SISTER OR RIVAL: RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN WOMEN IN THE SHORT FICTION OF KATHERINE ANNE PORTER

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

One cannot read Katherine Anne Porter's short fiction without observing that her protagonists are almost always women. In fact, as Jane Krause DeMouy notes, "Only two of Porter's major stories, 'Noon Wine' (1936) and 'The Leaning Tower' (1944), have male protagonists" (6). In her comprehensive, groundbreaking 1983 study, Katherine Anne Porter's Women: The Eye of Her Fiction, DeMouy seeks to categorize and analyze the vast array of Porter's female characters. She discusses woman as angel, woman as mother, woman as matriarch, woman as virgin, woman as prostitute, woman as storyteller, woman as artist, even woman as witch. DeMouy focuses through it all, however, on Porter's portrayal of the "duality of womanhood" (7). Nearly all of Porter's female characters, no matter what their place in life, demonstrate this tension between a longing for freedom and independence, unfettered by societal codes, and a longing for the security and structure offered by the traditionally defined roles of wife and mother. Surprisingly, perhaps, this internal struggle changes little from character to character, story to story, and remains constant from the Mexico fiction of the early 1920s through Porter's later Miranda stories. In fact, DeMouy argues that only the character of Miranda, Porter's primary

female persona and alter ego, moves in any way beyond this duality through the agonizing process of "reject[ing] love and death, choosing instead independence and art" (6). Nevertheless, this choice does not come without cost, for "being free means being alone" (DeMouy 6). No matter their circumstances, nearly all of Porter's female characters ultimately face this choice of enduring isolation or suffering with the roles imposed upon women by a male-centered society.

As illuminating as DeMouy's study often is, though, there are also some problematic omissions. DeMouy seems very much to be following the popular vein of 1980s feminist criticism established by critics such as Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar. Just as Gilbert and Gubar examine nineteenth-century women writers as "enclosed in the architecture of an overwhelmingly male-dominated society" (xi), so too does DeMouy figure Porter as a woman artist writing of other women artists, a fighter stifled by yet struggling valiantly against the male-centered literary establishment, as well as male-centered society as a whole. DeMouy very much tries to portray Porter as a champion of feminist principles. In building her argument, however, DeMouy occasionally glosses over or simplifies significant contradictions and ambiguities which mark Porter's portrayal of gender roles and issues.

Several other more recent critics concerned with gender follow DeMouy's lead, constructing a very specific type of feminist reading of Porter's works, claiming her as a feminist despite her vehement written sentiments: Porter hated the term, calling it a "slimy word" in one letter (Letters 178) and a "horrid name" in another (Letters 503). Yet these critics do make convincing arguments that Porter, despite her written sentiments and her careful construction of a genteel, perfumed, feminine Southern Lady public persona, imbues her stories at least with feminist sensibilities. Peter G. Christensen, for example, commends Laura in "Flowering Judas," reading her protection of her virginity not as coldness, but as an attempt to maintain "her own identity…in the masculine ethos of the revolution" (45). Again, Porter's heroine chooses isolation over male control. Likewise, Janis P. Stout discusses the reticence of Porter's female characters and claims that it is a strategy they use to preserve themselves and their identity apart from male defined roles; silence is a rejection of a corrupt society and its "gender inequities" (Strategies 146).

But the question arises, then, whether alienation, isolation, and silence are the only alternatives to succumbing to society's suffocating, rigidly defined gender roles. Are there no relationships which foster freedom

rather than enforce restriction? We can only discover the answers to these critical questions through a careful examination of reasons why Porter felt as she did toward the idea of feminism and how these feelings affected both her portrayal of relationships between men and women and, more significantly for this study, her portrayal of relationships between women.

In Chapter II of this study, I will examine the complex cultural identity Porter constructed for herself and suggest how contradictions within this construction reflect the ambivalence toward gender roles that permeates Porter's short fiction. In Chapter III, I will demonstrate that Porter's portrayal of relationships between men and women, romantic or otherwise, exhibits in her female characters a complex longing for approval from father or lover combined with an innate awareness that such approval never comes without great cost or sacrifice. Therefore, I will argue in Chapter IV, nearly all of Porter's depictions of relationships between women reflect this highly charged desire for male approval and companionship: nearly all women in Porter's fiction are sexual competitors on some level. Finally, in the concluding chapter of this work, Chapter V, I will assert that an examination of The Old Order (1936) and "Holiday" (1960), the two works where this rivalry is not an issue,

where two women characters form a connection based on other motives and desires, yields an interesting, complex, if not wholly satisfactory resolution of the tension and rivalry so prevalent between female characters in Porter's short fiction.

CHAPTER II

FEMINISM VERSUS FEMININITY

As most critics and readers now know, the personal history Katherine Anne Porter shared with the public was a detailed, fascinating, and mostly fabricated picture of Old South gentility. With her furs, fashionable clothes, legendary romances, witty and vivacious manner, and seemingly endless family anecdotes, Porter played to perfection the role of the Southern belle. I wish to suggest, however, that by adopting this persona, Porter was disguising herself, hiding within a recognized societal and cultural role, but the role she chose carried with it complex and rather troubling implications.

The glamorous facade Porter crafted was so perfect that getting to the truth behind it was a daunting task. Porter herself seemed unwilling or unable at times to keep all the details straight. During a taped interview, Porter told friend and biographer Enrique Hank Lopez, "My mother died less than six months after I was born, and it was my birth that caused her death" (4). Lopez describes the "rush of compulsion in her voice, a sense of urgency, as if she needed to unburden herself of a long-suppressed anguish" (4-5). Yet scarcely a week later, when Lopez asked for further details, a surprised Porter denied the tragic tale:

> Now where on earth did you get that notion?... People are always saying that, Hank. I guess some reporter got it all wrong a long time ago, and now everyone keeps telling the same mistake. But it simply isn't true. My mother died two years after I was born, and my birth had no bearing on her death-none whatever" (4)

More than one biographer must have admitted defeat before the nearly insurmountable walls Porter built up to safeguard the truth of her past.

Not until after Porter's death did an intrepid researcher strip away much of the confusion. Thanks in large part to a groundbreaking 1982 biography in which Joan Givener seeks to untangle the web of Porter's many half-truths, exaggerations, and outright falsehoods, we have a more complete, less romanticized version of the chaotic, cramped, hand-to-mouth existence Porter shared with her father, grandmother, and siblings in a tiny house in Kyle, Texas:

> There were beds everywhere, [Porter] later recalled, and when she visited the place years afterward, she observed bitterly that the dreary little place was empty, full of dust, decayed, and even smaller than she remembered. (Givener 46)

Added to the complete lack of privacy was Porter's mortification at her excessively worn clothing. She abhorred neighbors' well-meaning offers of charity, and wrote in a 1921 letter to her sister Mary Alice, "If I get a little money, I must always have clothes" (qtd. in Givener 47).

Even worse than the stigma of poverty, though, the young Porter also had to endure a troubled relationship with her father. Givener crafts a painfully compelling portrait of an "intelligent, well-educated man of impressive appearance" who "retreated into hopeless self-pity, ceased to work and provide for his family, and in his last years [became] paranoid and almost mad" (49). Porter's father leveled constant, vicious insults at his family that her brother characterized as "soul-searing" (qtd. in Givener 49). Porter was frightened of her father's periodic demonstrations of affection because they were "based on incomprehensible motives and...likely to change for inexplicable reasons" (Givener 50). Harrison Boone Porter

> doled out his preference by whimsy to whichever daughter he decided was the prettiest...[and] for a time Porter was the main object of his attention (it can hardly be called love) because she was the prettiest of his daughters. But soon

she had a formidable rival in her younger sister, who was blond and plump and won first place in his esteem. (Givener 50)

Givener makes a persuasive argument that this enforced rivalry with her sister gave rise to Porter's lifelong concern with physical beauty, "an insatiable hunger for masculine admiration, and a sense of uneasiness in the presence of other women who might deflect attention from her" (51). As an adult, Porter clearly wished to put the painful uncertainties of her childhood as far behind her as possible, and constructing a new past, or even multiple pasts, for herself was one means to that end.

