The ambivalent art of Katherine Anne Porter

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A thinking woman sleeps with monsters.
The beak that grips her, she becomes.

Adrienne Rich

TO MY MOTHER, JILL TITUS, IN GRATITUDE FOR A LIFETIME OF BOOKS

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INTRODUCTION

"I will make beauty after my own secret thought," said the Princess, "and I will also devise my own cruelties, rejecting utterly the banal sufferings imposed by nature."

In a story composed during the 1920s but unpublished in her lifetime, Katherine Anne Porter created a brilliant and masochistic young woman who dedicates her life to art. The Princess glories publicly in her choice but weeps privately at its price—social alienation and childlessness. "Nature is abhorrent, a vulgarity," the Princess proclaims; she celebrates an eccentric creativity expressed in elaborate costume and stages a personal rebellion against proscribed gender roles.[1] Family and social law mass against Porter's Princess, and she dies, literally drowning beneath the weight of her dedication. The oppositions created in this early story, and the tensions they generate, are painful and absolute. On one side is life as an artist, a choice demanding all of body and mind; on the other side are social norms, in particular traditional gender roles. Porter's "The Princess" belongs in the company of other remarkable tales of female sexuality and art, such as Isak Dinesen's "The Blank Page."[2] Like Dinesen, Porter creates an imaginary world to make visible some of the underlying cultural assumptions of her own. This story (which is discussed in far greater detail in chapter 1) provides a standpoint for viewing Porter's literary achievement; evidence of its tensions appears everywhere in her work, from her earliest tales for children to her final opus, *Ship of Fools*.

"The Princess" is an early and extraordinarily important example of Porter's thinking about gender and identity. The story's complex and ambivalent contents merit summary. Society in "The Princess" defines female identity through the physical body; biological materiality determines role and ritual. Yet through her art, which takes the form of elaborate costume, the Princess makes it clear that the body can provide a stage for the imagination. When these two ideological positions meet, tensions arise. The Princess's sartorial art suggests that female identity is endlessly manipulable, performative. Yet, as the

story repeatedly reminds the reader, beneath its glittering surfaces the Princess's body remains simple female flesh, compressed and bruised by its elaborate encasements. In death the layers flow away and she lies naked, exposed and unadorned. The tensions evident in Porter's early-twentieth-century tale call to mind key debates in feminist theory between, as one theorist summarizes, "a desire for a materialist articulation of bodies and their liberation in indeterminate or multiple resignifications."[3] There is a real body in "The Princess," and there is great liberation through the "resignification" that occurs when that body becomes the vehicle of the artist's work. The tale also contains mixed emotion. The princess is an admirable artist and a tragic madwoman; her art looks gorgeous, but it hurts to wear it. The combination of her gleeful creativity and gruesome end, drowned and naked, corroborates Elizabeth Wingrove's wry response to poststructuralist efforts to shed biology entirely: "Gender identity is complexly coded through social roles and expressive practices, but its referential sine qua non is biological materiality: the drag show would come to a screeching halt—or at least it would become something else entirely—if the performers took off their clothes."[4]

That Porter should be so attentive to and deeply aware of the complexity of female sexuality and gender identity can be explained, in part, by the coming together of her ambitions, her cultural background, and her historical moment. Born in 1890 and living until 1980, Katherine Anne Porter witnessed almost a century of dramatic changes in the lives of American women. An acute observer, immersed in the cultural and social currents of her historic moment, Porter responded to these changes in her published and unpublished writings: fiction, essays, poetry, extensive private notes, and lively correspondence. Through all the years, from Texas to Paris, from one husband to the next, from poverty to relative affluence, Porter never relinquished her dominant ambition. At the age of seventy-three she told an interviewer, "I started out with nothing in the world but a kind of passion, driving desire. I don't know where it came from, and I do not know why—or why I have been so stubborn about it that nothing could deflect me. But this thing between me and my writing is the strongest bond I have ever had—stronger than any bond or engagement with any human being."[5] Her first biographer, Joan Givner, acknowledges this drive: "Her emotional center, the one continuing thread of her life, was her work as an artist."[6] Yet for Porter, being both a woman and an artist proved challenging, and the interrelations of these two roles became a fundamental subject of her work.

Porter's recurring and intense concern with the relations between "woman"

and "artist" emerged, in part, as a response to her conservative nineteenth-century upbringing. Her childhood environment provided limited images of female creativity beyond self-beautification, pursuit of a marriage partner, childbearing, and domestic labor. Although later in life she liked to describe the worn literary classics that filled the family bookshelves, in unpublished notes titled "Reading Matter," she lists as early reading "Beauty and the Beast" and "Cinderella" as well as "a writer named 'The Duchess' whose heroines were made of alabaster and snow . . . [and] Ouida . . . I read at least half a dozen of her novels."[7] Stories of girls whose linked beauty and sweetness bring them wealth and happiness reinforced the childhood lessons that communicated the culturally endorsed belief that appearance and sexual status were of vital importance to a woman's value. In an unpublished autobiographical essay titled "Pull Dick—Pull Devil," Porter recalls that her father "liked vanity and decorative qualities in women" and "shamelessly favored the prettiest [daughter] in turn."[8] For Porter, as well as Willa Cather and other American women writers raised in rural communities, the most evident alternative to marital success through beauty and charm was the theater, in the form of the traveling companies with female performers that visited their areas. Although her grandmother considered the stage an indecent place for any proper young woman, Porter found it a resource for much-needed money. Porter's sister Gay recalled that their grandmother once whipped Katherine Anne ceremoniously and strenuously when she informed a visiting clergyman that she aspired to a career as an actress.

Porter resorted to the stage when she desperately needed money and had only her beauty and natural talent to rely on. In 1905 she and her sister offered lessons for women, listing themselves as "Misses Porter, studio of music, physical culture and dramatic reading."[9] She also briefly pursued a film career, and in 1914 she worked on the Lyceum Circuit, singing sentimental ballads in a beautiful red gown.[10] Certainly among members of "good" society in Porter's youth, public performance was socially unacceptable. Just as in later life she confronted issues of gender and performance with a divided mind, so too, given her sensitivity to her grandmother's (and dead mother's) nineteenth-century standards of female decorum, Porter must have felt both excitement and discomfort about these early forays onto the stage.

