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Suzanne W. Jones
University of Richmond, sjones@richmond.edu

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SUZANNE W. JONES

Reading the Endings in Katherine Anne Porter's "Old Mortality"

> I won't have false hopes, I won't be romantic about myself. I can't live in their world any longer, she told herself, listening to the voices back of her. Let them tell their stories to each other. Let them go on explaining how things happened. I don't care. At least I can know the truth about what happens to me, she assured herself silently, making a promise to herself, in her hopefulness, her ignorance.

With these final sentences of "Old Mortality" (1937), Katherine Anne Porter qualifies the progress eighteen-year-old Miranda has made toward self-knowledge and sophisticated reading strategies. This long story is a bildungsroman of sorts, tracing Miranda's development from childhood to young adulthood, but focusing particularly on her apprenticeship as a reader. Porter links Miranda's quest for self-discovery with her attempts to determine fact from fiction in the stories her family tells about the love affairs, brief marriage, and early death of her beautiful Aunt Amy. By dismissing both her father's romantic legend and her Cousin Eva's feminist critique as untrue—by focusing on narrative as representing reality rather than producing reality—Miranda misses not only the "truths" that both versions of the story contain but also the nature of the ideologies that shape these "truths." By failing to comprehend the complexity of the reading experience, Miranda undermines her own ability to see how she has unconsciously used the romance narrative to script her elopement and the feminist critique to write the erotic

plot out of her life. In the end, Porter herself shies away from the feminist politics of the reading experience, by concluding "Old Mortality" with a typical modernist ambiguous ending that runs counter to the plot's interest in creating feminist readers.

By and large the critical commentary on "Old Mortality" has concentrated on Porter's modernist concerns about the difficulty of representing reality and of determining truth rather than on her strong feminist concerns about the role of storytelling in the production of the gendered self and the struggle of defining oneself against stereotyped images.[1] In her 1948 notes on "Old Mortality" Katherine Anne Porter wrote that "This book is based on my own experience." It is evident from these notes that she was concerned with the politics of storytelling, not simply the difficulty of representing reality.

> I was given the kind of education and the kind of up-bringing that in no way whatever prepared me for the world I was to face. When I was ready to step out in the world supposedly grown up, I was as ignorant of the world as it is possible to be.
>
> You begin to question, you try to understand, and you try to discover for yourself ways of meeting the world. And you feel you cannot rely on anything that you were told or anything you were taught because everything that you met in your experience was simply, apparently another thing.[2]

One subject that Porter felt she was misinformed about was romantic love and marriage, a topic she returned to over and over in both her fiction and her essays. In "The Necessary Enemy" (1948), she cautions Americans about their naive definition of love.

> Romantic Love crept into the marriage bed, very stealthily, by centuries, bringing its absurd notions about love as eternal springtime and marriage as a personal adventure meant to provide personal happiness. To a Western romantic such as I, though my views have been much modified by painful experience, it still seems to me a charming work of the human imagination, and it is a pity its central notion has been taken too literally and has hardened into a convention as cramping and enslaving as the older one.[3]

In "Old Mortality" Katherine Anne Porter is especially interested in the legends of romantic love that young Southern women, like

herself, were brought up with at the turn of the century—the legends that taught them how to entice men, how to be Southern belles. The three-part structure of "Old Mortality" emphasizes Miranda's changing interpretations of family stories as she grows older, and the effects her "readings" of these stories have on her development as a woman. Porter's interest in a reader's cognitive and psychological development as well as the effects his or her gender, personality, family history, cultural experience, and social positions have on reading make for a complex politics of reading indeed.[4] Porter challenges the reader of "Old Mortality" to be alert to the stories that make the reader/self, especially those that constrict options for women, but she ends her long story skeptical about achieving the control over a text the feminist reader hopes for. Porter's skepticism reflects her modernist epistemological doubt and her vexed relation to feminism as well as her frustration with the available plots for women, which fulfill erotic desires or ambitious wishes but never both. While early twentieth-century feminists, such as Dora Russell, were fighting popular opinion that forced women to choose,[5] fictional plots for women continued to set the two desires at odds with each other. In "Old Mortality" Porter rejects the traditional marriage plot and the traditional quest plot, viewing both as narrow options for women.

While Porter's Miranda does not become as sophisticated a reader of her family's stories as she thinks she is, the reader Porter creates with her text is close to Patrocinio Schweickart's "feminist reader," as defined in *Gender and Reading:* this reader "realizes that the text has power to structure her experience" as a woman and so chooses to "take control of the reading experience" rather than to "submit to the power of the text."[6] Readers of Porter's "Old Mortality" are encouraged to see ideology in the narrative, whether that narrative be a product of the patriarchy or of the feminist movement. Porter structures the narrative so that from the beginning we question not only the facts of the Amy legend, and by extension the mystique of the Southern belle, but also the politics of its use.

