

ANALYSIS

“Maria Concepcion” (1922)

Katherine Anne Porter

(1890-1980)

“Besides ‘Flowering Judas,’ two of the stories in this book, ‘Maria Concepcion’ and ‘The Cracked Looking Glass,’ would be almost perfect by any standard. In these two, and to a lesser extent in ‘He,’ the author has superimposed rhythm and melody on the confused feelings of an inarticulate person, not in such a way as to bring pattern into a life that lacks it, but rather to bring into the reader’s senses, more often by sound than definition, the emphases inherent in a character’s living.... All the reticence, violence and power of Maria Concepcion are in the carriage of her body when she takes her fowls to market.... It is not absurd to speak of perfection in this context.”

Eleanor Clark

“Flowering Judas and Other Stories: Cameos”

New Republic 85 (25 December 1935) 209

“‘Maria Concepcion’ is a simple, direct story (the first Miss Porter ever finished...) of a young Mexican peasant woman who kills the girl who threatens to steal her husband from her, and thus wins back her husband and restores her universe to order.... It is only after a cold act of murder that her world assumes its former balance. But this murder does not disturb the Mexican peasant girl who commits it and who regards it as merely something she has to do in order to retain her peace and happiness. The story closes on a note of peaceful domesticity, a strange contrast to the violent means by which the peace has been obtained.... So Maria Concepcion returns to the elemental existence of the earth she loves and understands, and the savage primitivism of which she is herself an expression.... ‘Maria Concepcion’ illustrates the plight of an individual driven to take the life of another, and one who can do so without raising any questions of morality, but simply as a means of gaining a desired end.”

Harry John Mooney, Jr

The Fiction and Criticism of Katherine Anne Porter

(U Pittsburgh 1957) 48-49

“‘Maria Concepcion’ is the portrait of a young Indian woman in Mexico, illiterate, poverty-stricken, yet proud and wise in her native dignity. Her husband Juan works, intermittently for an expedition of archeologists led by the American Givens, but he is indolent and lacks character. Juan flirts with another girl, Maria Rosa, and when Maria Concepcion discovers the intrigue he runs away with Maria Rosa to the sporadic war which can always be found going on in the region. Maria Concepcion bides her time; when Juan returns she accepts him back, but goes secretly and kills Maria Rosa with a knife, saying, ‘For me everything is settled now.’ Opinion in the peon community condones the murder, and the authorities have no evidence to charge her with the crime; Maria Concepcion goes home contentedly from the investigation with the baby of her rival, which as Juan’s offspring she considers rightfully her own child. At the end, secure in the circle of her family, she feels a ‘strange, wakeful happiness.’

The key quality in Maria Concepcion’s character is that she always acts instinctively, in accordance with her elemental impulses, and is therefore guiltless and serene in everything she does. Her reactions are basically savage (as opposed to civilized) and at the same time deeply feminine; e.g., it is feminine of her that her resentment is against her rival Maria Rosa rather than against Juan, toward whom she feels merely amorous and protective. Her ‘crime,’ as civilization would regard it, is the natural and instinctive act of a woman who feels her home menaced by the seductions of a rival.”

Donald Heiney

Recent American Literature 4

(Barron’s Educational Series 1958) 319-20

“That her reputation remains at a peak cannot be doubted. Since her first story...Miss Porter has never gotten a completely unfavorable review. She has been praised by *Time* and the *New York Times* with equal enthusiasm. The *Saturday Review* has unequivocally placed her in the category of Flaubert, Hawthorne, and James... In ‘Maria Concepcion’...the footloose and irresponsible Juan is drawn back to the life-pattern incorporated in his wife, who dispassionately murders her rival to possess her husband’s child.... The sterile ‘Mary of the Conception’ kills the ‘Mary of the Rose’; *i.e.*, the principle of ritualistic propagation destroys the principle of love....another example of Miss Porter’s explorations in the theme of the death of love as a part of man’s destined suffering.”

James William Johnson
“Another Look at Katherine Anne Porter”
Virginia Quarterly Review (Autumn 1960)

“‘Maria Concepcion’ is a cool, bright study of Mexican peasants, showing neither disapproval nor admiration for their primitive ferocity. There they are, as vivid as art can make them; the reader supplies the point of view. We see Maria in the beginning, married, pregnant, and totally happy. That is the peasant in her: she wants very little, but achieving it, she achieves a complete content that is unknown in the world above her. Juan abandons her for another woman; she loses her baby; and she now becomes as totally wretched as she was formally totally happy. When Juan returns, flaunting his new woman and child, Maria murders the woman, adopts the child, and recaptures Juan. The entire village conspires to block the feeble processes of justice, and Maria goes free, secure in the possession of Juan who ruefully acknowledges to himself that he has at last been worsted and captured by a woman.... Miss Porter understood that, at least on the primitive level, it is the female who must fight to obtain her male.”

