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Taking Eudora Welty's Text Out of the Closet: Delta Wedding's George Fairchild and the Queering of Saint George

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TAKING EUDORA WELTY'S TEXT OUT OF THE CLOSET: DELTA WEDDING'S
GEORGE FAIRCHILD AND THE QUEERING OF SAINT GEORGE

by

JAMES R. WALLACE

Under the Direction of Pearl A. McHaney

ABSTRACT

Eudora Welty's characterization of George Fairchild (Delta Wedding) queers the heroic masculine ideal, St George, whose legendary exploits have been popularized in narrative literature, Catholic iconography, and children's fairy tale. Lauded by the Fairchild women for his "difference," George's sexuality offers him an identity apart from the suffocating Fairchild family myth. George Fairchild's queer sexuality and homoeroticism augments our critical understanding of Delta Wedding, the character, as well as other characters. The author's subtly politicized construction of the novel's ostensible hero subverts literary tradition, the gender binary, and patriarchal myth.

INDEX WORDS: Eudora Welty, Delta Wedding, George Fairchild, St. George, Fairy tale, Intertextuality, Hero, Gender, Patriarchal myth, Queer theory, Difference, Homosexuality, Homoeroticism, John Robinson, Identity, Family, Family myth, Chivalry, Southern lady, Southern gentleman

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Degree of

Master of Arts

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Georgia State University

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To My Friend and Wife

Wendy Wallace

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I would like to profess my love and gratitude for my wife Wendy, who provided me with emotional and financial support during my studies. She believed in me and my abilities when it seemed few did. She labored for years to provide for our family, so I could continue my dream, and I will never forget her efforts. My schooling has been a long, tumultuous journey and it is primarily because of the fortitude and sacrifices of this very special lady that this study exists. Thank you, Wendy. I love you.

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CHAPTER 1.

INTRODUCTION

We have the writer's own vision of everything in the world when we place his novel in the center. Then so much is clear: how he sees life and death; how much he thinks people matter to each other and to themselves, how much he would like you to know what he finds beautiful or strange or awful or absurd, what he can do without; how well he has learned to see, hear, touch, smell – all as his sentences go by and in their time and sequence mount up. It grows clear how he imposes order and structure on his fictional world; and it is terribly clear, in the end, whether, when he calls for understanding, he gets any. (Eudora Welty)¹

When we place Eudora Welty's 1946 novel Delta Wedding "in the center" of our critical understanding, the depicted metaphoric imagery, shifting narrative, mysterious dialogue, and raw emotion threaten to overwhelm our understanding of author and text. Although early reviewers criticized the novel for depicting a story in which "[d]ramatically speaking nothing happens," in actuality, there seems to be so much happening that it becomes difficult to comprehend the totality of the text (Trilling 60). Voices bombard the reader. The narrative focus shifts from one female Fairchild family member to another fragmenting the novel into a myriad of individualistic statements and concerns. The novel's narrative structure not only defies traditional masculine narrative by providing women with a voice,² it depicts the multiplicity of white Southern femininity by giving voice to several different types of women.

¹ "Words into Fiction." (The Eye of the Story. [NY: Random House, 1977]: 141-2).

² Susan V. Donaldson, in "Gender and History in Eudora Welty's Delta Wedding," (South Central Review. 14.2 [Summer 1997]: 3-14), argues that the novel should be read as "feminist interrogation of history and historical perspective" (3). Suzan Harrison, in "'The Other Way to Live': Gender and Selfhood in Delta Wedding and The Golden Apples," (Mississippi Quarterly. 44.1 [Winter 1990-91]: 49-67), analyzes Welty's feminine narrative strategies as a "decentering" of hierarchal gender oppositions (50). In "Putting the Colonel In: Eudora Welty's Feminist Poetics." (Resisting History: Gender Modernity, and Authorship in William Faulkner, Zora Neale Hurston, and Eudora Welty. [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2007]: 52-78), Barbara Ladd argues that Welty challenged Faulkner's representation of Southern history by constructing her fiction around "places and characters" that white male authors of history typically ignored (53). Several other critics have recognized a similar pattern of feminist intertextuality in Welty's collection of inter-related short-stories, The Golden Apples (1949), most notably Rebecca Mark (in Dragon's Blood [Jackson: U.P. of Miss., 1994]) and Patricia Yaeger (in "'Because a Fire Was in My Head': Eudora Welty and the Dialogic Imagination" [PMLA 99.5 (Oct., 1984): 955-73]).

Issac Rosenfeld panned the novel for the multiplicity of its “interior esthetic contemplation[s],” which he claims decenter the Fairchild family dynamic and “hopelessly tangle” readers “in a welter of entering-and-exiting” narration (58). Rosenfeld fails to realize that the diversity of the narration, however difficult, provides the novel with meaning. The convergence of the varied perspectives of the Fairchild women (Ellen, Shelley, Dabney, Laura) toward the exultation of a single character (George Fairchild) signals that character’s importance to our grasping the novel.

George’s importance rests in his “difference” from traditional male literary heroes and the individuality his “difference” affords him.³ George Fairchild represents a queering of the heroic masculine ideal St. George whose chivalrous exploits include saving damsels in distress from dragons and other mythological creatures. Queering George’s heroism frees the damsel in distress from a literary scenario that marginalizes female characters by not providing them with a voice. The scenario also assumes that young women need or want rescuing, that men are willing or able to rescue women, or for that matter, that any real threat exists at all.

A queer reading of George Fairchild jibes with what we already know about author and text. Susan Donaldson summarizes criticism’s general understanding of Delta Wedding as “not just a portrait of a matriarchal world but an oddly inverted heroic narrative, one that appears to reverse the gendered conventions of western quest myths and narratives” (5).⁴ This assessment can be applied to much of the author’s work during the 1940’s.⁵ Rebecca Mark recognizes the author’s “confrontation with,” and reformulation of “patriarchal myths and masculinist texts,”

³ I am aware of the sexual politics that surround contemporary discussions of “difference.” It is my hope that I can incorporate portions of thought on the subject without theoretic deviations from the primary focus on Eudora Welty and Delta Wedding.

⁴ Harrison, Ladd, Mark, and Yaeger concur with this assessment of Welty’s feminine reappropriation of masculine literary conventions.

⁵ I am thinking here specifically of Welty’s novella The Robber Bridegroom (1941) and The Golden Apples (1949), her cycle of interrelated short stories.

coining the term “feminist intertextuality” to describe Welty’s politicized literary re-fabrication that, the critic notes, “uses every kind of cultural artifact from folktales, literary texts, fairy tales, and oral narratives to musical scores, popular songs, advertisements, children’s rhymes, and newspaper articles to challenge dominant literary conventions” (3). Yet another vein of scholarship reads the novel as a “conflict between the need for individual autonomy and the equally powerful need for community” from a Fairchild family legacy indifferent to individual identity (Glenn 50).⁶ Although these readings fail to satisfactorily explain George’s designated role as hero, their conclusions about the novel appear legitimate and provide a framework around which an analysis of character, characterization, and novel may occur. A queer reading of George compliments, if not strengthens, criticism’s understanding of the novel as both a rewriting of heroic narrative and a text concerned with individuality.

In George Fairchild, Welty queers her novel’s hero, providing an antithetic alternative to St. George’s iconic hyper-masculine heroism. As literature aimed at an especially young audience, St. George’s fairy tale⁷ serves to indoctrinate and reaffirm the patriarchal ideal: an active, courageous, Christian, alpha-male, whose heroic exploits involve spreading Christianity

⁶ Several critics agree with Glenn’s reading: Joseph Childers, in “Character and Context: The Paradox of the Family Myth in Eudora Welty’s *Delta Wedding*.” (*Essays in Literature*. 14.2 [1987]: 241-50), reads George as a intensely conflicted character suicidally torn between family and individuality; Brannon Costello, in “Playing Lady and Imitating Aristocrats: Race, Class, and Money in *Delta Wedding* and *The Ponder Heart*.” (in *Plantation Airs: Racial Paternalism and the Transformations of Class in Southern Fiction 1945-1971*. [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2007] pp. 38-70), sees George as an individual whose actions reject the family’s oppressive aristocratic legacy. Dan Fabricant agrees; he recognizes “George’s refusal to live falsely” in a world of empty Southern romanticism (53). He asserts that George represents the “experience of life” to a plantation family suffocated by the weight of its historic past (59). In “The Role of Family in *Delta Wedding*, *Losing Battles*, and *The Optimist’s Daughter*.” (in *Eudora Welty: Critical Essays*. Ed. Peggy Prenshaw. [Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1979]), Jane L. Hinton claims that many of the novel’s “characters examine themselves as individuals and attempt to ascertain their respective positions in the family” (121).

⁷ The fairy tale originates in print around the thirteenth century, with Jacobus de Voragine’s *Legenda Aurea*, or *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints* (Trans. William Granger Ryan. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993). William Caxton anglicized the legend in a 1483 printing, entitled *The Golden Legend; or, Lives of the Saints*, (London: J. M. Dent, 1931. Facsim. ed. 7 vols. NY: AMS Press, 1973), although Welty was probably introduced to the fairy tale version, “St. George and the Dragon,” through *Every Child’s Story Book*, the fifth of the ten volume library reference set *Our Wonder World* (Chicago: G. L. Shuman and Co., 1914), which I analyze in detail later.

and rescuing otherwise doomed women. The myth evolved into an allegory for the patriarchal need to protect feminine sexuality and save it from the dangers of paganism and sin.⁸ Delta Wedding's hero cares little about preserving feminine sexuality. His passivity reverses St. George's active pursuit of upholding Christian values, and his shy social awkwardness contrasts St. George's fantasized bravado. George Fairchild derives his heroism not by gallantly protecting feminine sexuality, but as a consequence of his very being, through the individuality his unconstrained sexuality provides.

He also represents, albeit passively, feminist hope for the individual Fairchild woman. George's differences slay patriarchy's hetero-social binary of man/woman by subverting heroic narrative's construct of man as inherently masculine or naturally chivalrous, and thereby superior to women and femininity. Just as the author does with femininity, Welty characterizes masculinity, as unfixed and diverse. George, his brothers Battle and Denis, and Dabney's fiancé Troy Flavin represent various points of masculinity along the male spectrum, with each relating to or benefiting femininity in varying ways.

Welty's philosophy of fiction prioritizes human emotion, human relationships, and human experience over crusading political commentary.⁹ This is not to say that she avoids political content altogether, but as a novelist, she "hopes to show, to disclose. [Her] persuasions are all toward allowing [her] reader to see and hear for himself" ("Must?" 149). And although her queering satirizes St. George's traditionally masculine persona, he is first and foremost a representation of a real human being: "some certain irresistible, alarming (pleasurable or

⁸ For a genealogy of the St. George myth, see Samantha Riches', St. George: Hero, Martyr and Myth. (Stroud: Sutton, 2000), and P.J. Hogarth's "St. George: The Evolution of a Saint and His Dragon." (History Today. 30.4 [April 1980]: 17-22).

⁹ See Eudora Welty's "Must the Novelist Crusade." (in The Eye of the Story. [NY: Random House, 1977]: 146-58).

disturbing), magnetic person” that “startled or moved the [author’s] story-writing mind to complicity” (“Writing” 108). She hoped to capture and explore the human condition, not just a stereotypical or politicized caricature. On a human level, Welty’s construction of George is an effort at exploring the reality of sexual multiplicity, specifically, the psychology and libidinal behavior of men that satisfy their sexual desires with partners of either sex, and how it affects their personal relationships, social and familiar. As her literary philosophy proscribes, Welty grounds Delta Wedding in characters whose diversity and inner depth shroud her political aims.

Although George escapes sexual designation in the text, the Fairchild women repeatedly characterize him as “different.” Critics generally assume that George’s heroic “difference” is his ability to assert himself as an individual within a family indifferent to individuality, whereas I argue that his sexual queerness constitutes the “difference” that provides him with a distinct individuality. This “difference” is not a pejorative mark of deviation from a hegemonic masculine norm, but rather a positing of George’s “sweet,” “special,” and “intense” maleness as a legitimate type of masculinity, one seldom given heroic status in literature, although none-the-less present in the real world. The women in the novel prefer George’s gentler heroism to the chivalrous machismo of the traditional swash-buckling hero. It may have been Welty’s preference as well. Rebecca Mark finds that the author similarly advocates for “different” types of masculinity in her short story “Music from Spain,” in which Eugene MacLain’s homoerotic journey through the streets of San Francisco becomes “a movement to the heightened awareness of, and a willingness to accept, the full range of masculinity... [a sexuality that] embraces and includes the feminine” (203). Because of George Fairchild’s heroic status, his “different” mode of masculinity suggests a Weltian preference for the character’s “difference,” and not a reaffirmation of a referent “normal” masculinity.

Welty's preference for queered masculinity may be the result of what Alex Nissen characterizes as the author's "lifetime love affair with gay men" (209). Suzanne Marrs, a Welty biographer, agrees, explaining that a number of "her youthful friends ... were considered gay," including "Hubert Creekmore, Lehman Engel, Frank Lyell, Walter Clemons, and Reynolds Price" (EW 207). But no man would shape Eudora Welty's conception of queer sexuality more than Mississippian, John F. Robinson "whom she had known since their days at Jackson High School" (Marrs, EW 56). Welty shared an "on-again, off-again" romantic relationship with the "[t]all, slender, and rather debonair, Robinson" for over ten years, even though, in later years, he would live exclusively and openly as a gay man (Marrs, EW 56).¹⁰ The Fairchild women's preference for George's "difference" may be the result of Welty's affinity for Robinson.

Although Marrs claims that Welty was deeply in love with Robinson, the biographer characterizes the lengthy relationship as one that would "ebb and flow" because "Robinson refused openly to acknowledge his homosexuality" (EW 138, 156). Although Marrs contends that Welty found his "alternating roles as a suitor and a man fleeing commitment... profoundly disturbing," the biographer reveals, "Eudora at some level understood the deeply submerged conflicts in Robinson's life" (Marrs, EW 156). Marrs and Harriet Pollack both assert that Welty fictionalized her relationship with Robinson in various short stories during the 1940's.¹¹ The biographer even makes the case that Robinson's service in World War II created in Welty a "sense of ... heroism" that fueled her construction of Delta Wedding (Marrs, EW 120). Several

¹⁰ Marrs's third chapter ("'Being Apart from What Matters': World War II and the Home Front, 1941-1945") and fourth chapter ("'Love First and then Separateness': 1945-1951") reconstructs the couple's relationship, including Robinson's gradual acceptance of his sexuality and its affect on Welty.

¹¹ Marrs hints that because Robinson worked as a traveling insurance adjuster before the Second World War, he provided something to the character of "the forlorn bachelor protagonist in 'Death of a Traveling Salesman'" (EW 56) and Tom Harris of "The Hitch-Hikers" (63), a story Nissen examines for queer content. Both Marrs and Pollack (in "Reading John Robinson." [Mississippi Quarterly. 56.2 (Spring 2003): 175-208.]) recognize Robinson's influence on Welty's queer construction of Eugene MacLain from "Music from Spain."

textual and biographical similarities suggest Robinson's queer sexuality provided a template for George's "difference." George's nude corralling of two knife-wielding youngsters, a scene spotlighted below for its homoeroticism, solidifies the character's "difference" as sexual, while hinting that Welty knew or had suspicions about Robinson's sexuality before Delta Wedding's completion date in September of 1945, all of which aids scholars by placing Welty's awareness of Robinson's sexuality at an earlier date than previously suggested (Marrs, EW 135).¹²

George Fairchild is neither a simple inversion of St. George nor an exact portrait of John Robinson, but rather a satiric meshing of St. George's fantasized heroism with John Robinson's queer sexuality. Eudora Welty denies that any of her characters "represent[s] a real person," but admits to Jan Gretlund that "any character you write has bits and pieces of somebody; but they are really conceptions of the imagination, which are invented to carry out what I want to do in the story" (213-4). This is precisely how Welty constructs George Fairchild, through "confluence,"¹³ an imaginative melding of what the author has read (myth, folklore, and fairy tale) with what she has experienced, i.e., memories, emotions, people, and relationships.