Oddly enough, Porter uses naive, eight-year-old Miranda, who does not realize that the Amy legend has power to structure her experience, to reveal to readers the power of this myth in Miranda's life. In part I Miranda notices the discrepancies between the statements her father makes, such as "There were never any fat women in

the family, thank God," and the great-aunts she knows, such as Great-Aunt Eliza, who "squeezed herself through doors," and Great-Aunt Keziah, whose husband would not allow her to ride his good horses after she reached 220 pounds.[7] Furthermore, Miranda cannot fit her father's descriptions of Aunt Amy's great beauty and mesmerizing charm to the photograph of Amy that she and her sister Maria have studied closely—a photograph that reflects, in their minds, clothes and a hairstyle that are "most terribly out of fashion" (p. 173). Porter does not suggest that Miranda and Maria's assessment of Amy is any closer to fact than their father's memory, which has been frozen in time by his own definition of female beauty and an intense loyalty to his sister—merely that their judgment is clouded by their own contemporary notions of beauty and fashion. Porter reveals the ideologies that shape both father's and daughters' perspectives and suggests, as cognitive psychologists Mary Crawford and Roger Chaffin have demonstrated, that "understanding is a product of both the text and the prior knowledge and viewpoint that the reader brings to it."[8]

And yet I cannot help but wonder if the omniscient point of view Porter uses in "Old Mortality," which gives the reader a sense of power *over* the text—the power that Schweickart champions—does not conflict with the ending of this story, where the narrator denounces as naive Miranda's belief that she will be a better reader of her own life than her father and Eva have been of Amy's. At the same time that readers of "Old Mortality" see the ideology that shapes each narrative of Amy, we also see the difficulty of controlling the "reading" experience through Miranda's captivation with the Amy story despite her awareness very early on of its contradictions. In part 1 the very young Miranda has difficulty separating life from representations of it. She is a literal reader, the type J. A. Appleyard calls a "player" in a fictional world.[9] When she sees a play about Mary, Queen of Scots, she thinks the actress in black velvet is the queen, and is "pained to learn that the real Queen had died long ago, and not at all on the night she, Miranda, had been present" (p. 179). Similarly she has trouble understanding the use of figurative language, because of her concrete way of thinking.[10] When her Uncle Bill tells her that Aunt Amy was as beautiful "as an angel," Miranda's mental image of "golden-haired angels with long blue pleated skirts dancing around

the throne of the Blessed Virgin" (p. 176) does not match either the dark-haired, dark-eyed woman in the photograph or the spirited enchantress of family stories. Miranda spends a great deal of her childhood wondering, "Oh, what did grown-up people *mean* when they talked, anyway?" (p. 197). Paradoxically her father, who obviously understands the use of figurative language, counters the girls' confusion and incredulity with lines like, "Now what has that to do with it? . . . It's a poem" (p. 181), but he seems as tricked by his own tropes[11] about Amy as his daughters. The constant equation between Amy and angel in his and his family's stories has resulted in their own literal reading—they have begun to think of Amy not simply as perfect, but as the perfect woman—a reading that has disastrous consequences for Miranda's definition of woman and thus for her view of herself.

This problem is compounded because as Miranda grows older and begins to focus on her own identity, she views the Amy story as a narrative of gender definition as well. Miranda persists "in believing, in spite of her smallness, thinness, her little snubby nose saddled with freckles, her speckled gray eyes and habitual tantrums, that by some miracle she would grow into a tall, cream-colored brunette" (p. 176). Even when Maria tells her that they will always have freckles and therefore will "never be beautiful," Miranda "still secretly believed that she would one day suddenly receive beauty. . . . She believed for quite a while that she would one day be like Aunt Amy, not as she appeared in the photograph, but as she was remembered by those who had seen her" (p. 177). In *Reconstructing Desire,* Jean Wyatt speculates that "Children, with their undiminished faith in the possibilities of life, their eagerness to try on new experience, and their proximity to the age of permeable ego boundaries may read novels with a passionate identification closed off to adult readers." Because Aunt Amy is the heroine of family stories, Miranda wants to be like her. In Appleyard's developmental study of reading, he argues that for the seven- to twelve-year-old child such larger-than-life characters are "the fantasized embodiments of the unambiguous virtue, skill, popularity, and adult approval that will resolve confusion about identity."[12]

While at twelve Maria is a better judge of life's possibilities than Miranda, she is still susceptible to the definitions of female beauty

and the single goal of marriage for young women that their father and grandmother advance in the family stories. The adults' authority and the society's validation of the charming Southern belle, Aunt Amy, and castigation of the bitter "old maid," Cousin Eva, who lives alone and works for women's rights, make it difficult for the young girls to see the patriarchal ideology in their father's and grandmother's stories of either Amy or Eva. Another mitigating factor is that the girls know Eva and consider her a part of their "everyday world of dull lessons to be learned . . . and disappointed expectations," while Amy, dead but brought to life by family legend, belongs "to the world of poetry" (p. 178). They love to hear her story because, as Jean Wyatt suggests, we read to experience what life has not provided us.[13]

In the course of "Old Mortality," Porter emphasizes, however, that the girls hear not only a biased story but an incomplete one. When their grandmother tells them about Aunt Amy's life, she plots it with the romance and adventure of fancy balls, broken engagements, midnight rides, and family scandals, but ends it properly and appropriately with marriage. The story that the girls hear is a fantasy of romantic love, which defines a woman's power as the ability to attract a man and which makes a man the agent of a woman's destiny, the sole cause of her happiness or unhappiness.[14]