Porter's concern with questions of gender and creativity was also intensified and enriched by her cultural moment. Her generation witnessed some of the most dramatic and richly debated changes in female gender roles. Raised by her grandmother, Porter grew up listening to the edicts that controlled the private and public behavior of conservative white nineteenth-century women. In her

fictional portrayal of her grandmother's power, Porter examines both the creativity and limitations arising from what we now call the nineteenth-century "cult of domesticity."[11] Porter's mother, although she died young, belonged to the generation of the New Woman, those intrepid pioneers who filled the settlement houses of the burgeoning cities and attended some of the first women's colleges. The New Woman appears in Porter's marvelous portrait of Cousin Eva in *Old Mortality*. Here Miranda—Porter's fictional self-representative—listens to her fierce older cousin's battle for women's suffrage and thinks, "it seemed heroic and worth suffering for, but discouraging too, to those who came after: Cousin Eva so plainly had swept the field clear of opportunity."[12] Like Cousin Eva, the New Woman of the late nineteenth century often rejected marriage for a career and political action. As Carroll Smith-Rosenberg notes, "From the 1870's through the 1920's, between 40 and 60 percent of women college graduates did not marry at a time when only 10 percent of all American women did not."[13] In the portrait of independent Cousin Eva, one can trace not only Porter's admiration for the generation of women that preceded her but also the influence of the social arguments that gradually discredited their story. The women of Katherine Anne Porter's generation, who followed in the footsteps of the New Woman, found their sexuality the subject of public debate and scholarly, scientific study by the sexologists. They witnessed popular culture's adaptation to and ultimate appropriation of women's revisionary struggles, including the transformation of the New Woman from self-made heroine to "invert" and old maid. Thus, although Porter's Eva is clearly admirable, she is also notably "chinless," "withered," and bitter.

This attention to female sexuality, with its accompanying social scrutiny of marriage and career options for women, impelled Porter's thinking about gender identity. As the historian of sexuality Christina Simmons attests, "The years 1900 to 1930 were a period of dramatic and self-conscious cultural, political, and intellectual change in the United States, the beginning of a shift from a Victorian to a modern mentality in which feminism and female public roles, the emergence of sexological science and modern psychology, and the effects of an ethnically diverse urban culture conjoined to undermine Victorian marriage and sexual codes. This change occurred especially among sophisticated and educated urbanites, artists, and intellectuals and most publicly and intensively in major cities like New York and Chicago."[14] These changes encouraged sexual radicalism in many forms, to which Porter responded both directly and indirectly in her writing. Certainly the changes fed anxiety about

her vocational choice, for, ironically, sexual liberation brought with it other forms of sexual control that questioned female independence. Although the lightweight, liberated "flapper" replaced the sterner and more serious New Woman, with the flapper came the ideology of companionate marriage, which sought to channel women's increasing autonomy and newly recognized capacity for sexual desire. "Companionate marriage represented the attempt of mainstream marriage ideology to adapt to women's perceived new social and sexual power. . . . [It] directed female energies toward men and marriage."[15] The acknowledgment of female sexual desire as equal to male, promoted by the sexologists and their popularizers, brought with it a new perspective on gender roles. The nineteenth-century concept of a separate women's sphere became potentially divisive and threatening to heterosexual hegemony, for it directed women's sexual and economic power away from the heterosexual establishment.

As a result of these cultural shifts in the ideology surrounding women's sexuality, Porter and her contemporaries, particularly other women artists and professionals, experienced powerful social pressures not to make choices that could potentially separate them from the heterosexual path of marriage and childbearing. Frequently this pressure came in the form of accusations of sexual deviance. "By the 1920s charges of lesbianism had become a common way to discredit women professionals, reformers, and educators."[16] As early as 1910 Havelock Ellis had correlated female success with inversion, noting that many of the "distinguished women in all ages and in all fields of activity . . . have frequently displayed some masculine traits."[17] For lesbian women, the acknowledgment of "inversion" as an identifiable and inborn quality was somewhat liberating, for it named and thus acknowledged them, and the association of lesbianism with "masculine traits" influenced women like Radclyffe Hall to associate lesbianism with masculine attire as well as "physiologically and psychologically masculine traits in women."[18] However, for a heterosexual and often heterosexist woman such as Porter, the suggestions that her ambitious career manifested sexual difference were deeply disturbing. Despite her personal unease, Porter was intrigued by her homosexual compatriots and found their playful experimentation with gender performance and cross-dressing both attractive and repellent. This interest, supported no doubt by her early experiences with theater and time spent watching Sergei Eisenstein filming, generated her attention to gesture and costume, the awareness we see in her fiction that "gender is instituted through the stylization of the body . . . the mundane

way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self."[19] Witness her depiction of Adam checking his wristwatch in "Pale Horse, Pale Rider."

The rich turmoil of the 1920s, with its radical questioning of sexual and social order, inspired some of Porter's finest fiction, but ultimately she found the decade's disorders threatening. In the 1930s, as she drew increasingly near to members of the Agrarian writers community, she turned to the South and her own past, part memory, part legend, to craft both an ambitious family history and a new public presence. The conservative politics of the Agrarians included a narrow view of women's place and potential, which Porter increasingly seemed to embrace, particularly in public or in the more casual places of publication, such as the pages of women's magazines. As Lewis P. Simpson notes in *The Fable of the Southern Writer*, the Agrarians were particularly self-conscious about their role as public southerners: "writers like Tate and Porter might at times specifically identify themselves as personal representations of the southern experience of defeat."[20] Porter's stories of the South, especially those in *The Old Order* and *Old Mortality*, offer complex and critical views of southern womanhood, but as Porter herself took on the role of southern lady of letters, she increasingly performed a class-bound, highly feminized version of female identity. In her final years of productivity, her intense questioning of gender ideology in her fiction slowly changed into anger and bitterness, and the female characters of her 1962 novel *Ship of Fools* appear trapped in narrow lives filled with romantic disappointment and sexual betrayal.