This character analysis will begin with an examination of the St. George legend, which will chart both the saint's hagiography and mythology, through its many versions, to the fairy tale version Welty read as a child. A portion of the analysis will analyze St. George's heroism, masculinity, and chivalry, while outlining the gender dynamic established in the St. George narrative as means to explain how the legend became an evolving allegory for good triumphing over evil and how the hero became inextricably associated with feminine sexuality. The focus

¹² Although Marrs concludes that Welty "at some level" understood Robinson's sexuality, both she and Pollack chronologically place Welty's "knowing" in early 1947, with a visit to San Francisco, where Robinson was then living, and where Welty wrote "Music from Spain."

¹³ In the final pages of her published autobiographical lectures One Writer's Beginnings ([Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983] 98-104), Welty contributes the creation of her fiction to "confluence," a culmination of all her "human experience[s]" (102).

will shift then to Welty's fictional fabrication of autobiographical experience, specifically her relationship with John Robinson. At the time of Delta Wedding's composition, Welty and Robinson's relationship was expressed through letters and literature. An examination of the similarities between reality and fiction, between John and George make Robinson's influence on Welty and her creation of George and his family more apparent. The fourth chapter will analyze Welty's queer characterization of George Fairchild: his heroism, his "difference," his relationships, his homoeroticism, and his veneration by the Fairchild women.

An analysis of George Fairchild offers the unique opportunity to contribute to Welty scholarship in a number of ways. Such a reading offers a more critically satisfying understanding of George. Because Welty "invented" George to "carry out what [she] want[ed] to do in" Delta Wedding, this analysis benefits our understanding of the novel as a subversion of masculine heroic narrative and an advocacy of individual identity and gender diversity (Gretlund 213). Lastly, this study provides academia with further examples of the author's unique creative and imaginative processes. A queer reading represents new critical territory for the character, while strengthening the novel's dense critical history.

CHAPTER 2.

EUDORA WELTY'S INTRODUCTION TO THE LEGEND OF ST. GEORGE

If in Delta Wedding Eudora Welty “invert[s] heroic narrative” by “revers[ing] the gender conventions of western quest myths,” then it benefits an understanding of the author and her novel to identify and analyze her referent sources (Donaldson 5). The children’s fairy tale “St. George and the Dragon”¹⁴ provided Welty with one such source. The story is a familiar one: a masculine hero rescues a fair maiden from certain doom. St. George’s legend incorporates and helps perpetuate, through the popularity of the story, an ancient homogenous heroic standard and misogynic gender dynamic. The story presents men and women with rigid medieval gender roles, but the fairy tale is particularly offensive in its conception of the feminine ideal.

Welty subverts¹⁵ St. George’s heroic narrative in several ways: she queers the myth’s hyper-masculine hero; she provides the literary female with a voice; and, she changes the face of masculine heroism by making George Fairchild’s heroism a matter of both his unique individuality and his passive acceptance of other individuals. In a novel where women possess narrative privilege, George retains his heroism, in spite of his maleness, in order to communicate a Fairchild female preference for broadening conceptions of masculine heroism. George Fairchild’s sincere and obtainable sort of heroism supplants St. George’s hegemonic Christian heroism; and, in doing so, Welty asserts that chivalrous heroism is antiquated, and that men need no longer preserve female chastity. An analysis of St. George’s heroism, masculinity, and

¹⁴ “St. George and the Dragon” is a reprint originally published in the Rhys’ anthology Fairy Gold: A Book of Old English Fairy Tales (NY: Fredrick A. Stokes Company, 1906).

¹⁵ I prefer the word “subvert” to describe Welty’s intertextual re-visioning of heroic narrative, as opposed to Donaldson’s feminist incorporation of the word “invert.” I would argue that Welty’s re-fabrication avoids simply “invert[ing]” narrative focus by foregrounding women and backgrounding men; rather, Welty’s subversion of the gender binary skews the entire oppositional structure of man/woman by adding variations that confront the naturalness of society’s conception of gender and sexuality.

legend, through its many variants and allegorical meanings, elucidates Welty's decision to "reverse" the narrative's established "gender conventions" and reinvent the masculine hero.

Eudora Welty acquired the St. George fairy tale as a child. The author was particularly candid in interviews and personal essays about her earliest reading habits.¹⁶ A self-described "ferocious, voracious reader," Welty recounts in a 1972 interview that in her adolescence she "read lots of fairy tales and all the childhood books" (Freeman 174). The author's considerable literary reservoir, especially in classical mythology, folklore, and fairy tale, appears the result of her insatiable craving for the written word.

In her autobiographical essay "A Sweet Devouring," Welty remembers her family's "home shelves" had provided the burgeoning reader "with the usual books,"¹⁷ which she "read... with love," but devoured quickly: "...[S]nap, I finished them. I read everything just alike – snap" (797). Children, Welty theorizes, "read with higher appetite and gratification" than do adults, and this was certainly true in her case ("Devouring" 797). It would not be long before Chestina Welty would need to introduce Eudora to the local public library as means to quench the daughter's thirst for books ("Devouring" 798). Welty would later recount her daily adolescent bicycle trip to the nearby library, tellingly revealing a shortcut ("through the Capitol") and comically vilifying the librarian (Annie Parker) for establishing and strictly

¹⁶ Welty writes of her early love affair with reading, and specifically her youthful affinity for fairy tale, in "A Sweet Devouring." She discusses The Robber Bridegroom and her melding of fairy tale and regional folklore in her published lecture, "Fairy Tale of the Natchez Trace" (Eye of the Story: Selected Essays and Reviews. NY: Random House, 1978], 300-14). Prenshaw's Conversations with Eudora Welty offers a number of insightful interviews on the subject (cited by interviewer and page number): Jean Todd Freeman, 172-99; Jan Nordby Gretlund, 211-29; Joanna Maclay 268-86; Jo Brans, 296-307; Scott Haller, 308-15.

¹⁷ It appears as though "[t]he usual books" Welty references here are children's books like Five Little Peppers and Tales from Maria Edgeworth, even though, in OWB, she remembers her family's extensive reference library and the family's holdings in Charles Dickens and Mark Twain (6-7).

enforcing rules that the young borrower saw as unnecessary obstacles to her beloved books (“Devouring” 798-9).

The “ferocious reader” earned an early reputation as a bookworm. Family members gave her books, and money specified for books as gifts (“Devouring” 799-801). In One Writer’s Beginnings, Welty remembers her “parents could not give [her] books enough” and calculates that “they must have sacrificed to give [her] on [her] sixth or seventh birthday... the ten volume set of Our Wonder World (8). Welty conveys with fondness her memories of laying “on the floor in front of the diningroom [sic] hearth” reading the “beautifully made, heavy books” (OWB 8). She “located [her]self in these pages and could go straight to the stories and pictures [she] loved,” which “more often than the rest [was] volume 5, Every Child’s Story Book” (OWB 8). Welty acknowledges reading “St. George and the Dragon” (OWB 8).

In fact, “St. George and the Dragon” is the first fairy tale in Welty’s storybook. It would have been hard for her to miss it there on the second page. Locating the tale in the earliest pages speaks to an understanding of the legend’s longevity and worldwide popularity. “The image of St. George,” P.J. Hogarth contends, “is familiar to us all... as firmly fixed in art as in the popular imagination” (17). Samantha Riches cites the “100 [still extant] visual cycles of his legend,” the “countless individual images,” the “almost 100 medieval wall paintings,” and the “considerable number of literary versions of his life” as proof of the legend’s popularity (1).

Although the figure of the mounted white knight seems a timeless and unchanging one, in actuality, St. George’s legend evolved in significant ways over several centuries. The image of St. George slaying the dragon, Riches explains, is a far cry from “the putative original” (35). Riches contributes the legend’s broad and lengthy appeal to its “malleab[ility],” its ability to serve any number of diverse and often times conflicting cultural agendas (178). Because of

these diverse appropriations, Riches characterizes “St. George [as] an enigma personified... a highly complex figure” that wears “many guises” (1). Although Welty can only be definitively linked to the fairy tale version of the legend, and speculation amounts to little more than conjecture, my understanding of Welty as an author with a considerable literary curiosity leads me to believe that she “did her homework” and understood the character’s complexities, the myth’s evolution, and the legend’s lengthy history as a tool of sexual oppression. St. George’s genesis as a martyr informs his later fairy tale; therefore, a prefatory glimpse into the character’s evolution should help explain, in part, Welty’s decision to queer George Fairchild.

Although St. George has been “confusingly” mistaken for other historical figures,¹⁸ Riches cautions, “it cannot be claimed with any veracity” that an “‘actual’ St. George ever existed at all” (6-7). “Despite the apparent uncertainty over the precise nature of the physical saint,” she explains, “there is clear evidence that a cult of St. George existed from the earliest times,” with churches being erected and dedicated to the saint by the mid-fourth-century, and accepted versions of his hagiography circulating by the sixth century (Riches 11). The antediluvian accounts of the legend make no mention of St. George’s battle with dragon. “[T]he dragon was a late addition to the saint's legend” (Riches 100). “The earliest versions of the legend... present him as a [Christian] martyr” who endures terrific lengthy tortures for his Christian faith (Riches 36). His martyrdom provides the basis for his sainthood.

¹⁸ Riches relates that the saint is often mistaken for “George of Cappadocia,” who lived during the same era, even though she proves that they were not the same person (6-7). The saint’s birthplace and cite of martyrdom varies according to the version’s religious or nationalistic purposes, which scatters his origins throughout Europe and the Middle East. Riches claims that there is little historical accuracy in any of these accounts and there is just as much evidence to suggest that St. George’s legend was a fictional story (6-10).

“The accepted version [of the saint’s hagiography] is based on two related main sources, one Greek, the other Latin” (Hogarth 17-8). There are variations,¹⁹ but “the Latin follows the Greek in general plan” (Hogarth 18). P.J. Hogarth summarizes the Greek tradition:

While George was still a child his father died for his faith, and mother and child fled to Palestine. George grew up there and eventually joined the Roman army where he served naturally, with distinction. On his mother’s death he used his inheritance to establish a position at the court of the Roman Emperor, Diocletian, who ruled from AD 284-305.

At the outbreak of Diocletian’s persecution of the Christians, George distributed his wealth to the poor and declared himself a Christian in the presence of the Emperor. For this, he was sentenced to die. There followed a grisly series of tortures²⁰... but after each episode, he was miraculously restored to life and health. (18)

Between tortures and multiple resurrections,²¹ St. George performs several miracles²² that convert thousands, particularly in the Latin version, which emphasizes the severity and length of the tortures (Hogarth 18). St. George’s final miracle cements his legend as a Christian hero:

¹⁹ Hogarth explains the Latin differences: “Diocletian has become Dacian, Emperor of the Persians. [He] lives and dies in Melitene, in eastern Cappadocia. The tortures continue for seven years, and are considerably more inventive; they result in the conversion of 40,900 people... and, as George dies, a whirlwind of fire carries off the wicked Dacian” (18).

²⁰ George’s tortures vary. Among the typical tortures: “George was crushed with heavy stones, bound to a wheel set with sharp blades, cast into a pit of quicklime, made to run in red-hot iron shoes, boiled in molten lead, scourged, and forced to drink poison” (Hogarth 18). In the second chapter of her book (“[St. George and the Martyr: Torture and Resurrection](#)”), Riches examines closely the creative variations of the tortures as they appear in extant visual art cycles, many of which are stunningly elaborate and explicitly gory scenes of extreme violence that emphasize his faith.

²¹ The severity of St. George’s torture required the saint’s resurrection. In some versions, he requires as many as three separate resurrections (Hogarth 18). In some visual versions of the saint’s life, he is resurrected by other iconographic figures, like the Virgin Mary, St. Michael – also a dragon-slaying soldier-saint – or an angelic Christ-like figure. For more on St. George’s resurrection, please see the second chapter (“[St. George and the Martyr:](#)

[B]y making the sign of the cross[,] he caused all the statues of the gods to fall before him. This miracle converted the Empress Alexandra to Christianity, which proved too much for Diocletian to bear. Alexandra was sentenced to death, and George decapitated; this time his death proved permanent. The date was April 23rd, AD 303. (Hogarth 18)

The Emperor dies shortly afterward in nearly every literary version of the legend. The date of St. George's martyrdom is commemorated in numerous countries still today, which speaks to the broad popularity of these early versions of the legend.

St. George's "martyrdom legend... demonstrates [the] direct conflict between Christianity and the classical Greco-Roman religions, which is characteristic of the lives of early Christian martyrs" (Riches 3). Riches theorizes that this early figure of St. George draws heavily from the legends of other religious martyrs, like Jesus Christ, who similarly performed miracles, inspired converts, incurred terrific tortures, and rose from the dead (35). She marvels at "the ease with which St. George has been manipulated to fulfill a number of quite distinct roles with Christian thought" (Riches 100).

Like Christ, St. George's martyrdom became a paradigm for good triumphing over evil. The "malleab[ility]" of the good versus evil paradigm, its simplicity and applicability, allowed for a number of religious and nationalistic appropriations, the popularity of which helped propel George to the revered status of saint (Riches 68-9). In exploring all the possibilities of the paradigm, the pious capitalized on the popularity of various religious icons by uniting the figures

Torture and Resurrection," p 36-67) and third chapter ("The Virgin's Knight: St. George and the Chivalric Ideal" p 68-100) of Riches book.

²² St. George's resurrection leads to miraculous abilities of healing, fertility, and rebirth. In various versions of the saint's life, he raises a man and an ox back to life, heals a widow's only son, and causes bare vegetation to suddenly bloom fruit (Riches 11, 184-5).

in iconography and narrative. Very often St. George is paired with the Virgin Mary. St. George's reputation as a Christian hero flourished along with mariolatry as "well-established devotion[s]... by the late medieval period" (Riches 68). Authors, poets, playwrights, and artists of several mediums combined the popularity of these two otherwise distinct figures in order to propagate chastity and establish the chivalric ideals of courtly love (Riches 68). St. George and the Virgin Mary became idealized representations of good masculinity and good femininity; they became idealized moral standards on opposite sides of a gender binary that refused to recognize the legitimacy of sexual variation and deviation.

Although "the precise origins of the motif are unclear, the link is evident by the late twelfth-century ... version²³ of his story" (Riches 68). Riches explains the generalities of the collaboration: "St. George was identified as the Virgin's champion, a knight who would represent his patroness in combat, publicly defending her honour [sic] when it was impugned by the unworthy" (68). His reputation as "Our Lady's Knight,"²⁴ resulted in St. George symbolizing chastity, specifically the purity of the idealized Virgin mother (68). This affiliation places the hero in the unique position of representing contradictory symbolic meanings because he also personifies rebirth and fertility as a result of his many resurrections (68).