Her writer's eye and love of a good story explain in part her desire to create a fictionalized version of her past: after all, a history of one's own making is so much neater, so much easier to control. Porter writes, "My own habit of writing fiction has provided a wholesome exercise to my natural, incurable tendency to try to wrangle the sprawling mess of our existence in this bloody world into some kind of shape" (Collected Essays 93). However, her near complete burial of the truth of her childhood also suggests a bone-deep pain and a compulsive need to "wrangle the sprawling mess" of her own existence into a more pleasing shape for her own peace of mind, as well as for her public image.

Indeed, it was not enough for Porter simply to employ her stories of alter-ego Miranda and her large eccentric family to evoke the sense of the Old South, with its legacy of master and slave, mansion and cabin. Porter sought to immerse her own being in the romanticized myth of a grand past, lost but ever lingering in the hearts of the sons and daughters of the South. In a 1963 interview with Barbara Thompson, Porter paints a nostalgic picture of her childhood:

> In those days, you belonged together, you lived together, because you were a family. The head of our house was a grandmother, an old matriarch, you know, and a really lovely and beautiful woman....But the point is that we did live like that with grandmother's friends, all reverend old gentlemen with frock coats, and old ladies with jet breastplates. Then there were the younger people, the beautiful girls and the handsome young boys,...when I was a little girl, ...they represented all glamour, all beauty, all joy and freedom to me. Then there was my own age, and then there were the babies. And the servants, the Negroes. We simply lived that way. (39)

Reading this description, one can almost see the sepia tinted photograph, fading around the edges, that depicts this gathering of relics from the nineteenth century. The properly dressed ladies and gentlemen pose stiffly against the backdrop of a large white house, the younger children peering through the verandah railing, the devoted family retainers standing respectfully to one side, careful not to encroach too far into the picture's center.

In this description, we hear Porter's longing for a safe, secure, happy family. In this serene picture, there are no empty stomachs, no crowded beds, no cast-off clothing from the church charity basket, no critical, carping father. In this picture, everyone has and knows her place. This nostalgic longing for an illusory past-that-never-was is understandable, perhaps, but Porter's words suggest something beyond a mere desire for a family and a sense of belonging. Porter longed for a family with status and standing in a very rigidly hierarchical community. The rural setting in many of Porter's short stories is nominally in Texas, but as Stout notes, "in many small ways, [Texas] is reconstituted or resituated. Home is shifted eastward to more nearly coincide with the Old South" ("Estranging..." 89). Similarly, while Porter was born and raised in the wild and wide open plains of Texas,

in the heritage she crafted for herself, her roots were sunk in the rich soil east of the Mississippi River.

Porter once told an interviewer: "I belong to the guilt-ridden white-pillar crowd myself," although she hastened to add that "it just didn't rub off on me. Maybe I'm just not Jewish enough, or Puritan enough, to feel that the sins of the father are visited on the third and fourth generations" (qtd. in Thompson 41). The same interviewer notes that Porter seems "to have felt little of the peculiarly Southern preoccupation with racial guilt and the death of the old agrarian life" (Thompson 40), and Porter is one of the few, if not the only Southern writer of the twentieth century who only rarely confronts issues of slavery, race relations, the Civil War, and the social collapse which was its aftermath. Porter seems to take pride and pleasure in the grand mythology of the Old South yet suffers little of the tormenting guilt and anguish evinced in the literary works of other sons and daughters of Southern heritage.

While the primary focus of this study is gender rather than class or race, I believe that Porter's troubling references to race, her cavalier, almost cheerful adoption of guilt-free membership in the "guilt-ridden white-pillar crowd," indicates disturbing contradictions in the facade she constructed for herself. Certainly she would not

demonstrate the racial guilt that motivated so many Southern writers. Why would she, since this cultural identity was, to a large degree, assumed? And, of course, the most cursory reading of her fiction reveals that Porter was far more concerned with matters of gender than of race. Her adoption of the romanticized Southern Lady persona, then, suggests emotions, motives, and desires quite as complex and problematic as any Porter attributes to her female characters. As the women in Porter's fictional world find to their cost, the pleasure of male admiration and approval is always tempered by male-defined expectations and restrictions. I think it quite significant and revealing that Porter found such a rigid, patriarchal culture, a culture with such unbending expectations for all people not white and male, a culture that glorified genteel womanhood and placed it on a pedestal, so compelling and attractive that she would adopt it not only as the setting for much of her short fiction, but also as the setting for her own social and cultural identity.

Why, then, do so many current critics make such compelling arguments concerning the feminist underpinnings of Porter's fiction? I find something incongruous in the very idea of a woman who fashioned herself into a prime example of the flower of Southern womanhood also aligning

herself with a political movement dedicated to smashing such patriarchally defined gender roles. In fact, Porter expressed a near horror at what she perceived as the breaking down of gender roles. In a 1958 letter, Porter corrects critic Edward Schwartz when he suggests that Miranda's illness in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" represents an opportunity for her to escape her gender restrictions and "assume the active role of the male" (qtd. in Letters 548). Porter says, "To me this is so wrong it is shocking, and yet it is almost impossible for any woman to convince any man that this is false" (Letters 548). Porter goes on in this letter to express the "horrid truth" that men who are "trying to be women" are "incomplete, sometimes mutilated, men." Likewise, women who assume masculine roles or behaviors are "mutilees and perverts" (548).

While Porter is not specifically referring to feminists in this letter, other sources indicate that she adhered to the popular prejudice that feminists wished to assume masculine roles rather than question and undermine the validity of such prescribed gender roles. Porter seemed to give voice to this view when she laughingly discussed feminism and Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique in a 1970 interview:

> There is something lacking there. I just can't

> read any more about them [feminists]. I don't care what they do, just so they don't do it in the streets and scare the horses. I felt that way too about Betty Friedan's book when it was sent to me to read. While I was going through it, I thought, "Oh, Betty, why don't you go mix a good cocktail for your husband and yourself and forget about this business." (qtd. in Givener 462)

Recalling Porter's disdain for the "slimy" and "horrid" term "feminist," I cannot help but wonder if her condemnation of "mutilees" encompassed feminist activists as well. At the very least, we know that Porter expressed firm opinions concerning inherently masculine versus inherently feminine behaviors.

Perversely, though, as is often the case with Porter and her slippery presentation of her views, things are neither as simple nor as straightforward as they might appear. The preceding observations come from the Katherine Anne Porter of the 1950s and '60s, but Givener characterizes the young Porter of the 1910s and '20s as a "vocal feminist" who scolded her brother for misogynistic comments and actively advocated women's suffrage (101). In fact, Porter defied convention and tradition concerning gender roles her whole life. In marginal notes in her

copies of texts by St. Jerome and St. Paul, she deplored the contempt for women she found in Catholic Church dogma (Givener 102). As a struggling young writer, she "railed...about the condescension and patronage of the masculine literary establishment in general, and against Malcolm Cowley, Paul Rosenfeld, and Ford Madox Ford in particular" (Givener 461). As her string of infamous romances attests, she certainly did not settle into the staid domesticity considered appropriate for women of her era.

