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ISSUES OF CULTURE AND GENDER IDENTITY IN KATHERINE ANNE PORTER'S *MIRANDA STORIES*

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ABSTRACT

Katherine Anne Porter is an established twentieth century Southern writer. Like so much American writing, particularly Southern writing, Porter's stories of the Old South are based on her family past in antebellum Kentucky and Texas during the Reconstruction Era offer. They offer a statement about the past and its impact on the present. These stories though written over the span of a decade, fall into a pattern, being united around the heroine and called "Miranda Stories"; present a wide variety of characters illustrating the kinds of the feminine models Porter grew up with, thus providing an insight into her ideas about herself and woman's role in the society.

Apart from fictionalizing parts of her own life through the character of Miranda, Porter also depicts a reshaping of the cultural ideologies surrounding gender roles and the formation of identity. This paper attempts to present Miranda's gradual disillusionment with the patriarchal ideology of gender and her steady movement toward a self-fashioned identity free from social constructs by charting Miranda's maturation through these two sets of stories "The Old Order", "Old Mortality" and "Pale Horse, Pale Rider".

Key words: Culture, identity, Southern writing, Miranda Stories

Katherine Anne Porter (1890–1980) is an established twentieth century writer, well known as a Southern woman writer. Like so much American writing, particularly Southern writing, Porter's stories of the Old South ("The Old Order" series and "Old Mortality") based on her family past in antebellum Kentucky and Texas during the Reconstruction Era, offer a statement about the past and its impact on the present. These stories which are openly autobiographical and central to porter's oeuvre also provide a way of approaching Porter as a woman writer. These stories though written over the span of a decade, fall into a pattern, being united around the central character Miranda and are called "Miranda Stories". These stories present a wide variety of characters illustrating the kinds of the feminine models Porter grew up with, thus providing an insight into her ideas about herself and woman's role in the society.

Porter not only fictionalizes parts of her own life through the character of Miranda but also depicts a reshaping of the cultural ideologies regarding gender roles and the formation of identity. Those characters who represent either a willing submission to the patriarchal view of gender or a paradoxical rebellion against it

in "The Old Order" and "Old Mortality" serve to show Miranda the repressive nature of this cultural ideology. This paper attempts to discern Miranda's gradual disillusionment with the patriarchal ideology of gender and her steady movement toward a self-fashioned identity free from social constructs by charting Miranda's maturation through these two sets of stories and "Pale Horse, Pale Rider".

Miranda's first awareness of her society's cultural ideologies of gender comes through her grandmother, who signifies a passive acceptance of the patriarchal order. A surface reading of "The Old Order" may seem to indicate that the grandmother, Sophia Jane, is rebelling against these ideological codes of behavior and thinking, but, she is in fact, subtly and, perhaps naively, perpetuating them. Although portrayed as a woman who does "man's" work like cutting timber and plowing fields, she, in reality, passively reinforces the patriarchal ideology of gender. She does not reject the traditional roles of gender but enacts each gender role distinctly and in accordance with her society's cultural codes. In her docile maternal role, she sits for hours with Nannie "under the mingled trees of the side garden" sewing patchwork quilts made from "scraps of family finery," talking about the past, and observing the activities of those around them. When enacting the paternal role, Sophia Jane is seen enforcing discipline with her riding whip or striving to provide the basic needs of her family: "She had built a house large enough to shelter them all, of hand-sawed lumber dragged by oxcart for forty miles, she had got the fields fenced in and the crops planted" (p. 339). Although Sophia seems to be a dissenter of the patriarchal culture in doing these traditionally unfeminine jobs, she simply performs these tasks out of necessity to provide for her family's needs.

Sophia Jane's distinctive handling of both of the patriarchal culture's gender roles is best demonstrated in the incidence which describes her two distinct reactions to her two younger sons, who ran away from home. After she catches up with them and brings them back home, she first enacts the paternal role in going "through the dreary ritual of discipline she thought appropriate to the occasion," and "her duty performed, she broke down and wept with her arms around them" (p. 338). It is only after Sophia Jane fulfills the traditional obligations of a paternal disciplinarian that she can fulfill the nurturing maternal role. As part of the patriarchy, both the gender roles conform to the idea of authority and order. Accepting the identity society gives to her, Sophia Jane represents not a challenge to the patriarchal order but rather a submission to it.