The idealization of the chaste women "has its roots in the deep vein of misogyny that is often identified with the development of European societies" (Riches 96). Burgeoning European cultures and countries beyond adopted the misogynic Judeo-Christian "designat[ion of women] as imperfect men, a threat and a challenge to male dominance" (Riches 96). Male authority's

²³ The Golden Legend version of the story, which I discuss in detail below.

²⁴ Riches provides multiple instances in song and written versions where St. George garners the moniker, "Our Lady's Knight," and points out that "this sobriquet would be particularly appealing to an English author and audience, for England was sometimes referred to as 'The Virgin's dowry'" (70).

“concerns about women largely related to female sexuality” with a particular “emphasis on [female] abstention from sex” (Riches 96). “The Virgin Mary, a chaste, unsexual woman who still contrived to become a mother, was held up as the epitome of womanhood, a perfection to which no other woman could realistically aspire” (Riches 96). Men seeking to socially align with St. George held women to this moral standard. His legendary pious resolve makes him an ideal protector of the Virgin mother’s chastity. The discipline St. George uses to endure his tortures serves him in his platonic pairing with the Virgin because “in [their] relationship... the conventions of noble behaviour [sic] are never broken, and this ‘perfect’, unconsummated love underlines [her] status as a beautiful, chaste and noble woman” (Riches 69).

As a corollary to the iconographic rise of St. George and the Virgin Mary, chivalry and chastity became idealized social standards. St. George’s moral authority evolved into a set of social orders that outlined acceptable knightly behavior, including guidelines for appropriate social situations with members of the opposite sex. In many towns throughout England, aristocratic guilds dedicated to St. George became enforcers of these mores (Riches 138). The evocation of St. George’s name carried authoritative weight as Kings, aristocrats, and other noblemen sought to be identified with the knight (Riches 138). These edicts spread to the familiar arena, where patriarchal authority charged fathers, brothers, and the other men in the community with protecting the sanctity of the women within their households and communities.

St. George’s heroic protection of the Virgin mother became a mandate for all men. St. George’s iconographic affiliation with the Virgin Mary contributed to the social and sexual oppression of the politically defunct medieval woman. The legend provided early social-architects with the medium and audience needed to establish and guide the misogynistic conceptions of chivalry and courtly love. The legend perpetuates the patriarchal authority it

helped institute by allowing oppressors the social reward of identifying with St. George.

Alternatively, if a male or female failed to adhere to these mandates, they could both be subject to public rebuke, or, worse, guild intervention (Riches 138). St. George became an authority figure, and many of his medieval guilds were concerned with “social control” (Riches 138).

Early purveyors of the pairing propose that a St. George-like resolve is required of men if women are expected to retain their virginity. St. George’s unflinching faith characterizes the saint as the perfect male companion. His celibacy²⁵ excludes him from being a threat to the Virgin’s chastity. But while the martyrdom legend’s religious thematic reverberated in the ears the pious, St. George’s chivalric orders may have fallen by the wayside with many had they not been associated with the saint’s manly soldiering.

The saint’s “supposed military background” as a Roman soldier, who “served ... with distinction ... was undoubtedly a factor in his later popularity” (Hogarth 19). The fact that “soldiers are not often saints” did not hinder St. George’s popularity; it actually broadened his appeal (Hogarth 19). Hogarth explains that “the turning point in George’s posthumous career came with the Crusades ... at the siege of Antioch in 1098,” where hard-pressed Christians were reportedly led into battle by a heavenly army headed by St. George (19). “A century later, [during the Third Crusade,] St. George rendered similar assistance to Richard Coeur de Lion at the siege of Jerusalem” (Hogarth 19). St. George’s distinction as “soldier-saint” made him an ideal figurehead for the Crusades. The crusaders’ evocation of St. George shows that they identified with his holy warrior status. Their ability to draw battlefield inspiration from his apparition speaks to their reverence for the character. “The returning crusaders would bring

²⁵ Although Riches explains that St. George and the princess marry in most post-medieval versions, she clarifies that this is not so in medieval versions that clearly present the saint “emulate[ing] the monastic vows of poverty, chastity and obedience” (97).

back to their native lands feelings of respect for a Saint that had so signally helped them to victory” (Hogarth 19). The crusaders re-energized the legend and strengthened the saint’s cult.

St. George’s reinvigorated reputation for battlefield prowess in the wake of the Crusades informs the saint’s slaying of the dragon; because, not long after the Crusades, during the mid-thirteenth-century, Dominican Jacques de Voragine’s version of the saint’s life, as it appears in the Golden Legend (c. 1260), amends the martyrdom motif to include St. George’s battle with the dragon (Hogarth 19). “The popularity of the [Golden Legend] was enormous” (Hogarth 19). The addition of the dragon marks a significant change in the evolution of the legend; the image of St. George slaying the dragon became a very popular “visual and literary motif” (Riches 100). “It is in his capacity as a dragon-slayer that George is henceforth celebrated, rather than as a martyr” (Hogarth 19). All subsequent versions include St. George’s battle with the dragon.

St. George’s legend became an often-revisited subject during the Middle Ages, with artists of every medium capitalizing on both the popularity of the dragon-slaying motif and the saint’s “status as an icon of chivalric virtue” (Riches 179). Several recognizable authors and poets adapted the legend, including John Lydgate, Alexander Barclay, and William Caxton, but few deviate from the tradition instituted in Voragine’s Golden Legend. “In essence ... the story varies very little ... in this form ... throughout the Middle Ages” (Hogarth 20).

Richard Johnson’s late Middle Age adaptation The Most Famous History of the Seven Champions of Christendome (1576-80) ushers in the early modern era of St. George’s legend by establishing the post-medieval standard for subsequent accounts of the saint’s life (Riches 179), including the Ernest Rhys’ fairy tale that begins Eudora Welty’s Our Wonder World storybook. Johnson’s romanticized version exemplifies the “strong, and long-standing tradition of embellishment of the basic narrative in England” (Riches 21). Many of Johnson’s changes

became standards of the legend, like the saint's Anglicization; he casts St. George as the English-born son of a nobleman, "Lord Albert, the 'High Steward' of Coventry" (Riches 180). The Anglicization of St. George, along with his reputation as a soldier, allows Johnson to establish the saint's English knighthood and re-emphasize his heroism in the mold of the popular Arthurian legend, which drew inspiration in part from the Golden Legend incarnation of the St. George myth (Riches 182). "[V]ersions of the tale from the seventeenth century onwards tend to be concerned with the establishment of St. George as a ... figure of chivalry" (Riches 186).

St. George would no longer be known primarily as a religious figure. Johnson recasts the saint as an English knight. His adaptation deepens England's veneration of the saint²⁶ by making him a symbol of masculine and national pride. Before, in the hands of the pious, St. George's veneration idealized his disciplined piety, but here, under English direction, Johnson emphasizes the character's heroic chivalry and violent masculinity. His adaptation "entirely omits the important motifs of the torture and martyrdom of the saint" (Riches 182). The dragon takes the place of St. George's tortures, and his dragon slaying represents his martyrdom, his overcoming of sin (Hogarth 19). This is not to say that Johnson abandons St. George's Christian resolve altogether; the hero retains both his faith and his soldier-saint status as one of the Seven Champions of Christendom, a group of holy warriors charged with spreading Christianity. He does, however, lose his late medieval classification "as a virginal, or at least chaste, hero" by marrying and having three sons with Sabra, the princess he saves from the dragon (Riches 99).

²⁶ Riches finds that the cult of St. George existed in England from earliest times. His popularity would increase exponentially during the Middle Ages, beginning with The Synod of Oxford's 1222 edict that officially declared St. George's date of martyrdom an observed holiday (103). But "it was not until the time of Edward III (reigned 1327-77) that royal devotion to St. George really came to the fore" (Riches 103). "Perhaps the greatest testimony to Edward's devotion to St. George was the founding of the Order of the Garter [during the winter of 1347-48]... and the establishment of St. George's Chapel at Windsor Castle," which "was actually a rededication and partial rebuilding of a royal chapel dedicated to St. Edward the Confessor," whom St. George usurped as the patron saint of England around 1351 (Riches 106).

Johnson's turn on the legend presents St. George as the Late Middle Age's ideal English male: a masculine, brave, chivalrous, Christian, nobleman, with a wife and three legitimate male heirs.

Riches credits Johnson's adaptation with initiating St. George's marriage to the princess (99). Johnson's betrothing marks a first in the tradition. The saint's "sexuality is never identified explicitly in medieval narratives of his life," even though the "hero-rescues-maiden-from-dragon romance," from which his dragon-slaying legend derives,²⁷ "invariably" sees the hero marry the princess (Riches 96). In a few instances, "St. George is explicitly said to be offered the princess's hand in marriage as a thank-offering following the defeat of the dragon," but "it is never resolved through the marriage of the rescuer to the rescued" (Riches 96). This "subversion of the original [hero-rescues-maiden-from-dragon] schema," Riches explains, "clearly indicates the saintly nature of the deliverer: he is a Christian hero who is far more interested in converting... people from their heathen ways than in claiming a prize of marriage, or even money or land" (97). Riches speculates that Johnson marries St. George to establish the hero's masculinity by placing him in the recognizable roles of husband and father (Riches 99). Johnson's presentation of the hero broadens the saint's appeal by emphasizing his manliness.

Johnson's "embellishments" establish the English tradition; henceforth, St. George would be known as an English-born mounted knight, who slays a ferocious dragon to save a beautiful princess. He would still be known as a Christian-warrior, but Johnson's adaptation emphasizes

²⁷ The motif of the hero saving a maiden from a dragon or other monster is an ancient one. Riches writes "virtually every recorded human culture seems to have had at one version of the story of the hero and the monster" (27). Several heroes from classical mythology slay dragons, sea monsters or other fantastic monsters, including Zeus, Thor and Apollo, but Hogarth finds the myths of Herkales and Perseus "so closely... resemble each other that they can only be variants of the same story, attached to different place and different heroes; and each is so similar to the Golden Legend version of the life of St. George as to suggest that this legend is in turn derived from the earlier ones" (Hogarth 22).

the character's manly bravery. "Subsequent reworkings of the St. George legend tend to be far more prosaic, and often add little to [this] basic narrative form" (Riches 186).

Rhys' adaptation, "St. George and the Dragon," modernizes the legend, while remaining a relatively faithful retelling of Johnson's version. As we turn toward Rhys' fairy tale, be cognizant that it draws heavily from Johnson's version, just as Johnson's drew inspiration from the Golden Legend and martyrdom variants, all of which incorporated aspects from much older oral and written narratives. The fairy tale that Eudora Welty encountered as a child, in many ways, exhibits the legend's earliest "serv[ice] as a tool of religious propaganda and sexual politics" (Riches 178). By "invert[ing St. George's] heroic narrative" and "revers[ing] the gender conventions" (Donaldson 5) contained within, Welty not only satirizes the St. George fairy tale from her storybook, she confronts literary history's lengthy masculine bias.

The heroic standard and gender dynamic in Rhys' fairy tale descended from ancient misogyny. Margery Hourihan explains²⁸ that "the conceptual center of a hero story consists of a set of binary oppositions," which evolved from the philosophical concept of "fundamental dualism," an idea that allowed thinkers like "Plato and Aristotle" to structure the world into manageable binaries: "humans to animals, free men to slaves, men to women, reason to passion, and soul (or mind) to body" (15, 2). These oppositional binaries "shaped Western thought," but lead to prejudice and bigotry by claiming that one of the things held a "natural superiority" over the "inferior" other (Hourihan 16). For centuries, "white European men" used dualism to assert their superiority over women and people of color (Hourihan 2). The dualism behind the gender binary indirectly resulted in the social and sexual oppression of countless women.

²⁸ In Deconstructing the Hero: Literary Theory and Children's Literature (London: Routledge, 1997), Hourihan analyzes the structure and meaning of children's quest adventures. She asserts that "the story of the hero and his quest... is always essentially the same," and it almost always propagates the "superiority, dominance and success" of the white male (1-2).

“Christian thought largely mirrors these values, and links them to the concepts of good and evil” (Hourihan 2). The Old Testament establishes a religious precedent for oppressive gender binaries. It sets forth a gender ideal similar to St. George’s; and, it too, rewards male purveyors of female oppression with a badge of moral righteousness, a guise of Good. Although not a Biblical character, St. George’s sainthood resulted in his characterization as good.

St. George remains a good Christian in Rhys’ tale. Like Johnson’s romanticized adaptation, Rhys casts St. George “among the brave heroes known as the Seven Champions of Christendom,” a group united under the precipice of “rang[ing] the wide world over in quest for adventure” (2); but regardless of their stated goal, their tacit mission is Christian conversion. The early circumstances of the Champions’ journey reveal their true agenda: they “rode forward... till they came to a broad plain, where seven different roads met, and where a brazen pillar was set up in the center” (Rhys 2). The brazen pillar signifies that their directives come from God and the seven different roads presumably represent the Earth’s seven continents. With “each [Champion] choosing a different road,” it becomes clear that their true objective is the global expansion of Christianity (Rhys 2).

With their mission in hand, the Champions set off to enact God’s plan. The legend makes it clear that the Champions expect a fight, or some measure of resistance: “They had armed themselves like knights-errant” (Rhys 2). Again assuming the role of Christian knight, St. George represents the Middle Age’s heroic masculine ideal, two sides of the same coin: a moral, pious, and disciplined Christian with a courageous and violent battlefield prowess. God morally

legitimizes St. George's violent soldiering, which allows him to retain his classification as a good, morally sound character, a prerequisite for fairy tale heroes.²⁹

Rhys introduces St. George as morally righteous and heroically brave. The character assumes the role of good in the author's recycling of the legend's ancient good versus evil paradigm. With Christianity donning the guise of good, Islam and unsanctioned sexuality, the latter in the metaphoric shape of a ferocious dragon, constitute the evils that St. George must dispatch. St. George sets his sights for Egypt. He actively seeks out "a ship about to sail... to that eastern land," where he plans to renew his crusading rivalry with Islam (Rhys 2). In the East, St. George encounters several immoral Muslim emperors whose countries are "unhappy" because of oppressive laws (Rhys 6). Playing off the Saint's motivational evocation during the Crusades, the Muslim leaders consider St. George "a dangerous enemy to the Mohammedan religion" (Rhys 4). These "Pagan monarchs" represent the antithesis of the good Christian, St. George, who liberates the people of Persia at the end of the tale by defeating³⁰ the evil emperors and enacting his own "wise new laws" (Rhys 6). Rhys' fairy tale and the entire St. George legend for that matter perpetuate religious prejudice. The fairy tale classifies Islam as evil because of its difference from Christianity.

In Delta Wedding Welty confronts the hegemonic biases that wrongly equate difference with moral or social inferiority. Her challenge to fairy tale hegemony may have been provoked

²⁹ Hourihan finds the adventure hero to be universally good, so that he can "regard any opposition as evil" (58). The hero can have "weaknesses," but his superior morality always wins out in the end (58).

³⁰ Although "defeating" here might imply that St. George killed the emperors, in actually, two of the three (King Ptolemy and the Sultan) commit suicide (Rhys 6); and the third, "Almidor, the Black King of Morocco," was "led in chains to Tripoli, and there put to death" (Rhys 6). Killing the emperors would compromise St. George's heroic righteousness. The suicides emphasize the Muslim emperors' cowardice and immorality.

in part by war. Marris explains³¹ that Welty understood that racial and religious intolerance led to the Second World War. Inspired by the heroism of those serving in the war,³² she wanted desperately to contribute to their effort (Marris, EW 120). She thought she might do so through her writing,³³ but found it difficult to write about the war from a direct approach.³⁴ Instead, the remarkably creative author manages to indirectly oppose Hitler's homogeneous worldview by confronting the fairy tales' hegemonic propagation of the white, European, Christian, chivalrous, male as the masculine ideal. Welty diversifies masculinity and deflates male superiority by heroicizing George Fairchild because of his difference from the suggested ideal. Welty's skewing of the fairy tale's hegemony is a subsidiary of her subversion of the gender biases established in St. George's battle with the dragon; and so, we will focus closely here on the narrative's dragon-slaying scene and emphasize its gender dynamic.