The question arises then of why the middle-aged, successful, well-known Porter made such strong public statements about preserving traditional gender roles. Givener proposes several explanations for this contradiction. Perhaps the "pleasures of success made [Porter] forget her early difficulties" (461). Also, the tale-spinning Porter often "spoke for effect, and gauged what opinions would go down well with her audience" (462). The explanation that I find most persuasive and significant, however, originates in the childhood rivalry that her father imposed on Porter and her sister, a rivalry that would always color Porter's dealings with other women. Givener suggests that this life-long sense of rivalry and insecurity with other women extended into intellectual arenas as well, and her criticism of feminist writers of

the 1950s and '60s stemmed from Porter's own sense of intimidation by these well-educated, confident women who did not seem to share her deep-seated sense of self-doubt (461).

Like those of her characters, Porter's attitudes toward gender issues were complex, even paradoxical at times. She fought for success and fame in a male-dominated discipline; she then safe-guarded that fame by paying at least lip-service to conventional societal mores and codes. She suffered through her childhood under her father's irrational and unpredictable whims of affection and indifference; she then spent her adult life striving to maintain the standards of physical beauty he insisted were the measure of a woman's importance. She adopted a cultural identity that placed a higher premium on female beauty and docility than it did on female intelligence and independence; she also worked and honed her craft, proving herself an artist and woman of great intelligence and independence. Like her characters, Porter struggled with ambivalent, conflicting desires, with longings for both the security provided by adherence to the gender restrictions of a male-defined society and the lonely freedom offered by the defiance of such restrictions.

CHAPTER III

BONDS OF LOVE AND HATRED

Mary E. Titus states that, ultimately, all romantic relationships in Porter's fiction are "seen as stifling and destructive" ("The 'Booby Trap'" 633). Titus may be referring to sexual relationships between men and women, but I think this statement may be broadened to include all female relationships with men, sexual or otherwise. Miranda's relationship with her father (like Porter's relationship with her own father) is certainly neither healthy nor nurturing. In "Old Mortality" (1937), her father's acceptance and approval hinge on women's adherence to certain societal standards. Miranda hears her father's commentary on proper feminine appearance as he examines a picture of his long dead and much revered sister Amy: "It's not very good. Her hair and her smile were her chief beauties, and they aren't shown at all. She was much slimmer than that, too. There were never any fat women in the family, thank God" (Collected Stories 174). The astonished Miranda wonders at this statement, remembering her great-aunt Eliza, "who quite squeezed herself through doors" (Collected Stories 174), as well as great-aunt Keziah, who was not allowed to ride her husband's horses after she reached the weight of two-hundred-twenty pounds. Keziah's husband justified his insult to his wife's feelings

with the opinion that "female vanity will recover...but what about my horse's backs? And if she had the proper female vanity in the first place, she would never have got into such shape" (Collected Stories 174). Despite these examples of females of large girth, however, Miranda's father insists that all the women in each generation of the family have been "without exception, as slim as reeds and graceful as sylphs" (Collected Stories 174). The young girl Miranda learns early in life that failure to live up to very exacting standards of female grace, beauty, and charm leads to a marginalized role in her family. If one fails to meet these standards, in fact, one might as well not exist.

Miranda's father does not hesitate to reprove his daughters in typically callous fashion if they fall short of his expectations:

> He was a pleasant, everyday sort of father, who held his daughters on his knee if they were prettily dressed and well-behaved, and pushed them away if they had not freshly combed hair and nicely scrubbed finger-nails. "Go away, you're disgusting," he would say, in a matter-of-fact voice. (Collected Stories 184)

This conditional affection extends into Miranda's adulthood as well. At the end of the story, Miranda, recently married without her family's approval or presence, returns

home for a family funeral. As her father greets her, Miranda painfully realizes that "his hands on her arms held her off, the tone was forced. There was no welcome for her, and there had not been since she had run away" (Collected Stories 218). No matter her age, Miranda must be rebuffed, reproved for her disobedience, for her assertion of independence, whether in the matter of marriage or mussed hair.

Miranda's romantic relationships with men fare little better, but the failure of her marriage is clearly related to the rigidity of her father and the larger social world he represents. After her father's coldness at the train station, Miranda determines that

> she would have no more bonds that smothered her in love and hatred. She knew now why she had run away to marriage, and she knew that she was going to run away from marriage, and she was not going to stay in any place, with anyone, that threatened to forbid her making her own discoveries, that said no to her. (Collected Stories 220)

But the reader must treat with skepticism this naïve assertion from eighteen-year-old Miranda. Her angry, rather petulant statement that she "hates" (Collected Stories 219) her father clearly reveals her pique at his

disapproval, as well as her longing for his love. Miranda, seething and frustrated, thinks, "I hate love,...I hate loving and being loved, I hate it" (Collected Stories 220-21). Miranda's family has conditioned her to think that love can never be based on tolerance or acceptance. Instead, love requires, at least for a woman, sacrifice of her own wishes and a painful reshaping of herself to correspond to the wishes of others. She determines to rebel, to separate herself from the rigid mold set by her father, her family, and her larger society:

> Ah but there is my own life to come yet, she thought, my own life now and beyond. I don't want any promises, I won't have false hopes, I won't be romantic about myself. I can't live in their world any longer,...Let them tell their stories to each other....I don't care. At least I can know the truth about what happens to me. (Collected Stories 221)

These are brave, defiant words, but Porter's omniscient third-person narrator immediately undercuts them, reminding the reader in the very last line of the story that Miranda makes this "promise to herself, in her hopefulness, her ignorance" (Collected Stories 221). Miranda will not so easily shake off the fetters of the complex mixture of

longing and loathing that characterizes so many of Porter's women.

This mingled "love and hatred," this inextricable melding of passionate emotion with control and submission plays, to a greater and lesser degree, a role in all male and female relationships in Porter's fiction, finding its most extreme form in what Titus argues is sadomasochistic imagery in the Mexico fiction, "fueling the transformation of women into symbolic and erotic objects" ("The 'Booby Trap'" 617). Perhaps the best example of the effects of this transformation may be found in the relationship of Laura and Braggioni in "Flowering Judas" (1930), the story that DeMouy calls Porter's "most intense rendering of the struggle between the love/sexuality/security syndrome and the choice of autonomy through art/action" (78). The protagonist Laura seeks to break out of restriction into freedom by becoming a political activist and joining a band of revolutionaries in Mexico. Ironically, the leader of the freedom fighters has expectations for women perhaps even more rigid than those Laura left behind in her American homeland.

Each evening, an unwilling Laura endures a lengthy serenade from the revolutionary leader Braggioni, an egotistical braggart as his name suggests. Laura longs for solitude in which to remove her hairpins and tight sleeves,

but sits and listens, captive, night after night for a month. Laura senses the threat in Braggioni if she fails to appreciate his romantic gesture: she listens with "pitiless courtesy, because she dares not smile at his miserable performance. Nobody dares to smile at him....It is dangerous to offend him, and nobody has this courage" (Collected Stories 90-91). Braggioni is "rich, not in money, but in power" (Collected Stories 93), and he counts on this power ultimately to sway Laura to sacrifice her virginity to him. Laura wears the "uniform of an idea, and has sacrificed vanities" (Collected Stories 92), but Braggioni looks beyond the sensible blue serge and lusts after the "incomprehensible fullness of her breasts, like a nursing mother's" (Collected Stories 97). In Braggioni's world, Laura has the voluptuous body of a woman of passion, so he cannot comprehend her "notorious virginity" (Collected Stories 97). He scoldingly tells her that "no woman need go begging....The legless beggar woman in the Alameda has a perfectly faithful lover" (Collected Stories 100).