Porter, however, supplies the reader of "Old Mortality" with a different ending to the Amy story than the one the young girls hear. We read two letters, which significantly the narrator tells us the girls are not allowed to see until they are grown. Porter makes it clear that while the girls think Amy's story follows the conventional love plot, it may very well have been a quest for adventure, starring Amy as the active agent in her own destiny. Because Amy's family will not allow Amy, who is so beautiful, to remain unmarried like Cousin Eva, which she vehemently says she wants to do, Porter suggests that Amy uses marriage to Gabriel, a man she does not really love, as an escape from her family and a way to New Orleans for Mardi Gras and perhaps a meeting with her old beau Raymond. The ending that we construct from the letters is an unhappy one: vivacious Amy, constricted by a disappointing marriage, takes her own life just six weeks after her wedding. She dies, not from tuberculosis as even the eighteen-year-old Miranda thinks, but from an overdose of pills.

Perhaps Amy, even in her flight, was still in thrall to the fantasy of

romantic love with the right man, but Porter early on gives her readers hints of Amy's desire for creative autonomy. Amy insists that she "could not imagine wanting to marry anybody" and would rather be "a nice old maid like Eva Parrington" (p. 183). While Amy's desire for "a good dancing partner" (p. 183) to guide her through life suggests that she is more interested in being a belle than in having a career, it is clear that she wishes to have some control over the predictable pattern of life that her family has determined for her—if only to remain a vivacious belle rather than to become "a staid old married woman" (p. 192). After a three-day ride to Mexico from which she returns with a fever, Amy refuses to allow her parents to scold her, declaring, "if I am to be the heroine of this novel, why shouldn't I make the most of it?" (p. 189). It is significant that Amy, much to her mother's dismay, rewrites the script of her wedding, choosing to wear grey rather than white: " 'I shall wear mourning if I like,' she said, 'it is my funeral, you know' " (p. 182). This detail, which Miranda's grandmother does convey to her, is one that the young girl must not have been able to make sense of given the endings of the conventional marriage plots she was used to.

In part 2 Miranda comes face to face with Gabriel, the hero of the stories she has heard so often as a young child. Porter portrays Miranda, who is now ten, as a different sort of reader than she was at eight—no longer reading novels with passionate identification, but able to distinguish fiction from reality: "They had long since learned to draw the lines between life, which was real and earnest, and the grave was not its goal; poetry, which was true but not real; and stories, or forbidden reading matter, in which things happened as nowhere else . . . because there was not a word of truth in them" (p. 194). Miranda's experience of dull convent life in a Catholic girls' boarding school teaches her that the "thrilling paperbacked version" (p. 194), in which she reads about "beautiful but unlucky maidens . . . trapped by nuns and priests . . . 'immured' in convents, where they were forced to take the veil" (p. 193), does not reflect her own experience. For this reason, Miranda and her sister dismiss the stories as untrue even though they adopt the word *immured* to refer to their condition, thinking that it gives "a romantic glint to what was otherwise a dull life" (p. 194). Porter's narrator, however, conveys a more subtle point about the way the girls have read this "forbidden reading

matter" (p. 193). The narrator explains that the girls have adopted the word because it represents to some degree their feelings of confinement at the school, whose grounds they leave only occasionally when relatives take them to the horse races. The narrator also emphasizes the politics of reading, or certainly the politics of giving books as gifts, by humorously suggesting that a Protestant cousin "with missionary intent" (p. 193) had left the book behind at their grandmother's farm, hoping that the Catholic girls would be influenced by it.

The primary event in part 2 is the girls' first meeting with Uncle Gabriel, the "handsome romantic beau" (p. 197) they have envisioned from the family stories about Amy. Miranda's correct assessment of Gabriel as a drunkard, based on descriptions she has read of drunken people, shows that she continues to use fiction as a source of information about life, even though she recognizes that it is not always an exact representation. That Gabriel is "a shabby fat man with bloodshot blue eyes . . . and a big melancholy laugh" (p. 197) causes momentary confusion and disappointment and validates Miranda's new belief that stories are more romantic than life. However, her disillusionment about Gabriel does not cause her to question other parts of the Amy legend or to notice that Honey, Gabriel's second wife, has suffered from his continued preoccupation with the long-dead Amy. Most importantly, it fails to provoke Miranda to assess the role the legend has had in her own loss of self-esteem.

Part 3 centers on Miranda as a young adult. At age eighteen she is returning home for Gabriel's funeral. On the train she meets her Cousin Eva, whom the family has used in their stories as Amy's foil, the epitome of a woman who has not succeeded in becoming a Southern belle. Because of her "weak chin," she has failed to attract men with her looks; because of "strong character" and her preoccupation with intellectual subjects, she has failed to charm men with her conversation. Or so her family says, particularly Amy. As Eva and Miranda reminisce about the past, Miranda receives a very different interpretation of the Amy legend. Eva gives Miranda a feminist critique of the other aunt's story. She thinks Amy and girls like her were driven to chasing men because of their need for husbands to support them, and that their dreams of romantic love were a pretty cover-up for what could not be spoken—female sexual desire.[15] Eva

suggests that women of Amy's generation would have been better off if they had used their minds, as she did, not just their bodies, and if they had dared to think for themselves and learned to take care of themselves, as she has. Eva attributes Amy's difficulty in choosing an independent life to the family's narrow definition of female beauty and worth, a definition that Eva says was pervasive, but one that she believes was more tenacious in the South than elsewhere in the United States.