Although his slaying of the dragon constitutes his most indelible triumph, "St. George is not unique in his association with dragons," Hogarth explains: "Well over 100 saints – not to mention knights, kings and other heroes – slew dragons" (20); and, "in all these examples, and many more, the meaning is plain. The slaying of the dragon is an allegory of the triumph of good over evil" (Hogarth 20). With St. George manning the role of good Christian knight, the dragon assumes his familiar position as evil monstrosity.

Rhys' characterization of the dragon establishes the beast as evil, a scourge of the land it inhabits. Egypt is cursed by the presence of the beast: "[T]he whole land was weeping and

³¹ The third chapter of Marris' biography ("Being Apart from What Matters" pp. 85-137) provides the basis for these assertions about Welty and the Second World War, and its affect on her fiction.

³² Welty had two brothers and several friends including John Robinson serving overseas (Marris, EW 85).

³³ Marris writes, "Throughout her career Eudora passionately sought to transform experience into fiction, doing so was a way of understanding, coping with, even redeeming what seemed irredeemable" (EW 90).

³⁴ "[B]etween August 1942 and December 1944," Marris writes, "omnipresent worry" over the safety of her loved ones left Welty "unable to write" explicitly about the war. (EW 90).

mourning, owing to the deathly havoc caused by a dragon” (Rhys 2). “This pitiless beast killed hundreds and hundreds of the people with his poisonous breath” (Rhys 2). The dragon’s “poisonous breath,” a trope initiated in the late medieval period, during a time of plague outbreaks, likens pestilence or disease and may be the result of the Middle Age’s belief that sinfulness perpetuated the deadly diseases that spread throughout Europe (Riches 141-2). As a figurehead of evil, “the dragon ... could be adapted to signify heresy, paganism or sin” (Hogarth 20). The Bible reinforces the dragon’s signification of evil by associating Satan with the tempting serpent from the Garden of Eden (Riches 146). Riches points out that the terms “serpent” and “dragon” are often interchangeable in Biblical scripture, which she concludes led to visual artists depicting St. George’s dragon as physically resembling Satan (146).

At other times, artists depict the dragon in a human form to moralize against specific sins. Several medieval artists³⁵ show the dragon having human female genitalia or lying slain in a sexually suggestive pose in order to equate the monster with female sexuality. Riches finds “the presence of [a gendering orifice,] nipples, breasts, or dugs” a trope unique to St. George’s dragons that “supports the contention that these particular monsters are meant to be read as female” (169); however, Riches thinks it important to note that “[w]hile it is obvious that simple misogyny informs the construction of the feminized dragon, we must be careful not to see St. George’s monster simply as female (177). “Rather,” she asserts, the dragon “stands for a specific type of femininity that is sexual and bestial, everything that is worst about women in the late medieval mind” (Riches 177). “[I]t was widely accepted that... sexualized femaleness

³⁵ Riches explains that “dragons with a ‘gendering’ orifice... occur in at least forty images in the late medieval iconography of St. George,” but she clarifies, “there are literally hundreds, possibly thousands, of images of St. George and the dragon extant from the medieval period, and those that appear to show genitalia constitute a tiny fraction of this number (158, 164).

was... a concomitant of evil and depraved creatures” (Riches 164). The feminized dragon appears a result of a medieval misogynic fear of unconstrained feminine sexuality.

The oppositional binary in the good versus evil paradigm morally legitimizes the misogyny of the feminized dragon. The saint’s chastity presents him “in opposition to the dragon's obvious sexuality” (Riches 172). “[T]he dragon (female, sexual, evil, bestial) is placed, both literally and figuratively, in opposition not only to St George (male, chaste, good, human), but also to the rescued Virgin princess (female, chaste, good, human)” (Riches 172). “The dragon and the Virgin seem to be intended to embody the polar opposites inherent in late medieval attitudes toward women” (Riches 172). The feminized dragon reaffirms the morality of chastity and admonishes female sexuality.

The feminized dragon was largely a visual tradition and only occurs once in written accounts of the saint’s life³⁶ (Riches 175). Rhys’ dragon is a male, but this changes little as the dragon still represents evil. He threatens to make Egypt “a land of death and misery” by devouring the Princess – “the only victim now left to give him” (Rhys 2). The dragon’s habit of “devour[ing]” one “beautiful maiden every day” presents the monster as a serious mortal threat to both the princess and her rescuer (Rhys 2). The monster’s habit has sexual connotations that suggest the dragon, regardless of sex, symbolically represents human sexuality. The dragon’s evil sexuality counters St. George and the Princess Sabra’s chastity. This places the dragon in evil opposition to both of these good characters.

Sabra, like her saintly hero, garnered a reputation for chastity because of her association with the Virgin Mary. In the earliest versions of the dragon motif, the Virgin Mary resurrects St. George so that he can slay the beast and save the princess (Riches 77). A tradition develops in

³⁶ Alexander Barclay’s *Life of St. George* (1515).

the Middle Ages whereby the princess signifies chastity because of the Virgin's intercession (Riches 97). As time passed, the Virgin disappeared as a reoccurring character in the legend and the Princess became her literary descendant, of sorts, by assuming the role of idealized female and filling the Virgin's evacuated void (Riches 99). As a result, Princess Sabra represents a repackaging of the medieval feminine ideal: a chaste, beautiful, voiceless, domesticated woman.

The Virgin Mary's idealized chastity evolved into the Princess Sabra's defining beauty. Both of these misogynic conceptions constrain femininity by selectively idealizing in women just those attributes that medieval men traditionally deemed important. Rhys regularly prefaces the Princess Sabra's name with "beautiful" to propagate her physical attractiveness as the new feminine ideal. Sabra's beauty constitutes her value as a woman; it makes her indispensable to Egypt, she being "the only [attractive] victim now left to give" the dragon to satisfy his one-beautiful-maiden-a-day habit (Rhys 2). There are other females in Egypt, but they are "older women," who are presumably not beautiful anymore, and therefore possess no value to a nation and a dragon that specifically desires "beautiful maidens" (Rhys 2). The fairy tale assigns women value based almost exclusively on their beauty.

Rhys de-emphasizes feminine intellect by providing Sabra with very little dialogue. The princess is a voiceless character throughout much of the story. She speaks her only dialogue three-quarters of the way through the legend as means to restore St. George to honor and arms, but this serves only the functionary purpose of advancing the story to conclusion. She remains a one-dimensional, background character throughout the story and defers the narrative spotlight to the fore-grounded male hero. Rhys manipulates the character in and out of the spotlight like an objectified stage prop: she represents the saint's reward for his dragon slaying; and, she provides St. George with a reason to return to Egypt; in both cases, her value is her beauty.

Placing this high value on a woman's beauty or her chastity commodifies these attributes presenting them as objects that can be lost or tainted and therefore need forceful protection in order to preserve their value. Chivalry rewards male protectors of feminine beauty and chastity with a mantle of heroism. Rhys positively reinforces these misogynic socio-sexual conceptions by propagating the "brave" and "manly" St. George as *the* masculine ideal. The author continually peppers St. George with descriptions of the knight's bravery in order to emphasize his manliness. Men are encouraged to identify with the heroism of St. George and subscribe to his orders of chivalry, while women wait to be rescued in order to be given a "life."

Rhys uses St. George's battle with the dragon to accentuate the hero's manly bravado. He does so in two ways: he characterizes the dragon as a ferocious beast; and his hero slays the dragon with violent efficiency. Although an Egyptian hermit characterizes the dragon as a "pitiless beast... with poisonous breath," which maintains the dragon's traditional representation "as an aggressive, death-dealing creature," the threat of a challenge does not deter St. George (Rhys 2; Riches 152); in fact, it motivates him: "the desire to rid the country of this cruel dragon, fired the courage of St. George. He vowed he would either save the Princess, or lose his own life in the attempt" (Rhys 2). As the battle begins, St. George's death seems a real possibility:

A sound more terrible than thunder announced the dragon's approach, and his appearance might well have made the stoutest heart tremble. His length from his shoulders to his tail was nearly fifty feet; his body was covered with scales, hard as brass and bright as silver, and his stomach was of the color of gold.

He came roaring out of from his den, and set upon St. George so fiercely with his flaming wings that he almost beat the knight to the ground. The knight's lance was shattered into a thousand pieces, and then the dragon gave him such a

blow with his tail that both horse and rider were overthrown, and St. George was flung to the earth and sorely bruised. (Rhys 2)

At this point in the battle, St. George appears a bit overmatched, but as a testament to St. George's courage, the hero mounts an inspired second effort:

Then he arose, and with his trusty sword Ascalon... he smote the fiery beast in the breast. Next while the beast reeled, he gave him a deep thrust with his spear under one of his red wings, so that the weapon pierced his heart and all the grass in the valley turned crimson with the torrents of blood that flowed from the wound. St. George then cut off the dragon's hideous great head, and fixed it on a pole. (Rhys 2-3)

This scene's horrific violence seems peculiar given the storybook's intended audience, but Hogarth explains that the legend has a long tradition of shocking imagery, whether it be the martyrdom legend's elaborate tortures or St. George's brutal mutilation of the dragon (20). The feral violence of St. George's dragon slaying distinguishes his method from the "over 100 saints" that "slew dragons," even among those that "overcam[e] dragons by force of arms" (Hogarth 20). St. George also brutally kills two hungry lions and a "terrifying" Muslim giant in latter sections of the story – all with his bare hands (Rhys 4-5). The narrator says that in battle with the giant, St. George "fought manfully," which accounts in part for the saint's propensity for violence; it accentuates St. George's masculinity to characterize him as a man's man, which broadens his appeal among some men and categorizes chivalry as a practice of real men.

The Ernest Rhys fairy tale captures the essence of the larger St. George tradition, but, in modernizing the legend, Rhys' fairy tale perpetuates the legend's ancient misogynic gender dynamic. The fairy tale empowers the male at the expense of the female who is forced to assume an objectified role based on her value as a beautiful virgin. The male is charged with protecting female sexuality by order of chivalry, and violence is not only permitted, it is preferred. The dragon-slaying motif wrongly assumes that feminine beauty is under constant threat of violation. It also asserts that women are incapable of fending off supposed threats and therefore need some masculine and brave man to intercede on their behalf. Rhys' version even implicitly suggests that men keep women in a domestic setting to limit their exposure to threats of violation.³⁷

I imagine that as a young reader Eudora Welty found "St. George and the Dragon" a bit disappointing because the story never develops the lead female into a substantial character. As a child, with her storybook open before her, Welty probably wondered, 'Why doesn't the Princess get to talk?' or 'Why doesn't the story follow the Princess home?' Welty, being naturally inquisitive, surely desired insight into the character with whom she closely identified. As an adult, "having... read The Golden Bough and The Decline of the West and all kinds of folktales and fairy tales," Welty understood that legends like St. George's evolved over lengthy periods of time and traditionally contained offensive medieval gender biases (Marrs, EW 48). She must have realized that these legends and fairy tales were reflections of the misogynic cultures that produced them, but it must have disturbed her on some level to discover that this sort of children's literature, stories that she had read as a child, indoctrinate the young into biased

³⁷ On two separate occasions in the tale, Sabra leaves home as St. George leaves for battle. Before he rides to the dragon's valley, she "went back to her father's palace" (Rhys 2); and at the end of the tale, before leaving to confront Almidor in battle, "the seven Champions agreed that each one of them should return to his native land in order to place his beloved lady in safety and collect a body of fighting men" (Rhys 6). In both instances, the tale backgrounds the female in the safety of a domestic setting.

medieval mindsets that rationalize the purveyance of religious and racial prejudice and bigotry.

This may explain why Welty sought to subvert the masculine biases that inform St. George's

heroic narrative by queering the legend's hero and skewing its gender dynamic.

CHAPTER 3.
EUDORA WELTY'S FICTIONAL FABRICATION OF
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL EXPERIENCE

Growing up in Mississippi, a state that romanticized antiquated notions of the Old South,³⁸ Eudora Welty must have felt patriarchal pressure to conform to her culture's oppressive socio-sexual standards. The South, even at the time of Eudora's maturation in the 20's and 30's, "was still an apparently patriarchal world" (Westling 27). Louise Westling explains that in the South men venerated Southern women based on the stereotype of the chaste Southern lady, which she shows descended from the ancient devotion of mariolatry by way of Victorianism (15). "The old fashioned ideal of the lady, made demands of [Eudora Welty]... by requiring she meet the "standards by which women were ultimately measured" (Westling 27).

The Southern lady was beautiful, chaste, and cultured, and her heroic male protector, the Southern gentlemen, was brave, moral, and chivalrous. The Old South's gender conventions are similar to those at play in the St. George legend. These gender ideals came to the Old South through Victorianism (Fabricant 53). "The Victorian idea of human perfection" used ideals of chastity and chivalry as means to distinguish proper human conduct from animalistic behavior, which "resulted in extreme sexual repression and concern for moral and spiritual cleanliness" (Fabricant 53). Dan Fabricant explains that Southern planters sought to align with the aristocratic ideals of Victorianism to defend against "hostile social criticism leveled at them by other Americans and foreigners" for their use of slavery (52). William R. Taylor explains, the genesis and perpetuation of the "antebellum myth coincided... with the appearance of militant

³⁸ Dan Fabricant expounds on the South's post-Civil War "antebellum myths of aristocracy and 'The Southern Gentlemen'" in "Onions and Hyacinths: Unwrapping the Fairchilds in Delta Wedding" (52).

abolition movements in the North” (165). White Southern men incorporated chivalry to morally defend the patriarchal stronghold they had established in the region. As part of their antebellum myth, “they touted all Southern planters as descended from Cavalier noblemen,” which provided back-woods agrarians with a conflated sense of moral and ethical superiority (Fabricant 52). The Gent “was a heroic figure, capable of bringing order and culture out of chaos. Marked by concern for family and racial traditions, paternalistic benevolence, and impeccable character and honor, he was a man whose natural impulses were curbed by strict decorum” (Fabricant 52-3).

Women were required to play their idealized part. “The Southern lady was expected to embody the ideals of her culture” (Westling 8). Her “Christian virtues [were] lauded in public to divert attention from problems of slavery and racism” (Westling 8). In the South, female worth, as it had been throughout history, was measured by a woman’s beauty and her sexual purity (Westling 27). “In her ideal form,” the Southern lady came to represent the propagated purity of “the land [and culture] itself” (Westling 9). Placing an exorbitant value on feminine chastity commodifies the sexual attribute and objectifies women. White Southern women became possessions to be worshipped and protected from threats of devaluation; and, as a result, they were expected to behave in a socially acceptable manner to maintain this perceived value.