If Braggioni cannot fathom a woman without a lover, Laura, for her part, is both repelled and strangely held in thrall by the rebel leader. On the one hand, he represents everything she must despise. He is a professional revolutionary who possesses the "hardness of heart

stipulated for loving the world profitably" (Collected Stories 98). He is not motivated by any true idealism or conviction, and the descriptions of his oily obesity suggest that he has gotten fat from the labor of those beneath him. On the other hand, Laura cannot say that her own political work is based on strong personal convictions; she is "in tacit collusion" (DeMouy 89) with Braggioni, taking his money, running his errands. Also, she feels an odd detachment from the cause for which she works, and she wonders, "Precisely what is the nature of this devotion, its true motives, and what are its obligations? Laura cannot say" (Collected Stories 93).

Laura finds little of the sense of purpose she hoped for in her work, and I am not the first critic to note she seems to hang suspended between the two extremes of self-controlled virgin and wanton sexual object for Braggioni and the other men who pursue her. DeMouy calls her a "tightrope walker whose inability to go either forward or backward necessitates a fall" (81). We, along with Laura, sense that Braggioni, whose infidelities cause his faithful wife to spend "part of her leisure lying on the floor weeping" (Collected Stories 99), poses the most real and immediate threat to her virginity. The words Porter uses to depict him are filled with barely controlled violence and images of sadomasochism: as he sings to Laura,

"Braggioni curves his swollen fingers around the throat of the guitar and softly smothers the music out of it" (Collected Stories 100). Yet DeMouy argues that Braggioni poses not only a threat to Laura physically, but also to her emotional and psychological well-being. While Laura is drawn to the idea of sex, she fears losing her virginity:

> Acquiring...sexual knowledge is a dead loss in her own mind....It does not occur to her that she might become something more than she already is through sexual experience; for Laura it is death rather than metamorphosis.(DeMouy 86)

Laura embodies the characteristic struggle for Porter women. She can deny her impulses for sex, companionship, and love and buy her freedom at the cost of feeling alienated and being castigated as cold and unnatural. Or, she can accept the roles placed before her by men; in Laura's case, she can become a sexual creature, a sexual object for men and lose herself in the process. Whatever the relationship, the men in Porter's stories have unbending expectations for the females in their sphere, from little girl to lover, and, as both Miranda and Laura's struggles suggest, these female characters can either retreat into the defense of isolation or be subsumed by male-defined roles.

CHAPTER IV

WOMEN AS RIVALS

What then of the manner in which Porter depicts relationships among women? Many critics have focused solely on male/female relationships in Porter's fiction, making the convincing case that these relationships are inherently unequal, boding only ill for the women involved. Relatively few critics have dealt with Porter's depiction of the way women relate to each other. Using a "lesbian/feminist focus" (9), Roseanne L. Hoefel treats female relationships in "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" (1929), arguing that the story portrays a close, primary relationship between two women, Ellen Weatherall and the mysterious, never-clearly-identified Hapsy. While the argument is interesting, it is thin on textual evidence and does not consider how such a reading could possibly be reconciled with such an avowedly heterosexual and heterosexist writer as Porter.

How then should we read Granny and Hapsy's relationship? DeMouy, as do other critics, assumes that Hapsy is Granny's deceased daughter (51). This seems to me a logical assumption; when Granny's daughter Cornelia assures her mother that she has sent for her siblings, Granny wonders, "Did you send for Hapsy, too" (Collected Stories 85). No other clues in the text strongly suggest

that this is other than a mother/daughter relationship, although the very name "Hapsy" might also indicate a black servant. Nevertheless, we must look closely at the manner in which Porter portrays Granny and her feelings toward Hapsy. Granny, in her deathbed delirium, says that

> she had to go a long way back through a great many rooms to find Hapsy standing with a baby on her arm. She seemed to herself to be Hapsy also, and the baby on Hapsy's arm was Hapsy and himself and herself, all at once, and there was no surprise in the meeting. (Collected Stories 85)

Of this image, DeMouy states that Hapsy with her baby "is the central symbol of Mrs. Weatherall's powerful maternity….Representing three generations, taken together they are an avatar of motherhood and life poised always on the brink of death" (53). I tend to agree that Hapsy functions primarily as a representation of the cycles of birth and death that govern Granny's life rather than as a fully-fleshed character. Granny has spent her life mothering and caring for "sick horses and sick negroes and sick children" (Collected Stories 83). Granny states that her long-dead husband would not recognize her, would instead "be looking for a young woman with the peaked Spanish comb in her hair and the painted fan" (Collected Stories 83). Granny is no longer this young woman who

trades on her sexual allure to attract a husband. Rather, she is the care-giver, the nurturer, the matriarch, and she now defines all of her relationships within this framework. Hoefel suggests that Granny finds freedom through her relationship with Hapsy. I assert that Hapsy embodies the very roles of wife and mother which confine Granny; she is bound to and by these patriarchally-defined roles.

Hoefel takes issue with this view, charging other critics with defining Ellen Weatherall solely through her humiliating experience at the hands of "one man," her fiancé George, with calling her "granny" rather than her given name of "Ellen" and thus denying her an identity apart from her family (13). I argue that Porter herself defines Ellen Weatherall through her family connections by calling her "granny" in the title and throughout the story. Furthermore, Porter's narrator also reveals Granny's character primarily through an explication of her relationships with men, even portraying her death in such terms; at the last moment of her life, Granny is jilted once more: "Again no bridegroom and the priest in the house" (Collected Stories 89). While this seems to be a clear reference to the bridegroom of Christ who gives Granny "no sign" (Collected Stories 89) that there is anything beyond death, readers must be aware of the significance of the bridegroom's betrayal. As the image of

the jilting lover exemplifies, throughout the breadth of her fiction, Porter privileges the male-female relationship as the primary, if most problematic, human connection.

Having established this context, however, I am intrigued by what a study of the few female relationships Porter does portray might yield. Not surprisingly, perhaps, most of the female relationships Porter depicts spring from and are sparked by male-female relationships. Competition among women for the attention of men serves as the catalyst for most of the interaction between women. The most common portrayal depicts women as sexual competitors.

In "Maria Concepcion" (1922), for example, the title character murders Maria Rosa, her rival for her husband Juan's attention, and appropriates the infant Juan had fathered on Maria Rosa. Her family circle once more firmly established, Maria Concepcion sits, "falling asleep, head bowed over the child,…aware of a strange, wakeful happiness" (Collected Stories 21), leaving the reader with an oddly serene Madonna and child image. DeMouy discusses Maria Concepcion and Maria Rosa in archetypal terms of the Great Mother and the temptress, and argues that only by "absorb[ing] the erotic [as represented by Maria Rosa] into her personality" may Maria Concepcion become "a woman who

knows the fullness of love and its fruition" (27). DeMouy further notes that,

> on a social level, Maria Concepcion moves from loneliness to community, from isolation and struggle outside the circle of women who wish to share her trouble to communion and peace in the circle of…women whom she now recognizes as sisters. (27)

Maria Concepcion does indeed join in this community of women; as she stands among them, "their eyes g[i]ve back reassurance, understanding, a secret and mighty sympathy" (Collected Stories 20).

