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## Eudora Welty's Sleeping Medusa

THROUGHOUT HER CAREER, EUDORA WELTY BORROWED, DISASSEMBLED, and revised ancient mythological narratives in her fiction and personal correspondence. Several critics who discuss the feminist implications of her work therefore begin by addressing a related question: Is it possible for an author to write from a feminist perspective and also saturate her work with allusions to ancient myths when such myths tend to rely on misogynistic renderings of gender and sexuality? The question stems from an ongoing feminist debate. The use of ancient myth as an illustrative medium has been central to the work of prominent feminists, especially Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray. As Vanda Zajko and Miriam Leonard observe, "Instead of creating new genealogies," such writers have attempted "to revivify ancient narratives to arm contemporary struggles" (2). Unsurprisingly, this trend has struck some as curiously backward; such allusions would seem to lend themselves not to the production of unconventional epistemologies but to the reinforcement of paradigms already in place. Fully cognizant of this suspicion, Zajko and Leonard contend, nevertheless, that feminist manipulations of myth may be defended as efforts to confront past archetypes, precisely in order to disrupt the logic behind the patriarchal assumptions accompanying them.

Critics have made this argument regarding Welty's fiction. Patricia Yaeger, for instance, has suggested that Welty's work may be understood in Bakhtinian terms as a site of "dialogic" struggle where interaction with myth "not only reflects" dominant myths but actively combats the implications or "intentions" buried within them ("Because" 562, 567). Rebecca Mark has argued similarly that while it would be naïve to suggest that an author is ever in sovereign control of her "intertextual" exchanges, Welty permanently alters what myths may signify through her "direct engagement" with them (259). Both of these studies provide ways to acknowledge the intentions myths carry over time and to explore Welty's ability to use them subversively. While this work has greatly contributed to the way we understand Welty's feminism, there is a need to distinguish further Welty's appropriation of myth and to

challenge the idea that it is always by “direct engagement” that the author alters what mythological characters might signify.

Using Welty’s allusion to the myth of Perseus and the Medusa in her personal correspondence and in *The Golden Apples* (1949), I will demonstrate that omission—an indirect means of engagement—is integral to her appropriation ancient myth for feminist purposes. Essential to reading Welty’s fiction is not only what her allusions make visible but also what they leave out. Critics have often read Welty’s references to Perseus and the Medusa as an effort to deconstruct a hero/monster binary upheld by earlier versions of the story. The problem with this reading is that Welty does not refer to her Medusa as monstrous. A letter Welty sent in 1947 to her estranged love interest, John Robinson, may shed light on the significance of this omission. The letter indicates that Welty’s thoughts on Perseus and the Medusa were largely influenced and perhaps inspired by a painting on an attic vase from the fifth century BCE that portrays the Medusa not as a monster but as a comely maiden sleeping while Perseus prepares to decapitate her. As Kathryn Topper notes, the vase image corresponds to a tradition that depicts the Medusa’s death as a “perversion” of an “erotic abduction” motif common in ancient vase paintings—“perverted” in that Perseus has come to kill the Medusa, not rape her (86). The vase thus accentuates the figure’s apparent status as “victim” at the moment of her death, the same characteristic Welty explores at length in her writings. By omitting the horror of the Medusa’s infamous appearance, Welty does more than revise the mythical figure she references; she lifts the Medusa fully from her customary context.

That this method of adaptation is rather inconspicuous—the product of omission as opposed to explicit modification—is an important feature of Welty’s allusive technique. In an analysis of Welty’s use of allusion, Harriet Pollack has likewise called attention to the author’s tendency to deviate from conventional readings of “referent texts” (“On Welty’s Use” 115). In Pollack’s argument, however, this failure to fulfill readers’ expectations is described as a “strategy” of “obstruction.” While I largely agree with Pollack’s observations, I would contend that the concept of obstruction—the erection of a barrier meant to impede visibility—does not fully capture the nature of Welty’s allusions. Wherever the author relies on omission, stories are transformed not by obstruction but by a “leaving out” of familiar details. This indirect method of engagement—

an inferable though inexplicit means of reconfiguring archetypal figures—is essential not only to understanding the significance of Welty's allusions but to understanding her feminism as well, a feminist approach often unconcerned with overtly defining itself as such. When Welty replaces or abandons the misogynistic underpinnings of mythological narratives, she does so without directing the gaze of her reader to the structures being left behind.

Regarding Welty's Medusa, attention to what the writer has omitted requires that one explore the significance of the allusion at the end of *The Golden Apples* without reverting to themes of monstrosity. In "The Wanderers," the collection's final story, protagonist Virgie Rainey recalls a picture her piano teacher, Miss Eckhart, had kept in her studio, one depicting "Perseus with the head of the Medusa." Virgie realizes that Miss Eckhart's decision to "absorb[] the hero and the victim" into herself gave the teacher the ability to play Beethoven successfully (555). The significance of the Medusa thus lies in the figure's apparent defeat. Nowhere, in fact, does Welty mention the Gorgon's petrifying gaze or hair made of serpents. Despite these missing characteristics, critics have read monstrosity as integral to the struggles Virgie and Miss Eckhart experience. Peter Schmidt reads Miss Eckhart as a woman who must "struggle against seeing herself as a Gorgon," an "enraged, insane Medusa figure," whose "independence" is perceived by others as "monstrous" (182). To cast a recuperative light on the Medusa, Mark emphasizes the "rage and power of the Medusa" as something internalized by Virgie as a source of creativity (14). Different as they may be, both readings fail to recognize that Welty's Medusa is not a raging monster but a figure under attack.