Katherine Anne Porter certainly rebelled against her upbringing, seeking far more expansive and varied opportunities for creative expression as well as intellectual, cultural, and sexual freedom. No doubt her unhappy early marriage at age sixteen, the changes in women's lives that mark her historical moment, her restless and imaginative character, and countless other influences provided impetus for breaking from the narrowly defined roles for women provided by her early environment. Yet her rebellion was characterized, in Givner's words, by "a complicated ambivalence" due to the influence of her childhood and the pressures on female independence that characterized the 1920s.[21] Raised to admire women—and herself—for decorative beauty, Porter resembles other women writers in the close connections she both creates and questions between the female body and art. At the same time, she never relinquished a belief that domesticity, marriage, and childbearing denote female success; as Givner states, it is notable "how closely linked her idea of femininity was with fertility."[22] A turn away from women's traditional roles toward the independent creativity of

an artistic career represented, Porter feared, a turn away from what she had learned was natural to female identity. To become an artist was to deny her sexuality; it was to become, in Porter's own words, "monstrous." Among her papers are notes for a review of Marian Storm's 1937 biography *The Life of Saint Rose* that struggle with questions of gender and vocation:

> The body of woman is the repository of life, and when she destroys herself it is important. It is important because it is not natural, and woman is natural or she is a failure. . . . Therefore women saints, like women artists are monstrosities. . . . You might say that if they are saints or artists they are not women.[23]

Porter rewrote these words, eliminating the link she had made between the woman saint and the woman artist. Her final version is as follows: "Saints create themselves as works of art; their lives are among the most mysterious manifestations of genius. As in all great works of art, there are terrible and even monstrous elements in the beauty of these lives."[24] Both versions are of interest. Explicit in Porter's notes is the belief that a woman is defined by her biological capabilities; her body "is the repository of life," and if she denies this she "destroys herself": women artists are "monstrosities" and are "not women." "If we define the monster as a bodily entity that is anomalous and deviant vis-à-vis the norm," as Rosi Braidotti argues in her essay, "Mothers, Monsters, Machines," then the woman intentionally choosing an "unnatural" vocation is indeed monstrous.[25] Although Porter erased both the terms "woman" and "artist" in her published version, her language retains the intense unease with difference. Hopeful here, however, is the recognition of genius and beauty, compensations for the "mysterious" and "terrible" intentional life.

Overall, the influences of her family upbringing and early experiences created in Katherine Anne Porter what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in the 1980s usefully termed the woman writer's "anxiety of authorship," a fear that her vocation is unnatural for a woman, that her artistic labors leave her "unsexed," that her gender and her art cannot be reconciled.[26] In this anxiety, Porter joins company with many other women writers from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In her study of several American women writers concerned about their vocational aspirations, Deborah Barker insightfully argues, "these writers were in many ways very conventional in their attitudes toward gender and aesthetics, yet it was their very desire to be identified as artists that instigated their investigations into the complex gender assumptions" about art and the artist. Like Porter, these women feared, in Barker's apt phrasing, that "the female artist was not simply an anomaly but an oxymoron."[27]

Throughout her long career, Porter repeatedly probed cultural arguments about female creativity, a woman's maternal legacy, romantic love, and sexual identity, always with startling acuity, and often with painful ambivalence. As a result, much of Porter's writing, perhaps all of her best known work, serves as a medium for what this study terms her gender-thinking: her serious and sustained examination of the interrelated issues of art, gender, and identity.[28] This gender-thinking always remained at the heart of her creative work, from her earliest tales for children to her last and longest work, the novel *Ship of Fools*. For many reasons, Porter's ongoing gender-thinking did not yield single, definitive answers. Rather, her fictional processing tended to open up contradiction and complexity. As Janis Stout observes in her intellectual biography of Porter, "her thought and her sensibility . . . were structured not by a single meta-belief or truth-statement but by variance and tension. . . . she responded to and reflected her time, in all its countercurrents and bewilderments, with extraordinary sensitivity."[29] In his work on the relations between Porter's intellectual contexts and her writing, Robert Brinkmeyer fruitfully employs Bakhtin's concept of dialogism to highlight Porter's "inquiring and dissenting sensibility," the source of her fiction's fascinating tangles and tensions.[30] Early in her career, Porter herself made light of her intellectual impressibility, identifying it as a trait of her sex: "Being feminine, our mind makes itself up brand-new every hour or so, and though it keeps life from being dull, it also complicates things a trifle now and again."[31] Rather than set her words aside as a bit of tongue-in-cheek sexism, which is a temptation, it is more interesting to note that they predicate a view of women's thinking that much more recently has been used to characterize female modernist narrative strategies. In their groundbreaking work on women writers in the 1980s, theorists from Marianne Hirsch to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have identified "oscillation and contradiction," Hirsch's terms, or "double consciousness," Gilbert and Gubar's, as "paradigm[s] for the discussion of women's writing within feminist criticism."[32]

In her fiction exploring questions of gender and sexuality, Porter does oscillate and contradict; her texts are often comic, contentious, and conflicted. Like her contemporaries, she found gender issues front and center during her cultural moment and, again, like many of them, she was not of one mind about new ideas of identity and sexuality. Attracted and repelled, insecure yet often judgmental, she attempted, with fascinating results, to encapsulate it all in her fiction. In this writing, Porter repeatedly confronted interpretations of female experience and representations of female identity in her culture, at times acknowledging their appeal to her, at times attempting alternative

formulations. Occasionally, as in "Holiday" and "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," she not only critiques the gender configurations of her cultural moment but also attempts visionary and revisionary reconfigurations. Because she witnessed a remarkable range of female gender roles and ideological takes on female sexuality—from those of her grandmother to those of revolutionary Mexico, 1920s New York, and 1930s Paris—she was keenly aware of the socially constructed quality of female identity. From her own lived experience, she knew firsthand how "sex/gender systems," in the language of contemporary theory, "are transformed—contingently, contextually—as a function of the transformations of political, economic, and religious ideologies."[33] Each and every such transformation, Porter knew, has implications for a woman choosing to be an artist. In her own life, she chose, increasingly, to play a highly feminized public role of southern lady, emphasizing certain portions of her own and her family's past while repressing others. But where her public appearance became increasingly performative, her writing never relinquished its intense drive for truth in all of its complexity: "Only there," in her fiction, as her biographer Joan Givner affirms, "did the austere truth-teller in Katherine Anne Porter consistently triumph over the theatrical public performer."[34]