However, through her rather troublesome emphasis on the images of triumphant motherhood and female unity, DeMouy downplays a crucial fact: Maria Concepcion is now a murderer. Membership in this sisterhood requires a bloody initiation, for Maria Concepcion's full acceptance into this community comes only with her successful defense and fulfillment of the all-important roles of wife and mother. This acceptance comes also at the price of another woman's life, for "Maria Rosa had thrown away her share of strength in them, she lay forfeited among them" (Collected Stories 20). In most cultures, a murderer is a social outcast, one who has broken the social contract, betrayed one of the most fundamental human taboos. In this story, however,

Maria Concepcion's actions-the bloodletting, the appropriation of the child-assume almost mythic, heroic proportions. Maria Concepcion preserves a vital aspect of this community through her violent behavior. Maria Rosa's unrestrained sexuality, not Juan's infidelity, constitutes the larger threat to the institutions of marriage and family, and the women's rejection of Maria Rosa and acceptance of Maria Concepcion serve as approval and validation of the latter as, ultimately, the more successful sexual competitor. The fact that little if any of Maria Concepcion's anger is directed toward her errant husband Juan reflects a clearly patriarchal definition of family and gender roles. Men are perhaps even expected to be unfaithful, their strong sexual drives validated by the culture of *machismo*. Women, on the other hand, must be sexually restrained and faithful. The woman who allows herself to be seduced, especially by the husband of another woman, is the rule-breaker, the one who must be driven out and punished, the one who has pushed the rules of sexual rivalry too far.

The pattern of sexual competition continues in "Virgin Violeta" (1924). Fourteen-year-old Violeta longingly watches her sister Blanca being courted by their cousin, the poet Carlos, and wishes for "life to begin at once—next year anyway" (Collected Stories 24). She also

wonders rather jealously "why Mamacita considered Blanca so very attractive" (Collected Stories 23). Immediately, Porter establishes the sisters as sexual rivals, a rivalry which is heightened when Carlos terrifies Violeta with a brief kiss, what he slyly terms a "little brotherly kiss,...precisely as I kiss Blanca" (Collected Stories 29). This kiss serves metaphorically, however, as a defloration, an initiation into the adult world of sexual awareness. Violeta is, as the title suggests, a violated virgin. She no longer lives in a hazy romantic world where she may soon "wear red poppies in her hair and dance" (Collected Stories 24). Rather, Violeta spends her summer "refus[ing] to read Carlos' poetry" and "quarrel[ing] on more equal terms with her sister Blanca, feeling that there was no longer so great a difference of experience to separate them" (Collected Stories 32). Ironically, while Violeta's experience with Carlos puts her on more level footing with her sister, no sympathetic connection may arise from this new equality, for they are now separated by their true and equal rivalry as sexual beings, or, more importantly, male-defined sexual objects.

In this story too there is a community of women, but one very different from that in "Maria Concepcion": a convent. Porter was fascinated by convents, as Givener reveals in her biography. Porter would listen with rapt

attention while her Tante Ione told stories of her education in a convent school, and Porter, with her penchant for fabricating a romantic past for herself, "told friends who knew nothing of her early life that she had eloped from a New Orleans convent when she was sixteen and had married a man much older than herself who shut her up" (Givener 58). Unlike the group of women in "Maria Concepcion" who band together to maintain the institution of marriage, the nuns, to Porter's female characters, form an unnatural sisterhood designed to keep women from their natural roles as wives and mothers.

In "Old Mortality" (1937), sisters Maria and Miranda, even while acknowledging how inapplicable such tales are to their tranquil, somewhat dull convent school, thrill to pulp fiction stories of "beautiful but unlucky maidens, who for mysterious reasons had been trapped by nuns and priests in dire collusion; they were then 'immured' in convents" (Collected Stories 193). The term "immured" holds fatal fascination for the two sisters and seems indeed an appalling process. Maria and Miranda seem at first reading to be an exception to the pattern of female rivalry; they do sustain each other in the convent, for while they are not precisely imprisoned or, as they would phrase it, "immured" in the pleasant convent with "a large garden with trees and a grotto" (Collected Stories

194), they are lonely and isolated from their largely inattentive family. This isolation is broken only on rare occasions when a carelessly indulgent relative takes them on an outing to the races. Yet, this close sister relationship is not destined to continue throughout their lives. In later stories, Miranda seems as estranged from her sister as she is the rest of her family. The closeness in this story stems from the fact that they are not yet sexual rivals but still "little girls" (Collected Stories 194). However, the "romantic glint" (Collected Stories 194) which the lurid tales lend to their lives with the nuns suggests that Maria and Miranda, like the pulp-fiction heroines, like Porter's other female characters, will struggle against the bondage of the female community, even if their success means only retreat into another kind of bondage, marriage to a man "who shut[s them]…up."

In "Virgin Violeta," the title character, also a convent student, dreams of an image from Carlos's poetry: "The nuns are dancing with bare feet/On broken glass in the cobbled street" (Collected Stories 25). Violeta is fascinated by this image of the ghosts of sinful nuns returning to dance with their forbidden, ghostly lovers in front of the old ruin of their convent. As penance for their sin, the nuns 'tread…with bared feet on broken glass" (Collected Stories 24). Violeta shudders with excitement

when she reads these words, "certain she would be like those nuns someday" (Collected Stories 24). Violeta takes masochistic pleasure in the penance since it is due to her rejection of the spare, ascetic life of the nun in favor of love and passion: "She would dance for joy over shards of broken glass" (Collected Stories 24). While Violeta's romantic notions disappear after her encounter with Carlos, she does not turn toward this community of women for succor and safety. Rather, "in the early autumn she returned to school, weeping and complaining to her mother that she hated the convent. There was, she declared as she watched her boxes being tied up, nothing to be learned there" (Collected Stories 32). In Porter's fictional world, a community of women which emphasizes sisterhood over marriage and childbearing and thus places itself outside the traditional female sphere has little value and is in fact perceived as a threat which "natural" or sexually "normal" women must resist.

Interestingly, Porter depicts a brothel, another kind of female community, in "Magic" (1928), a strange and intriguing story almost wholly concerned with the struggle for power between women. In this work, a black maidservant tells her mistress the story of a New Orleans prostitute who attempts to escape her profession, only to be forced back to her old life through the influence of a

particularly vicious magic charm commissioned by the madam of the fancy house. DeMouy figures her discussion of this story in the same terms she uses to discuss other Porter works:

> a woman who wishes to assert her integrity or identity must combat a woman who defines herself by her sex, although in this case, the madam represents a larger authority, both male and female, which conspires to keep women in their "place." (39)

While the runaway prostitute does not turn her back on the traditional roles of wife and mother in the same manner as the nuns in their cloistered convent, she does reject a role defined by men for their own pleasure and convenience, and, thus, she becomes the outsider. In fact, the prostitute Ninette returns to the brothel, Porter ironically implies, not because of magic but because of economics: "she is sick, she has no money, and she has no prospects" (DeMouy 40). Ninette valiantly tries to subvert the system and fails.

I find DeMouy's reading of Ninette's story convincing and illuminating, but I take issue with her discussion of what is to me the more subtle and interesting power struggle in this story, that between the maidservant and Madame Blanchard. DeMouy dismisses the maid as "completely

powerless, [one who] must be careful to avoid offending her mistress by so much as a pulled hair" (40). A closer reading suggests, however, that the maid, despite her lower social status, is far from being powerless. Rather, she and Madame, in an interesting twist, join the long line of sexual rivals portrayed by Porter. The maid, both in her physical manipulation through brush and comb and her emotional manipulation through storytelling, wields a great deal of control over Madame. Madame's admonition concerning the maid's brushing of her hair, "You are pulling a little here" (Collected Stories 40), seems less a confident reproach to one of the lower orders and more a subtle suggestion to the reader of how vulnerable a position Madame Blanchard actually occupies.