Analyzing the physical vulnerability of Welty's Medusa will help to explain how *The Golden Apples* subverts the gender-inflected hero/victim binary often encoded in iterations of the myth. A kind of subversion that neither announces itself nor demands attention, Welty's selective allusions are comparable to what Elizabeth Grosz has called a "politics of the imperceptible," a strategy of resistance that "does not seek visibility or recognition as its goals" but instead pursues "actions, effects, consequences, forces which generate transformation without directing that transformation to other subjects who acknowledge its force" (167-68). Just as this feminist strategy aims to interfere with conditions of oppression without seeking discursive validation, so do Welty's

allusions often uproot deeply entrenched traditions without directing attention to voices that would uphold those traditions. In Welty's fiction, we may rename this strategy a "politics of exclusion": a method of political intervention that does not seek widespread cognizance of its effects but pursues instead the transformation of a given signifying order by excluding pieces of contextual matter from which that order emerges.

### **The Madwoman in the Attic Vase**

To further distinguish this approach to mythical allusion from analogous feminist projects, I will compare Welty's Medusa with Cixous's, an iconic figure in feminist studies. An effort to confront directly the horror frequently attributed to the Gorgon and her gaze, Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa" is a piece with which Welty's indirect engagements may be contrasted. It not only combats the myth as it is frequently portrayed but responds to a specific psychoanalytic interpretation of the myth articulated in Sigmund Freud's "Medusa's Head," published posthumously in 1940. One of many attempts by Freud to explain his theories of psychosexual development with the aid of ancient myth, "Medusa's Head" argues that themes of castration anxiety underlie the Medusa's story. The essay thus begins with its peculiar thesis: "To decapitate = to castrate." The equation refers to the climax of the Medusa myth, the battle between Perseus and the Medusa and its conclusion when Perseus cuts off the Gorgon's head. According to Freud, one may read this act as symbolic of castration, the Medusa's head representing a dismembered penis.

A strange conclusion then becomes even stranger. Freud argues that the Medusa's head may evoke castration anxiety in yet another way: as a symbol of female genitalia. "The terror of the Medusa," he explains,

is thus a terror of castration that is linked to the sight of something . . . it occurs when a boy, who has hitherto been unwilling to believe the threat of castration, catches sight of the female genitals, probably those of an adult, surrounded by hair, and essentially those of his mother. (202)

Just as the fictional Medusa's head turns an observer to stone upon eye contact, so does the sight of a woman's genitalia petrify young boys. As Thomas Albrecht notes, the two readings "would appear to be difficult to reconcile" (8). If the decapitation of the Medusa should imply the act of castration—figuring the head as a severed penis—then the

relationship Freud posits between the Medusa and the mother's genitalia is paradoxical. Freud reveals his concern not with reading the Medusa but with the fanciful perceptions of a male spectator trying to fit the Medusa inside a castration-obsessed schema. Caught within this reading, the Medusa is never really visualized, not because her countenance turns onlookers to stone but because she has been constructed in contradictory terms.

In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous addresses Freud's paradoxical logic with a call to action: "Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies. . . . Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement" (875). Cixous achieves this movement in her portrayal of the mythological figure summoned by her title; she inserts herself, her interpretations, into the broader, intertextual Medusa in order to transform it. Though she does not name Freud's essay, she directly confronts its logic:

They riveted us between two horrifying myths: between the Medusa and the abyss. That would be enough to set half the world laughing, except that it's still going on . . . regenerating the old patterns, anchored in the dogma of castration. . . . Too bad for them if they fall apart upon discovering that women aren't men, or that the mother doesn't have one. But isn't this fear convenient for them? Wouldn't the worst be, isn't the worst, in truth, that women aren't castrated . . . ? (885)

For Cixous, there is a deeper fear masked by castration anxiety, the fear that the centrality of the phallus in patriarchal language may be challenged and overcome. To admit that "women aren't castrated" would be to admit the reality of sexual difference, to displace the phallus and to destroy a host of patriarchal myths—paradoxes epitomized by Freud's Medusa. For this to happen, according to Cixous, women must write their bodies and make them impossible to ignore. Cixous invokes the image of the Medusa to articulate the revolution this kind of writing may bring: "You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing" (885). The Medusa can serve Freud's purposes only as long as she remains unseen. Were it possible to view the Medusa, one might observe not only the absence of her horror but the beauty and potential for new language residing within her.

As Zajko and Leonard note, Cixous's use of the Medusa has come to illustrate well the power that resides in the malleability of myth. It "exemplifies the way that mythical figures tend to transcend the restrictions of their particular textual incarnations" and "shows how the potency of particular receptions transform the mythical figure so that her subsequent and previous identities are profoundly altered" (13-14). Indeed, ancient mythology is not only susceptible to revision; it provides a space in which archaic restrictions invite rebellion. Of all the mythological figures manipulated by the psychoanalysts and their detractors, the Medusa has become one of the most frequently referenced. According to Marjorie Garber and Nancy Vickers: "Poets have called her a muse. Feminists have adopted her as a sign of powerful womanhood. . . . Political theorists have cast her as a figure for revolt. . . . The most adventurous of postmodern designers and performers see her as a model, a logo, and figure for the present age" (1). This extraordinary potency associated with the Medusa has undoubtedly influenced the manner in which Welty's Medusa has been interpreted thus far. Familiar as an image of rebellion, the Medusa becomes less legible once her threatening countenance and supernatural power are excluded. I would argue, however, that Welty's figure is no less transcendent or subversive for lacking the ferocity commonly attributed to her. Welty liberates her Medusa from the same qualities addressed by Cixous; she merely does so by different methods.