For the first time, Miranda is forced to think about storytelling, not as an extension of reality or an attempt to represent reality, but as the production of reality. In talking about Gabriel's request to be buried next to Amy rather than Honey, Eva compels Miranda to consider how the legend of Amy may have affected Miss Honey's life. Eva says, "After listening to stories about Amy for twenty-five years, she [Honey] must lie alone in her grave in Lexington while Gabriel sneaks off to Texas to make his bed with Amy again. It was a kind of life-long infidelity, Miranda, and now an eternal infidelity on top of that" (pp. 210–11). Eva's remarks make Miranda wonder for the first time what Honey was like before she met Gabriel and had to live with his endless comparisons to Amy. Interestingly enough, Miranda still does not seem to see the effect that growing up in Amy's shadow has had on Eva. She keeps wondering why Eva is so bitter, why she hates Amy so much. Eva's version of the story allows Porter's readers, however, to see that although Eva's bitterness at being another victim of the Amy legend shapes the way she tells the story, her family's version of the Amy story has caused Eva's bitterness. Indeed, it has shaped her life.

Listening to Eva's storytelling, Miranda finds herself in the situation Diana Fuss describes. "In reading, for instance, we bring (old) subject positions to the text at the same time the actual process of reading constructs (new) subject-positions for us. Consequently, we are always engaged in a 'double reading' . . . in the sense that we are continually caught within and between *at least* two constantly shifting subject-positions" that may be "in complete contradiction."[16] Miranda must negotiate between her loyalty to an old family story and her fascination with Cousin Eva's new perspective. As Eva presents new interpretations of Amy's behavior, "She was a bad, wild girl" (p. 214), Miranda counters with the readings she has grown up

with, "everybody said she was very beautiful" (p. 214). Eva stands her ground, "Not everybody" (p. 214). As Eva implicates Amy in the suffering Eva experienced as a child, Miranda responds with another interpretation:

> She [Amy] used to say to me [Eva], in that gay soft way she had, "Now, Eva, don't go talking votes for women, when the lads ask you to dance. Don't recite Latin poems to 'em," she would say, "they got sick of that in school. Dance and say nothing, Eva," she would say, her eyes perfectly devilish, "and hold your chin up, Eva. . . . You'll never catch a husband if you don't look out," she would say.
>
> "She was joking, Cousin Eva," said Miranda, innocently, "and everybody loved her."
>
> "Not everybody, by a long shot," said Cousin Eva in triumph. "She had enemies. If she knew, she pretended she didn't. If she cared, she never said. You couldn't make her quarrel. She was sweet as a honeycomb to everybody. *Everybody,*" she added, "that was the trouble. She went through life like a spoiled darling, doing as she pleased and letting other people suffer for it, and pick up the pieces after her." (p. 211)

But beneath Miranda's verbal protests, she finds that Eva's version of the story, in which Amy dies and Eva survives, confirms an old maxim, "Beauty goes, character stays" (p. 215). While drawn to this view, Miranda is deflected from it by the way her family has taught her to see "strong character" in a woman. She continues to view "a strong character" as "deforming" (p. 215), and therefore, sees Eva as unattractive. Eva's habit of frankness runs counter to Southern manners, which require a lady to be polite but evasive when faced with unpleasantness.

But the message of Eva's story—the tremendous effect family stories can have on a young girl's development and self-esteem—has parallels in Miranda's own experience, and these parallels are what create Miranda's "horrid fascination with the terrors and the darkness Cousin Eva has conjured up" (p. 214). In part 3 Miranda reads Eva's stories with a self-consciousness she did not have as a child. Typical of adolescents, she is aware of her own subjectivity, which is sometimes in conflict with the social roles she must play, and she uses

reading to think about possibilities of expressing a truer self.[17] She sees similarities between herself and Cousin Eva: they both have had to wear hand-me-down dresses as children, and they both are interested in women's suffrage. As she listens to Eva's storytelling, Miranda's burning question is, "What was the end of this story?" (p. 214).

Miranda's desire to know another ending comes from her knowledge that the traditional ending for women, that marriage will produce happiness and fulfillment, has not worked for her. After her father told her she would never be tall and therefore would not become a great beauty like Aunt Amy, Miranda eventually developed other fantasies of self-fulfillment—at first, to be a jockey or to play the violin, and finally, to be an airplane pilot. However, she must have perceived her desires as transgressive for a female because she kept them secret, planning to train in private and to surprise her family with her career choice only when she had succeeded. Despite Miranda's conscious fantasies and her awareness of contradictions in the Amy stories, Miranda has unconsciously patterned her life after Amy's by eloping from her convent, a fact that Porter surprises her readers with in part 3. The romantic Amy legend and the forbidden reading material about the convent have mingled in Miranda's mind to produce a plot and an ending very close to the fictional ones she has been brought up with: spirited young woman, immured in convent, is rescued by dashing young man. But she has quickly grown dissatisfied with this ending to her own life.