“[W]omen receded into domestic life” (Westling 20); they were expected to socially and politically defer to men. The “pedestal” on which the Southern male kept his chaste possession, Westling observes, “left the white Southern lady” in “chilly isolation” (23). “Southern men wanted their women kept in cages peripheral, submissive, inert. Any movement towards independence was grimly opposed” (Westling 20). As a corollary, intelligence in women was strongly discouraged. Southern men sought to avoid recreating the type of “strong-minded Northern women in the Abolition and Temperance movements” (Westling 19). “[S]erious

intelligence in women was a terrible threat because it might probe through the sentimental façade” of the Old South, the Southern lady, and the proud Southern gentlemen (Westling 27).

Fabricant notes that “the myth was created out of the Old South’s bid to preserve social order” (52). The perpetuation of the façade meant a continuation of a social construct that empowered the white Southern male. In protecting the honor of the Southern lady, the gentleman was also heroically preserving the values of the Old South. Southern men, Westling explains, accepted the charge of protecting their women, their land, and their way of life from progressive Northerners who sought to destroy the traditions of their culture (14). The fear of losing their cultural stronghold motivated Southern males to adopt and maintain medieval orders of chivalry, but it was the reward of heroism that reinforced the veneration and preservation of the gender ideals beyond the Civil War and Reconstruction eras. During the cultural milieu of the post-Civil War South, male Southerners grasped at the cultural remnants of the Old South to retain some semblance of the power they enjoyed before the war, and chivalry helped them maintain their social control over women and blacks (Fabricant 51). Although during Welty’s maturation “the Old South’s chivalric code was on the wane,” her development was still blighted by a “culture that depended... on chivalric ideals” (Westling 39).

Although Welty recalls “never [meeting] with any prejudice” because of her gender, she was subject to patriarchal authority (Van Noppen 250). Welty experienced smothering patriarchal oversight in her own home. She remembers that her parents (Christian and Chestina) were overprotective because their first-born son “died at the age of fifteen months” (OWB 18; Marris, EW 1). Christian Welty had a cautionary, if not suppressive, influence on his daughter’s early writing career. Although he bought her a dictionary and typewriter, she remembers: “it was [her] mother who emotionally and imaginatively supported [her] in [her] wish to become a

writer” (OWB 81). “It was he who expressed his reservations that [Eudora] wouldn’t achieve financial success by becoming a writer” and advised her “to prepare to earn [her] living some other way” (OWB 81). He considered fiction writing “a waste of time” and forced her to change her course of study before permitting her to attend graduate school at Columbia (OWB 82).

Her father “had been apprehensive about the move to Manhattan” and “only her willingness to enroll in a practical course of study (an advertising/secretarial program) convinced him that [her] time in New York would prove beneficial” (Marrs, EW 25). But home would not be the only setting for Welty’s encounters with patriarchal authority. “Protecting young women was a concern even at a major university in New York City” (Marrs, EW 25). Eudora and a group of female friends from Jackson “were not allowed to share the off-campus apartment they so much wanted” because all female students under the age of twenty-one were required to live on-campus under the watchful eye of a chaperone (Marrs, EW 25). Whether it was her father’s over-protectiveness, her chaperone’s regulations, or the university’s housing regulations, she surely resented misogynistic rules that constricted her social and intellectual opportunities.

Eudora Welty did not begin her writing career until after her father’s death. “He never knew that [she] became a writer” (OWB 81). Although she describes both her parents as “sympathetic” and “supportive,” fifty years after his death, Welty could not tell John Griffin Jones with any certainty that her father would have approved of her literary accomplishments: “I don’t know what he would’ve thought about what I did” (320). Welty’s battles with patriarchal authority took a toll on the maturing author, as she explains, “There is no wonder that a passion for independence sprang up in me at the earliest age. It took me a long time to manage the independence, for I loved those who protected me – and I wanted inevitably to protect them back. I have never managed to handle the guilt. In the act and the course of writing stories,

these are two of the springs, one bright, one dark, that feed the stream” (OWB 19-20). This passage reveals the emotional baggage that Welty carries from these confrontations, which the author admits find their way into her fiction. Welty’s mother was the “supportive” parent “encourage[ing] her [daughter] to reject patriarchal authority” (Marrs, EW xiv). Chestina Welty, being a Southerner (West Virginia),³⁹ was “sympathetic” to her daughter’s plight; she understood that “Southern white women carried a distinctive burden as darlings of their world” (Westling 8).

Welty is an author who “questions conventional systems of sexual politics” (Prenshaw, “Transform.” 19). Delta Wedding “gives us a fictional world that profoundly challenges the roles men and women have been given to play in Western culture” (Prenshaw, “Transform.” 19). In George Fairchild, Welty disassociates male heroism with chivalry. A re-conception of the male heroic ideal, George and his queer heroism sardonically lay to rest the Old South’s chivalric ideal of the Southern gentlemen.⁴⁰ In a novel dominated by women, George retains his heroism, particularly among his female kin, by refusing to subscribe to chivalric ideals. George recognizes Dabney’s right to marry Troy Flavin, he never chastises Shelley for her bookishness, repressing sexuality is not his concern, and saving females is neither his passion nor his forte. “George’s refusal to live falsely... expose[s] the emptiness of the Old South romanticism and suggests that a more personal and modern covenant with life is needed” (Fabricant 53).

Welty’s queering of her novel’s male hero provides a heroic alternative to the hyper-masculine chivalric heroism of St. George and the Southern gentlemen. And although the

³⁹ Eudora Welty told Jones her “mother was a Southerner and a Democrat” and her “father was a Yankee and a Republican. They were different in everything” (Prenshaw, Conversations with Eudora Welty, 321).

⁴⁰ This heroic assessment coalesces with Fabricant’s understanding of the novel: “[It] portrays a well-to-do family in a leisurely agrarian world reacting to the approaching twentieth-century modernism. It reveals the reactions of a last generation of nineteenth-century Southern gentility and the first generation of the twentieth-century” (51).

queering of George satirizes the traditional conception of the male hero, George is first and foremost a representation of a real human being, a “transformation” of someone she has met or known (Little 253). The real life muse for George Fairchild’s queer heroism was Mississippian John F. Robinson, a man with whom Welty shared an “on-again, off-again” romantic relationship with for over ten years (Marrs, EW 56). The Fairchild women’s affinity for George’s “difference” may be Welty’s preference for Robinson’s queer sexuality, which eventually led him away from Welty and into a committed thirty year homosexual relationship. Several textual and biographical clues suggest that Robinson’s queer sexuality provided a template for George’s “difference.” By examining the similarities between reality and fiction, between John and George, Robinson’s influence becomes apparent.

Welty’s philosophy of fiction prioritizes human emotions, personal relationships, and real experience over crusading political commentary; she prefers to present her politics subtly through characters and relationships that emphasize the reality of the human condition. “Her hope for a better society lies not with ‘political ideals,’ but rather in the individual heart” (Prenshaw, “Transform.” 21). John Robinson’s heart consumed Welty’s thoughts as she wrote and expanded the stories that became Delta Wedding. Their relationship and his queer masculinity provided the novelist with the raw human emotions and real life experiences she would use to confront Hitler’s Germany, the Old South, and masculine quest narratives such as St. George’s legend.

There is still uncertainty over the precise nature of their camaraderie. “Welty never discussed [with interviewers] the nature of her relationship with Robinson” (Marrs, OWI 106). She was extremely protective of her private life and actively worked to hide the circumstances of the relationship that she and Robinson shared. “She destroyed sometime in the 1970’s,” “more

than two hundred writings” that Robinson “sent to [her]... between 1946 and 1951... so as to protect his privacy” (Marrs, EW 139). But there are, as Harriet Pollack observes, “little shards of evidence,” namely extant letters⁴¹ and literature⁴² that “Welty and Robinson wrote to each other,” during the 1940’s, that suggest the true nature of the relationship and its affect on Welty’s writing (177). Marrs contends that by the time Welty began “The Delta Cousins,” her “letters show that she was deeply in love” with Robinson and “may well have been in love [with him] as early as 1937” (Marrs, EW 56). Marrs romantically links the two until 1952, even though she concedes that there is no actual evidence to suggest “John and Eudora ever became lovers” (Marrs, EW 151); regardless, she finds theirs to have been “a close... serious relationship” (Marrs, OWI 106).

Friends believed the two were in love. William J. Smith, a poet and friend of Welty and Robinson’s, would tell Marrs that he and his wife “both felt that marriage was in the offering for Eudora and John,” after spending time with the couple in early 1950 (Marrs, EW 188). “At the time, Smith did not suspect that Robinson was gay” (Marrs, EW 188). “And in fact, the Smiths came to feel that Eudora and Robinson were ideal for each other, that their gentleness, their humor, their intellects [and] their talents were perfectly harmonious” (Marrs, EW 188).

Marriage may have been on Welty’s mind as she wrote Delta Wedding, but so was the Second World War, as was fear for the safety of “brothers and friends who entered military service,” Robinson among them (Marrs, EW 85). Robinson enlisted as a private in the Army Air Corps and initially served in Sicily (Marrs, EW 89). “When Robinson... was sent into combat,”

⁴¹ “In 1983, John’s nephew discovered a hoard of Eudora’s letters to John stored under the old family home, and John quickly decided they should be returned to her” (Marrs 140).

⁴² In “Reading John Robinson,” Pollack melds written correspondence, biographical facts, and fictional excerpts from Robinson’s short story “...All This Juice and All This Joy” and Welty’s “Music from Spain” to propose a discursive conversation between the pair. The stories appear to discuss their relationship and Robinson’s sexuality.

Marrs explains, Welty “experienced most intensely the doubling and redoubling nature of hope and despair” (EW 85). Welty’s worries would consume her thoughts during the war, leaving her unable to write fiction for extended periods of time (Marrs, EW 117).

But Robinson would not be in harm’s way for long; he completed “officer training, became a second lieutenant, and was sent to North Africa” (Marrs, EW 99). Eudora, Marrs reveals, was elated that Robinson would “no longer be literally under fire” (EW 102). “For a time, Eudora could abandon worry for loneliness” (Marrs, EW 102). Although Robinson felt guilt for the timely promotion, “Eudora felt no such compunction” (Marrs, EW 102). The dissipation of her anxieties “freed [the author] to write fiction” for the first time “in more than a year” (Marrs, EW 102); and she soon found her purpose: “Eudora sought to send Robinson a piece of home,” something “she hoped would capture his imagination and brighten his days” (Marrs, EW 102-3). “Thinking of John as her audience, thinking of the story as a way of communicating more fully with him and of making his situation more bearable... she turned to the Mississippi Delta, which Robinson’s ancestors had helped to settle, where he had taken her to visit, and about which he had told her so much” (Marrs, EW 103). “Not surprisingly, when Welty did write fiction again, she wrote about a world that Robinson had shown her” (Marrs, OWI 78). “By early November [1943] she had completed “The Delta Cousins,” the short story that she would later expand into Delta Wedding (Marrs, EW 103).

Welty mailed Robinson a copy of “The Delta Cousins” and, the story fulfilled its function: “It cheered Robinson up” (Marrs, EW 103-4). He “liked the story,” and by Marrs’ estimation “John seems to have been moved by Eudora’s devotion” (EW 103-4). Publishers would not be as accepting. Mary Lou Aswell at Harper’s Bazaar recommended “the story be substantially cut and suggested that digressive episodes could be eliminated” (Marrs, EW 104).

But Welty could “not be persuaded... to make cuts,” because of the story’s “very personal origins” (Marrs, EW 104). Despite her agent’s encouragement⁴³ to expand the story into a novel, she shelved “The Delta Cousins” for nearly a year (Marrs, EW 120).

She revisited the story when concerns for Robinson’s safety resurfaced. Again he served as a catalyst for Welty’s construction of fiction. “Eudora learned that John Robinson was participating in night-fighter missions” (Marrs, EW 119). “Robinson, feeling guilty about scheduling young men for these missions, chose to accompany them” (Marrs, EW 119). “When Eudora realized that he had willingly put his life at risk, she was distraught” (Marrs, EW 119). “In the midst of – and perhaps because of – her renewed sense of his heroism[,] Eudora returned to fiction and the characters she had created for him in “The Delta Cousins.” In “A Little Triumph,” she developed episodes that she would eventually revise and incorporate into... Delta Wedding. Shortly before Christmas [1944] she sent the new story to Robinson” (Marrs, EW 120-1). He liked the story, but “sensed that ‘A Little Triumph’ contained more than a portrait of the South, and Eudora expressed pleasure with his reaction” (Marrs, EW 120-1).

Robinson’s assessment of the story may have to do with the inclusion of Uncle Raymond’s (renamed George in Delta Wedding) homoerotic subduing of two black boys.⁴⁴ The story was Welty’s hint to Robinson that she knew about his sexuality and accepted his individuality. “A Little Triumph,” Marrs explains, “speaks in opposition to the racial [sexual and religious] categories on which Hitler insisted, which had so long characterized southern culture, and which denied the importance of the individual” (EW 121). “[C]entering her fiction

⁴³ Welty told Charles T. Bunting in a 1972 interview that “it was Diarmuid Russell who told me it was a novel. I sent him something called ‘The Delta Cousins,’ and he read and sent it back and said, ‘This is Chapter Two of a novel’” (Prenshaw, Conversations with Eudora Welty, 47).

⁴⁴ George’s scene with the African-American boys is examined in detail in the following chapter.

on the private lives on individuals,” allowed Welty to “call for values she believed the nature of war threatened – respect for each individual’s sacred worth” (Marrs, EW 127).

“Having written two interrelated stories about a Mississippi Delta family, [Welty] set about doing even more with the subject, and a visit to John Robinson’s cousins in the Mississippi Delta provided the spark she needed” (Marrs EW 127). On a trip to Webb, Mississippi (his hometown) in February of 1945, Robinson’s cousins allowed Welty “to read the diaries of Nancy McDougall Robinson, John’s grandmother” (Marrs, EW 127). “These diaries helped [Welty] incorporate ‘The Delta Cousins’ and ‘A Little Triumph’ into” Delta Wedding (Marrs, EW 127). The diaries “provided a history for the fictional Fairchild family,” which Marrs notes is missing in the previous short story versions of the novel (EW 129). This was important because Welty was not wholly familiar with the particulars of plantation life being from Jackson, a capitol city.

The diaries’ introspective glimpses into the individual psyche appear to have had an additional influence on the author. Welty develops an inner-conscious narration that reads like personal diary entries, and she narrates portions of the novel through a character’s journal entries. The intensity of these “interior esthetic contemplation[s],” as Issac Rosenfeld critically christens them, depicts the depth and diversity of real Southern women. Through the innermost thoughts and feelings of the Fairchild women, the author gives her audience insight into the emotions, relationships, and human experiences that shape individual political thought. The narration provides a glimpse into the plight of the early twentieth-century Southern women, and through the Fairchild women’s veneration of George Fairchild, it provides a positive vision of what could be if humans were more accepting of others. But this political commentary is subtle. As a novelist, Welty “does not argue” (“Must?” 149); rather she “hopes to show, to disclose. [Her] persuasions are all toward allowing [her] reader to see and hear for himself” (“Must?”

149). Welty explains that “crusading fiction” fails to initiate change because the noisiness of the message is lost in the crowd (“Must?” 153). She understood that for political assertions to resonate with readers and change their beliefs or behaviors, the politics must “keep a private address” by speaking to the audience’s “mind and heart” (“Must?” 153).