Luis Auchincloss
Pioneers & Caretakers: A Study of 9 American Women Novelists
(U Minnesota 1961) 137

“In ‘Maria Concepcion,’ we have a story of competition between wife and mistress, set in the simple surroundings of a primitive Mexican village. Here moral choice is made, not alone by the principal characters, but by the whole community, for they condone the killing of the mistress by the wife, not because they approve of bloodshed, but because they believe that, in a contest between simple sexual pleasure and the marriage bed, marriage and family must win out.... We can see in the cheerful amorality of the Spanish dancers [in *Ship of Fools*] a resemblance to Maria Rosa and Juan Villegas in ‘Maria Concepcion.’ There is a hint of Maria Concepcion herself in the brief appearance of the Indian nurse for Senora de Ortega’s infant on board the ship.”

Ray B. West, Jr.
Katherine Anne Porter
(U Pittsburgh 1963) 8, 39

“All of the stories, as critics have agreed unanimously, display a technical mastery achieved through years of lonely artistic discipline.... ‘Maria Concepcion’[s] heroine possesses the proud self-reliance that will appear later in the autobiographical heroine Miranda. Maria...is portrayed at length and with evident admiration and yet is not at all identifiable with Miranda. Miss Porter has considerable respect for the simple, passionate, elemental life of the Mexican peasant, and as in her portrayals of the South, she sees the best qualities of a society embodied in its women.

Juan Villegas, like the vast majority of her Southern men, is an overgrown child. Maria has only a narrow field in which to exercise her strength of character. Her instincts, corroborated by society and her strong Catholic faith, demand that she preserve her family by any means. Like the grandmothers of the Olde South, she finds herself in a predominantly painful marriage, and like them she asserts her integrity and independence not by escaping from the social framework but by dominating it. During the months while her husband is away at war, accompanied by Maria Rosa, Maria Concepcion lives an isolated life of prayer and hard work, rejecting every offer of sympathy and help from the women of the village: ‘Keep your prayers to yourself, Lupe, or offer them for others who need them. I will ask God for what I want in this world.’ She is not pining for an absent lover; she is, by a long and painful asceticism, purging herself of all dependence and developing the strength she will need to restore by violent and decisive action the family of which she is guardian. In her this process is instinctive, inarticulate, and obscured by a

superstitious piety which gives an air of near madness to her behavior; yet the emphasis on her self-sufficiency is unmistakable. She is the first of a long line of strong, proud, independent heroines, and in her these qualities receive the approval of instinct, of society, and...of all nature....

The story is primarily a portrayal of Maria... The austere, apparently simple style is so perfectly adapted to her serene, elemental wisdom that it is sometimes impossible to say whether a given sentence...is a description of her or a recording of her own thoughts.... Maria clearly dominates the marriage. It was she who bought the license and insisted on a wedding in the church. Though Juan has a job, he is delinquent during the entire period covered by the story; it is Maria who earns and saves.... The hut in which they live is referred to as her house. During the emergency of the murder investigation, Juan assumes with courage and resourcefulness the position of family leadership required by society, but he is only acting out another facet of his romantic idea of himself, and his short time in the role exhausts him completely. The end of the story finds him returned to his former narrow selfishness, sprawled in sleep while Maria sits holding the child of his love for another, which she has in a sense conceived and borne without his help by her act of murder. Juan, however, has learned something; he has new respect for his wife, enough of which will probably endure to preserve their marriage from this time on....

In the first of her published stories Katherine Anne Porter confronts the mysterious forces of nature... and finds that these forces act most strongly through a woman. In obeying them this woman attains a dignity which sets her apart from others. No act of hers, not even murder, rings false to Nature. Her brief, violent disturbance after the deed lasts only long enough to free her from the imputation of inhumanity, and soon gives way to a calm which is not broken even by the sight of the dead girl's face. The women who had criticized her for standing alone now approve of her conduct. Even wise old Soledad...bestows upon her 'the smile of a born wise-woman.' Miss Porter obviously smiles upon her too."