In spite of Miranda's intense interest in Eva's ending to the Amy story, Miranda does not appreciate Eva's reduction of all romance to female rivalry for men and festering sexual desire. At this point she declares Eva's story as fantastic as her father's. Miranda simply refuses to consider her mother's courtship and marriage in such terms. However, Eva's conclusion that the family is "the root of all human wrongs" (p. 217) is substantiated for Miranda by the way her father snubs her when they get off the train, a sign of his continuing disapproval of her elopement. Miranda's subsequent decision to cut all family ties, even those to her husband and his family, is predicated on her listening to Eva's version of the Amy story, but Miranda remains unconscious of the effect Eva's story has had on her own thoughts. While Miranda now perceives that a story is not simply a representa-

tion of the world but of the storyteller's vision of the world, she does not realize that meaning comes from a reader's interpretation as well.[18] Miranda does not realize that Eva's story validates and clarifies what she has not been able to articulate about her marriage and her family, but what she is now beginning to realize: "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" (p. 220).

Such knowledge and the refusal of the heterosexual romance plot as sole key to a woman's happiness might provide the ending of a feminist bildungsroman, but Porter does not conclude at this point. Porter's bildungsroman ends with what Martin Swales has defined as the conventional ending of the traditional German and modern British bildungsroman—its questioning of the narrator's and ultimately the reader's capacity for self-reflection and its concern with the values and assumptions that shape human experience.[19] Miranda rightly sees that her father's, grandmother's, and Cousin Eva's stories of Amy are only versions of the truth, but she still persists in thinking she can know the truth about herself. The narrator states that she does so "in her hopefulness, her ignorance" (p. 221). If Katherine Anne Porter had followed her feminist inclinations, instead of the fictional models of her male modernist predecessors,[20] perhaps "Old Mortality" would have concluded with a less ambiguous ending, one more in keeping with Jane Tompkins's statement that "When discourse is responsible for reality and not merely a reflection of it, then whose discourse prevails makes all the difference."[21]

While it is clear from Miranda's father's and grandmother's versions of the Amy story that the romance plot certainly separates love and quest, as Rachel DuPlessis argues in *Writing beyond the Ending*,[22] Porter suggests that a feminist plot does the same, only reversing the emphasis, rewriting the resolution so that love is repressed instead of quest. The independent Eva, who has reduced love to hormones and marriage to economics, lives alone, but she is unhappy and bitter, and Miranda seems to be following in her footsteps—a direction the narrator judges as very problematic. When Miranda decides that in order to make "her own discoveries" she must give up relationships, Porter writes, "I hate love, she [Miranda] thought, as if

this were the answer, I hate loving and being loved, I hate it. And her disturbed and seething mind received a shock of comfort from this sudden collapse of an old painful structure of distorted images and misconceptions. 'You don't know anything about it,' said Miranda to herself, with extraordinary clearness as if she were an elder admonishing some younger misguided creature. 'You have to find out about it'" (pp. 220–21). The narrator undercuts Miranda's decision to renounce love with the phrase, "as if this were the answer"—a phrase Porter added in revising the story.[23]

Although "Old Mortality" ends before Miranda discovers anything more about love, life, stories, or reading, Porter is not finished with Miranda. In a companion piece, "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," Miranda has a life after divorce, but her career is a rather dull job as a theater critic for a Denver newspaper (an assignment reserved for women), and she is looking for love. She finds the perfect Adam—tall, tanned, and blond—who, in a reversal of roles, nurses her when she becomes deathly ill with the flu. This story ends with his death and Miranda's return to life, but Porter describes it as a life that stretches out before her in "the dead cold light of tomorrow."[24] Porter is clearly frustrated with the available plots for women, but in neither her life nor her fiction is she able to imagine a love relationship that is mutually supportive of each individual's work.[25] As a result, Porter undoes the marriage plot in "Old Mortality" and the quest plot in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," although in both she resists the conventional fictional closure for women's lives—marriage or death.

The dates that Porter uses in "Old Mortality" encourage comparisons to her own life, even though her narrative persona is uncharacterized. At the same time that Porter acknowledges in her notes a similarity between Miranda's experiences and her own, she emphasizes that "Old Mortality" is "not an autobiographical story" and that Miranda is "by no means intended to represent herself."[26] As if to suggest a link but not an exact comparison to her protagonist's experiences, Porter has Maria's birth date rather than Miranda's correspond with her own. However, 1912, the date of part 3, was a momentous year for Porter as it was for Miranda—a time when Porter was reassessing her marriage to John Koontz, her first husband. Because he was on the road that year as a traveling salesman, she experienced freedom for the first time (she had married at six-

