyed, impeccably dressed man, his black hair tinged with grey, he is suave, debonair, intelligent, crafty, and shrewd. Later, we will discover he is also personally brave and an excellent swordsman. Unfortunately, Monastario is also everything a man in power should *not* be: proud, greedy, covetous, petty, selfish, narcissistic, cruel, vindictive, ambitious, amoral, avaricious, vengeful, abusive to the soldiers under his command, tyrannical over the civilians he's supposed to be protecting, and utterly ruthless. In subsequent episodes, Monastario will (among other sins): accuse an innocent man of treason in order to seize his land and wealth for himself, kidnap innocent women to try and make a husband/father turn himself in and confess to crimes he didn't commit, attempt to coerce said innocent women into accusing said husband/father, intimidate people into false confessions (or terrified silence) by threatening their families, round people up and set them to enforced labour, then blame the wrongly accused victim for their suffering, attempt to rig a trial, commit various and sundry crimes and frame Zorro for them, and try to coerce a beautiful, wealthy senorita into marrying him.

The show teaches children some valuable lessons about evil. Virtues (like courage) talents (like cunning) and skills (like swordsmanship) can be used for wicked and selfish ends. Possessing them is not enough; one must direct them toward pursuing the right goals in the right way. A winning smile and pleasant manners may be the guise with which evil cloaks itself. For all his pretensions, Monastario is no gentleman; he may possess the air and manners, but he lacks the character and virtue. Like all true gentlemen, Diego possesses a sense of *noblesse oblige*, justice,

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reverence, honour, and righteousness. Monastario would dismiss such concepts as naïve, idealistic foolishness.

It is worth noting that, as the privileged heir of a wealthy landowner with a massive estate, large mansion, and substantial herds of horses and cattle, Diego is exactly the kind of quasi-aristocratic protagonist to irritate Marxists, Jacobins, and other radical egalitarians. With such an agrarian inheritance, Diego has more in common with George Washington or Jeff Davis than he does with Bruce Wayne.[8]

When Diego reaches home, his father, Alejandro, is overjoyed to see him. After their reunion, the enraged elder de la Vega tells Diego of Monastario's tyranny:

"The rancheros are being taxed out of existence. Those who cannot pay are flogged and thrown into prison. The Indians are torn from their families and forced into slave labour – all for the benefit of one man: Capitan Monastario! ...Monastario is the law! He brought in a crooked lawyer from Mexico City to make his crimes appear legal! ...He is a black-hearted scoundrel! If he remains in power, our country faces ruin. We must get rid of him, Diego. That is why I've called you home. Someone must do something!"

Diego's response? "You're right, father, we must do something! I'm going to sit down and write a detailed letter to the governor!" Alejandro is understandably disappointed and upset by this milquetoast reaction, and, suggesting his son is tired from his long journey, sends Diego to bed. When he reaches the secrecy of his room, he tells Bernardo: "I have just had to do something I'm not very proud of. I've convinced my father that I'm a spineless weakling. But if I were to take open action, as he wants to do, his life would be in danger."

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Alejandro allows the show to address at least three worthwhile subjects: lawful authority, filial piety, and self-control. Notice in the quotation above that Alejandro says Monastario's crimes have been made to "appear legal." Nothing the Comandante does is within his rightful authority, at least not correctly construed, but the Captain is excellent at justifying his expansive interpretation of his authority. The people, forced to submit, recognize his *power*, but not his *authority*. They do not consent to being governed in such a manner – that's why they support Zorro. Sound familiar?

The problem of Alejandro's strained relationship with his son is also a major theme of the show. Constantly, he urges Diego to take open action, and every time Diego responds with some deflection. Usually, the younger de la Vega is in the right, despite his persona of the prancing dandy. When Monastario throws two gentlewomen in cells and refuses to provide them with any comforts, or even food and water, until they sign a document condemning an innocent man, Alejandro is incensed. He gathers a collection of his neighbours and makes a plan to storm the quartel where the women are being held. Diego tries to restrain them, but they are justifiably livid and go through with the idea. Unfortunately for them, Monastario had a spy in their midst, got wind of the scheme, and set a trap. Alejandro is wounded and eventually captured, and Zorro goes to a great deal of trouble to free him.

Alejandro is reckless, rash, imprudent, and quick to anger. But his ire is righteous, his sentiments just. He is more gallant than he is prudent, but he is certainly not the bumbling dolt of the modern fictional father. Diego is obviously heartbroken at deceiving his father into thinking him a fop and a milksop. He loves and respects Alejandro, and wants him to be proud, as any son would. He is sometimes frustrated by his father's lack of self-control over his temper, but though he recognizes that weakness, he never disrespects his *pater familias*.