William L. Nance
Katherine Anne Porter & the Art of Rejection
(U North Carolina 1963) 13-15

"The central theme of 'Maria Concepcion' is the strength of life over defeated death, illustrated in Maria Concepcion's treatment of the chickens, in the Indians' unconcern for their buried past, in Maria[s] reasons for murdering Maria Rosa, and in the protection she is then given by her husband and by the Indian women. The opening scene is a brilliant and characteristic performance by Miss Porter; her first published story, it demonstrates a complete grasp of technique.

Maria Concepcion, wife of Juan the head digger at the excavations at the buried city, was hurrying down a path which ran through magueys and cactus with their painful thorns and spines, to take noonday food to her young husband and his employer. The heat, the dust, the lonely, forbidding landscape, are superbly drawn, as is Maria Concepcion, pregnant, walking carefully to keep from stepping on thorns. A proud descendant of the race only partially integrated into Mexican life, she was carrying a dozen live chickens over her shoulder, chickens on the way to market and to death....

From the first scene, Miss Porter introduces the reader to the ironic distance between things as they are and as they should be, between truth and fiction, between expectation and fulfillment, between art and life. She lays bare the ambiguities of life... Maria Rosa, she thought, was her enemy—a whore with no right to live; and the mere fact that she herself had struggled even less when Juan had first seduced her was meaningless—for they had later been married in the church.... Juan did not return to his wife, to the strict young woman who had insisted on a wedding in the church, but fled with Maria Rosa...

In avenging herself on Maria Rosa, she sets herself up as a goddess, decreeing death and taking for her own the newborn baby.... Juan...confident that he could manage the two women...in a drunken stupor attempted to beat Maria Concepcion, to become again the master of his household. She resisted, even struck back... It is clear in Miss Porter's story that this seemingly primitive society with its own order, its own morality...was being encroached upon by a harsh Nature, a Western religion, and the more sophisticated society of the outside world. Maria Concepcion could re-establish order in her own world only by breaking outwardly imposed restraints, by becoming a goddess dispensing justice.

The actual murder and the flight of Maria Concepcion are not described...Maria...crawled toward [Juan] as she had previously crawled toward a shrine; he was, in fact, a kind of God for her, and she had quickly put away her earlier desire to kill him. Juan at first feared for his own safety; but, when he heard her story, he felt immense pride and a desire to protect her. He went through a carefully reasoned plan of cleansing her and the knife.... He could not understand her or himself, or life itself... That night they ate from the same bowl, as they had before his flight, symbolizing their reunion... Rosa lay in an open coffin; she was covered with a rose reboza, but Maria Concepcion could see Maria Rosa's scarred feet which were similar to the swollen feet of the death-marked chickens.... Miss Porter in the story introduces a series of opposites: the buried life/the present, the light/the dark, Christianity/Paganism, American/Indian, love/duty, walking/stumbling, honey/thorns."

George Hendrick
Katherine Anne Porter
(Twayne 1965) 30-34

"It is interesting to compare [D.H.] Lawrence's treatment of the sexual with Miss Porter's as it is found in 'Maria Concepcion,' that astounding first effort, a fabulous tale on which it is no stricture to say she never improved.... [A] notoriously 'arcadian' scene from *Lady Chatterley's Lover* has the look, at least, of a similar scene in 'Maria Concepcion'....: 'You are the "Knight of the Burning Pestle!"'.... It was Lawrence's hope that with such writing he could employ the explicit to transform the prurient into the innocent, and succeeded, in the view of Miss Porter and a few others, only in the unintentionally comic, the making of doleful farce. The weakness of the scene is precisely in the explicitness, both Lawrence's and his characters'.... The self-conscious pastoral playfulness which Lawrence expected us to find sublime in his scene, Miss Porter found only preposterous. For her, passionate relationships between men and women are not to be rendered in fiction as utopian. A debt to their seriousness must be paid in blood....

We regard Maria Rosa playing the coy nymph but from the point of view of Maria Concepcion whose murderous feelings correct the possibility of conventional erotic romanticism.... Within, the image of Maria Rosa's fully draped thighs 'knocked' by the heavy jar at her wrist is fundamentally steamier than anything comparable and unclad in Lawrence's novel, but it is also terrible both in its moment and in the larger context of the story, first, because of its pathos and, second, because it carries the burden of violence and dread so carefully promises us at the outset....