Sophia Jane's faithfulness to the patriarchal ideology not only compels her to make sure that both traditional gender roles are represented in her own family, but also judges others according to how well they carry out these conventions. She disapproves of her youngest son's new wife who "was altogether too Western, too modern, something like the 'new' woman who was beginning to run wild, asking for the vote, leaving her home and going out in the world to earn her own living" (p. 333). She shows this same kind of disapproval toward Harry's wife, "who was delicate and inadequate at housekeeping, and could not even bear children successfully, since she died when her third was born" (p. 339). In recognizing Sophia Jane as a figure of the patriarchal tradition, one may consider her disapproval as being in accordance with her culture's ideology of gender because, for her, any deviation from the traditional feminine role signified a threat to her culture's order. Perhaps one of the main reasons that the grandmother disapproves of her daughters-in-law is that she herself accepted the patriarchal culture's idea that a woman should be passive, domestic, and subordinate to masculine authority. Submitting to the order and authority of the patriarchal culture, she offered no protest when her husband gambled away her dowry. She believed "it was the business of a man to make all decisions and dispose of all financial matters," and "against her will and judgment she accepted their advice" (p.337). She is controlled or rather dominated by her husband even after his death because "her husband's ghost persisted in her" (p. 338). Perhaps it was this sense of male domination that also prompted her to carry on the masculine role of authority when she mercilessly drove her sons, the servants and horses in their labor. Fulfilling the patriarchal culture's expectation that the woman should be self-sacrificing, Sophia Jane sold parts of her own land to buy her grown up children the land they preferred. Her annual ritual of disinfecting, sanitizing, and whitewashing implies that she thinks the slaves and everyone else on the farm lack the self-discipline and just as the males in her life dominated everyone who was considered inferior; she thinks that she alone can and must rescue them from a life of disorder. In doing so, she reinforces the patriarchy's fixed code of living. While most of those on the farm benefit from the grandmother's visits, the

narrator points to the oppressive nature of the patriarchy by describing Sophia Jane as a "tireless, just and efficient slave driver," a tyrant from whom the grandchildren wish to be free (p. 324). Even in her feminine role, the quilt she sews is a patchwork of "carefully disordered" fabrics which shows that she has so internalized the patriarchal code that even her "chaos" is planned and outlined to stay within set boundaries. The grandmother derives her sense of identity from her place in society and it has nothing to do with her occupation but rather depends on how well she maintains the traditional gender roles, how strictly she preserves order, and how closely she observes the cultural boundaries. Having an identity gleaned from external circumstances, she naturally conforms to the cultural expectations.

"The Circus," portrays Miranda's first noted reaction to the patriarchy. On her first visit to the Circus, She becomes aware of the physical distinctions between males and females which form the basis of the ideological conventions of gender roles. She does not understand the peculiar gaze of the "little boys peeping up from the dust below" (p. 344). When Dicey's reacts by drawing Miranda's "knees together and her skirts around her" and warning her to stop throwing her legs around (p.344), she learns that the boys with their "bold grinning stare" are peeping Toms. This scary incident which makes her aware of the sexual differences is significant for Miranda because it initiates her to understand that the she is in a position of vulnerability. The incident establishes the basis for accepting the patriarchal ideology which privileges the masculine over the feminine.

Miranda's reaction to the patriarchal codes of gender at a more mature age is presented in "The Grave". The two incidents within this story involve the "treasure" found in the family's burial place and a discovery made after Paul, Miranda's brother, shoots a rabbit. Dressed like a tomboy, Miranda goes out hunting with her brother, and while exploring along the way, they look into two empty graves. Miranda finds a dove-shaped coffin peg in her grandfather's pit and Paul unearths a ring (probably the wedding ring). Esim Erdim suggests that the dove symbolizes "freedom and the flight of the spirit" and that the ring symbolizes traditional womanhood. They exchange their newly found treasures, and the elegance of the ring is what gets Miranda interested in taking a bath, using violet tale, wearing a dress instead of her overalls, sitting in a wicker chair under the trees, and dreaming of luxury. Notably, after this description of her desired transformation, the narrator says, "she lagged rather far behind Paul, and once she thought of just turning back without a word and going home" (p. 365), suggesting that in order to accept traditional womanhood, a female has to give up her freedom.