Most surprising, perhaps, the Medusa we encounter in Welty's correspondence seems rather vulnerable. She is first portrayed as a sleeping maiden with only wings to indicate she is superhuman. The image is one Welty traced from a book and sent in a letter to Robinson on November 13, 1947:

I've had out my book on the red figured vases. . . . Heracles is always just wonderful—big black eyes and as exuberant as all get out. This one I traced (badly) is Perseus cutting off Medusa's head. Since *we* have to look at Medusa, she is pretty—or is that why? They are all so magnificent and alive that it makes the heart beat fast to see them. (Correspondence)

What Welty seems to appreciate most about the image of the Medusa is that the figure, famous for being impossible to look at, now demands attention in the context of the representation. She and Robinson "have to look at Medusa," she emphasizes, now that this image has been

depicted and displayed before them. Moreover, they must do so and remain uncompromised (i.e., not turned to stone), an experience that makes their interaction with the Medusa ironic from the outset. The image thus exposes the myth's failure to depict the Medusa accurately, insofar as the figure is not so threatening or horrific as legend would suggest. Welty then adds to these thoughts an ambiguous question, "—or is that why?" The question can be read in several ways. Is this Medusa "pretty" because her beauty is manifest and because Welty as a spectator must now acknowledge this fact? Has the artist modified the Medusa's appearance for the spectator's sake? If we acknowledge that the spectator's gaze is always responsible for constructing beauty and horror, is she "pretty" simply because Welty has called her so?

These are the questions the image appears to have inspired in Welty. Because her tracing survives, we can revisit the depiction she encountered and consider these questions in light of the image as she would have viewed it while writing the letter. The tracing corresponds to an image on an attic vase acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1945. Dating from 450-430 BCE, the vase displays, as Marjorie Milne explains, "one of the earliest illustrations of the story to show the Gorgon not as a hideous monster but as a beautiful woman" (126). Whether Welty understood the significance of the vase when she traced it is unclear. Regardless, the "pretty" face of the Medusa is what struck Welty initially, the revelation that the horror lay not in the Medusa herself but in the spectator who perceives such horror. Indeed, one intuits from the red-figured depiction that if Perseus perceives a horrific Medusa, it is not because he sees her that way but precisely because he is looking in the opposite direction. Such was Cixous' critique of Freud, and in this similarity Welty's and Cixous's Medusas intersect: both writers read the legend of the Medusa's horror as a peculiar fantasy that says more about those imagining the horror than it does about the Medusa herself.



Welty's tracing of the Medusa.  
Letter to John Robinson, November  
13, 1947. Eudora Welty Estate and  
Mississippi Department of Archives  
and History.

Welty's reflections on the vase painting became more profound during subsequent months. Allusions to the myth in a second letter to Robinson ten months later and in a story drafted around the same time suggest that she began to observe how the painting altered the significance of the Perseus figure as well. With his sword on the neck of a sleeping, non-threatening Medusa, Perseus no longer enjoys the glory associated with an arduous and dangerous struggle. On the contrary, his attack prevents onlookers from perceiving him as daring or valiant. As Topper notes, the painting inspires an important question: why would a painter want to "expose" his hero's adversaries as "no more threatening, and no less desirable, than ordinary maidens?" (88). It is humiliating for the hero, Topper goes on to explain, for in vase paintings only pathetic satyrs try to molest sleeping maidens. While "his actions may seem fitting when he is faced with a monster whose glance can kill," Topper writes,



Polygnotos (5<sup>th</sup> BCE). (Attributed to). Terracotta pelike (jar). Greek, Attic, ca. 450-440 B.C. Terracotta, H. 18 13/16 in. (47.8 cm) diameter 13 1/2 in. (34.3 cm). Rogers Fund, 1945 (45.11.1). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, USA. Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art/ Art Resource, NY.

“they look distinctly out of place when directed toward a sleeping maiden” (92). This irony is enhanced by the fact that Perseus cannot face his victim and must instead direct his gaze towards Athena, his protector. He is caught between a goddess whose power exceeds his own and a victim who only diminishes his alleged heroism. This emasculation of a renowned hero, of a subject supposedly fearless, is what continued to inform Welty's allusions to the myth.

In her personal life, this destabilization of heroism seems to have aided Welty in analyzing Robinson, a melancholic man with whom she shared an ambiguous and complicated relationship during the late 1940s. Robinson was coming to terms with his homosexuality in California at the time. Many of Welty's letters imply she was trying to counsel him on matters he would not fully divulge. Though it is not clear when Welty became fully aware of his homosexuality, a second letter she wrote him regarding Perseus and the Medusa effectively taps into the sexual discomfort he had been expressing in various forms.<sup>1</sup> “I'm so glad you do feel better,” the letter begins. In the role of counselor, she continues,

The only thing more dear than your health is your *self*—One mustn't be at the expense of the other—If it had to be one I would rather have the true self not happy yet—struggling, *beginning*—than the partial or cut-away self now content—I think in us all there are Perseus & the Medusa—must keep on being—Only in a breath taking piece of art or in myth or poetry is the separation even bearably consummated—& then only as far as the very moment—too unexplorable beyond—even for heroes, much less for human beings—And then I feel too that the Medusa *is*. Haven't I felt it all too! Sometimes love & friendship & the Medusa were the same to you—I knew that—Maybe always will be a little—It's all right—There's something there