The image of Maria Concepcion as the very type of unevolved femaleness, as much *of* the earth as *on* it, carrying within her the future of race and sex, is couched in brutal terms, not the brutality of an overwrought society turned in on its darker self but the brutality of original conflict. She gives only passing attention equally to the cruel thorns of nature piercing her flesh, to the incipient life within her, and to mindless nature, stupid, but alive around her neck. Soon she will slaughter those fowls with as little self-consciousness as she will later murder the other Maria... Juan can romanticize himself as the revolutionary, but Maria Concepcion knows herself better....

It was the earlier D. H. Lawrence of *Sons and Lovers* who pleased Miss Porter, and if the contrasted scenes illustrate a difference between the romantic Lawrence and the classical Porter it is in this more traditional novel that we can see something of an affinity, if not an influence.... Maria Concepcion's sexual vitality like Miriam's want of it similarly is not 'symbolized.' In that brilliant opening view of Maria there is no metaphorical configuration of sexuality nor is there a promise of an eroticism to come."

M. M. Liberman
Katherine Anne Porter's Fiction
(Wayne State 1971) 63, 65, 67-69

"'Maria Concepcion'—about a Mexican Indian girl who murders her husband's mistress and takes their baby for her own—is Miss Porter's first work in this vein.... In most interpretations, she is misrepresented as a pure primitive, who triumphs by the power of instinct over the disorder that the encroachments of alien civilization have brought to her society. As her name is surely meant to indicate, Maria is actually the victim of her own tragic 'conceit.' She commits the murder in a desperate effort to realize her obsessive

idea of herself as a wife and mother—an idea that she has from her oversimplified training in Catholicism, not from her Indian heritage.”

John Edward Hardy
Katherine Anne Porter
(Ungar 1973) 63

“[Porter] saw the woman delivering her husband’s lunch and also bringing the old archeologist some live fowl. She had slung the chickens over her right shoulder so that half of them fell upon the flat of her back and the rest dangled across her breast. In spite of the squirmings and fluttering of the live chickens she moved gracefully and with instinctive serenity. When Porter admired the woman’s queenly manner the archeologist told the story of how she had killed her rival. She had been barely eighteen when she married, and her husband had soon afterward run off with a fifteen-year-old sweetheart. After the two returned the woman ignored them until the sweetheart’s baby was born....

The theme was her favorite one—a strong, queenly woman who is wronged and who by her own exertion and resourcefulness avenges herself and sets her world in order. But Porter added another moral dimension by making her story, ‘Maria Concepcion,’ reflect the outrage she had expressed in her essays at the oppression of the Mexican Indian, whom she felt to be the life of the country.... Maria Concepcion of the story is such an Indian, converted to a Christianity which is alien to her culture and to her nature. For her livelihood she is meagerly paid by a foreigner who is unearthing the relics of her historical past. She has been married in the Church and is to have a baby when her husband deserts her because he prefers the pagan charms of another free spirit to his wife’s respectability.

Maria, however, is not like the straw women of the Denver stage against whom Porter wanted to cry out, ‘Why don’t they stand on their feet?’ She avenges herself and sets her world to rights. When her husband returns with his mistress and a baby just after Maria Concepcion has lost her own baby, she attacks her rival with a butcher knife, kills her, and takes the baby for her own. In doing so, she regains the affection of her husband and the admiration of the townspeople, and she lives happily ever after.”

Joan Givner
Katherine Anne Porter: A Life
(Simon and Schuster 1982) 161-63

“It is the story of three Mexican Indians caught in a triangular relationship nursed by love, jealousy, and revenge.... Maria...discovers that her husband is making love to Maria Rosa just before Juan and his mistress run off to war together. Maria Concepcion becomes stolid, refusing even to cry when her child is born and dies.... Maria Concepcion manifests the character and attributes of the archetypal mother goddess. She is, first of all, Mary of the Conception, designated a mother from birth by her name. She is also pregnant... She is superior to her fellows, even her husband, whose work in the ‘damp trenches’ of the ancient buried city marks him as a servant of the womb. He exists primarily to impregnate her. She needs him for nothing else. She has skill and money. She is an independent, energetic, proud woman who initiates her marriage to Juan Villegas by paying for the license and who then sets herself above her more common neighbors by paying the priest to marry them in church.... Her small, enclosed house sits shrine-like ‘halfway up a shallow hill,’ while her rival, Maria Rosa, lives in the valley, attended by Lupe, the medicine woman, whose pagan charms and cures Maria Concepcion eschews. This queen-like woman, with her hens, symbols of fertility, slung over her shoulder, her body swollen with pregnancy, and her long-bladed knife at her waist suggests a primal goddess like the Cretan mother figure....