teen), and she wrote her first short story while he was away. When she left him later that year, her father disowned her. Katherine Anne Porter must have felt in 1912 as Miranda did in 1912, that the beautiful fantasies of romantic love that young girls grow up on can be dangerous. Eva's declaration that the family is a "hideous institution . . . the root of all human wrongs" (p. 217) must have been rather close to Porter's own assessment. In 1936 a few days after finishing "Old Mortality," Porter decided to end her third marriage. She described the last few months of 1936, a period of incredible productivity, as "the most wonderful" of her life. Cloistered in the Water Wheel Tavern in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, she attributed the disruption of her creativity to the arrival of her husband, Eugene Pressly. This realization led her to decide that she must have complete freedom and solitude if she were going to write. Six months later, however, she found she could not tear herself away from Albert Erskine, a handsome young man who looked like Adam in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider"[27] and who was as captivated by Porter as Gabriel was by Amy. Porter agreed to marry Erskine a year after her decision to break up with Pressly; the marriage to Erskine lasted two years.

Porter's biographer Joan Givner has detailed Porter's contradictory attitudes toward feminism, from her early support of women's rights as evidenced in correspondence with her brother in 1909[28] to her derogatory remarks in the 1960s and 1970s about Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan. Porter's comments reveal that she was uncomfortable with strains of feminist thinking that set forth monolithic definitions of *woman* and that portrayed women as victims and passive sufferers. Of Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* Porter said in a 1962 interview, "Whenever I find a book that begins 'Women are . . .' or 'Women do . . .' or 'Women . . . ,' I say 'That's enough.' " To a March 1970 question asking if she was ready to join the Women's Liberation Movement, Porter replied, "I will not sit down with you and hear you tell me men have abused you. Any man who ever did wrong to me got back better than he gave."[29] Porter's dismissal of feminism reveals her fundamental dislike of women's passively occupying stories, not her lack of support for women's rights.[30] In "Old Mortality" the narrator undercuts both Eva's "woman as victim" stories and the rest of the family's "woman as Southern belle" stories.

Porter's ambivalence toward feminism is felt in "Old Mortality" in the tension between her narrative positioning of Eva as the character who dismantles the Amy myth and the stereotypical way in which the narrator describes her: "She had two immense front teeth and a receding chin, but she did not lack character" (p. 206). Givner believes that Porter "was torn between wishing to be an accomplished, independent woman, speaking out authoritatively on literature and world events and wishing to be a charmingly capricious belle, sought after for her beauty and arousing chivalrous thoughts in every male breast."[31] Porter's portrait of Eva suggests that although Porter believed in women's rights, she bought into the patriarchal ideology of her day, which depicted feminists as ugly, as alone, and as interested in careers and women's causes only because no men would have them. Porter's portrait of the ill-fated Amy suggests that although Porter saw the dangers for women in the Southern-belle role, that vision of female beauty and charm was deeply imbedded in her unconscious. So too was the fantasy of romantic love.

The narrator's ironic distance from the Amy story and from Miranda's predicament belies Porter's own deep entanglement in both, and supports the final irony of "Old Mortality." Miranda's assumption that she will have total control over her own life—both in living it and in understanding it—is undercut repeatedly by the narrator at the end of "Old Mortality":

> Oh, what is life, she asked herself in desperate seriousness, in those childish unanswerable words, and what shall I do with it? It is something of my own, she thought in a fury of jealous possessiveness, what shall I make of it? She did not know that she asked herself this because all her earliest training had argued that life was a substance, a material to be used, it took shape and direction and meaning only as the possessor guided and worked it; living was a progress of continued and varied acts of the will directed towards a definite end. (p. 220)

Miranda's attempt to be done with the stories of the past fails because the teachings embodied in these stories have become part of her unconscious—"she did not know that she asked herself this." Porter succeeds in discrediting the stories Miranda has grown up with, but she gives Miranda little control over their lingering effects. In "Old

Mortality" Porter demonstrates the difficulty of reading or writing a story rather than being read or written by it—the problem of unconsciously playing out old plots, even after one has become a feminist reader aware of their dangers. Porter's ending undermines the reader's attempt to control her text.

Notes

My thanks to Alison Booth for her editorial suggestions.

1. For a discussion of Porter's modernist themes, see Robert Penn Warren, "Irony with a Center," in *Katherine Anne Porter, a Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Robert Penn Warren (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1979), pp. 93–108; M. M. Liberman, *Katherine Anne Porter's Fiction* (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 37–51; Willene Hendrick and George Hendrick, *Katherine Anne Porter* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1988), pp. 55–59; Janis P. Stout, "Miranda's Guarded Speech: Porter and the Problem of Truth-Telling," *Philological Quarterly* 66, no. 2 (1987): 259–78. For a discussion of Porter's Southern themes about the dangers of idealizing the past, see John Edward Hardy, *Katherine Anne Porter* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1973), pp. 24–33; Darlene Harbour Unrue, *Truth and Vision in Katherine Anne Porter's Fiction* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1985), pp. 124–31; and Ray B. West, Jr., "Katherine Anne Porter and 'Historic Memory,'" in *Southern Renascence: The Literature of the Modern South*, ed. Louis B. Rubin, Jr., and Robert D. Jacobs (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1953), pp. 278–89. In *Katherine Anne Porter's Women* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1983), Jane Krause DeMouy provides a feminist critique of the social roles Porter's characters were expected to play (pp. 145–57).