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<sup>1</sup>In the late 1940s, as Pollack demonstrates in “Reading John Robinson,” Welty and Robinson exchanged stories and letters that explore homosexual and homoerotic themes. Welty's story “Music from Spain” is the best example of such exploration in *The Golden Apples*. It tells the story of a male protagonist who leaves his wife in a state of confusion one morning. He then encounters an exotic male guitar player from Spain and proceeds to share his day with him—a day full of vaguely homoerotic interactions. Pollack notes the inevitable inquiry that such a story inspires: “Does the situation resemble John's in the late 1940s when he seems to have been wandering into transforming narratives without speaking them straightforwardly to Eudora?” (194). The broader question—“What did Welty know and when?”—we cannot answer conclusively. Nevertheless, we may look for moments in Welty's correspondence when consciousness of Robinson's sexual discomfort begins to emerge implicitly, even if it is unclear whether that consciousness was then being directly articulated between them.

—Anyway all right—And happiness is so renewable, the self is not—Enough words anyway (Correspondence)

This enigmatic letter's attention to Robinson's mental stability is clear. Suzanne Marrs suggests that Welty here identifies herself with the Medusa (165), but Welty seems more invested in employing both Perseus and the Medusa to describe two battling selves in the same individual: John Robinson. Perseus and the Medusa, separable only "in a breath taking piece of art or in myth or poetry," exist together "in us all." Welty thus began to see Perseus's slaying of the Medusa as the representation of a subject perpetually fractured by dissonant entities engaged in violent struggle.

Reading Robinson in terms of this conflict, Welty makes evident her preference for his "true self" over what she calls the "cut-away self." If we read Perseus as this "cut-away self," a self trying to amputate other selves or parts of selves in order to restore a sense of wholeness or singularity, the subjectivity of the cut-away Perseus is inauthentic. Any legitimate subjectivity, for Welty, seems to demand a kind of multiplicity. In Robinson's case, it is clear Welty sensed the existence of a Medusa's head that Robinson feared and wanted to ignore, something "struggling, *beginning*." Without fully realizing it, perhaps, Welty was tapping into the Medusa's head that was Robinson's same-sex desire. In reading Robinson's Perseus as a tormented subject who cannot acknowledge parts of himself even as he tries to cut them away, Welty advocates a less coherent self in which apparent opposites and extremes coexist.

This is not to suggest that Welty intended for Robinson to acknowledge and accept his homosexuality. We cannot assume she fully knew or comprehended Robinson's same-sex desire at this time. What she explores more broadly is Robinson's fears of intimacy. "Sometimes love & friendship & the Medusa were the same to you," she says. The pursuit of interpersonal desire is figured as the Medusa's head trapped under Robinson's sword. Incapable of organizing his desires and anxieties into an acceptable identity, Robinson (in this portrait by Welty) attempts to separate those desires from himself permanently. In this regard, Welty's reading may be articulated in psychoanalytic terms. Perseus functions like Freud's ego, the "I" as it is articulated by language. Accordingly, we may read the sword he wields—a weapon aimed at silencing desire—as a tool of symbolic language responsible for setting

an individual apart as a subject. As Lacan writes, this “I” is the “apparatus to which every instinctual pressure constitutes a danger” (79). In Welty’s equation, the Medusa represents such instinctual pressures, those that cannot easily be incorporated into the self. One may therefore attempt to extinguish such pressures, but for Welty this split can never fully be “consummated” insofar as instinctual pressure is indivisible from one’s “true” self. Robinson may refuse to acknowledge the Medusa within him, but his refusal in no way diminishes the Medusa’s existence. This seems to be what Welty means when she says cryptically, “And then I feel too that the Medusa *is*.” The Medusa is that which already exists: forces, instincts, and discontinuities that are present before any hero or subject is fabricated. Inspired by the Perseus in the vase painting whose heroism has been compromised, Welty further destabilizes heroism, deciding that Perseus and the Medusa, whatever their manifestations, can exist only because they are implicated together in the same story or subject.

In this manner, we may read Welty’s Medusa against Freud’s. While Freud’s Medusa’s head drifts from metaphor to metaphor—a symbol that may signify male or female genitalia as long as that reading, in turn, implies castration—Welty visualizes the Medusa’s head before her as a physical entity that defies previous descriptions of its horror. This quality links Welty’s Medusa to Cixous’s, though Welty does not speak directly to Freud or to psychoanalytic theory. While she does away with the idea that the Medusa is monstrous, she revises the myth by excluding past details and by giving the story a fresh context, not by overtly confronting ways in which the myth has been manifested elsewhere. Once asked in an interview whether Freud was ever an influence, Welty replied,

No. I don’t think any ideas come to you from other people’s minds, when you’re writing, as directives. . . . That all has to come from within. It doesn’t mean that you haven’t read things and understood things through reading . . . that don’t filter down and apply. What I mean is you’re not using a snippet of Freud and a little piece of Jung or anything like that. . . . you wouldn’t take a scrap of someone else’s painting and put it in your painting. You might both be treating of the same landscape, but you would put on paint as a matter of vision in both cases; your painting is your vision, not somebody’s else’s (“The Interior World” 58)

To read Welty’s Medusa purely in the context of Freud’s, then, would be to mischaracterize Welty’s adaptation. This is not to say that other adaptations did not “filter down and apply” in her portrayal. However,

Welty fiercely resisted situating her work and vision as a reply to or critique of another's. In using the Medusa to counsel Robinson, Welty found herself compelled to defamiliarize the myth simultaneously. Engaging with Welty's adaptation thus requires that one abandon earlier interpretations, not because the text explicitly demands such a break with tradition, but because a distance must be traversed, and recognizable terrain left behind, if one is to decipher the significance of Perseus and the Medusa as they have been rewritten.