During her life and even more so after her death, Porter has benefited from the attention of biographers and critics, some already mentioned, whose work has contextualized and enriched her achievement. Joan Givner's authorized biography in 1982 (revised in 1991) was followed in 1995 by Janis Stout's intellectual biography, *Katherine Anne Porter: A Sense of the Times*. At the same time two ambitious overviews of her work identified core sociopolitical contexts for her work: Thomas Walsh's 1992 *Katherine Anne Porter and Mexico* and Robert Brinkmeyer's 1993 *Katherine Anne Porter's Artistic Development: Primitivism, Traditionalism, and Totalitarianism*. Both draw on newly available biographical materials, published and unpublished. Accompanying book-length studies of Porter have been collections of hitherto scattered or archived writings. In 1990 Isabel Bayley brought out a selection from Porter's letters; in 1991 Darlene Harbour Unrue published Porter's book reviews and in 1994 Porter's poetry; and in 1996 Ruth Alvarez and Thomas Walsh brought together a rich assortment of Porter's early prose. Over the years many excellent essays have provided feminist readings of Porter's work, and Janis Stout includes a provocative chapter titled "The Issue of Gender" in her biography; however, since Jane Krause DeMouy's 1983 *Katherine Anne Porter's Women*, no book-length study has focused on gender questions in the work of this important modernist woman writer. The biographical materials accumulated since Porter's death and the

now available unpublished or out-of-print writings offer a rich lode of hitherto unmined material. *The Ambivalent Art of Katherine Anne Porter* draws on these newly available materials as well as Porter's extensive unpublished papers collected at the University of Maryland, bringing to them current insights from cultural studies and feminist and gender theory in order to illuminate her brilliant and complex gender-thinking and thereby place her creative achievement in a new light.

Like all creative work, Porter's fiction emerges from and is in complex relation to a network of influences, central among them her moment in cultural history, her biographical experience, and both the possibilities and limitations of her medium, language. Although all these influences are necessarily interrelated, *Ambivalent Art* often chooses to focus on one or another, seeking the richest context or most trenchant view. At the same time, this study also draws on a range of theoretical approaches, changing critical perspectives as one or another becomes more appropriate or productive. The chapters that follow do not offer an all-inclusive reading of Porter's achievement; instead, they illuminate aspects of her gender-thinking, bringing together interrelated stories, poems, essays, and unpublished materials, selecting what seems, to this reader, most intriguing and instructive. Because *Ambivalent Art* is in no way meant to be an exhaustive analysis of Porter's work, readers may miss discussion of a favorite story. I encourage them to extend approaches to Porter's gender-thinking on their own. Porter herself never remained fixed in her thinking; she was complex, contradictory, and ambivalent. I see no need for any one of us to limit our reading of her work to one lens when she was such a marvelous shape shifter.

Following Porter's career for the most part in chronological order, *Ambivalent Art* begins with a discussion of an extraordinary and provocative unfinished story, "The Princess" (newly available in print), in which Porter, near the start of her career, took on directly the complex interrelations of "woman" and "artist." "The Princess," already briefly discussed above, presents a young woman resisting her culture's control of female sexuality by inventing art. Through this brilliant, creative, isolated, mad, and ultimately punished heroine, Porter explores multiple aspects of gender proscription and female creativity. Because "The Princess" articulates concerns that recur throughout the rest of Porter's writing career, the story is a touchstone for this study, and each chapter that follows the first opens with an allusion to its complex and ambivalent contents.

Chapter 2 moves back approximately a decade to look at Porter's earliest published fiction, magical and exotic tales that first appeared anonymously.

These "retold" tales all demonstrate Porter's concern for women's power; comparison with their originals reveals how thoroughly and carefully she sought to highlight female capability as she revised. "The Shattered Star," "The Faithful Princess," "The Magic Ear Ring," and "The Adventures of Hadji" explore aspects of female identity and begin addressing questions of female authority and creative power. They also present her early romantic view of the woman artist as an alienated visionary. Her first acknowledged published fictional work, "María Concepción," continues this exploration of female power while addressing the fashionable fascination with primitivism.

Chapter 3 looks at a related group of early stories in which Porter explores women's simultaneous attraction to and rejection of the culturally available roles of beautiful object and muse/inspiration for the creative labor of the male artist. Portraying sadomasochistic pleasures connected to female objectification, these stories, including "Flowering Judas," "Virgin Violeta," "The Martyr," and "The Lovely Legend," address with unflinching honesty women's symbolic role within patriarchal culture.

Reflecting the wide and diverse range of Porter's gender-thinking, chapter 4 examines fiction concerned with an entirely different subject, a woman writer's relation to her mother and maternity. Like Virginia Woolf and other female modernist writers, Porter was interested in questions of the woman artist's maternal legacy. In several stories, including "The Fig Tree" and "The Grave," and in related poetry, she addresses with some ambivalence the ties between mothers and daughters, language and memory, seeking answers to crucial questions for a creative woman: what is the source of language for a woman writer? Is it connected to the mother's absence? Is there a mother-tongue? Does reconnection with her maternal legacy nourish or stifle the woman artist?

If a woman artist is a monster or a madwoman, as Porter seems to have anxiously considered her at times, what happens if she embraces these roles with laughter? Chapter 5 employs Bakhtin's theories of carnival and cultural release to illuminate the comic and radical content of "Holiday," a story in which an isolated and alienated woman writer accepts her otherness and rides far away from the world of patriarchy on a road less taken.

Chapter 6 attempts to shed light on the mysterious connections Porter created between the gestation of "Holiday" and intimate events in her own life. In 1924 Porter completed the story while awaiting the birth of a child, who was stillborn just over two weeks later. Her letters to Genevieve Taggard connect this child's conception to the composition of "Holiday," and the legacy of these events reverberates through "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" and two unfinished stories,

"A Season of Fear" and "A Vision of Heaven" and intensifies the connections she recurrently makes between the woman artist's body and her art.