Porter's narrator seems to me to be equating sexual power with the dark exoticism represented by the maid. The maid says that the cook who placed the spell on Ninette "was a woman, colored like myself, like myself with much French blood just the same, like myself living always among people who worked spells" (Collected Stories 41). The maid strongly connects herself with this powerful woman and makes it clear that the cook's power lay in her love charms: "Colored women" used these charms "to bring back their men" (Collected Stories 41). The maid by association suggests that she too is powerful and that her power lies

in her understanding and control over human passions. Ironically, the maid combs, brushes, and perfumes, making Madame Blanchard sexually alluring, all the while asserting that she is the one with the sexual power. While these women, because of stark differences in class and race, are not the direct sexual rivals depicted in other stories, Porter still couches this power struggle in sexual terms.

This figuring of women as sexual rivals continues into Porter's later fiction, such as her Miranda stories. Perhaps the most interesting incident of this nature occurs in "Old Mortality" in the final section during Miranda's trip home for her Uncle Gabriel's funeral. On the journey, Miranda meets Cousin Eva, an older relative Miranda remembers vaguely from her childhood. In her memory, Miranda cannot help but compare Eva unfavorably to her late Aunt Amy, Miranda's father's sister, family legend and icon. When compared by older family members to current young ladies in the family, Amy always comes out the clear winner:

> Amy had the pure Spanish style, she could bring out paces in a horse no one else knew he had....Amy had been lighter, more smooth and delicate in her waltzing....Amy, said the elders, had the same high spirit and wit without boldness. (Collected Stories 177)

Amy is held up as both the model to emulate and the untouchable, unattainable ideal to worship from afar. Her sexual allure burned as fiercely as the consumptive fever in her flushed cheeks and was not dimmed for her admirers even by death.

When Amy finally gave in to family pressure and married her devoted admirer, second cousin Gabriel, she refused to wear white satin, declaring, "I shall wear mourning if I like,…it is *my* funeral you know" (Collected Stories 182). Miranda begs again and again to hear the tale of how Amy stepped into her wedding carriage, refusing to wear her cloak to shut out the cold and instead begging a glass of wine. No one in the family saw her alive again. Miranda, almost like a catechist, asks the familiar question of why Amy refused her cloak. Miranda receives the familiar, expected answer, "Because she was not in love, my dear" (Collected Stories 176). This image of the doomed Amy standing by the carriage seems to bring to Miranda the same sort of masochistic pleasure the nuns bring to Violeta. Just as the nuns gladly suffer the broken glass as penance for their love, Amy will suffer death rather than endure a dull, loveless, passionless marriage. As Violeta longs to be like the nuns, Miranda "persist[s] through her childhood in believing, in spite of her smallness, thinness, her little snubby nose saddled

with freckles, her speckled gray eyes and habitual tantrums" (Collected Stories 176), that she will grow into a beauty like Amy.

Poor Eva, on the other hand, bears no resemblance to such a striking, charismatic, romantic creature. Eva,

> shy and chinless, straining her upper lip over two enormous teeth, would sit in corners….She wore her mother's old clothes, made over, and taught Latin in a Female Seminary. She believed in votes for women, and had traveled about, making speeches…Eva was a blot, no doubt about it. (Collected Stories 178)

Eva, a suffragist and campaigner for women's rights, is the only character in Porter's fiction who could rightfully be called a feminist, and she seems to take the brunt of Porter's disapproval of the breed, for Eva is a bitter, jealous woman.

Since they are traveling to the funeral of Amy's husband Gabriel, conversation naturally turns to the family legend, which Eva proceeds to dismantle. Eva disparages Amy's wild ways, her preference for parties to the serious work of life. Eva condemns Amy as "simply sex-ridden, like the rest. She behaved as if she hadn't a rival on earth" (Collected Stories 216). Clearly, however, Porter's narrator suggests that Eva has always been and still is

intensely aware of Amy as her sexual rival, a rival she has always been helpless and hopeless against. A male relative comments of Eva, "When women haven't anything else, they'll take a vote for consolation. A pretty thin bed-fellow" (Collected Stories 183). As cruel a statement as this is, little in Porter's depiction seems to undercut this estimation. We recognize clearly Eva's envy for what it is when Miranda thinks coldly, "Of course it was not like that. This is no more true than what I was told before, it's every bit as romantic" (Collected Stories 216). Through Eva's own words, as well as the snide observations others make of her, Porter's narrator suggests that those women who complain most loudly about the role of women as sexual rivals recognize themselves as poor competitors and therefore retire from direct combat in favor of the sneak attack, but they participate in the sexual rivalry nonetheless.

Indeed, this spirit of rivalry permeated Porter's own dealings with other women, especially other women writers, as Stout reveals in her discussion of Porter's complex attitude toward Willa Cather. In contrast to the nurturing, matriarchal model of the female writing community advanced by feminist critics, Stout discusses Porter's 1952 essay on Cather in terms of "Harold Bloom's well-established theory of the 'anxiety of influence'

besetting male writers" ("Reflections..." 719). While purporting to pay homage to Cather in her essay, Porter uses the technique of "direct praise followed by indirect devaluation" ("Reflections..." 730) to slyly diminish Cather's standing and thus bolster her own position as an artist. Stout suggests still further evidence that Porter herself, not Cather, is the real subject of this essay: "The essay begins with the word 'I' and the first-person pronouns 'I,' 'me,' 'my,' and 'mine' occur sixteen times in the first paragraph alone" ("Reflections..." 721).

Porter even carries the competition into the realm of physical appearance, discussing a photograph of Cather. Porter describes the image in the photograph as "a plain smiling woman...with a ragged part in her hair..., as the French say, 'well-seated' and not very outgoing" (Collected Essays 29). As if this unflattering description were not bad enough, Porter goes on to say later in the essay that "Miss Cather looks awfully like somebody's big sister or maiden aunt, both of which she was. No genius ever looked less like one, according to the romantic popular view" (Collected Essays 30). Stout calls Porter's words

> a fair enough description, perhaps, or even an affectionate one. But again, more is happening here than is immediately apparent. Porter's characterization accentuates, or perhaps

> exaggerates, the plainness of Cather's appearance. ("Reflections..." 723)

This plainness, of course, would be an indirect contrast to Porter's own notably glamorous public persona.

Givener includes several photographs of Porter in her biography, and a number resemble publicity stills for Hollywood actresses in the 1930s and '40s. In one photograph in particular, Porter strikes a dramatic pose: flowing skirts draped artistically over an expensively upholstered sofa, coiffure strikingly and elegantly arranged, head turned to the side and thrown back to display the profile to greatest advantage. By no stretch of the imagination would someone mistake Porter for a maiden aunt. Porter's comment that Cather did not look like the "romantic popular view" of a genius reveals much about the importance she placed on the carefully crafted physical image she presented to the world. Clearly, the complex rivalry between women colored many aspects of her own life as well as that of her characters.