### **Exclusion as Constellation in *The Golden Apples***

In *The Golden Apples*, Welty combines with her selective allusions the use of exclusion as a formal technique. As a short story cycle in which all stories revolve around residents of the fictional town of Morgana, Mississippi, yet do not depend on one another for narrative coherence, *The Golden Apples* is itself constituted by considerable omissions—breaks that keep the elements therein discretely isolated, even as those elements speak to one another and connect in concrete ways. The stories thus echo Welty's treatment of myth as something structured by detached adaptations that touch but are not continuous.

The most provocative metaphor Welty uses to illustrate how isolated elements are linked is the constellation, a word she uses in "June Recital" and "The Wanderers" to highlight the gaps that are crossed but never really sutured when objects are brought into relation with one another. In her allusions to the Medusa in *The Golden Apples*, Welty constellates words and characters to make apparent the distances dividing elements, even as distinct lines emerge between them. One of the strongest threads connecting the stories is a shared theme that can be traced to the image of Perseus and the Medusa in the attic vase: the role of gender in giving certain kinds of violence their legibility. Instances in which women are attacked or violently seized by men are central to multiple stories in the collection. I will discuss two of these stories in relation to the Medusa myth, emphasizing at once their ties to one another and the differences in tone and content that threaten to dissolve those ties.

Just as differences between these stories complicate the significance of the Medusa for *The Golden Apples*, so do different tones compete in the attic vase that initially sparked Welty's interest. The depiction of Perseus's attack upon a sleeping Medusa is difficult to interpret not only because it shows, as Topper writes, "the strong preying on one who is

obviously weak," but also, as she goes on to explain, because it is difficult to determine whether the vase is meant to provoke "laughter at the hero"—whose heroism is being undermined—"or sympathy for the maiden" (93). Context and its intended effect are likewise difficult to decipher in Welty's narrations of violence. Most troubling in *The Golden Apples* is Welty's refusal to clarify whether certain violent acts are instances of rape. As Yaeger has described Welty's portrayal of rape in another story, the author's "prose twists, proliferates, withholds, maddens . . . her style cracks and whirrs, refusing to specify trauma" ("Editor's Column" 14). This quality of her prose, equally descriptive of *The Golden Apples*, is a manifestation of Welty's politics of exclusion. Welty's resistance to specifying rape or trauma represents an effort to undermine any easy collapse of individual instances of rape into an all-encompassing idea that doesn't attend to personal experience. This dissolution of the general into the particular, which we might articulate as the breaking up of a constellation into its observable points of intersection, in turn calls attention to the gaps that make rape legible or illegible.

Welty's refusal to homogenize depictions of rape makes it possible for her to free individual narratives from the ideological baggage rape is often made to carry. As Nivedita Menon argues, discourse around rape, feminist discourse included, frequently essentializes "sexual violence" as something unique in the attack it makes on one's "'real' and 'private' self" (141)—an implication figuring identity as something reducible to sexuality. Menon contends that such discourse thus "mystifies" sexuality, identifying it as the "truest, deepest expression of selfhood." This mystification implies that "the harm of sexual assault lies not so much in the physical assault, but in the transgression of the victim's conceptions of selfhood and sovereignty." By essentializing individuals who have been raped according to this discursive significance, feminists have sometimes come close to reinscribing women in the same misogynistic confines they intend to subvert: bodies that are defined by sex and, therefore, fundamentally vulnerable to it. This is by no means to diminish rape's seriousness. On the contrary, Menon suggests that we may better attend to rape's gravity if we interrogate discourses that would generalize its meaning across varied experiences. In *The Golden Apples*, Welty seems to be invested in a similar project. Not only does she depart from patriarchal narratives of sexual violation; she explicitly

critiques them as the byproduct of a society that feels compelled to interpret instances of sexual assault in terms of normative assumptions about gender and sexuality.

That Welty links the myth of the Medusa to her broader concern with sexual violence is easily overlooked but crucial to understanding the importance of the allusion to *The Golden Apples*. Toward the end of “The Wanderers,” as Virgie makes an effort to remember the qualities Miss Eckhart embodied as a pianist—qualities she associates with the picture of Perseus and the Medusa the teacher kept in her studio—the language of the passage recalls a moment from an earlier story, “June Recital,” in which Miss Eckhart performs a piece of music on the piano after several students have gathered around her. The passion of the performance alarms the young girls: “something had burst out, unwanted, exciting, from the wrong person’s life . . . some brilliant thing too splendid for Miss Eckhart, piercing and striking the air around her” (364). Here the memory comes to another of Miss Eckhart’s students, Cassie Morrison, who recalls that as the music became “too much” for her, her thoughts drifted to an incident that happened years earlier. While walking alone one evening, Miss Eckhart had been attacked. It is never explicitly stated that the nature of the attack was sexual. The reader is told only that as neighbors learned of the event and its details, they began to ostracize her, finding it easier to ignore her rather than be reminded of the episode. Cassie’s recollection reveals that one detail of the event inspired the reaction more than all others: the suspected attacker was black.