The author connects with her reader through recognizable emotions. “Emotions,” Welty contends, “do not grow old” (OWB 52). She told interviewers that she writes out of her own “emotional experiences,” taking real life events from her life and changing them, while retaining the feelings of the experience: “It’s a transposition” (Little 253). In describing the method of the “ordinary novelist,” Welty summarizes her own technique: “taking a particular situation existing in the world, and what [she] feels about it in [her] own breast and what [she] can make of it in his own head, [she] constructs on paper, little by little, an equivalent of it” (“Must?” 149). For Welty, having previously felt the emotion is essential: “I couldn’t write about any important emotional thing if I had not experienced it” (Little 253). More times than not, relationships provide the outlet for Welty’s transposed “emotional experiences.”

Welty often structures her stories and novels around familiar human relationships, such as a family or a romantic attachment. She admits that love and relationships are the “real subject[s]” of her work: “What other kind of story is there? It’s the basis for any kind of structure of the story – narrative and plot – the drive, the spirit, what makes the human. It’s the center of all the stories. Human relationships are all that matter” (OWB 86; Wolff 265). Welty theorizes that her career and her fiction benefited from a centering on “human relationships” (OWB 86). She concludes that because relationships are easily recognizable to her and most people, the emotions associated with relationships – positive or negative – are likewise

identifiable (OWB 86). "Brutal or lovely," Welty explains, "the mystery [of relationships] waits for people wherever they go, whatever extreme they run to" ("Writing" 114).

But Welty's fiction and the relationships within are "not merely a translation of the personal into domestic... dimensions, but the elevation of the personal into a political principle" (Marrs, EW 135). The author admits that human relationships can be used to convey any number of political purposes; they have the ability, as she puts it, "to spread out as a destination however unlikely" ("Writing" 114). By grounding her fiction in recognizable human relationships and establishing an empathetic rapport with her reader, Welty shows how broader political issues affect the average human being on an emotional and personal level.

In Delta Wedding, through both family and romantic relationships, Welty demonstrates how patriarchal authority constrained Southern women, and men too, by forcing them to project antiquated chivalric ideals. Given opportunity to read the thoughts and feelings of the diverse Fairchild women, we see their individualities threatened by "a Southern world [that] provide[s] a dishonest basis for a girl's identity as she [grows] into a women, and dishonest grounds for relations with men" (Westling 27). Battle Fairchild, the novel's patriarch, and his siblings – "the last generation of nineteenth century Southern gentility" – stifle young women's individualities and the region's social progression by "groping to preserve a bygone romantic era" (Fabricant 51). The affect on the younger generation is profound: Shelley becomes insular; Dabney marries Troy in a doomed exercise of rebellion; and Laura feels isolated for her mother's past digressions.⁴⁵ But Welty provides hope, in the form of a new male heroism, one that the

⁴⁵ Laura's isolation may be a consequence of her mother Annie Laurie's migration from the Delta, which I discuss in detail in the following chapter.

Fairchild women are shown to internally revere for its “difference” from the traditional ideal, the type propagated in the St. George legend and in the idea of the Southern gent.

Welty’s new conception of the heroic masculine ideal owes something to John Robinson. We have already seen that he had a significant influence on her creation of Delta Wedding. She wrote it for him, mailing him chapters as she completed them, and delighting in his approval of what she sent. She even dedicated the novel to Robinson.⁴⁶ During her creation of the novel, Robinson was Welty’s knight in shining armor, and being so, it seems feasible that he provided a real-life blueprint for the novel’s hero. But Welty was diffusive about the origins of her characters. She would tell Jean Todd Freeman that “it would be impossible” to take a real person and transform them into fiction (179). She denied, in several interviews, ever writing with a real person in mind. But some of Welty’s friends disagreed with this contention, namely Katherine Anne Porter. Confronted with Porter’s dissension, Welty admits, “a character has bits and pieces of somebody,” before clarifying, “they are really conceptions of the imagination” (Gretlund 213). Welty explains: “The characters who go to make up my stories and novels are not portraits. [They are] characters I invent along with the story that carries them. Attached to them is what I’ve borrowed, perhaps unconsciously, bit by bit of persons I have seen or noticed or remembered in the flesh” (OWB 99). If Robinson did not wholly inspire the author’s creation of George Fairchild, then “bits and pieces” of her real life hero informed the character.

But Welty protected her and Robinson’s “strong... sense of privacy” by saying that she could never write about “people to whom [she was] close” because they “do not yield to [and] could never fit into, the demands of a story” (OWB 100). The emotions that loved ones conjure, Welty explains, are “too deep, too overflowing, ever to be plumbed outside of love” (OWB 100).

⁴⁶ Welty also dedicated the short story, “The Wide Net” to Robinson.

These earnest efforts at concealing Robinson's influence contradict what Welty tells us about her creation of fiction: that "things in [her] life were used in the stories, but they were very much transformed" (Lee 146), that she writes out of her own "emotional experiences" (Little 252), that she centers her stories and novel's around "real human relationships," and that her stories, while not autobiographical, are "very personal" (Gretlund 213). Her denials also conflict with recent criticism, particularly Marrs' and Pollack's works that theorize that the relationship influenced Welty's development of select short stories. Welty's tactful elusiveness hides Robinson's influence, but it obviously existed. We can agree that Welty's intentions were not to mirror the life of Robinson or any real person; rather, she incorporated aspects of Robinson and other real people to transform them into characters that helped her satisfy her story's larger designs.

Robinson redefined Welty's conception of heroism, and she sought to capture his masculine diversity in her fiction. George's laudable attributes represent the qualities that Welty revered in John Robinson, the "bits and pieces" of Robinson that "moved [Welty's] storytelling mind to complicity" (Gretlund 213; "Writing" 108). Unlike the masculine ideal propagated in heroic quest narratives and aristocracy myths, George's queer heroism lacks chivalry, accepts diversity in women, embraces difference in others, chooses not to stage a manly performance, and participates in sexual relations with members of either sex. George does not subscribe to hegemonic mindsets or oppressive gender binaries because his existence proves their assertions false. His sexuality provides him with a different heroic sensibility and a distinct individuality, but in 1923 Mississippi, it makes him an outsider. Welty describes George as "an outsider" in a 1986 interview (Devlin and Prenshaw 106). George has no intentions of supporting a culturally-driven gender dynamic that attempts to exclude him, and the Fairchild women love him for it.

Robinson likely provided the blueprint for George Fairchild's cultural rebellion. The gender dynamic of the Southern gentleman and the Southern lady failed to account for queer sexuality, or any diversity for that matter. Robinson seemingly rejected Southern gender conventions and value systems in the same way he shunned the region by relocating to San Francisco and later Italy after the war. And by that same token, he was ambivalent or indifferent to suppressing feminine sexuality and protecting chastity. Welty and Robinson's relationship shows that Robinson embraced diverse conceptions of femininity and rejected the manly tropes of chivalry and patriarchal authority. He also displayed no qualms about feminine intelligence. Robinson "shared [Welty's] passion for literature and language," supported her in her quest for artistic fulfillment, and, for a few years after the war, also "pursued [a] career related to the arts" (Marrs, EW 208). Each was often the first to read the other's work in the 1940's, and they even collaborated on projects together. Welty found Robinson's masculinity liberating, which may explain George's ability to sexually and artistically liberate the Fairchild women.

Delta Wedding redefines male heroism from a medieval standard of chivalry and machismo, the type propagated in the St. George legend and in the idea of the Southern gentleman, to a sincere and achievable masculine ideal, a heroic sensibility not threatened by feminine diversity or female sexuality, and accepting of individuality. George Fairchild's queer heroism is key to everything Welty wants to accomplish in her foray into the genre, while paying homage to Robinson's queer masculinity and heroism. Regardless of the larger political aims behind her queering of the masculine heroic ideal, George Fairchild, first and foremost, represents a human being. She hoped to capture and explore the human condition, not just a stereotypical or politicized caricature. On a human level, her literary explorations are an effort at understanding the psychology and libidinal behavior of queer men, with a particular focus on

how their sexuality affects their relationships. These biographical circumstances justify Welty's interest in male queerness as more than a superficial purveyance of exploitive subject matter or stereotypes. Her purpose seems sincere; she sought to understand the man she loved, the young, closeted John Robinson.

CHAPTER 4.

EUDORA WELTY'S CHARACTERIZATION OF GEORGE FAIRCHILD

In February 1945, as Eudora Welty launched into expanding the short stories “The Delta Cousins” and “A Little Triumph” into her first full-length novel Delta Wedding, she worried that a novel was beyond her authorial abilities (Freeman 180). Welty’s reservations about the elongated form of the novel may explain the novel’s nuclearization around the extended Fairchild family. The clan stretches across several generations and includes deceased members whose stories loom portentously over individual family members. Welty uses the Fairchild’s genealogy as a deep character pool to draw from in her authorial expansion into the genre.

The foreboding size of the group isolates the individual Fairchild. The family’s legacy weighs heavily on their self-identities, especially those of the women. But why does their want for recognition, differentiation and individuality lead Laura, Shelley, Dabney and Ellen to venerate George? What is it about George that differentiates him from the group? As previously noted, none of the many critical explanations for the family’s affinity for George theorize a queer sexuality despite a plethora of strong textual evidence to support a queer reading.

George Fairchild’s sexuality provides him an identity apart from the Fairchild norm, a removed position the narratively-privileged Fairchild women revere. The suffocating uniformity of the Fairchild legacy provides no space for self-identity. Welty avoids subtlety in propagating the Fairchild family uniformity; her characters regularly discuss the likeness of the group, as is the case when Laura concedes, “the boys and men, girls and ladies, and all the old and the young of the Delta kin... were alike – no gap opened between them” (DW 102). Several family members make similar claims. Ellen, a Fairchild by marriage, observes that all her children – indeed all the Fairchilds – physically resemble one another (DW 110). The mother of eight is no

longer surprised by the hereditary trend, and notes, “she had never had a child to take after herself and would be astonished as Battle now to see her own ways or looks dominant” (DW 110). Further confounding hereditary chance, all of the Fairchilds – including George – are “left-handed,” even though Battle breaks his offspring of the trait (DW 100). They share numerous unflattering characteristics, such as bad tempers (DW 194, 203), forgetfulness (DW 120), unintelligence,⁴⁷ “vanity” (DW 247), and “conceited” natures (DW 104, 277). These family-wide characterizations communicate an unfavorable uniformity.

The family and region remain intertwined in the cultural remnants of slavery and the Old South. The Fairchild legacy affords the group the leisure they enjoy throughout the novel; but the legacy looms over the entire clan and weighs heavily on individual family members’ identities. The Fairchilds wield a great deal of influence in the region, but the legacy casts an inescapable shadow in the Delta. The Fairchild name precedes members wherever they go in the region. The family’s three plantations homes (Shellmound, The Grove, and Marimon) constitute the heart of the Fairchild’s self-sustaining hamlet. The children attend Fairchild Elementary and the community purchases groceries from Fairchild’s, the local market. In the Delta, the Fairchilds, especially the women, have no public identity outside their legacy. They are trapped by an inescapable Fairchild history that emphasizes family first.

The Fairchilds also publicly propagate the storied and, at times, deadly exploits of its family – past and present. All the Fairchild men, save for George and Battle, were killed in war, which complicates an already grim family history; these deceased family members are male Fairchilds that attempted to assert themselves outside of the Delta and the family’s immediate regional influence, and most died violent deaths. Annie Laurie, Laura’s mother and George’s

⁴⁷ Shelley says, “[N]one of the Fairchilds are smart” (DW 172).

sister, represents one of the few women to exert herself outside the Delta, but again the attempt ends tragically with her death.

The deadly exploits of past family members provide a dual proclamation to the maturing generation: only men will be allowed to exert their individualities outside the Mississippi Delta, and such an excursion will likely result in death. This proclamation may represent the Southern white male's metaphorical fear of progressivism.⁴⁸ Their legacy, because of its propagation of power, wealth, prestige, and external appearance, overshadows the individual Fairchild by prefacing and complicating, if not suffocating, their identities with an inescapable family history.

On a human level, Welty provides readers perspective through glimpses into the "significant thoughts and feelings" of Laura, Shelley, Dabney and Ellen Fairchild, but their thoughts, Ruth Vande Kieft points out, "seldom break into [spoken] words" (94). Ironically, their introspectiveness captures a family isolated from one another in spite of an impending wedding dictating their close proximity and "shared activity" (Vande Kieft 94). At a time when the family is spatially close, the Fairchilds, as individuals, could not be farther removed from one another. Shelley recognizes the family's isolation from the world, and from one another: "I think one by one we're all more lonely than private and more lonely than self-sufficient" (DW 173). The family's legacy and the older generation's use of patriarchal authority blanket the individual and require that emotions, personal desires, opinions, resentments, laudings, fears, and concerns be suppressed to maintain the plantation culture's status-quo. "What they felt was *second* (DW 247). Vande Kieft speculates that Battle and Ellen's plantation home, appropriately named "Shellmound," may be an authorial nod to the shell wall that the Fairchild's have built to shield

⁴⁸ See chapter two of Louise Westling's Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens for an thorough examination of the Southern mindset before and during Welty's authorial maturation

“against [outer] exposure” (95). Shelley realizes that, “[A]ll together we have a wall, we are self-sufficient against people that come up knocking, we are solid to the outside” (DW 172-3). Their solitude protects their culture from progressivism, but it leaves individual family members isolated, especially the women, who are expected to project the image of the Southern lady.

Annie Laurie’s daughter, Laura McRaven brings a valuable outside perspective to the novel having been raised outside the Delta and away from the Fairchilds. During her return to the Delta, the Fairchilds treat Laura like an outsider by either ignoring her, handling her with indifference, or enacting unwarranted physical abuse on her. This treatment seems particularly odd for two reasons: first, Laura represents Annie Laurie’s existential remainder; and secondly, she appears genuinely interested in connecting with the family, for they are a genealogical link to the mother she lost six months prior. From her removed perspective, she characterizes the individual Fairchild’s isolation using metaphor, “Laura found herself with a picture in her mind of a great bowerlike cage full of tropical birds her father had shown her in a zoo” (DW 103). She notes their external beauty, but cautions that their “sparkle...was the very thing that broke your heart, for the birds... were caged all the time and could not fly out” (DW 103). Laura quickly realizes that they were not free, but rather “they were compelled” (DW 103).

One of the Fairchild “birds,” however, has flown the coop. Why is George not “compelled” to remain caged like the others (DW 103)? What is it that differentiates him? Why is he allowed to exert himself outside the family sphere? Why is he allowed to live in Memphis, away from the Mississippi Delta and the Fairchild plantation? What is it that makes the women admire him so? It is the “difference” in George, a mystery.

Ellen demonstrates a perceptive eye for George’s “difference.” Fabricant finds that Ellen’s “adult view is the most encompassing in the novel” (58). Being keenly aware of those

around her may be a consequence of the fact that “Ellen had grown up not especially trusting appearances” (DW 246). Her perceptive eye for difference also discerns George’s left-handedness, a trait, she reveals, that Battle was “determined” to break in all their children (DW 111). Ellen points out, “George had remained left-handed,” and it “was somehow visibly apparent not just momentarily but always” (DW 110). Battle’s “determined” insistence supports a queer reading of left-handedness by reading suspiciously like an abjection of George’s “difference.” George’s sinistral preference shows that he embraces his innate differences. Left-handedness queers George by attributing him with qualities that threaten Battle’s patriarchal wont for homogeneousness. History’s stigmatization and hetero-social abjection of queer sexualities parallel the precarious situation historically afforded the southpaw. Welty recognizes the similarities and symbiotically combines the two in order to satirize the biased physical, mental, and moral stigmatizations that inform hetero-normalization.