In the second incident, after Paul and Miranda find treasure in the tombs, he shoots a rabbit and, as if he had chosen where he would shoot it, complacently says, "right through the head." After skinning the body quickly: "'Look,' he said, in a low amazed voice, 'It was going to have young ones'" (p. 366). Just as the treasure of the tomb symbolizes tradition, the "treasure" of the womb symbolizes the destruction of the feminine. Before realizing that the rabbit was pregnant, Paul smugly goes about skinning the rabbit. Although he speaks as though he had always known about everything, Paul's reaction after the discovery of the womb testifies to the power it commands over him. Brought up in a patriarchal culture, Paul cannot help but stand in amazement at this strictly female source of potentiality: "Paul said cautiously, as if he were talking about something forbidden: 'they were just about ready to be born' and 'His voice dropped on the last word' (p. 367). Miranda readily accepts this view of the power of the womb and convinces herself that she has always known about it. While this scene provides an illustration of the patriarchal idea of female empowerment which allocates power only to the womb, not the woman, Miranda vaguely senses part of the ramifications of acting upon this ideology: the blood running over the tiny rabbits signifies that the cost of female power is the risk to one's own life. DeMouy asserts, "Miranda is not traumatized until her quick mind sees the link between her femaleness and the precarious, bloody ritual of birth. Giving life means risking death. This is her true legacy from her grandmother and her society" (p. 140). The womb is seen as an empowering tool which puts the feminine on the same level as the masculine. After putting the tiny rabbits back into the womb of the rabbit, Paul hid her away and tells Miranda:

> "Listen now. Now you listen to me, and don't ever forget. Don't you ever tell a living soul that you saw this. Don't tell a soul. Don't tell Dad because I'll get into trouble. He'll say I'm leading you into things

you ought not to do." (p. 367)

It is clear that Paul tries to reinforce the patriarchal codes of gender. Paul's anticipation of his father's reaction to this revelation of forbidden knowledge is in alignment with the patriarchy's insistence on abiding by an established order. For a female to use the womb as a tool of empowerment would constitute a threat to traditional authority. Because Paul views the womb as taboo, he cannot do anything with the pregnant rabbit except restore the babies to the womb and hide it away.

In the next sequence, "Old Mortality," Miranda is introduced more fully to a paradoxical rebellion against the patriarchal culture, a rebellion which attempts to place the feminine on par or even superior to the masculine. Through the three dated sections with the first one beginning in 1885 and the last one taking place in 1912, we see Miranda who is raised by a likeable, average father and a strong-willed grandmother gradually withdrawing from the family myths which have comprised her whole understanding of reality as a young child. There are three women in this story who are of entirely different kind: Miranda, Miranda's Aunt Amy, and her Cousin Eva. Aunt Amy and Cousin Eva are the two main representatives of rebellion here. The narrative describes Amy as the admired beauty of the family, a "spirited-looking young woman" with a "reckless indifferent smile" (p.173). Eva, on the other hand, is an ugly old maid--a shy and chinless "blot" whose upper lip strains over two enormous teeth. Amy was universally acknowledged as the greatest *belle* of her time, high-spirited and independent. Her physical beauty corresponded in every detail to her family's standard of female perfection. It is through Amy that Maria and Miranda learn their roles in society. They learn what women were supposed to be, or rather, what women were supposed to look like. Porter says:

"There were points of beauty by which one was judged severely. First, a beauty must be tall; whatever the color the eyes, the hair must be dark, the darker the better; the skin must be pale and smooth. Lightness and swiftness of movement were important points. A beauty must be a good dancer, superb on horseback, with a serene manner, and amiable gaiety tempered with dignity at all hours. Beautiful teeth and hands, of course, and over and above all this, some mysterious crown of enchantment that attracted and held the heart" (176).

Although Miranda's family romanticizes Amy's life as a heroine, Amy lives and dies to undermine her culture's expectations. Amy refuses to listen to the suggestions of her father or her suitor. When Gabriel compliments her on one of her dresses, she changes into another. In another instance, the narrator says: He loved her long black hair, and once, Lifting it up from her pillow when she was ill, said, "I love your hair, Amy, the most beautiful hair in the world." When he returned on his next visit, he found her with her hair cropped and curled close to her head. He was horrified, as if she had willfully mutilated herself (p. 183)

A similar kind of reaction can be seen in her refusal to marry Gabriel until he is financially cut off from his grandfather. Later, Amy initiates the renewed proposal and decides on the wedding date. Her ultimate display of control comes in the form of her death, her insistence on being the final authority of her life. For Amy, committing suicide--intentionally making Gabriel a widower, is a method of taking power away from the patriarchy, which would try to keep women subservient. Though the text does not offer conclusive proof that Amy committed suicide, certainly the nurse sounds a bit anxious about the possibility that someone might think she was careless in not keeping the medicine away from Amy.

Lest the reader is tempted to interpret Amy's suicide as her victory, Porter in the latter part of the story directs the reader to view it as a defeat by showing Miranda as disillusioned with such "anti-patriarchal" ideology because of its self-consuming nature. Miranda and her sister watch Miss Lucy, Gabriel's horse, win the race, defeating great odds, and they notice her knees trembling and the blood from her nose running down her velvet chin. Miss Lucy's victory may be seen as paralleling Amy's "victory": Miranda thus no longer idealizes Amy's life or death because it negates selfhood.