While neither the narrator nor Cassie states that Miss Eckhart was raped, then, the sexual nature of the attack is implied, the signifiers being the affective response of the community and the significance of the man’s race to the severity of that response. Through free indirect discourse, Cassie recalls the rumors surrounding the attack as the narrative proceeds:

One time, at nine o’clock at night, a crazy nigger had jumped out of the school hedge and got Miss Eckhart, had pulled her down and threatened to kill her. That was long ago. She had been walking by herself after dark; nobody had told her any better. When Dr. Loomis made her well, people were surprised that she and her mother did not move away. They wished she had moved away . . . then they wouldn’t always have to remember that a terrible thing once happened to her. But Miss Eckhart stayed, as though she considered one thing not so much more terrifying than another. . . . Cassie thought as she listened, had to listen, to the music that perhaps

more than anything it was the nigger in the hedge, the terrible fate that came on her, that people could not forgive Miss Eckhart. (365)

If what the town despises most about Miss Eckhart is that this “terrible fate” did not visibly disable the piano teacher or provoke her to abandon her community in shame, the “fate” to which Cassie refers involves something she is simultaneously omitting. Implicit is the sexual and racialized stigma Miss Eckhart endures thereafter. It would be difficult to read the event otherwise, the greatest evidence being, perhaps, the infamous commitment of Southern communities to preserving the purity of “white womanhood” during this era. An event set in post-Reconstruction Mississippi, as David McWhirter notes, it is steeped in the “specter/fantasy of miscegenation” (78). Not only is this rapist a “nigger” in Cassie’s memory; he is a “crazy nigger” and later a “black nigger,” designations that multiply the significance of the attacker’s race. For McWhirter, the obsessive reference to race thus exposes simultaneously Cassie’s inculcated fears of what he calls, borrowing from Miriam Hansen’s work, the “promise of sexual—and ethnic-racial—mobility”<sup>2</sup> made evident to her by Miss Eckhart’s survival, her refusal to leave town, and her return to everyday life (80). Because Miss Eckhart has not been visibly marked by trauma, because she shows no sense of disgrace or ruin, the town cannot reintegrate her into its social fabric.

The sexual connotation of the passage thus proves to be a function of the racialized shaming Miss Eckhart should have experienced but did not. Evident in the passage, in other words, are not only the proximate signs of race and affect that together disclose what the text does not say, but also the space between those signs—a space full of content yet marked by absence. It is equally important to recognize, therefore, that the sexual in this instance is denoted by a gap in the narrative, one requiring readers to make legible something not quite locatable. To call attention to this moment of omission, Welty introduces the idea of the constellation. “[S]pectacular moments,” the narrator says,

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<sup>2</sup>McWhirter quotes this from Hansen’s book, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*. Hansen here explores ways in which “the promise of sexual—and ethnic-racial—mobility” was communicated by “the projection of the ethnic and racially male other” in American silent film “as sexually potent, uncontrollable, and predatory” (255).

hideous things like the black nigger jumping out of the hedge at nine o'clock, all seemed to Cassie to be by their own nature rising. . . . like whole constellations, turning at their very centers maybe, like Perseus and Orion and Cassiopeia in her Chair and the Big Bear and Little Bear, maybe often upside down, but terribly recognizable. (365)

The “terrible” quality of such recognition echoes Welty’s use of the same word to describe the “fate” with which Miss Eckhart is associated after the incident, something that reaches the town as a loose grouping of known details but is nevertheless easily made into an interpretable whole. For Cassie to see the event in her mind as a constellation is for her to comprehend, perhaps subconsciously, where the sexual fundamentally lies—what it is made up of—for a town preoccupied with making Miss Eckhart perform a socially acceptable affect if she is to obtain redemption. Whether Miss Eckhart was raped, then, is not the question Welty wants answered here. Indeed, by excluding any conclusive evidence, Welty turns our attention to the way such narrative gaps are filled—the way nodes are linked in the form of a constellation by those viewing it from a distance. The omissions that undergird Cassie’s retelling of the event make the process of remembering—the discourses that make remembering possible—more worthy of interrogation than the memory itself.

Welty’s use of constellations to illustrate how “spectacular moments” in history are drawn into the realm of the recognizable is evocative, perhaps, of Walter Benjamin’s use of the term to describe the primary objective of historiography. For Benjamin, to constellate is to locate in history, famously defined as a great accumulation of debris that “keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage” (“On the Concept” 392), a body of nodes that may be crystallized and made to emerge as a recognizable image. What Benjamin and Welty share, then, is an effort to extract the concept of the constellation from its status as an object in space in order to map it onto the historical and thus explain the way past phenomena may be combined in their cohabitation of the present. This is one of the most striking themes one can trace throughout Welty’s fiction—her attention to the inescapability of the past, its persistent invasion by means of memory. While it would be fruitful to compare their uses of the term at length, however, it better serves the interests of the feminist strategy being explored here to resist such a move. In line with Grosz’s call to consider the value of feminist transformations that refuse to lay

claim to a lineage of the forms they alter, I want to explore Welty's constellation on its own terms. For Welty, the importance of constellation as a concept is less its ability to arrest things in a "standstill" or to induce a "caesura in the movement of thought" (Benjamin, *Arcades* 475) than it is the attention constellation brings to the role of exclusion in the coalescence of memory, the ease with which things are misremembered—to destructive ends in the case of Miss Eckhart's stigmatization, for the purpose of reinvention in the case of Welty's *Medusa*—and the close attention that is therefore required to locate the elements that give a narrative its shape.