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Self-control and channeling one's anger productively are also recurring themes throughout the show. Diego often finds himself on the verge of acting in anger, and it is often Bernardo who restrains him. Unlike Alejandro, Diego makes a conscious effort not to let his temper control his actions. Wisdom and prudence, wit and cunning, are essential to his successes.

**Always outnumbered, it is brain that must triumph over brawn.** That's the whole point of the Zorro persona – it gives Diego the ability to take action without being thrown in jail or driven into the hills. The best example of our protagonist's self-control is a mid-season episode in which a royal official shows up at Alejandro's door and announces that he will be taking up residence at the de la Vega hacienda until his business in Los Angeles is concluded. Diego, incensed at this, manages to restrain himself. Acting the part of the young popinjay, he smiles and simpers and welcomes the official into their home (Alejandro is thankfully away on business). Retiring to his room, he vents to Bernardo:

“What a pompous, egotistical fool! No, really, this is too much! I can no longer live in the same house with a man like that and keep up this pretense of pacifism! I came within a half inch of throwing him out the window!”

The official later turns out to be up to no good and Zorro handles him with his usual dash and vigour. The show thus combines a lesson on self-control with the valid, if rarely applicable, point that arrogant government officials who invite themselves to live in your home are probably not good men. Given their vehement opposition to the Quartering Act (which only allowed royal troops to be housed in people's barns and outbuildings), the Founding Fathers clearly agreed.[9]

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Brave, humble, and self-controlled, it should come as no surprise that Diego is also a reverent man. In one episode, he must find a way to help one of Monastario's victims who has taken sanctuary in a church. Clever devil that he is, Monastario interprets the law of sanctuary as narrowly as possible, surrounding the place with soldiers so that the victim cannot go out, and no one who goes in may take him nourishment. The local priest, Padre Felipe, attempts to sneak food and water through and is caught by Monastario, who snatches it up and begins devouring it himself. When the indignant padre insists he should at least be permitted to take the man some water to slake his thirst, the following exchange occurs:

**M: "Let him drink the holy water!"**

**P: "I trust there is an especially warm place reserved for you in the hereafter."**

Zorro leaps into action and tries to smuggle sustenance to the poor man inside the sanctuary. Despite the difficulty of sneaking past the cordon of Monastario's soldiers and the high stress of the situation, Zorro still takes time to stop, kneel at the altar, and cross himself before approaching the beneficiary of his errand of mercy. Unfortunately, Diego was spotted making his way in, and Monastario and his soldiers are fast on Zorro's heels; none of them bother to stop and pray before chasing the Fox away. I doubt a modern Disney protagonist would be caught dead darkening the door of a church, let alone kneeling and praying in one.

Like Francis Marion and John Singleton Mosby, Zorro fights a partisan war against long odds.[10] Monastario has dozens of soldiers, while Zorro nearly always rides alone. Striking at night, galloping across the countryside atop a horse as black as midnight, he fights and runs away, baffling Monastario with his knowledge of the countryside, his excellent horsemanship, and the occasional aid of the common folk. Every episode

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is a rip-roaring adventure that will keep kids' eyes glued to the screen. And every episode is a worthwhile entry in a saga that teaches children how heroes and villains behave.

In an era when Southerners, especially Southern children, are being bombarded with anti-Southern, anti-Western heathen propaganda, it is absolutely vital that we pass on Southern virtues. Good stories are among the most effective tools we have to accomplish that goal. *Zorro* helped teach this Southern boy what a man should be: brave, humble, selfless, honest, courteous, chivalrous, reverent, gallant, wise, generous, self-controlled, dutiful, and willing to defy fearful odds in a righteous cause – just like Diego.

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[1]This list is illustrative, not exhaustive.

[2]<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/8092/8092-h/8092-h.htm>

[3]C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 14.

[4]<https://www.thoughtco.com/horatius-at-the-bridge-4070724>

[5]<https://insidethemagic.net/2020/01/disney-cartoon-owl-house-kc1/>

[6]<https://www.cnn.com/2020/08/15/us/disney-bisexual-trnd/index.html>

[7]Robert L. Dabney, *Discussions: Secular*, (Mexico, MO: E.B. Ervin, 1897).

[8]Funny enough, *Zorro* was one of two characters who served as inspiration for Batman. The other was Mary Roberts Rinehart's *The Bat*.

[9]<https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/quartering-act>

[10]Marion and Mosby had their own TV shows back in the late 1950's. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Swamp\\_Fox\\_\(TV\\_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Swamp_Fox_(TV_series))

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Gray\\_Ghost\\_\(TV\\_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Gray_Ghost_(TV_series))