By contrast, Maria Rosa is clearly the feminine love principle whose passionate, seductive nature is suggested by her association with the flower of love.... Nothing could be more appropriate to a goddess of love than that she keep bees and dispense honey to the village. Her presence there among the hives is a statement of both the sweetness and the sting of love that Juan will come to know through her. Everything about her milieu is sensual, a drowsy, warm, and fragrant air hangs over her hive-like house and the mounded hives themselves are surrounded by ‘a dusty golden shimmer of bees’.... Everything about her is sultry, soft, and consenting as she disappears under the cornstalks with Juan. Truly, she is like honey to him.... A vain little peacock of a man, he merits all of the irony in the story.... It was pleasant to see himself in the role of hero to two such desirable women’.... Maria...responds with amazing assertion for a

woman of her class, refusing to yield to her husband's right to beat her, and even hitting back at him.... It is Lupe who recognizes that the loss of her child has transformed Maria Concepcion into the Terrible Mother. 'She is mere stone,' Lupe says of her.... Terrible Mothers like Medusa killed by turning their victims to stone.... Death will be the mother's office so that new life may be generated....

The bonding of these [village] women in the candle-lit hut over the body of a sacrificial victim has a ritualistic character which reminds us that, for all its Christian trappings, this culture remains essentially pre-Christian. Maria Concepcion may be named for Mary, the virgin mother of a patriarchal god [an Atheist's demeaning way of referring to God], but Porter's use of the name is ironic rather than literal. Although she has been married in church, Maria Concepcion's blood is Aztec, not Catholic.... On the mythic level, the necessity for Maria Rosa's bloody sacrifice is...illuminated by its parallelism to ancient Aztec mythology. The mythology of many cultures contains a triangular relationship between the goddess of the corn (a mother's fertility), a young maiden, and a youth... The Aztec triangle is seen in the relationship of Xochipilli, Xochiquetzal, and the Great Mother goddess.... Other parallel aspects of the triangular relationship are found in the tales associated with Quetzalcoatl, the hero god of the Aztecs. He is a phallic god whose name means 'plumed serpent'...

When Maria Concepcion claims the newborn child, who 'spat blood the moment it was born,' the women who had defended her recognize her claim to this new life and, with it, her resumption of her office as Great Mother and goddess of fertility.... The wise women and the healer recognize that the death of Maria Rosa has been nothing more than the flight of an evil spirit... When she returns to Juan...she is more 'womanly' in the terms her society recognizes: she is subservient and humble, and leaves the initiative to her husband. She defers to him as to her god, approaching him on her knees, and depends on him to save her. In short, she behaves not like Maria Concepcion, but like Maria Rosa.... Having absorbed eros, she is no longer simply Mary of the Concepcion, the virgin, but a woman who knows the fullness of love and its fruition....

On a social level, Maria Concepcion moves from loneliness to community, from isolation and struggle outside the circle of women who wish to share her trouble to communion and peace in the circle of 'reassurance, understanding, [and] a secret and mighty sympathy' among women whom she now recognizes as sisters. For Maria Concepcion, blood and honey have mingled to coalesce."

Jane Krause DeMouy
Katherine Anne Porter's Women: The Eye of Her Fiction
(U Texas 1983) 21-27

"The story grew out of an account given her by Professor William Niven, an aged archaeologist, who had gone to Mexico in the last part of the nineteenth century to excavate the ancient Mayan and Aztec ruins around Mexico City and whom Porter had met soon after her arrival in 1920. Niven, by her own account, told her the story of his foreman Juan, who was married to a woman named Maria but had a teenage sweetheart as well. The literary interest of the anecdote lay in the villagers' refusal to incriminate Maria after she murdered the sweetheart and took the girl's baby for her own.... Porter reproduced the story as fiction [with] larger symbolic and universal meanings. The story is also rich with the atmosphere of the early years of the artistic renaissance in Mexico, a cultural and social movement that was an attempt to resurrect the ancient past of Mexico and bring it into harmony with twentieth-century political aims.

'Maria Concepcion' is a story in which primitive instinct proves stronger than social customs and learned behavior. Maria Concepcion is an Indian woman who has accepted the conqueror's religion, but when the test comes, the savage ways prevail over the civilized religion's forms.... The Indians dig for Givens, the outsider who values their past, while they themselves do not; Givens condescends to his Indian diggers, 'for their primitive childish ways,' but Maria Concepcion condescends to Givens for his civilized distaste for killing fowl and for the fact that he has no woman to cook for him. Givens is patriarchal in the excavating society, and yet he lacks the strength to be a moral guide for his workers....