Chapters 7 and 8 address ways in which Porter responded to the radical rethinking of gender roles and changing social practices of the twenties. Romantic love and traditional marriage both came under scrutiny in that decade as women claimed new independence and sexual freedom. Porter viewed both traditional and modern views of heterosexual relations with suspicion and wrote several stories in which women find that either independence diminishes their lives or commitment constrains their creativity. Three very different stories, "Theft," "The Cracked Looking Glass," and "The Spivvelton Mystery," all examine female independence, economics, and heterosexual relationships. Homosexual relationships also interested Porter, as they did her contemporaries, and she responded to the new awareness and visibility of the gay community. Like other modernist writers, Porter employed costume as a metaphor for gender roles and sexual identity. In letters and both published and unpublished essays, she expressed strong homophobia, yet in fiction she used costume, especially cross-dressing, to expose and undermine patriarchal control of gender roles. She also enjoyed a long, personally sustaining relationship with a close-knit gay community, including the photographer George Platt Lynes, for whom she enjoyed posing in elaborate gowns. Concepts of camp and cross-dressing illuminate the complexity of her response to the changing gender roles and new sexual liberations of the twenties, especially in two of her finest fictional works, "Hacienda" and "Pale Horse, Pale Rider."

Friendships with members of the Agrarian writing community and her own longing to revise and thereby order the painful disorders of her childhood encouraged Porter to increasingly describe herself as a sympathetic member of the southern gentility. Chapter 9 looks at Porter's increasingly strong self-identification as a "Southerner by tradition and inheritance."[35] This chapter also compares Porter's southern identification to that of a younger, but equally ambitious, woman writing about the South, Flannery O'Connor, and examines the complex gender-thinking about southern womanhood in Porter's fiction, most notably in the short novel *Old Mortality*. The conservatism nascent in Porter's attraction to the Agrarian cause strengthened through the 1940s and 1950s and was accompanied by a narrowing of thinking about gender and identity. Anger tended to replace ambivalence, and comedy became bitter edged. Jenny Brown, the young woman artist of *Ship of Fools*, suffers all the personal anxiety and social adversity that Porter herself endured. To the complex and contradictory gender-thinking about all the changes Porter witnessed in women's lives from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, *Ship of Fools* offers a final scathing portrayal of sexual relationships, of unhappy men and women seemingly unable to change.

Ambivalent Art establishes Porter's significance as a *woman* writer, in whose beautifully crafted fiction we can trace a brilliant artist's shifting and complex response to the changing discourses on sexuality and gender in American culture during the first half of the twentieth century. In the end, an understanding of the ways in which gender shaped Porter's achievement illuminates that of her contemporaries. The tensions and ambivalence inscribed in her fiction as well as the vocational anxiety and gender performance of her life tell us much about what happens when an ambitious young woman resolves to bring together in her own life those two never simple roles: woman and artist.

CHAPTER ONE

THE PRINCESS OF ART

Sometime around 1927, Katherine Anne Porter struggled to complete a strange and bitter tale about a young woman who has dedicated her life to creating art. The result, although unfinished, represents an extraordinary document in Porter's exploration of gender roles and sexuality and, indeed, in the history of women's writing. "The Princess" creates a symbolic world that serves to define the cultural conflicts surrounding a woman artist. For Porter, the intellectual freedom allowed in an invented world was clearly libratory, providing a landscape in which she could explore dangerously charged materials with less risk because she made no claims for representational veracity.[1] The story presents with mingled irony and bitter humor the generational replication of a gender system, the social control of female sexuality, and a young woman's attempt to escape cultural conscription through the invention of art. "The Princess" is a remarkable and disturbing tale. Much revised, and incomplete, especially near its close, it yet represents a crucial document in Porter's gender-thinking, raising key questions that she continued to explore throughout her career.[2]

In the imaginary kingdom of "The Princess," daily life is dominated by a religious ideology "dedicated to the love and worship of nature."[3] The kingdom's inhabitants live naked and unshorn for most of their lives, rejecting anything that would alter what they view as their natural state. Technological developments, they believe, could lead their nation in the disastrous way of their neighbors, "the Ruzanites who put their food in the fire before eating it, so that their stomachs rotted while they yet lived" (232). Women's lives are strictly regulated in this kingdom, and marriage and childbearing are viewed as their natural goals. Under the authority of a powerful High Priestess, rituals are built around the stages of female physical development; the clothing allowed women functions solely to identify the reproductive status of its wearer's body. Prepubescent girls and women past the age of childbearing cover their bodies,

wearing white or plain gray shifts respectively. When they reach puberty, girls undergo a springtime ritual at the temple in which a male acolyte takes their virginity. During this "feast of marriage with the god" (230), they discard their white shifts; from then on they remain naked until menopause.

Into this rigid "natural" order Porter sets a rebel. At the proper age of thirteen, her Princess, sole child of the kingdom's current rulers, refuses to participate in the "rites of the spring sowing" (230). In response to demands that she "cast her shift upon the fire" (228) and undertake the ceremony, she dons first one more shift and then many heavy, colorful layers. As her protest builds and solidifies, she invents and then perfects the decorative arts, training her handmaidens in weaving, dyeing, silkworm cultivation, and increasingly sophisticated metal work. Porter's Princess and her maiden attendants become marvelously skilled, "beating heated metal into divers shapes, and fashioning splendid ornaments of brightly coloured stones" (231). All of their art is dedicated to one purpose—covering the Princess's body in increasingly elaborate materials.

From the moment she refuses to participate in the temple ceremony, Porter's Princess endures intense pressure to reverse her decision and conform to cultural dictates. For five years she ignores the prayers and threats of the High Priestess and her parents, the King and Queen. Although she attends the temple ceremonies each spring, she remains "by the side of her mother" (230). Finally, despite the Princess's odd appearance and demeanor, a young acolyte at the temple falls in love with her: "he felt a strangeness about her, and a terrible fated loneliness, and afterward he could not forget her" (230–31). When the Princess is eighteen, this acolyte asks the King for her hand, and he quickly consents, telling the Queen, "whoever wants this mad girl may have her and welcome" (231). But the Princess has other plans. When the marriage ceremony occurs at the temple, she wears so many heavy, ornate layers that she can barely walk. Rejecting the High Priestess's final command to "disrobe and cast upon the fire your heretical garments" (232), she walks out of the temple with her lover. The two dedicate themselves to "the beauty [the Princess] created out of a dream and a vision" rather than the beliefs and symbols of their culture (233).