“Left-handedness” possesses a lengthy etymological history with multiple distinct negative connotations. The Oxford English Dictionary (O.E.D.) defines the figurative connotations of “left-handed” as either a physical or mental deficiency (“Crippled, defective”), or a debilitating character flaw (“Awkward; clumsy, inapt”) (“left-handed,” def. 2a, 2b). Because lefties function in a world designed for the manipulative benefit of the right-hander, they have been stigmatized as dexterously deficient and thus physically queer. The stigmatization of the left-hander harkens the cultural plight of the queer. They live in a culture designed to benefit the dominant faction, and both are stigmatized for their difficulty, inability, or refusal to so.

Furthermore, left-handedness became linked with mental deficiency and psychological immaturity. Jack Fincher reiterates, giving his youthful understanding of the stigma:

“[s]omething, we were given vaguely to understand, was wrong with [left-handedness], psychologically” (18). The psychological derogation of the lefty resembles the situation afforded queer sexuality; until as late as 35 years ago, the American Psychiatric Association classified homosexuality as a mental disorder (Weiten 472). Like social and sexual queerness, left-handedness became symptomatic of a developmental disturbance that parents, teachers, and others, in like positions of power, sought to eradicate in young children, which explains in part Battle’s “determined” insistence to break his children of the habit (DW 111). George’s decision to remain left-handed is a heroic act of rebellious disobedience; the character will not quell his traits in order to satisfy a contrived hetero-normative ideal, regardless of the consequences.

“Left-handed” also connotes moral impropriety. The O.E.D. reflects this figurative meaning in defining “left-handed” as “characterized by underhand dealings,” while other entries mark the characterization with contemptuous detractions like “ill-omened, inauspicious, [and] sinister” (“left-handed,” def. 2c, 4). Moral objections to left-handedness, like those that condemn homosexuality and other forms of queerness, emanate from literal readings of Biblical scripture. History’s defamation of the left-hander, Fincher observes, has origins in “[b]oth the Old and New Testament,” which “refer repeatedly to the grace and power residing in, on, or at the right hand of God” (31). Fincher explains that “human hands are the inevitable symbols of all the fundamental dualisms underlying religious thought: good and evil, sacred and profane, the divine and the demoniac” (42). Biblical descriptions of God’s right-handedness, because of the polarity of religion and “the dichotomy inherent in opposing hands,” created an oppositional moral bias whereby the “left... is almost universally bad” (Fincher 41, 37). It should also come as no surprise that in nearly every visual account of St. George’s battle with the dragon, he slays the beast with his morally righteous right hand.

The stigmas associated with left-handedness persisted into Welty's youth, as did the methods used to forcibly train school-age children to use their right-hand. Welty was "born left-handed, but the habit was broken when [she] entered the first grade. [Her] father had insisted. He pointed out that everything in life had been made for the conveyance of right-handed people, because they were the majority, and he often used 'what the majority wants' as a criterion for what was for the best" (OWB 25). Fincher testifies to the prevalence of the stigma and to one mode of intervention in a story from his childhood. During the 1930's, after a first grade teacher caught him clutching his pencil southpaw, she brutally rapped on his left hand until he finally relented and wrote with his right hand (Fincher 17-8).⁴⁹ Fincher likens his experience to being forced "into the closet," which incorporates the vernacular of stifled queerness to describe the shame associated with his teacher's physical intervention (19). Welty understood that the power structures commissioned with eradicating difference incorporate oppositional binaries as a way of de-legitimizing the other; she knew from first hand experience how it worked, and her character's left-handedness and his queerness challenges these prejudices.

But left-handedness is not the only "difference" that Ellen discerns. She observes George's physical dissimilitude. He "was markedly bigger and fairer than any of them in the portraits, as if he were not a throwback to the type" (DW 110). She notes that George is a "new original – a sport of the [genealogical] tree itself" (DW 110). Ellen's use of the word "sport" has scientific meanings that refer to a plant or animal that "exhibits abnormal or striking variation from the parent type," but in true Weltian form – always obfuscating – the word may also connote "sexual intercourse" with a pun on the common use of the word to denote "recreation

⁴⁹ His experience harkens the power structures that Foucault found regulate "the sexual conduct of the population" by declaring that sexual activity, especially in young children, was "an object [for] analysis and... a target [for] intervention" (26).

derived from or afforded by an activity” (“sport,” def. 6a, 1c, 1b). A third possible meaning defines “sport” as “a matter or incident providing entertainment, diversion, or amusement; a joke, a jest” (“sport,” def. 3a). Ellen’s use of “sport” shows that she recognizes George’s difference and revels in his variation.

“Sweetness” is not typically idealized in male literary heroes, but Dabney often refers to George as “sweet” (DW 125). She and Tempe call George “the sweetest man in the Delta” (DW 130, 247). Dabney explains, “he had an incorruptible, and hence unchallenging sweetness at heart” (DW 135). “George and Denis were born sweet” and the women revere both (DW 125). Dabney understands from watching George ogle a floating butterfly, that “...he was different, somehow... It was very strange, but she had felt it” (DW 122). But his “[s]weetness,” Dabney realizes, “could be the visible surface of profound depths – the surface of all the darkness that might frighten her” (DW 125). While not proof of George’s queer sexuality, these statements characterize George as markedly “different” from the other Fairchilds, specifically in his “sweet” and “tender-hearted” emotional capacities (DW 125, 203).

Battle Fairchild is far less endearing. All the women allude to Battle’s searing temper. Laura calls her Uncle Battle a “Fire-eater” and fully expects him to “take up some fire and eat it... some night at supper” (DW 100). Battle represents a traditional paternal leader. He attempts to control his family, even though Dabney recognizes that he is powerless to stop her impending marriage to Troy (DW 120-1). Dabney delights in the fact that, as a maturing woman, she can defy “her father’s [patriarchal] wishes” (DW 120); and, Ellen admits, “It [is] killing Battle” (DW 114). “[N]ot wanting to let her go,” he was “relentless” about talking her out of marriage, which explains his disposition throughout the novel (DW 120); he constantly seems to be angrily “groaning,” “fuming” or “puffing” (DW 139, 109, 107).

The women prefer George's liberating masculinity to Battle's authoritative type. George lacks Battle's "glower of fatherhood" (DW 110). He refuses to suppress individuality or sexuality through patriarchal oversight; he rejects patriarchal authority as "the other way to know," because it "seemed [like] calculation and tyranny" (DW 121). George shows Dabney "that there was another way to be" (DW 121). He is accepting of his niece, and her decision to marry Troy. "Uncle George would be on her side" or "he would treat it as if it wasn't any side" which Dabney recognizes "would make [the wedding] better – make it perfect" (DW 119-20). "He would be sweet to her, sweet to Troy... [T]he family [was] leaving any sweetness, any celebration and good wishing, to Uncle George. They had said nothing very tender or final to her yet; hardly any special thing at all" (DW 122). Dabney appreciates George's indifference, especially given Battle's adamant disapproval.

George's rejection of patriarchal authority represents a conceptual subversion of the heroic masculine ideal, St. George. The legend of St. George was for centuries used to perpetuate chivalry and patriarchal authority. George Fairchild represents an antithetic alternative to St. George's hyper-masculine, chivalrous heroism: he cares nothing for preserving feminine sexuality; his passivity reverses St. George's active pursuit of upholding Christian values, and his acceptance of others contrasts St. George's violent enforcement of a hegemonic worldview. He achieves his male heroism by rejecting patriarchal authority and subverting a gender dynamic that refuses to acknowledge diversity and difference.

Welty places George Fairchild in clichéd heroic scenarios that spotlight his "different" brand of heroism. George's introduction harkens the image of St. George: "...[C]oming over the grass in the yard rode Mr. George Fairchild – in his white clothes and all – on a horse," but upon closer inspection, something is queer about George's heroic entry, particularly his horse: "It was

a sorrel filly with flax mane and tail and pretty stockings” (DW 137). George’s pony, a fabulous “wedding present for Miss Dab,” is not the traditional heroic transportation, nor is this a typical heroic entrance (DW 137). His difficulty controlling the horse, “the little filly kicked her heels,” adds to the queer introduction, especially considering the pony was “lady broke” (DW 137). Roxie compliments the satirical subversion of St. George by noting that George forgoes a sidearm for “a flask made of all gold” (DW 138).

George abandons the traditional heroic weaponry because the Fairchild women have no need for a chivalrous male hero. They prove self-sufficient, with the possible exception of Maureen and her showdown with the Yellow Dog, but even this supposed threat proves false. His attempt at saving his mentally-challenged niece satirizes both male heroism and the classic heroic scenario, in which a brave hero saves a maiden from a monster or other dangerous threat, here an approaching train. Welty rewrites the heroic scenario to point out that women do not need rescuing. She subverts the heroic scene in a number of ways: the mentally disabled Maureen represents neither an ideal damsel in distress nor an average woman; George failed to dislodge her foot from the trestle, gave up his efforts, and passively waited for the approaching train, and the death it entailed; it was actually Maureen that saved the two by pushing George who fell backward and pulled her down with him; and finally, the Yellow Dog cannot represent a real threat because it stopped before reaching the point where it would have harmed the pair. John Allen asserts that because the train stopped, “the incident became officially... shorn of every trace of the tragic or heroic” (36). By subverting the familiar heroic scenario, Welty confronts the perception that femininity is under constant threat.

But saving Maureen is not George’s only queer attempt at traditional male heroism. Dabney Fairchild remembers that Uncle George once broke up a knife fight between two

African-American boys “on the bank of the bayou,” but her memory of George’s heroic deed provides strong evidence of his queer sexuality. “It was then she had discovered in Uncle George one first point where he differed from the other Fairchilds, and learned that one human being can differ, very excitingly, from another” (DW 123). Her memory has strong homoerotic overtones, especially given George’s nudity: “Uncle George and Uncle Denis... had just come out of the bayou, naked, so wet they shone in the sun, wet light hair hanging over their foreheads, and they were stamping their feet, flinging out their arms, starting to wrestle and play, and Uncle George reached up and caught the knife” (DW 123). Then “turning, [George] rushed in among the thrashing arms and legs” (DW 123). George’s nude self-incursion into the fracas suggests homoeroticism, especially given Denis’ indifference: “Uncle Denis walked off, slipping into his long-tailed shirt, just melted away into the light, laughing” (DW 123).

Beyond his nakedness, Dabney remembers, George was “exultant, wild” in his bound subjection of the boys (DW 123). “George grabbed the little Negro that wanted to run, and pinned down the little Negro that was hollering” (DW 123). It seems odd that George confines and then binds the two boys when simply separating the two would have ended the quarrel. If George had wanted to stop the boys from harming one another, he could have accomplished this by permitting the boy to leave. But there seems to be no reason to bind the pair, as they were petrified, “the young fighters were still as mice” (DW 123). After George subdues the two, Dabney presents the proceedings abstractly:

Uncle George cussed the little Negro for being cut like that. The other little Negro sat up all quiet and leaned over and looked at all Uncle George was doing, and in the middle of it his face crumpled – with a loud squall he went with arms straight out to Uncle George, who stopped and let him cry a minute. And then the

other little Negro sat up on the ground, the small black pole of his chest striped with the shirt bandage, and climbed up to him too and began to holler, and he knelt low there holding to him the two little black boys, and saying, still worriedly, “Damn you! Damn you both!” (DW 123-4)

Although it seems that “all Uncle George was doing” refers to his bandaging of the second boy, it may actually refer to gay male sex. Reading George’s actions as a bandaging is an unsatisfactory explanation because almost immediately afterward, “He asked them their names and let them go” (DW 124). It makes little sense to bandage the boys, hold them close, ask them their names, and then immediately release them, if they genuinely needed medical attention.

The frenzied scene with its “blood[iness],” “hollering,” “crying” and “thrashing [of] legs and arms” conjures imagery of rape, even though the young men were physically involved with one another before George and Denis arrived on the scene (DW 123-4). The “face crumpl[ing]” and “loud squall[ing]” suggests an ejaculation or an orgasm (DW 123). A sexual reading of the scene provides a more satisfying explanation for George’s actions with the boys, as opposed to criticism’s general understanding of the proceedings as an embracing of the cultural other. Rather, I would argue that George’s pseudo-sexual knife fight is Welty’s allegorical nod to the Fairchild’s exploitative relationship with African-Americans.

The knife adds to the violence and homoeroticism of the scene. J. S. Leonard theorizes that Welty uses the knife as a phallic symbol in the skirmish (114). It becomes an object of initiation; George caught the flung tool as his introduction into the fray (DW 123). The knife became airborne “with the jerk back of a little wrist” (DW 123). Dabney’s admits, “[I]t was a

big knife – she was sure it was as big as the one Troy could pull out now” (DW 123). As a young adult, Dabney now understands the nature of her uncle’s “difference.”

The participants’ reactions to the event are telling. The boys react to their situation with distress (DW 124). After George releases the boys, Dabney relates that one of the two, “the one with the scar on his neck, had given trouble,” possibly discussing George’s actions, “and her father had let him go” (DW 123). If George’s actions were legitimate, then why had one of the boys “given trouble”? Dabney recalls feeling afterward that George had done something to alter her view of him, “He stood looking not like a boy close kin to them, but out by himself, like a man who had stepped outside – done something. But it had not been anything [she] wanted to see him do” (DW 124). George chose not to mention the incident later at dinner (DW 124). Because he avoids the subject, Dabney “was astonished, and then sure of a curious division between George and the rest” (DW 124). “It was all something that the other Fairchilds would have passed by and scorned to notice... yet went to a law of [George’s] being, that came to it, like the butterfly to his sight” (DW 124). The scene’s homoerotic overtones suggest the true nature of George’s “difference.”

Anomalies in George Fairchild’s marriage with Robbie Reid erode its legitimacy. Robbie’s androgynous name is Welty’s hint to investigate the troubled relationship. Moreover, nearly everyone in the Fairchild household still refers to her by her nickname and maiden name – “Robbie Reid.” The family refuses to afford her the Fairchild surname. It is unclear whether they withhold the name to question the legitimacy of their marriage or to preserve the sanctity and solidarity of the Fairchild clan. The family views Robbie as “threatening” and “endanger[ing]” to both George and the Fairchild way of life (DW 113).

Robbie, a Fairchild outsider, ignores the Fairchild dictate for self-censorship. Through inner contemplations and public outbursts, Robbie expresses the extent of the couple's difficulties. The marriage is not what she expected. She had not known what to expect from marriage, but knows "It was not this" (DW 233)! George fails to meet her expectations in a husband. "Robbie believed in her soul that men should rule the roost," but George showed "her that there were two kinds of people" (DW 234). Miss Mayo recognizes that George shuns his role as husband, warning Robbie: "It's bad for a girl to put a man's hat on" (DW 231). But the couple's troubles are deeper than his refusal of the patriarchal reigns. Robbie reveals that the two are emotionally separate for long periods of time: "It was [George's] way" to be emotionally removed, "as if he took long trips away from her which she did not know about, and then came back to her as to a little spring where he had somehow cherished only the hope for the refreshment that all the time flowed boundlessly enough" (DW 250). In Robbie's metaphor, her inadequate "refreshment[s]" are the motive for his emotional "trips away" (DW 250). Her unsuitable "refreshment[s]" have sexual connotations that refer to the couple's lack of passion or physical intimacy (DW 250). Robbie confirms as much by relating that she longed for "the pure, animal way of love" (DW 237).

