

Gail L. Mortimer

*Daughter of the Swan: Love and Knowledge in Eudora Welty's Fiction*

Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1994. Pp. 213

Reviewed by Joan Givner

Welty's fiction, characterized in its first phase by obscurity and allusiveness, has always presented a challenge to critics. However, after the death of her mother when Welty was in her sixties, her work took a turn towards overt autobiography and greater clarity. The fictions of the second phase—her autobiographical novel, *The Optimist's Daughter*, and her autobiography, *One Writer's Beginnings*—can be used as keys to the earlier works.

Gail L. Mortimer in this comprehensive and intelligent study grounds her readings theoretically in Nancy Chodorow's influential book, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, and in the extension of Chodorow's work by Carol Gilligan. Mortimer's approach is entirely appropriate since mother-daughter relationships are at the core of Welty's work. Through the lens of "mothering theory," Mortimer examines the tension between the desire for freedom, knowledge, and autonomy and the restraining forces of protective parental love—a tension painfully experienced by Welty and projected on to her characters.

One reason for the popular appeal of Welty's work (the autobiography was on the *New York Times* bestseller list for almost a year) is its benign presentation of the world of childhood, and, indeed, of the world in general. Some critics have expressed skepticism about Welty's benignity. Notably, Carolyn Heilbrun sees the lack of anger as a result of its nearly perfect repression rather than its absence.

If I have one quibble with this excellent study, it is that Mortimer is too easily seduced by Welty's rose-colored picture of the world. She would have done better to follow D.H. Lawrence's advice to trust the tale rather than the artist, for her reluctance to follow up Carolyn Heilbrun's insights smacks of naiveté.

Mortimer notes Welty's enthusiasm for Yeats and her passion for myths and legends, but in her exploration of the influences on Welty's style there is a significant omission. Mortimer pays little attention to Welty's lifelong fondness for fairy tales, even though they compose a large part of *Every Child's Story Book*, of which Welty has said: "I located myself in these pages." The omission is surprising since Mortimer is a student of feminist critics such as Gilbert and Gubar, who have done important readings of fairy tales. An examination of Welty's use of fairy-tale motifs from the perspective of Bruno Bettelheim is revealing. He points out that fairy tales combine overt and covert meanings in order to accommodate the child's acceptable and unacceptable emotions about the family. The ubiquitous evil stepmother of the fairy tales becomes the recipient of the anger and hatred which cannot be directed at the good mother.

The wicked stepmother is associated with the mother figure in both Welty's autobiography and her novel. *The Optimist's Daughter* begins with the protagonist's father sitting "on the raised, thronelike chair" flanked by his daughter and her stepmother. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that the daughter's good

mother and her wicked stepmother have much in common. In the best fairy-tale tradition, they are versions of the same person with the negative characteristics displaced on to the stepmother.

Welty's anger is neither absent from her fiction nor totally repressed; in fact, it is expressed strongly, albeit covertly. When she says that she located herself in fairy tales, it is often in the daughter figure of Snow White, whom the stepmother tries to poison, deprive of breath, and ultimately of life. Such a line of exploration would, I think, have proved more fruitful for Mortimer than her extended comparison of Welty with Faulkner. Her use of Faulkner as the masculine counterpart to Welty sets up a false dichotomy and perpetuates a system of binary oppositions.

Saad Elkhadem

*Wings of Lead: A Modern Egyptian Novella /*

*Ajnihah min Rasâs: Qissah Misriyyah*

Fredericton, N.B.: York Press, 1994. Bilingual edition. Pp. iv + 23 + 21

Reviewed by Hussein Kadhim

The experiences of the Arab student in Europe have provided the subject matter for a relatively large number of modern Arabic fictional works. Among popular treatments of this theme are Tawfiq al-Hakîm's *Bird of the East* (1938), al-Tayyib Sâlih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1966), and Yahya Haqqî's *The Saint's Lamp* (1944). *Ajnihah min Rasâs*, which was published in Cairo (Dâr al-Ma'ârif) in 1971, has been translated into English by the author and appears here for the first time in a bilingual edition; it is undoubtedly one of the most significant additions to this "sub-genre" in Arabic literature. More similar treatments are likely to follow as the incidence of displacement grows in response to worsening economic conditions and increased political and social repression throughout the Middle East, and as writers attempt to come to terms with their experience of exile. As a matter of fact, Saad Elkhadem himself has written two more works that deal with the same subject matter: *The Ulysses Trilogy* (1988), and *Trilogy of the Flying Egyptian* (1990, 1991, 1992).

Access to the world of *Ajnihah min Rasâs* is gained exclusively through the voice of its first-person unnamed narrator. From his fragmented narrative the reader gleans that he feels rejected by his native Egypt, having been denied admission by universities there because of his poor grades, spurned by the girl he loved, and mistreated by his domineering older brother, who receives preferential treatment from his parents.

Like many of his compatriots, the protagonist of the novella looks to the West for an opportunity he could not find in his native land; he goes to Europe "to quench his thirst for freedom, knowledge, and love" (8). He ends up in Vienna, where he attempts to enroll in a medical school. However, his hopes of becoming a medical doctor prove short lived; poorly prepared, confused, and unable to concentrate, he fails to meet the admission requirements of Austrian universities.