Although the Princess has agreed to marry the acolyte, she rejects all sexual contact. In response to her lover's amorous pleas, she increases her ornate armor until she is entirely encased in her art: "an image in stiff woven robes of gold, with corselet and girdle of jewels, and a tall crown of pointed crystals, and the face of the image was a golden mask, with eyes of amethyst" (234). Along with the decorative arts, the Princess develops a philosophy that exalts artifice over nature. "Nature is abhorrent," she professes, "a vulgarity perpetually to be denied by the soul of man" (234). Her philosophy, her art, and her elaborate,

disturbing presence all begin to threaten the religious order that regulates her kingdom. The women in particular fear her, calling her "mad" and a "heretic" and asking each other, "Since when has she become a god, to create with her hands?" (237). Of all the kingdom's women, the High Priestess most fears and hates the Princess and repeatedly commands her to strip off her decorative armor and participate in the rituals of sexual initiation. In her anger, the Priestess foretells the Princess's fate with an oracular proclamation: "Remember that the holy river shall wash away all that is dust." She decrees that "the fruitless woman may not inherit the throne" (233, 235), thereby cutting the Princess off from her inheritance.

Finally the Princess must face a sacred tribunal. While the judges interrogate and sentence her, she laughs, mocking them behind her golden mask. However, when she hears their "sentence of death"—"escort [the Princess] down to the river's edge at sunrise of tomorrow and with due and appropriate ceremonies . . . drown her as a heretic"—she weeps, "the tears rolling down the mask to her jewelled hands" (238). Porter worked through several possible scenes depicting the death of her heretical artist-Princess; as a result, the ending of her manuscript is particularly fragmented. However, all of her drafts show the High Priestess's prophecy coming true. In the most fully developed draft, the one chosen by the editors of *The Uncollected Early Prose*, the Princess flees at night from her prison tower accompanied by her devoted acolyte, who is now called the Poet. They pass under "a great scared faced moon" to a lake where the Princess refuses one last time to unmask herself for her lover (239). Instead, "she leaned straight over the brink of the lake, and slipped into the water like a falling stone" (239). Deep under the clear water she undergoes a sea-change, the water gently washing away her jewels and heavy robes until she lies "naked and glistening" in the transparent depths: "the crown slipped away and released the long red hair that streamed out like a soft flame, the mask slipped and fell aside" (239). Depending on different fragments among Porter's papers, the acolyte suffers several fates after the Princess's death. In two very brief fragments he joins her, slipping "quietly into the water." In a much more lengthy version, again the version chosen by Porter's editors, the acolyte, or Poet, lives on to create songs about the Princess and his love for her.

"The Princess" is an extraordinary and provocative text, and it is intriguing to speculate about Porter's sources. Ruth Alvarez suggests that the story may be indebted to T. A. Willard's account of the legend of the Mayan princess Ix-Lol-Nicte in *The City of the Sacred Well*,[4] which Porter reviewed for the *New York Herald Tribune* on February 6, 1927. However, another source may lie in James George Frazer's extraordinarily influential *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*.[5] In his discussion of South American religions, Frazer describes vestal virgins who serve a temple, guarding the sacred flame. In Peru, he says, these "virgins were of the royal family. . . . Besides tending the holy fire, they had to weave and make all the clothes worn by the Inca and his legitimate wife." The virgins lived in a convent where "all the furniture . . . down to the pots, pans, and jars, were of gold and silver" (244). Frazer then points to a similar arrangement in Mexico (which would certainly have been of great interest to Porter), where girls "offered incense to the idols, wove cloths for the service of the temple. . . . They were clad all in white, without any ornament" (245).

Images similar to Frazer's do appear in Porter's text, especially the royal descent of the temple virgins, weaving and precious metals, and the plain white shifts. But Porter may also have gathered inspiration from the host of other texts surrounding and springing from Frazer's. Late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century culture was fascinated with sexuality, and studies of the sexual practices of cultures past and present were commonplace. In his study *The Literary Impact of the Golden Bough*, John Vickery quotes one of Porter's peers who expresses fascination with issues similar to those addressed in "The Princess," in particular ways in which "the sexual instinct has moulded the religious consciousness of our race."[6] Chapter 2 of this study will probe Porter's initial attraction to but final disenchantment with primitivism, an attraction that may have led her to Frazer and his associates.

Overall, "The Princess" is remarkable for the complexity of its gender-thinking. In this text, Porter sought to represent and scrutinize the several institutions that together work to direct women toward marriage and childbearing, exploring the ways in which these interrelated social systems work to control female sexuality and define women's choices. The Princess's kingdom bases gender/sexual identity fully on an ideology of biologism: "social and cultural factors are regarded as the effects of biologically given causes. In particular biologism usually ties women closely to the functions of reproduction and nurturance."[7] One's biological status is marked on the body by regulated costume and in the life span by custom and ritual. What is institutionalized finds its verification and justification through invocation of the natural; custom, being grounded in the body, is termed natural and hence not open to question or change. Porter's view of a rigid biologism comes through in the edicts against haircuts and cooking in "The Princess." There is clear irony in her comic images and parodic language when she describes how no man "hindered his beard" and "food must be eaten without the pollution of fire."

The definition, boundaries, and articulations of the natural are all cultural

constructs at the service of ideology, and "The Princess" delineates strikingly how claims for gender roles based in nature may serve patriarchal social control. The kingdom's purported obedience to natural orders overlays its actual, active construction of gender identity. The exaltation of nature and debasement of culture in this imaginary kingdom work to control women. Most clearly in the ritual Porter calls "the rites of the spring sowing," in which maidens go "in a procession to the inner temple to bid farewell to their virginity," and in the associated sign system of shifts and nakedness, one can see how reverence for nature simultaneously masks and supports a cultural order whose central goal is regulation of the processes of female sexuality (230). Once it is named natural, Porter's text teaches, the cultural becomes inevitable and unquestioned.