The distance between the two is often an actual spatial remove; she waits "when George went away on a case or was late coming home" (DW 228). The town locals have their suspicions about the couple. Miss Mayo, in interrogating a distraught Robbie at the Fairchild's store, supports the young bride's suspicions, "I believe those Fairchild men are great consorters" (DW 231). Dr. Murdoch – a local physician – uncloaks his understanding of the relationship: "George and the Reid girl probably won't have children – he doesn't strike me as a family man"

(DW 224). These suspicious passages never amount to a public accusation of adultery or homosexuality, even though they allow for the possibility of both.

The contents of George's "blue letter" hold the true circumstances of "his predicament," his secret, his mystery (DW 163). Laura recognizes the import of its contents: "All his secret or his problem, or what was in the blue letter, though she did not know what it was, was sharp to her... and real and as cutting (and perhaps as filled with dreaded life) as a seashell" (DW 164). Welty never elaborates on the contents of the blue letter; much like the shadowy girl that Ellen encounters in the woods, the mysterious letter "seems to suggest alternative stories and possibilities" to which the reader is not privy (Donaldson 10). But there are hints of the secret. The letter refers to "a predicament" in Memphis where George and Robbie live. The shadowy girl that Ellen meets in the woods, the same girl that George admits to sleeping with by the "old Argyle gin," asks to be pointed in the direction of Memphis, which links George, Robbie, the shadowy girl, and the blue letter to "Memphis... the old Delta synonym for pleasure, trouble, and shame"⁵⁰ (DW 167, 160). Furthermore, Robbie dislikes Memphis, calling it "the dirtiest place in the world," which may allude to George's "predicament" (DW 228).

By admitting to a sexual liaison with the girl, George gives his "predicament" the shape of marital infidelity. But John Allen challenges the validity of George's confession (42); he wonders if the shadowy girl really exists at all, and points to the girl's apparitional appearance and the surrealism of the scene, as evidence that the meeting was a dream (44). Allen recognizes that the scene closely resembles a dream Ellen had earlier conveyed to her youngest daughter Bluet at naptime (43-4). "Because Ellen is describing something 'lost' long before Bluet's birth,

⁵⁰ In an interview with Clyde White, Welty explains: "Memphis and New Orleans... were places of pleasure, where you went for your flings" (Prenshaw, Conversations with Eudora Welty, 251).

the facile interpretation functions as a representation of Ellen's lost sexual innocence" (Patterson 53). Ellen attempts to retrieve the accessory, and her lost innocence, by searching for the pin under the actual physical tree from her dream, but she finds the shadowy girl instead.

The mysterious girl has "an important symbolic connection to the lost pin" (Westling 74). "Reading this scene as a parallel to the dream," Patterson asserts, "places the girl in the same position as the pin" (54). The girl becomes a symbol of feminine sexuality. But if the young girl's "nearly perfect... beauty" represents the purity and innocence of girlhood sexuality, then her tattered clothes and disheveled appearance represent a violation of that beauty (DW 158). In finding the girl, "the thought of Robbie Reid crossed [Ellen's] mind," which is interesting because later at Shellmound, Ellen senses "a quality of violation... quivering alive in Robbie" (DW 158, 255). The shadowy "spirit" represents Robbie's "lost" innocence, and not Ellen's as some have suggested (DW 160).

If George sleeps with women, young boys, mature men or whomever, his true transgressions are against Robbie, for causing her to lose her girlhood innocence. Robbie feels that George has become a "boogie-man," a threat like in a "nightmare" (DW 238). But in reconciling with her husband, Robbie becomes complicit in her own violation, which may account for the death of the shadowy girl in a subsequent scene. Her self-betrayal becomes the girl's fatal wound. Robbie becomes the pursuer and sets out on a pain-staking journey to Shellmound; she walks most of the way after wrecking George's car outside Memphis. Robbie's return to the Delta inverts the romantic scenario whereby the male hero overcomes several obstacles to reunite with his beloved. While Robbie gathers herself at Fairchild's grocery before walking to the plantation, Troy describes Robbie's appearance and, in doing so, alludes to the tribulations of her quest: "You look like you've been to Jericho and back" (DW 229).

Robbie learns from Troy that while she walked for miles to reunite with her husband, George was napping leisurely in a hammock at Shellmound (DW 229). George's lack of action characterizes his indifference to reuniting with his wife. Robbie is dismayed by his lack of concern: "I might have known he wouldn't hunt for me – I could kill him" (DW 230). Ellen recognizes that "George... won't say a word or go after [Robbie]" and that "he's left it up to her" to reconcile the marriage (DW 194, 195). Ellen discerns that George was indifferent to a great many things, including "Robbie's anguish" (DW 275).

In spite of George's indifference, Robbie still continues on foot toward Shellmound, which constitutes a self-inflicted blow to her pride and youthful innocence, a blow from which her immature understanding of love cannot survive; this explains why Robbie's return to Shellmound coincides with the discovery of a bird in the plantation home. Roxie recognizes the significance of the bird, "Bird in de house mean death" (DW 248). By returning to the Delta and seeking out a reunion with George, Robbie forfeits her innocence, which kills the shadowy girl. The circumstances of the shadowy girl's death are revealing. "She was walking up the track to Memphis," presumably a return to where she originated, and she was struck by a train, the old "Number 3" (DW 307). With the details of the girl's death, Welty concedes that there are serious threats to feminine sexuality, but the danger is in men like George, who break women's hearts and destroy their sexual innocence.

Robbie never communicates the exact nature of George's offense, but the Fairchilds believe that Robbie left George because she saw his actions on the train trestle as his choosing the Fairchild family over her and the couple's marriage. The family supports this conclusion by reciting Robbie's proclamation, "George Fairchild, you didn't do this for me!" (DW 149). Robbie admits that "she cried out for him to come back from his danger as a favor to her," but he

ignored her “and risked his life for that crazy child,” Maureen (DW 235). George’s relationship with his family is a major source of contention with Robbie; it represents *one* of the couple’s marital troubles, but there is an underlying tension with Robbie’s return to Shellmound that suggests the existence of “worse predicaments [and]... darker passions” (DW 255). Robbie concedes that she is the only one who really knows George: “the comfort [the Fairchilds] took in him... was a far cry from *knowing* him” (DW 280). Robbie has special access to George’s secret and in reconciling with her husband, she vows to fight “whatever threatened to waste his life, to lead him away, *even if he liked it*, she was going to go up against if it killed her” (DW 281). Clouded by the emotions of love, Robbie fails to realize that George’s secret has already claimed a victim, her innocence.

George Fairchild represents Eudora Welty’s sincere fictional exploration of sexual queerness. In her reading of Welty’s published autobiographical lectures (One Writer’s Beginnings), Laura Patterson finds that the author “reveals a certain self-consciousness about the desire to know the sexualized unknowable, even from the time she was a small child... [Welty] wanted to hear the stories that remain untold” (39). Delta Wedding is a novel that suggests untold stories. “We learn” by reading Welty’s novel, that in the South during the 1920’s “there [were] other sexual options for women [and men] – including premarital sex, out-of-wedlock pregnancy, and homosocial, if not homosexual relationships – even if those options cannot be told in full detail” (Patterson 40). George’s “difference” is one of the South’s untold stories. Welty posits George’s queer maleness as a legitimate type of masculinity, one seldom given heroic status in literature, although none-the-less present in the real world and the South.

Eudora Welty changes the face of masculine heroism by making George Fairchild’s heroism a matter of both his unique individuality and his passive acceptance of other individuals.

In a novel where women possess narrative privilege, George retains his heroism, in spite of his maleness, in order to communicate a female preference for broadening conceptions of masculine heroism. George Fairchild's sincere and obtainable sort of masculine heroism supplants St. George's hegemonic Christian gallantry, and in doing so, Welty asserts that chivalrous heroism is antiquated, and that men need no longer preserve female chastity. Welty confronts in her novel the hegemonic biases that wrongly equate difference with moral or social inferiority by challenging the fairy tales' hegemonic propagation of the white, European, Christian, chivalrous, male as the masculine ideal. By queering her hero, Welty diversifies masculinity, deflates male superiority, and indirectly opposes Hitler and Mussolini's homogeneous worldview.

CHAPTER 5.

CONCLUSION

Eudora Welty's Delta Wedding is a major authorial undertaking. Welty wanted to accomplish so much with her foray into the genre, but she presents her political commentary so subtly that the novel has only been understood in terms of its constitutive parts, which accounts for its underwhelming critical reception. But the novel deserves the respect afforded the author's most revered work, a position alongside The Golden Apples or The Optimist's Daughter. It is my hope that a new critical understanding of the novel will renew interest in the text, and propel Delta Wedding to its rightful status as one of the author's finest works of fiction.

Delta Wedding, "a feminist interrogation of history and historical perspective," reclaims heroic narrative from a hegemonic masculine bias that marginalized or, in other cases, demonized women and people of color for their difference from the white, European, Christian, male (Donaldson 3). The novel's intertextual reappropriation of the St. George narrative decenters the prejudicial oppositional binaries that inform masculine biases by diversifying sexuality and characterizing the multiplicity of femininity and masculinity, which allows Welty to challenge both the fascist mindsets of Hitler and Mussolini, and the homogenous idea of the Southern gentlemen and Southern lady.

The novel gives the narrative reins to a set of diverse white Southern women: a concerned mother (Ellen), a rebellious teenager (Dabney), an intellectual (Shelley), a shy, sexually maturing girl (Laura), and a disillusioned wife (Robbie). These varied voices diversify the feminine ideal propagated in heroic quest narratives that give a limited conception of femininity and denies the female a perspective, a voice. We see how these antiquated gender ideals affect each Fairchild woman: how they lead some into ill-advised marriages; how they

suppress feminine intellect and sexuality; and, how they constrain femininity by expecting women to assume the role of the chaste Southern lady.

The novel redefines male heroism through the diverse perspectives of the Fairchild females, who unitarily venerate George for his “difference” from the traditional heroic masculine ideal. These feminine perspectives, besides establishing the multiplicity of femininity, challenge the traditional masculinity of the St. George character by depicting a feminine preference for sincere forms of masculinity. George’s queer masculinity subverts the hegemony of literary history’s conception of a manly hero, and his depicted sexual relations with women and men deviate from Western culture’s repressed codes of socio-sexual conduct, the type of chivalric orders propagated in the legend and cult of St. George. George Fairchild takes to the background, deferring to the women, a reversal of the traditional dynamic. He is neither a gallant white knight, nor a swash-buckling hero, nor a chivalrous Southern gentleman and, if anything, George compromises feminine sexuality by having public sexual liaisons with both women and men. His indiscriminating libido poses the only real threat to femininity, but the Fairchild women, except for Ellen who admonishes George, overlook that fact because it primarily affects his wife Robbie, whom they dislike anyway.

In spite of his differences, George retains his heroism by rejecting the oppressive hegemony of traditional male heroism, which liberates the Fairchild women from an oppressive gender dynamic. “He takes the [Fairchilds] one by one,” and accepts each as an individual (DW 173). Shelley recognizes that “George spoils us, does not reproach us, praises us, even, for what he feels is weak in us” (DW 173). He accepts their differences. “George loves a great many people, just about everyone in the Delta... [he] loves countless people” (DW 254). “George loved the *world*” (DW 125). Welty deposits George’s accepting form of heroism as a new heroic

mold, one that confronts St. George's forceful institution of a hegemonic Christian worldview, while indirectly challenging the fascist mindsets that led to the Second World War.

A queer reading of George Fairchild corresponds with criticism's general understanding of the author and her novel. The queering is confluent with the criticism of Donaldson, Harrison, Ladd, Mark, and Yaeger, who all argue that Welty "invert[s] heroic narrative" and "reverse[s] the gender conventions of Western quest myths and narratives" (Donaldson 5). George's queer heroism allows Welty to confront "patriarchal myths and masculine texts," specifically the St. George legend (Mark 3). Through George's queer masculinity, Welty explores the "conflict between the need for individual autonomy and the equally powerful need for community," which constitutes another major vein of the novel's criticism (Glenn 50). A queer reading of George compliments, if not strengthens, critics' understanding of the novel as both a rewriting of heroic narrative and a text concerned with individuality. George Fairchild and his queer heroism is key to everything Welty accomplishes in Delta Wedding, which explains why the Fairchild women repeatedly emphasize his "difference."

Although the queering satirizes St. George's masculine persona, George Fairchild is first and foremost a representation of a real human being. Welty captures and explores the human condition, specifically the realities of sexual multiplicity, and not merely stereotypical or politicized caricatures. The real life muse for George Fairchild's queer heroism may well have been Mississippian John F. Robinson. Robinson consumed Welty's thoughts as she wrote and expanded the stories that became Delta Wedding. The Fairchild women's affinity for George's "difference" may be Welty's preference for Robinson's queer sexuality. Their relationship and his queer masculinity provided the novelist with the raw human emotions and real life experiences she would use to confront Hitler's Germany, the Old South, and masculine quest

narratives such as St. George's legend. Critics recognize that Welty's relationship with Robinson influenced her creation of short fiction during the 1940's, but none have applied such a reading to George Fairchild, or Delta Wedding, even though evidence suggests that Robinson's family provided a template for the Fairchilds. It is my hope that an analysis of the similarities between reality and fiction, between John and George, makes Robinson's influence on Welty and her fiction more apparent. This analysis also places Welty's awareness of Robinson's queer sexuality before the September 1945 completion date of Delta Wedding, which aids scholars by placing Welty's awareness of Robinson's sexuality at an earlier date than previously suggested.

There are, however, future avenues for criticism to explore. A more thorough analysis of the Fairchild women would further explicate their diversity, would offer a detailed understanding of how chivalric ideals and patriarchal authority affect their individualities, and would further explain how George's heroism liberates each respective woman. In this study, I attempted to give a sampling of each of the Fairchild women, but admittedly I could only scratch the surface of the available characterizations because of length and focus considerations. Likewise, an analysis of the other men in the novel could prove beneficial by distinguishing George's queer masculinity from Welty's other depicted forms of masculinity. Further research on this topic necessitates a study of the written-correspondence between Eudora Welty and John Robinson and a reading of "Delta Cousins" and "A Little Triumph," the unpublished manuscripts that Welty later expanded into Delta Wedding, all of which is available at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

The novel also lends itself to a performative reading of gender, with Shelley Fairchild providing excellent evidence for such a reading, "[T]he behavior of all *men* were actually no

more than this – imitation of other men” (DW 286).⁵¹ Eudora Welty, an astute observer of sexuality and gender, offers a conception of human sexuality that foreshadows modern gender studies, and predates Judith Butler’s invaluable work in performance studies by nearly a half-century. It would be very interesting to apply Butler’s theories to Welty’s depictions of masculinity and femininity.

A queer reading of George offers a more critically satisfying understanding of the character, explains his veneration by the Fairchild women, and elucidates his importance to our understanding of the novel, because Welty “invented” George to “carry out what [she] want[ed] to do in the story” (Gretlund 213). Additionally, this study provides academia with further examples of the author’s unique creative and imaginative processes. George Fairchild is neither a simple inversion of St. George nor an exact portrait of John Robinson, but rather a satiric meshing of the St. George character with John Robinson’s queer sexuality. Welty constructs George Fairchild through “confluence,” an imaginative melding of what the author has read (myth, folklore, and fairy tale) with what she has experienced, i.e., memories, emotions, people, and relationships, a culmination of all her “human experience[s]” (OWB 102).

⁵¹ Donaldson and Costello each offer performative readings of Troy’s imitative ice pick scene, but each fails to sufficiently compare it to George’s homoerotic knife fight.

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