Like Amy, Eva Parrington also attempts to undermine the patriarchal tradition, though her methods and motivations are totally different. Because Eva's family and society label her as an "ugly duckling" and an "old maid," she must use something other than physical charm to confront the patriarchy. The author says "She had two immense front teeth and a receding chin, but she did not lack character" (p. 206). It is this "character" and Eva's experience in teaching Latin at a female seminary that enables her to go out and champion women's right to vote. But even in her attempt to rebel against the patriarchal tradition, she still

seems to be confined to it just as Amy, and expresses a higher degree of bitterness over her circumstances. Nevertheless, Eva's tool of "empowerment"--her character becomes just as fatal as Amy's beauty because it leaves Eva a bitter woman. It is clear that she has not escaped the patriarchy, if she had, she probably would not have been warmly welcomed back by the family at the end of the story.

The paradoxical rebellion of Amy and Eva against the patriarchy is almost as despotic as grandmother's passive acceptance of the patriarchal idea of gender because in rebelling against this system, they are ironically defeated by it. Amy and Eva, in reality, are defined by it, and it too propagates dualistic thinking, offering two extremes. Amy, the "bad, wild girl", supposedly must manipulate her beauty as power; Eva the "Ugly Duckling" is forced to employ her character to confront the patriarchal codes. But Miranda becomes just as disillusioned with the option Eva presents as she did with Amy's role: "'Beauty goes, character stays,' said the small voice of axiomatic morality in Miranda's ear. It was a dreary prospect; why was a strong character so deforming? Miranda felt she truly wanted to be strong, but how could she face it, seeing what it did to one?" (p. 215). Her questioning of the rebellion against a patriarchal system is a direct result of her realization that there were only two choices for women: death or bitterness.

DeMouy asserts that the experiences of these two women "demonstrate that to be a legendary beauty like Amy in such a society, one must sacrifice freedom, and even life. To be independent, a bluestocking, and a suffragist like Eva is to become ossified in bitterness" (p. 127). Ironically, Amy and Eva believe they are in control of their circumstances, but, in reality, what they do with their lives is form a reaction to the patriarchy; thus, their identities are inevitably defined in relation to the patriarchy, which in turn means they must forfeit their ability to define and own themselves.

At the end of "Old Mortality", Miranda feels homeless, "but not sorry for it" which suggests that "there was something more beyond". Having witnessed the passive acceptance of patriarchal culture and a paradoxical rebellion against it and has come to the conclusion that she does not have to accept either of these ideologies with their manufactured identities (p. 219). Seeing a representative of both reactions to the patriarchy before her in the form of her father and Cousin Eva, Miranda wonders where her own people and her own time are: "I hate them both," her most inner and secret mind said plainly, "I will be free of them, I shall not remember them." (p. 219) She recalls how she was brought up under a system of dualistic thinking in which "one must make a choice." Desiring to live in her own world of endless possibilities, Miranda begins to take control of her life in that she is not succumb herself to decide to do certain things, or be certain things, or go certain places. To decide on any of these matters without allowing her options would mean succumbing to the rule of the old order.

In "The Fig Tree," Miranda is already exposed to the possibility that there is something beyond patriarchal culture. When she looks at the moon, a symbol of feminity, through her Great-Aunt Eliza's telescope, Miranda calls out in pure ecstasy, 'Oh, it's like another world!'" (p. 361). She becomes aware for the first time that there is not just another world, but a million others. Porter continues this revelation in the sequel to "Old Mortality," "Pale Horse, Pale Rider". Working as a newspaper reporter, Miranda experiences the encroachment of patriarchal figures - two fellow workers who try to intimidate her into buying Liberty Bonds to support the war. Instead of directly confronting them, simply tries to avoid their company. One hopes that she can eventually be free from patriarchal intrusions in her life, but Porter does not provide the reader with the hope that this is possible in the real world. Porter presents a world in which gender is not a factor of identity. Miranda's newly found world is presented in her fifth dream when she is sick with influenza. The people she encounters in her dream have transfigured faces, "each in its own beauty, beyond what she remembered of them, their eyes were clear and untroubled as good weather, and they cast no shadows. They were pure identities and she knew them every one without calling their names or remembering what relation she bore to them" (p. 311). This death-like (and therefore genderless) vision suggests Miranda's own idealized world, a world freed from the social constructs of identity through gender. This is a place in which each person has developed an individualized and authentic self. The fact that Miranda only experiences this world internally implies, ironically, that a "genderless" reality can only be an illusion. "The Old Order," "Old Mortality," and "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," are Porter's comments on how the ideologies of gender have not

only shaped the conventions of the patriarchy but also determined the evolution of one's identity. She also points out the inadequacies of using cultural ideologies for the basis of one's identity.

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