2. K. A. Porter papers, dated 24 June 1948, Special Collections, University of Maryland at College Park Libraries.

3. Katherine Anne Porter, "The Necessary Enemy," in her *The Collected Essays and Occasional Writings of Katherine Anne Porter* (New York: Delta, 1973), p. 185. See also "'Marriage Is Belonging'" (pp. 187–92).

4. In *Becoming a Reader: The Experience of Fiction from Childhood to Adulthood* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990), J. A. Appleyard takes up the very developmental issues about reader response that interested Porter and that have eluded many reader-response critics.

5. For example, in *Hypatia: or Women and Knowledge* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1925), Dora Russell is exasperated with people who force women to "choose": "'Choose,' say the Bishops and the school-managers (often the same thing); 'choose,' say the public authorities who support the Church and rather wish women would get out of this indelicate profession of surgery and medicine, 'choose between love and duty to the male and service to the community.' This is not feminism—feminists have fought it persis-

tently—it is medieval Christianity. It presents a choice between physical pleasure and service to the mind or soul" (p. 31).

6. Patrocinio P. Schweickart, "Reading Ourselves: Toward A Feminist Theory of Reading," in *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts*, ed. Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocinio P. Schweickart (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1986), p. 49. An excellent review essay of some recent works on gender and reading is Pamela L. Caughie's "Women Reading/Reading Women," *Papers on Language and Literature* 24, no. 3 (Summer 1988): 317–35.

7. Katherine Anne Porter, "Old Mortality," in *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), p. 174. Subsequent quotations from this edition will hereafter be cited parenthetically by page number.

8. Mary Crawford and Roger Chaffin, "The Reader's Construction of Meaning: Cognitive Research on Gender and Comprehension," in *Gender and Reading*, ed. Flynn and Schweickart, p. 3.

9. Appleyard, *Becoming a Reader*, p. 14.

10. Appleyard's chapter "Early Childhood: The Reader as Player" (pp. 21–56) in his *Becoming a Reader* is a good description of the cognitive limitations of children's thinking and of the psychological studies of young children and reading.

11. See Mary Jacobus's discussion of Breuer and Freud's being tricked by their own figures of speech about women in *Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1986), pp. 198–200.

12. Jean Wyatt, *Reconstructing Desire: The Role of the Unconscious in Women's Reading and Writing* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1990), p. 219; Appleyard, *Becoming a Reader*, p. 77.

13. Wyatt, *Reconstructing Desire*, p. 45.

14. In *Becoming a Woman through Romance* (New York: Routledge, 1990), Linda K. Christian-Smith argues that "Although romance bestows recognition and importance on heroines, it constructs feminine subjectivity in terms of a significant other, the boyfriend" (p. 28).

15. In "Irony with a Center," Robert Penn Warren suggests that Eva's critique is Marxist and Freudian, which indeed it is, but he fails to see that it is feminist as well. (Warren, ed., *Katherine Anne Porter*, p. 105).

16. Diana Fuss, "Reading Like a Feminist," in her *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 33.

17. See Appleyard, "Adolescence: The Reader as Thinker," in his *Becoming a Reader*, pp. 94–120.

18. In *Becoming a Reader* Appleyard argues that "The discovery of multiple levels of significance deriving from authorial intention is perhaps the limit of an adolescent's ability to deal with the idea of meaning in a story. . . . To go further would require taking the point of view that meaning results from an act of interpretation by the reader, which is the issue faced in the next stage of development. Adolescents interpret, but they do not have a

theory of interpretation. They debate about interpretations, but the point at issue is which one is the right one" (p. 112). At the end of "Old Mortality" eighteen-year-old Amy continues to be preoccupied with truth.

19. See Martin Swales, *The German Bildungsroman from Wieland to Hesse* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978), pp. 98–102, and "The German *Bildungsroman* and the Great Tradition" in *Comparative Criticism*, ed. Elinor Shaffer (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1979), pp. 91–105. Also of interest is Carol Lassaro-Weis's "The Female *Bildungsroman:* Calling It into Question," *NWSA Journal* 2, no. 1 (Winter 1990): 16–34.

20. See Joan Givner's *Katherine Anne Porter, A Life*, rev. ed. (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1991); Joan Givner, ed. *Katherine Anne Porter: Conversations* (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1987); and Porter's *The Collected Essays and Occasional Writings of Katherine Anne Porter* (New York: Delta, 1973) for modernist influences on her fiction, especially the work of James Joyce.

21. Jane P. Tompkins, "An Introduction to Reader-Response Criticism," in *Reader-Response Criticism, from Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1980), p. xxv.

22. See Rachel Blau DuPlessis's *Writing beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 1–19.

23. Liberman, *Katherine Anne Porter's Fiction*, p. 48.

24. Katherine Anne Porter, "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," in *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), p. 317.