CHAPTER V

THE "UNESCAPABLE COMMON SOURCE"

In light of these complicated, competitive female relationships, I wish to examine the few relationships between women in Porter's fiction that do not fit this model. I believe there are only two such relationships which Porter develops to any great length in her major short stories. The first is the relationship between the grandmother Sophia Jane and the former slave Nannie in the short story cycle The Old Order (1936). Sophia Jane and Nannie have been together since they were both five, their lives as interwoven and inextricable as the "carefully disordered patchwork" quilts the two women are forever piecing out of "scraps of the family finery, hoarded for fifty years" (Collected Stories 326). As DeMouy notes, the two women "conspire together to recreate their mutual past by reciting it to each other while they busy their hands making memory quilts" (123). The two women are approximately the same age; they married at the same time and "started their grim and terrible race of procreation, a child every sixteen months or so" (Collected Stories 334). They share virtually the same experience in so many facets of life, and DeMouy calls them

> two halves of one universal female experience…. Their…cohesiveness [is] emphasized almost to the

> exclusion of their racial differences, suggesting that theirs is the experience of womankind, not that of race or class….Men govern the intertwined lives of these two women. (123)

Certainly these statements are to a degree accurate. Their shared servitude to men builds a bond, and "both will eventually experience a quasi-emancipation: Nannie by presidential proclamation and Sophia by the death of her husband" (DeMouy 123). Again, however, DeMouy ignores a facet of this relationship that does not fit quite so smoothly into her larger argument.

While DeMouy emphasizes the similarities between these two women, the differences are also there and must not be ignored. When Sophia Jane first encounters Nannie, she has just been purchased by Sophia Jane's father for the laughably small price of twenty dollars. The auctioneer had dismissed Nannie as "regular crowbait" (Collected Stories 331). Five-year-old Sophia Jane, with her "tight black ringlets curled every night on a stick, with her stiffly-pleated lawn pantalettes and tight bodice," points to Nannie, "a scrawny, half-naked black child, with a round nubbly head[,]…fixed bright monkey eyes,…a pot belly, and…arms…like sticks from wrist to shoulder," and says "I want the little monkey….I want that one to play with" (Collected Stories 330). No matter what bond the two later

develop as women, readers cannot forget the disturbing inequities of this beginning.

Sophia Jane's father presents her with the gifts of a small person and a pony both on the same day and with the same degree of casualness. In fact, the excited Sophia Jane "for a while...could not decide which she loved more, Nannie or [her pony] Fiddler" (Collected Stories 330). Nannie is given a "good worming" to cure her pot belly, and she thrives on "a species of kindness not so indulgent, maybe, as that given to the puppies" (Collected Stories 332). The tenor of the relationship changes little as Sophia Jane "defend[s] Nannie fiercely against any discipline but her own," and when Sophia Jane marries, "Nannie is married off to a boy she had known ever since she came to the family, and they were given as a wedding present to Miss Sophia Jane" (Collected Stories 333). Undoubtedly, these two women love each other, but, as the child Sophia Jane writes in the family Bible, her former slave and devoted companion is "Nannie Gay…(black)" (Collected Stories 329), and neither Nannie nor Sophia Jane ever forget that crucial fact.

While both women share a sense of oppression from a male-controlled culture, and while both women must conform to the gender roles designated for them by this culture, by no stretch of the imagination can Sophia Jane's societal

restrictions be compared to the bondage suffered by Nannie. The wound runs deep for Nannie: years after the auction, when Nannie's original owner, now a judge, laughingly asks, "Is that the strip of crowbait I sold your father" (Collected Stories 332), the distracted Sophia Jane dismisses Nannie's deeply hurt feelings with a rather offhand, "Never mind, Nannie. The judge just wasn't thinking" (Collected Stories 333). This relationship is not marred by competition simply because it is not a relationship between equals; one controls the other, and indeed both are controlled by the socially-defined gender roles they never forsake. In fact, Sophia Jane cannot conceive of even seriously questioning these roles, despite the fact that "she despised men. She despised them and was ruled by them" (Collected Stories 337). When her spoiled youngest son marries a "tall, handsome, firm-looking young woman with a direct way of speaking, walking, talking," Sophia Jane "shudder[s] to the bone at the thought of women so unsexing themselves" (Collected Stories 333). Sophia Jane and Nannie are simply too mired in the rigid hierarchies of their culture to move beyond them in any significant way.

Perhaps then, the most nearly equal, and therefore the most interesting, relationship between women in Porter's fiction occurs in "Holiday" (1960). In this story, the

narrator (a young woman most critics and readers assume is Miranda) seeks refuge from the world on the remote farm of a German peasant family that has settled in Texas. While there, the narrator forms a strange bond with Ottilie, the horribly disfigured daughter of the family, whom the narrator first mistakes for a servant. This relationship seems to begin with inequalities similar to that of Nannie and Sophia Jane. The narrator and Ottilie are separated by the chasm created by their differences in both physical body and social class. Yet, these two women somehow manage to bridge this gap and form a bond unique in Porter's fiction.

An epiphanic moment in the story comes when the narrator realizes that Ottilie is in fact a family member. Ottilie shows the narrator a picture of a "girl child about five years old, a pretty smiling German baby,...wearing a frilled frock and a prodigious curl of blond hair...on the crown of her head" (Collected Stories 426). When the narrator suddenly realizes that this is a picture of Ottilie before her disfigurement, she says,

> for an instant some filament lighter than cobweb spun itself out between that living center in her and in me, a filament from some center that held us all bound to our unescapable common source, so that her life and mine were kin, even a part of

> each other, and the painfulness and strangeness of her vanished. She knew well that she had been Ottilie, with those steady legs and watching eyes, and she was Ottilie still within herself. (Collected Stories 426)

For the first time, a Porter woman connects with another woman in a way which disregards physical appearance, sexual power, or prescribed gender roles. For the first time, a Porter woman possesses an awareness of an identity divorced from the physical. Ottilie, in some essential way, is still herself despite her outward appearance, and the narrator perceives this inner self and recognizes the "common source," the spiritual essence, she and Ottilie share. That delicate filament that spins itself out for a moment between them contains a bond of extraordinary emotional and psychological dimensions.

But what actually makes this relationship different from the others? Titus, in a persuasive study, argues that the narrator identifies with Ottilie. Both are monstrous, unnatural because they are separated from the world of marriage and motherhood, Ottilie by circumstance and the narrator by choice. However, through this connection, this filament, the narrator finds her connection to a "common life source" ("'A little stolen...'" 90), a life source which connects all humans to the natural world, a life

source which she, as an artist, may observe and try to represent. How could she be unnatural with such a heritage? "Holiday," according to Titus, is Porter's "most positive fictional resolution" of woman versus artist ("'A little stolen...'" 90). I agree with Titus's reading, but I would like to take it a crucial step further: the relationship of the narrator and Ottilie is Porter's most positive resolution of woman versus woman.

A pivotal moment near the end of the story exemplifies this resolution. As the narrator is driving Ottilie in a cart, Ottilie comes near to slipping from the seat. The narrator says,

> I caught hold of her stout belt with my free hand, and my fingers slipped between her clothes and bare flesh, ribbed and gaunt and dry against my knuckles. My sense of her realness, her humanity, this shattered being that was a woman, was so shocking to me that a howl…rose in me unuttered and died again, to be a perpetual ghost. (Collected Stories 434)

The howl dies because at that moment, Ottilie laughs, "a kind of yelp but unmistakably laughter" (Collected Stories 434). She laughs for the sheer joy of being alive and outside on a warm spring day. The narrator studies her and ponders,

> She was beyond my reach as well as any other human reach, and yet, had I not come nearer to her than I had to anyone else in my attempt to deny and bridge this distance between us…? (Collected Stories 434)

This connection, like many human connections, is tenuous and temporary, but it is real. By going outside the male-defined gender roles of her society, the narrator has become, as DeMouy argues, a loner in many ways, separated from the security of traditional expectations. Yet, this very separation from traditional roles and expectations makes possible this brief connection between these two women.