One encounters the generative potential of constellation more fully in "The Wanderers." The reappearance of the term, again in relation to Miss Eckhart, provides the clearest link between the passage in which it appears and the passage in "June Recital," and yet the term seems to indicate, in its reapplication, a rather different method of looking back on the past—a looking back that is less socially prescribed and more cognizant of the absences that structure it. As Virgie recalls Miss Eckhart's refusal to accept her social status as victim, she realizes that the piano teacher put the picture of Perseus and the Medusa in her studio "for herself," a sign of her determination to "absorb" "the hero and the victim" together as a fractured sense of subjectivity (555). Whether Miss Eckhart partly identifies with the victim, as represented by the Medusa, because of the attack or because neighbors ostracized her afterward remains unclear. More important to Virgie's epiphany is the fact that trauma and heroism were afterwards inseparable and therefore equally indispensable for Miss Eckhart. In remembering the picture, Virgie sees it suddenly as a constellation. "Because Virgie saw things in their time, like hearing them—and perhaps because she must believe in the Medusa equally with Perseus—she saw the stroke of the sword in three moments, not one," the narrator explains. "[B]eyond" these three moments—moments the narrator cryptically refers to as "the beauty and the sword's stroke and the terror," a sequence that pictures the Medusa before, during, and after decapitation—"lay their existence in time—far out and endless, a constellation which the heart could read over many a night" (555). That Virgie is able to visualize both the constellation and the distinct, temporal elements that make it legible gives one a sense of what constellation might achieve as a reading practice. A method of absorbing, either into the self or into another text, a kind of multiplicity,

not to unify dissonant elements but to maintain their tension with one another, constellation allows one to incorporate into oneself the very distances that seem, at first glance, to keep objects, affects, and persons separate.

To put it differently, the generative value of a constellation lies precisely in its exclusions. This is to suggest that what Virgie recognizes in Miss Eckhart's absorption of Perseus and the Medusa is less remarkable as an inclusion of the two figures than it is as an act of incorporating also the space between them. In "June Recital," Cassie comes close to articulating this insight into Miss Eckhart's character as her memories unfold further. She remembers having heard someone say, "Miss Eckhart's *differences* were why shame alone had not killed her" (365). These are not merely Miss Eckhart's differences from other members of the community but the very spaces opposition seems to inhabit. These spaces across which things like heroism and trauma touch make it possible for one to reconfigure the significance of a spectacular moment while looking back on it.

Such reconfiguration is not merely another way of ventriloquizing the adage that an event always looks different over time, the way a constellation, turning in the sky according to the Earth's revolutionary cycle, may be viewed from different perspectives. The point is not that objects can always be observed from new vantage points but that the spaces essential to the formation of an object, when maintained as exclusions, make possible a radical re-delineation of relations. In "The Wanderers" is a rich description of what such a process looks like. Anticipating Virgie's later recollection of Miss Eckhart in relation to the Medusa, the narrator says, "Virgie never saw it differently, never doubted that all the opposites on earth were close together, love close to hate, living to dying; but of them all, hope and despair were the closest blood—unrecognizable one from the other sometimes, making moments double upon themselves, and in the doubling double again, amending but never taking back" (546). That Virgie "never saw it differently" means not only that she has always perceived life in such a way but that she has refused to read things in terms of permanent "differences." In reading apparent opposites as intimately related, as if by blood, Virgie absorbs them as Miss Eckhart has. This leads not to an annihilation of meaning but rather to a way of making meaning more fluid, of producing it more easily, each moment of the past having the capacity to be

understood alongside another. At the same time, it would be a mistake to read such fluidity and the “unrecognizability” it produces as the effects of a collapse of love into hate or hope into despair. The infinite doubling of things precludes the possibility of collapse insofar as it makes manifest a set of intervening gaps that can never be closed. “[A]mending but never taking back” brings Miss Eckhart into Virgie’s consciousness as an embodiment of Perseus and the Medusa in each moment of their struggle. Like Welty’s portrait of John Robinson, Virgie’s Miss Eckhart is a subject constituted by parts at once incommensurable and interdependent.

Such an approach to refiguring oppositional nodes, be they love and hate or heroism and victimization, is crucial to reading Welty’s mythological allusions. Ancient myths, familiar frames in which archetypes are depicted, may also be manipulated to make archetypal figures almost unrecognizable from their counterparts. By nature of their malleability, archetypal figures may be made to absorb and link events to one another, to make disparate “moments” and memories “double upon themselves.” Welty achieves as much by excluding the expected in her allusions to the Medusa; she brings the figure into her text as an array of omitted spaces, a site that may therefore be made legible alongside several distinct contexts and plotlines.

Constellation facilitates our understanding of how such a re-delineation of relations is achieved. In maintaining the space between oppositional entities, one is given room to redraw and reshape their instances of contact. Important as the constellation is to visualizing this potential, Welty offers in “The Wanderers” yet another optic for the purpose of representing her allusive process: the picture of Perseus and the Medusa itself. Surrounded by a “frame enameled with flowers, which was always self-evident—Miss Eckhart’s pride,” the picture “sometimes blindly reflected the window by its darkness” (554). An image of Miss Eckhart’s subjectivity, it also functions as a kind of mirror and, in its reflection, a window. In reflecting a window, the image incorporates into itself a mutable array of outside images, making its scene recognizable and applicable in another world. Even still, it is only partially a window. The reflected window is caught within a greater picture, the given adaptation, which provides by comparison direction and guidance in reading not only what is visible but what has been deliberately excluded. In interpreting Welty’s allusions, one must read

these layered sites of representation together, the image, the reflection, and the world accessible through the window. One must then, like Virgie, also see the allusion “shorn . . . of its frame” (554), imagining away any border that could otherwise impose a fabricated impression of coherence on the subject(s) and stories caught in its confines. Exclusion as a political strategy requires one to pay attention to productive disparities, the conditions of which may be engendered by careful selection and omission.