25. Recently feminist critics have called for a reinventing of both marriage and work as well as a reimagining of both marriage plots and quest plots. In *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988), Carolyn G. Heilbrun argues that "new definitions and a new reality about marriage must be not only lived but narrated" (p. 89). She defines as "revolutionary" a marriage in which "both partners have work at the center of their lives and must find a delicate balance that can support both together and each individually" (p. 81). In "Texts to Grow On: Reading Women's Romance Fiction" (*Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 7, no. 2 [Fall 1988]: 239–59), Suzanne Juhasz argues for a reexamination of both self-realization and the idea of quest. She believes that self-realization can include relationships, not just the "action, adventure, knowledge, vocation" linked to the quest motif (p. 248).

26. K. A. Porter Papers, Special Collections, University of Maryland at College Park Libraries.

27. Joan Givner, *Katherine Anne Porter, a Life*, pp. 97–98, 298–300, 305.

28. While Katherine Anne Porter's letter to her brother is not extant, its profeminist contents are implied in Paul's reply, dated 23 March 1909, in

K. A. Porter Papers, Special Collections, University of Maryland at College Park Libraries.

> Dear Callie: I haven't answered your welcome letter for I hardly knew what to make of it at first. You certainly took me by surprise with your vehemence. It must have been written on one of your off days. What was the trouble; had JK [John Koontz] asserted himself in contravention of the laws or rather, rights, of woman. Poor old JK. He is probably an h.p. suffragist at home any way if merly [*sic*] for the sake of peace. You will find that the average man does not activly [*sic*] oppose the ballot for women, but merly [*sic*] regards it with uneasy tolerance as liable to disturb the present relation between the sexes. Dear, why should you butt your head against hard facts; there is no practical reason for allowing you the ballot. I admit it would gratify their vanity, but aside from that it would be of no earthly use to women. It would not help the moral or economic conditions and would bring the millenium [*sic*] no nearer. False pride and ignorance account for a great many of the women who champion the cause, women whose views are inflated because of natures [*sic*] stinginess in brain and who blindly follow a lead with out the least conception of what it all means. They become bitter from a fanatical struggle for imaginary rights not knowing an effort not directed by common sense will invariably fail. They do not discriminate between bigness and fineness, unable to see that any influence that they could bring to bear along that line would not equal the influence of the feminine in maternal relations of the home. The worlds [*sic*] greatest need today is of good mothers, which is the master proffesion [*sic*] for women requiring every art and talent to perfect, of women who live close to their children, who will bear impressions of her training all through life. The farther away a woman gets from the thought that she was made to be the helpmate of man, and the mother of his children, the farther she will be from her usefulness. Competition between the sexes is unnatural, you should be mans [*sic*] inspiration, not his competitor. What effort you make for equality renders you unwomanly and consequently less deserving of the deference which is a womans [*sic*] portion. American women enjoy more liberty than any other nation on the earth and what are the results. Divorces, soul mates, and numerous other evils. If that is equality it would be far better to keep them fettered than to let them turn liberty into license. You say women are slaves; bound by routine and unappreciated labor. I should call them the White Mans [*sic*] Burden. . . . A man loves a woman on a pedestal, when she comes down he leaves her. It matters little whether women vote or not, as man is boss now will he be then; finis.

29. Joan Givner, ed., *Katherine Anne Porter: Conversations*, pp. xvii, 76, 155–56.

30. On 26 March 1958, Porter wrote to literary critic Edward Schwartz, because she did not like his Freudian analysis of Miranda's behavior in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" as a wish "to assume the active male role": "What they [women] really want, I think, is not a change of sex, but a change of the

limited conditions of their lives which have been imposed because of their sexual functions" (*Letters of Katherine Anne Porter,* ed. Isabel Bayley, p. 548). In Porter's letters, she often espouses feminist ideas at what she terms "the risk of being called a horrid name like Feminist" (pp. 503, 508). Porter is also refusing to read her life in anything but individualist terms (hence her repayment in kind to any one abusive man, but her dislike of a general women's movement).

31. Givner, ed., *Katherine Anne Porter: Conversations,* p. xiv. Givner also attributes the inconsistency in Porter's attitudes toward feminism to her "overriding desire to entertain and woo her audience," a desire that was surely fostered by her own early training as a Southern belle, whose "reflex is to make a conquest" (pp. xvii–xviii). Givner gives as an example the radically different ways in which she responds to a question about gender and writing depending on the sex of her interviewer. In a 1962 interview with Maurice Dolbier, Porter claims, "I've never felt that the fact of being a woman put me at a disadvantage, or that it's difficult being a woman in a 'man's world.' The only time men get a little tiresome is in love—oh, they're OK at first but they do tend don't they, to get a little bossy and theological about the whole business?" (p. 77). And yet, a year later when Barbara Thompson asked her if being a woman presented a writer with any "special problems," Porter responded differently, "You're brought up with the notion of feminine chastity and inaccessibility, yet with the curious idea of feminine availability in all spiritual ways, and in giving service to anyone who demands it. And I suppose that's why it has taken me twenty years to write this novel [*Ship of Fools*]; it's been interrupted by just anyone who could jimmy his way into my life" (p. 95).