In "The Princess" Porter's gender-thinking highlights ways in which patriarchal social systems collaborate in perpetuating and enforcing what they have defined as nature. From its legal system to its religious rituals and forms of dress, all the practices of the story's imaginary kingdom seek to confine women to a biological destiny. In the kingdom, for example, inheritance is limited to women who are both married and fertile. As the High Priestess warns the King and Queen, "Tell the Princess . . . that if she scorns and rejects the natural office of motherhood it is written that she will never rule over this kingdom" (235). Religion and law work together to encourage all women, including the Princess, to pursue heterosexual relations and childbearing. Religious sanctions are not only supported but also enforced by laws and courts. Thus the High Priestess's oracular condemnation of the Princess finds more secular expression in a legal sentence; while the High Priestess names the Princess a heretic, it is the court that condemns her to death. It is interesting to note that both here and in "The Adventures of Hadji," another early story discussed in chapter 2 of this study, Porter sets her heroine's climactic confrontation with cultural authority in a courtroom. But where in "Hadji" the female protagonist overwhelms authority with her verbal skill, proving herself master of the law's own terms, here the Princess, enraged and deeply alienated, entirely refuses to participate in her culture's rituals. She remains masked and contemptuous, responding to the law with mocking laughter. To even recognize her culture's governing authorities is to give them some validation. Any such validation would compromise the absolute freedom of her vision.

In its representation of the relations between women's traditional roles and their creativity, "The Princess" demonstrates particularly complex and brilliant gender-thinking. Like the majority of Porter's other explorations of sexuality and art, the tale does not embrace a single stance, but rather provides a complex and

conflicted view. On one level, the story opens up gender identity itself, hazarding questions about its substantiality, whether female gender is solely a product of costume and performance or rooted in something essential, if not biology then some sort of natural and fulfilling urge to nurture, some characteristic of femaleness. The Princess's choice of costume as her medium points to gender as something entirely fabricated. In the words of Judith Butler, "The gendered body is performative": "acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means."[8] The Princess's costuming is ongoing, endless; she is constantly "devising new ways of covering herself" (231) and staging her glittering presence before her people. She is repeatedly described with language that emphasizes this constructedness: "an image with the voice of a woman," for example, or "an image wearing a mask" (234, 239). At the end she is not one, but many: "Every one remembered her in a different guise, so that at last there were so many legends, no one knew which was the truth" (237). If a woman is white-shifted until puberty, naked until menopause, and grey-shifted thereon until death—what is the Princess? She is clearly disturbing: "maidens blushed for shame of her strangeness"; "not even the gods know what manner of woman is concealed in that robe!" (231). Through costume, the Princess destabilizes her culture's gender system, calling into question the signification of a woman. Law, religion, family—all unite to control or destroy her.

The forms the Princess's art takes, decorative cloth and jewelry, also call attention to Porter's interest in the female body as the medium of art, a practice deeply embedded in Western culture. As Bloch and Ferguson note at the start of their history of misogyny, "the linking of the feminine with the aesthetic, the decorative, the ornamental, and the materially contingent . . . as one of the deep-seated mental structures of the west . . . has served historically to define women as being outside of history."[9] In a richly suggestive essay from the early 1980s, "The Blank Page and the Issues of Female Creativity," Susan Gubar explored the possible meanings and consequences of linking women's art with women's bodies. Because male texts often employ women as art objects, on whose bodies they inscribe their creative vision, and because women for generations were denied opportunities to create art of their own, Gubar argued, many women experience their bodies as "the only accessible medium for self-expression": "the woman who cannot become an artist can nevertheless turn herself into an artistic object."[10] This is precisely what Porter's Princess does, and it is an act both painful and powerful. Obsessed with her appearance, the

Princess is a monster, and her "creativity has been deformed by being channeled into self-destructive narcissism." She finds it difficult to see outside herself or to love anything but her own objectification.[11] The Princess makes herself into a spectacle, her life and her body her text.

Porter's fairy tale princess has real-life counterparts in women artists of the late nineteenth or early twentieth century who used costume to stage their difference—Emily Dickinson forever in white, Edna St. Vincent Millay gamine among the apple trees; Willa Cather in her splendid hats. The lives and work of women like these raise important questions. Where does a woman artist's art begin and end? Is becoming oneself an object of art self-creative or self-destructive? With her bejeweled Princess, Porter joined her contemporaries, the "many female modernists [who] have studied the deflection of female creativity from the production of art to the re-creation of the body."[12]

Costume in "The Princess" raises some of the most radical aspects of Porter's gender-thinking. But the story remains deeply ambivalent. The Princess's splendid performances thrill, she glitters and declaims, but the personal cost is devastating. When, shut behind her hard gold mask, the Princess laughs at her death sentence and then weeps, it is unclear whether she is an entirely admirable revolutionary deserving uncritical sympathy, or if, in fact, she has become what her father calls her, a "mad girl." Not just in the depiction of her final grief before the tribunal or in the suggestion that she commits suicide at the close, but throughout this tale's portrayal of an artist-heroine, the reader can sense Porter's refusal to simplify the issues she saw surrounding gender identity and women artists. Although brave and talented, the Princess is also isolated, too different; she has been set apart since early childhood. At the age of five, according to the Queen, the Princess "read the magic runes on her father's sword . . . and that without instruction!" The image suggests that early on the Princess could penetrate the codes that mask and mystify the proscriptions of patriarchal authority. This knowledge of the texts that inscribe her father's power disturbs those around her, suggesting that she is unnatural, even insane. According to the High Priestess, it is "a certain sign of holy madness. . . . That is too great wisdom for a natural infant" (229).

Focusing on costume in "The Princess" highlights Porter's awareness that gender may be fabrication and performance and reveals a freethinking, heroic Princess; however, focusing on physical and emotional pain offers an entirely different reading. "Insane" and "unnatural," the Princess is a beautiful figure in Porter's story and also a terrible one—a monster in her gold mask with glittering eyes. Identified early by the power and difference of her vision, the Princess steps fully onto a different path at puberty. From then on she moves further and further from common humanity as she embraces her vocation. The more elaborate and skillful her art becomes, the less she resembles a human being. In her madness—or "too great wisdom"—in her monstrosity, and in the violence that surrounds her portrayal, Porter's Princess invites comparison with the mad-women inhabiting nineteenth-century women's fiction as they were viewed by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their classic study *The Madwoman in the Attic*. According to Gilbert and Gubar's approach, the Princess represents an aspect of Porter herself: "In projecting their anger and dis-ease into dreadful figures, creating dark doubles for themselves and their heroines, women writers are both identifying with and revising the self-definitions patriarchal culture has imposed on them."[13] Identification with, exposure of, and even revision of the proscriptions of patriarchy all can be found in Porter's acute analysis of social institutions in "The Princess" and in her heroine's creative and theoretical labors. And it is not difficult to see in the Princess the freakish, sexually unnatural "monster" Gilbert and Gubar identified as representative of a woman writer's anxiety about her vocation: "If becoming an *author* meant mistaking one's 'sex and way,' if it meant becoming an 'unsexed' or perversely sexed female, then it meant becoming a monster or freak."[14] Again Rosi Braidotti's definition of the monster as "the bodily incarnation of difference from the basic human norm" reflects Porter's discomfort with her independent heroine.[15]

