

Katherine Anne Porter's "The Old Order" and *Agamemnon*

Katherine Anne Porter's collection "The Old Order" tells of transition, a rite of passage from an old world to a new. Using life and death imagery, the stories in "The Old Order" detail the changes from slavery to freedom, aristocracy to bourgeois, birth to death. The multi-generational narrative elevates the story into mythic time of recollective past, present and projective future. Ritualized gestures, images and language enhance the mythic elements of the work. As Leslie K. Hankins observes: "Porter uses the ordered structure of the ritual elements in 'The Old Order' to highlight and intensify the reversal of tradition . . ." (23). The formalized high rhetoric of language is both biblical (Hankins 22) and classically "precise" (Unrue 219). Additionally, Darlene H. Unrue cites allusions to both Whitman and Homer in the section, "The Grave," with "the uncropped sweet-smelling wild grass" of the cemetery and its representation of new life (151).

Another powerful image in the section, "The Grave," is "discovery of the dead and bleeding rabbits with the concomitant discovery of [Miranda's] own mortality and femaleness" (Unrue 150). The paradoxical dead, yet fertile, rabbit imagery is also a classical allusion to Aeschylus' Greek tragedy, *Agamemnon*. In Porter's story Miranda observes:

Brother lifted the oddly bloated belly. "Look," he said, in a low amazed voice. "It was going to have young ones."

Very carefully he slit the thin flesh from the center ribs to the flanks, and a scarlet bag appeared. He slit again and pulled the bag open, and there lay a bundle of tiny rabbits, each wrapped in a thin scarlet veil. (366)

In *Agamemnon* the chorus recites a similar image of the unborn rabbits:

Kings of birds to the kings of the ships,
one black, one blazed with silver,
clear seen by the royal house
on the right, the spear hand,
they lighted, watched by all
tore a hare, ripe, bursting with young unborn yet,
stayed from her last fleet running. (42)

Aeschylus is referring to an omen that occurred at the beginning of the Trojan war. The two eagles were symbols of Agamemnon and Menelaus, the Greek rulers who would not only kill the living Trojans but all future generations of Troy, symbolized by the pregnant hare with her offspring forever unborn.

Future generations of Porter's characters, descendants of Sophia Jane and Nannie will not be obliterated, but, like Miranda, forever transformed. The characters of both the play and the short stories bear the responsibility of the past. Agamemnon loses his life, in part, for the heinous deeds of his father. Miranda does not lose her life but bears a historical psychological burden of her family and the South. She tries to shed this guilt through symbolic burials of small creatures.

Nannie's changing place in the family indicates the problems of reconciling an unjust past: "[The children] were growing up, times were changing, the old world was sliding from under their feet, they had not yet laid hold of the new one." They take care of Nannie, as their own fortunes change, recognizing her significant role in their lives.

Perhaps acknowledging a corrupt history is sufficient to stay the justice of the gods. Agamemnon's pride (*hubris*) prevents his awareness of his misdeeds and justifies his murder. Miranda, years later, recalls the rabbit incident with a sense of reconciliation, her evocative, violent vision absolved by the youthful and sober image of her brother.

An Indian vendor had held up before her a tray of dyed sugar sweets, in the shapes of all kinds of small creatures; birds, baby chicks, baby rabbits, lambs, baby pigs. . . . It was a very hot day and the smell in the market . . . [was like] the day she had remembered always until now vaguely as the time she and her brother had found treasure in the opened graves. Instantly upon this thought the dreadful vision faded and she saw clearly her brother, whose childhood face she had forgotten, standing again in the blazing sunshine, again twelve years old, a pleased sober smile in his eyes, turning the silver dove over and over in his hands. (367-68)

This concluding reflection of all the short stories in "The Old Order" is cathartic in eliciting compassion and hope by harmonizing the violent past to the eternal present through Miranda's mature vision. The classical allusion to the unborn generations, symbolized by the pregnant hare, unifies ancient literature with modern, past to present with a vision to the future.

P. JANE HAFEN

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