### Welty’s Feminism: Foregoing Recognition and Solidarity

To read Welty’s politics of exclusion, one must begin to look for ways in which her writings are indirectly subversive. This recognition might also illuminate the author’s complicated relationship with feminism. As critics have noted, Welty fiercely resisted public association with political movements, feminist movements included, throughout her career. Welty articulated this resistance most famously in “Must the Novelist Crusade?”, which argues that only the journalist or “crusader” should write with agendas in mind. The “novelist and the crusader” are meant to remain “on opposite sides,” she contends, each in his or her “own place—in the novel and the editorial respectively” (803). The argument seems rather reductive when read alongside Welty’s fiction.<sup>3</sup> One has only to return to the end of *The Golden Apples* to find the divergent opinion that diametric opposition is itself a problematic construct; all “opposites on earth” are actually “close together” (546). “Must the Novelist Crusade?” in this way threatens to hide the complexity of Welty’s fiction behind a façade of old-fashioned stubbornness. It is not that Welty wished to evade political action in her work but that she did not want her political endeavors to be recognizable under the label of a greater movement.

Welty resisted absorption into political agendas in this manner because she opposed any kind of association that could diminish her

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<sup>3</sup>Pollack recalls her personal reaction to the essay’s claims: “I thought of Welty as someone who understood story itself as obviously political—in spite of the contradictory pronouncements in ‘Must the Novelist Crusade?’” (*Eudora Welty and Politics* 4). Provoked by this sense of dissonance, Pollack and others came together in 2001 to publish a collection titled *Eudora Welty and Politics*, a collection that refigures what the political might mean in Welty’s fiction if dissociated from various qualities with which it is often automatically conflated.

individual achievements. Regarding the Women's Movement, in particular, she once admitted, "I think in some of the movements women are making fools of themselves, and I'm sorry for that, because it's cast a wry sad light on the real facts of the matter" ("A Conversation" 251). In the same interview, Welty clarifies what she means, recalling a letter she once received in the mail beckoning her to sign a statement saying, "I too have had an abortion and would like to establish something." Attached was a note explaining, "Even if you haven't had an abortion, we think you owe it to the movement to sign this" (251). A site at which the level of one's commitment to solidarity is tested, the letter captures the nature of the ethical dilemma Welty faced in her experimentation with exclusion and refusal as strategic methods of political engagement. An extreme example, the letter nevertheless communicates the risks implicit both in movements dependent on solidarity and feminist strategies attempting to sidestep identity politics. The former requires, at some level, that one's individuality be compromised; the latter risks the dissolution of collective effort into isolated struggles incapable of effecting change on a grand scale. Welty's commitment to the integrity of her individual vision led her to take the latter risk rather than the former.

The key to reconciling Welty's resistance to forming public political allegiances consistent with the feminism evident in her writing, then, is recognizing those indirect strategies of feminist engagement in her work that alter the present order and offer alternative representations of gender and sexuality without explicitly retaliating against or speaking in conjunction with other dominant discourses. As Welty said of her interaction with Freud, external voices may "filter down and apply," but such engagement does not require one to acknowledge or converse with those voices directly. Welty thus offers us a model of the kind of feminism Grosz has advocated—action unconcerned with recognition. It is subversive work that is more preoccupied with practical transformation than with definition. This feminism engages "not in critique or demolition . . . but in the revitalization of discourses to which they might otherwise seem opposed" (179). This is indeed the nature of Welty's mythological allusions.

As Grosz argues, such work has the potential to bring forth more radically alternative futures than mere critique can imagine:

Critique, ironically, affirms the privilege and priority of the position being critiqued. The more interesting questions of knowledge production are not bound up with the discovery of what is “wrong” with a discourse or position, what problems it exemplifies, what errors it commits. Rather, they are linked to how discourses and positions, whatever their problems might be, can be used differently, can be developed beyond themselves, can be utilized to highlight, analyze, or explain what they were not able to originally. (179)

These “more interesting questions” are the questions we encounter in Welty’s writings. By engaging with ancient myths without locating those myths in any singular privileged discourse, Welty liberates the metaphorical potential of the figures invoked. She manipulates them in unexpected ways and for purposes that might not be possible were they contained in familiar struggles to diverge from a specific theory or to identify with a greater movement.

Welty’s Medusa thus proves that she does not need to retain her monstrousness or her supernatural power to constitute a subversive force in *The Golden Apples*. As an integral component of Welty’s fragmented subject, she may be absorbed by any number of characters and plotlines and may refigure gender and sexuality across disparate contexts. She may be read in John Robinson and Miss Eckhart. She and Perseus construct not only a painting but a mirror in which a window is reflected. As a mirror, they integrate into themselves any character wandering within their vicinity; by surrounding a reflected window, they invite a wealth of intertextual relationships. At the same time, the Medusa is capable of inviting this multitude of relationships without ever fixing her eyes upon them. Indeed, one might argue that, in this sense, Welty’s Medusa is never really sleeping. She may not privilege external discourses by subjecting them to her gaze, but she is awake behind closed eyelids, constellating and reconstellating subjectivity through a variety of configurations.

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