Yet normalcy fares no better. Not only the Princess but all the women in this early fairy tale are imprisoned and diminished by the gender identity available to them, and they have no fully positive alternative roles. The story treats those who reverence their culture's edicts for women with irony and scorn. The Queen mother, for example, is a figure of ridicule. Cheerful and foolish, she is sure that "a husband will cure her [the Princess] of all these fancies and we shall have twenty grandchildren and a happy succession to the throne" (232). By contrast, the kingdom's other powerful woman, the High Priestess, is ambitious, plotting, and bad tempered. Because she frequently eases women's pain in childbirth by drinking a "sacrificial potion, compounded of bitter herbs" that causes "contortions . . . dreadful to endure and behold," the High Priestess finds that "her exalted station [is] gradually souring her temper" (235). The two women compete in petty ways, each trying to bow lower than the other, each striving to win the King's sympathetic ear. For the Queen, the High Priestess's childlessness provides an opportunity for scorn, and she cheers herself with the reassuring thought that she is a married woman and a mother, whereas the High Priestess, a "childless virgin," "is merely a cross old maid" (236). Although

the Queen is simple and a bit silly, her view of the High Priestess is supported by the text. The uncomfortable rituals of vicarious childbirth are presented in such a way that they mock the Priestess's dignity, and endorsing the natural is exposed as the High Priestess's means to power over other women in her society. There seems no way out for women in Porter's "The Princess." The Queen, a woman fulfilled through maternity, is merely a fool. The High Priestess, an ambitious unmarried woman, is sour tempered, "merely a cross old maid." And the Princess, a woman artist, is viewed by her society as a madwoman and a monster.

Although Porter dissects patriarchal institutions with an accurate and ironic eye, her portrait of the rebellious Princess raises questions about a young woman's choice of art over motherhood. The Princess is both an admirable heroine and a monster, a brave individualist and an isolated madwoman, simultaneously rejecting and being rejected by her society. Throughout the story, Porter structures absolute oppositions between her heroine's choices. The Princess's art is her own chosen alternative to cultural conformity, in particular sexuality and motherhood. Her decision to be an artist and to determine her own actions stands in opposition to and thus seemingly cannot be reconciled with the traditional female roles available to her. Most potent of all these ideologies is the belief that a woman is ideally fulfilled through motherhood. Porter forcefully juxtaposed fertility and artistic creation, portraying art as armor, a literal wall between a woman and sexuality. It is intriguing that the tribunal, summing up the Princess's crimes, condemns her in part for "offenses against . . . the Woman God." Porter's story links women's artistic creativity to physical sterility: the Princess invents art to escape the ceremony of "spring sowing." Throughout she appears cut off from a fertile natural world associated with the feminine. She cannot join the processions of singing and dancing brides, or the naked maidens who "kicked up their rosy heels" (234). At one point, the acolyte tries to bring her to acknowledge natural beauty, but she cannot see beyond her mask:

> "There's a moon over your shoulder, Princess, a gauze-silver moon, turned askew to spill kisses on lovers—a very antic and young moon, Princess!"
>
> When the Princess turned her head slowly, her long earrings clashed and tinkled softly against the golden cheek of her mask.
>
> "Gauze-silver, my love? The moon I see is a sickle-shaped emerald!"[16]

Inviting the Princess to admire the moon, the acolyte is encouraging her to see the beauty of cycles in the world and changes in her own body, but she can only see a "sickle-shaped emerald" through her mask. The image suggests a deathliness about her art, as if it is her grim reaper. The Princess may reject "abhorrent," "vulgar" nature for created beauty and attempt to transform her body into an artifice of eternity, but the beauty she achieves resembles a living death.

The sadomasochism everywhere evident in the Princess's art is likewise complex and disturbing. Her exaltation of culture over nature is accompanied by physical pain. The heavy robes are laborious to wear; the jewels are razor-sharp. This physical oppression seemed particularly important to Porter, and she drafted several dialogues in which the acolyte urges the Princess to free her body from its glittering prison. In one, for example, he pleads, "Oh Princess, what a cruel thing that your tender breast, the little shy breasts of a young maid, should be crushed under such a corselet . . . let me heal your bruised breasts with kisses!" (239). The story suggests that a woman's art requires, even originates in, the repression of her body. It is her triumph and at the same time her punishment. Art literally hurts. Creation is both vision and masochism, self-fulfilling and self-punishing.

However, at the same time that the Princess's glittering corselets and crowns punish her body, they also serve as weapons; she creates increasingly ornate armor to defend herself against human contact. When the acolyte asks to kiss her hand, she creates "a glove of woven silver . . . set with thorny jewels, so that his lips bled at the touch." And when he pleads to kiss her "soft woven hair," she dons "a tall crown of white jewels . . . and the braids of her hair were woven with these same stones, all sharpened like little daggers. And the lover could not touch them without cutting his hands cruelly" (233–34). A woman's art can be both terrible to its creator and terrifying to others, Porter's story also suggests. At the same time that a woman pursues power and independence through her creative genius, she is isolated and punished by the very thing she creates. And her creation—literally her powerful and beautiful (albeit monstrous and sterile) self—wounds those who seek to know and love her.

At this point, it is crucial to acknowledge that in her gender-thinking Porter does not present the expression of female creativity through the medium of the body as entirely negative. Such self-transformation brings power as well as pain and can even initiate social change. Despite the emotional and physical suffering her art requires, the Princess finds liberation through her glittering confines. "I will make beauty after my own secret thought," she tells the Chief of the Royal Council, "and I will also devise my own cruelties, rejecting utterly the banal sufferings imposed by nature" (235). Art represents a choice for