The fact that it is the touching of Ottilie's skin that brings about this jolt of connection is significant as well. In earlier Porter stories, when women touch each other, they often cause great harm or damage. In "Maria Concepcion," for example, Maria Rosa meets her death at the hands of the title character. In "Magic," Madame Blanchard suffers pulled hair and tense nerves under the less than tender ministrations of her maid. In "Holiday," by contrast, the narrator's fingers simply brush by accident under Ottilie's clothing. The sensual shock of flesh touching flesh jars the narrator into a sudden and stunned recognition of Ottilie as a woman, as a person. The

solidity of her "ribbed and gaunt and dry flesh" makes the narrator truly see Ottilie in a way that is unique for a Porter woman. When the narrator touches Ottilie's skin, she sees her neither as a competitor nor as an inferior, but simply as a person, a sister, "both equally fools of life, equally fellow fugitives from death" (Collected Stories 435). This physical connection also awakens the narrator to an awareness of the sensual, physical world around her: she, like Ottilie, becomes aware of the "feel of the hot sun..., the bright air, the jolly senseless staggering of the wheels, the peacock green of the heavens" (Collected Stories 434). Because of these realizations, these two women can indeed share a "little stolen holiday, a breath of spring air and freedom" (Collected Stories 435) as no two other female characters in Porter's fiction.

Still, acknowledging how this story is different does not explain why it is different. Certainly the character of Ottilie seems an unlikely partner in this unique female relationship. The narrator describes Ottilie:

> The blurred dark face was neither young nor old, but crumpled into criss-cross wrinkles, irrelevant either to age or suffering; simply wrinkles, patternless blackened seams as if the perishable flesh had been wrung in a hard cruel fist. (Collected Stories 420)

Physically unattractive characters, such as Eva in "Old Mortality" or Braggioni in "Flowering Judas," generally do not fare too well in Porter's fictional world, inspiring either pity or contempt. The lack of prettiness on the outside often suggests a coldness or bitterness hidden within the character. In addition to her physical deformity, Ottilie was rendered mute by her chidhood injuries. This voicelessness would seem to suggest a deep-seated helplessness, powerlessness. Ottilie is trapped in her scarred, mute body and, thus, also condemned to a life of endless, back-breaking toil on the small Texas farm. The narrator observes that Ottilie

> would always work too hard and be tired all her life, and never know that this was anything but perfectly natural; everybody worked all the time, because there was always more work waiting when they had finished what they were doing then. (Collected Stories 421)

In light of Porter's other stories, the sad little figure of Ottilie seems an unlikely heroine to transcend her physical and societal restrictions to meet the educated and elegant narrator on more or less equal terms.

So why does she? Why does Porter depart so radically from her customary manner of depicting women? I can only speculate, but I would like to suggest the reason may lie

in the length of time Porter took to complete this story. As Titus notes, Porter began this story in 1923 at the age of thirty-three, but did not complete it until thirty-seven years later at the age of seventy ("'A little stolen…'" 75). Perhaps it took Porter a whole lifetime of observing and writing about women to be able to complete her vision of this story. Titus observes that Porter held ambivalent feelings toward the feminist movements that to a certain extent molded who she was. She witnessed the artistic and intellectual advances of the New Women and cringed at the innuendoes concerning sexual deviance society hurled at these women ("'A little stolen…'" 73-74). Givener calls the young Porter a "vocal feminist" (101), but admits that the more mature "Porter's feminist sentiments had been considerably modified over the years" (461). Givener further suggests that "Porter was a little threatened by the well-educated, well-informed, articulate women" (462) who came to public attention in the 1950s and '60s. Considering Porter's documented insecurity about her family history, this feeling of inferiority is not surprising.

Yet the resolution of "Holiday" suggests that as she aged, Porter managed at least some sort of reconciliation of her ambivalent feminist feelings. The narrator of "Holiday" dismisses the troubles which drove her to the German family's farm: "It no longer can matter what kind

of troubles they were, or what finally became of them" (Collected Stories 407). Perhaps at seventy, Porter could dismiss and relinquish, at least momentarily, some of her own troubles and the insecurities which fueled her life-long rivalry with other women. Perhaps the advancing of age, with its accompanying wrinkles and ills, made Porter more compassionate and empathetic toward the disfigured Ottilie and allowed her to present her as a human, valuable in spite of her flaws, her awkwardness, her inability to fulfill the expected roles of lover, wife, or mother.

I do not wish to suggest, however, that the resolution of "Holiday" is wholly satisfying or completely without troubling aspects. One cannot help but wonder if this moment of connection would have been possible for the narrator if Ottilie's face and form were whole and undamaged. Could the narrator have looked beyond a pretty face to recognize her "fellow fugitive from death"? In other words, what makes the relationship of the narrator and Ottilie truly and fundamentally different from that of Sophia Jane and Nannie?

I would argue that before "Holiday," Porter's female characters fell into one of two categories: those women worthy to be sexual rivals and those women considered so inferior by other women, due to appearance, class, or race, that they may be either wholly dismissed, or else regarded

with a kind of contemptuous patronage. Poor Eva of "Old Mortality" is one of these unworthy women, as is the former slave Nannie. I believe that Ottilie is not. In herself, she comprises a completely different category for Porter women.

In another story, perhaps, the narrator could have dismissed Ottilie as easily as Miranda dismisses Eva or Sophia Jane dismisses Nannie. After the narrator and Ottilie commune together over the picture of the lovely, smiling child that would be so cruelly disfigured, however, the narrator evinces no condescension, no contempt, and very little pity for the woman before her. Instead, she feels compassion, companionship, and, most significantly, true empathy. Could this relationship have existed between two Porter characters of equal physical beauty? Given more time, would Porter's female characterization have ever developed to such a point? Quite simply, of course, we cannot know. Do these questions diminish or undercut the power of the women's relationship in "Holiday"? Perhaps, somewhat, but I think we must recognize and accept "Holiday" for the unique and striking departure it represents for Porter's female characters.

Porter herself provides an intriguing, if somewhat cryptic, commentary on this story in her preface to The Collected Stories:

> "Holiday" represents one of my prolonged struggles, not with questions of form or style, but my own moral and emotional collision with a situation I was too young to cope with at the time it occurred; yet the story haunted me for years and I made three separate versions, with a certain spot in all three where the thing went off track. So I put it away and it disappeared also, and I forgot it. It rose from one of my boxes of papers, after a quarter of a century, and I sat down in great excitement to read all three versions. I saw at once that the first was the right one, and as for the vexing question which had stopped me short long ago, it had in the course of living settled itself so slowly and deeply and secretly I wondered why I had ever been distressed by it. I changed one short paragraph and a line or two at the end and it was done. (v)

I suggest that only as she neared the end of her career as a writer could Porter recognize and reconcile herself to the emotional truth she had captured as a much younger writer. To a writer whose female characters had only ever striven against each other, this gentle story of peaceful recognition must have seemed strangely unfinished.

However, despite her well-documented distaste for the term "feminist," feminist sensibilities clearly underlie much of her work. Her female characters not only struggle against each other, they also often struggle or at least strain against the restrictions imposed upon them by the men who surround them, but their efforts are always laced with bitterness and ambivalence and are rarely successful. The one beautiful, bittersweet moment of fellowship and understanding in "Holiday" cannot wholly counteract the strife and alienation found in other Porter stories, but the significant fact is that this lovely moment does exist in Porter's fictional world, and it stands in marked and hopeful contrast to the rest.

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VITA

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