The most important irony developed in the story is that even though twentieth-century man intellectually has rejected the past, primitive instinct continues to reassert itself over civilized reason.... In this story

there is a hint of the Adam and Eve and Lilith myth, which Porter represented in her poem 'Measures for Song and Dance' (1950), and the myth of the scapegoat. Juan's sweetheart, Maria Rosa, becomes the scapegoat for all the villagers, who protect Maria Concepcion in an ancient ritual and code of justice that defies the laws of the civilized government. The image of blindness...is used here to suggest the unconscious, unreasoning forces that take over in the sequence of events after Maria Concepcion is betrayed by Juan and Maria Rosa. Maria Concepcion's face is 'blind-looking' after Juan and Maria Rosa leave for the war, and after Juan saves Maria Concepcion he feels a vast blind hurt'....

Allen Tate observed that the story is written in primary colors, and indeed red, blue, and yellow appear throughout as images associated with the natural and the primitive. Yellow is the color of honey, used universally as the symbol of earthly pleasures, and it is the color of the maguey leaves and Maria Concepcion's eyes after she murders Maria Rosa; red is the color of the earth; and blue is more complex: it is the color of the far-off mountains (representing the faraway past), Maria Concepcion's reboza, the tassels on Juan's hat, and the lining of Maria Rosa's coffin. It is finally primitive instinct (represented by the primary colors) that kills Maria Rosa and protects Maria Concepcion.

Another important symbol of primitivism is the cactus, which points to the destructive element within primitivism.... The cactus is...like bared knife blades, foreshadowing Maria Concepcion's killing of Maria Rosa with a knife. After seeing Juan and Maria Rosa among the beehives, Maria Concepcion burns all over, 'as if a layer of tiny fig-cactus bristles, as cruel as spun glass, had crawled under her skin.' With all her careful attention she has not been able to avoid the 'thorns,' and it is from here on that she becomes murderous. Later, when she realizes that involuntarily she is on her way to kill Maria Rosa, she sits under a 'sheltering, thorny bush' and gives herself over to her long sorrow. The thorns of the cactus are an implicit connection to the pattern of Christian imagery and symbolism in the story, linked of course to the crown of thorns, Christ's crucifixion, and betrayal.

Other parts of the pattern include Maria Concepcion's going to the church and 'kneeling with her arms spread in the form of a cross,' Juan's celebrating in the 'Death and Resurrection' pulque shop the birth of his and Maria Rosa's baby, Maria Concepcion's crawling to Juan after the murder, as he had seen her crawl toward the shrine at Guadalupe Villa, Juan's instructing Maria Concepcion in her line of defense as if he were instructing her in a catechism, their lighting candles by which to eat, Juan's flinging his arms 'up and outward' after the dreadful ordeal with the gendarmes is over, and finally Maria Concepcion's sitting with her head bowed over Maria Rosa's child, the posture of an idealized Madonna, 'aware of a strange, wakeful happiness.' The Christian imagery and symbolism serve irony again; the surface image is Christian, but the deep reality is the force of primitive instinct....

Maria Concepcion dreams that the child is hers, and she is 'resting deliciously.' The child is hers now by a law as old as the ancient civilizations of Mexico, and her delicious resting is the happiness that comes from the settling of a wrong according to an ancient code of justice."

Darlene Harbour Unrue
Understanding Katherine Anne Porter
(U South Carolina 1988) 24-28

"This story introduces a character type who is to dominate the fiction of Katherine Anne Porter: a strong-willed woman operating in a society of weak, ineffectual men. The evil to be eschewed is passivity, known to Porter through her whining, inactive, passive Texas father who, after the death of his wife, simply gave up and slowly withered away. Maria Concepcion illustrates the power of a determined woman and, incidentally, it shows how a passive male can be dominated by such a determined woman.

'Instinctive serenity' marks Maria Concepcion's character.... Absolutely without sentimentality (like Katherine Anne Porter herself...), Maria...does what has to be done to preserve her place in the world.... After she is deserted by her husband and Maria Rosa (who leave together to fight in the Revolution), her baby is born dead. When Juan and Maria Rosa return to the village, Maria Concepcion kills Maria Rosa with her butcher knife, taking Maria Rosa's infant to raise as her own, all this with the approval of the community.... The heroine's method of dealing with the foulness of the world (adultery and betrayal) was earlier foreshadowed in the story by her impassive treatment of the chickens.... Further, Maria[s] refusal

to be beaten by her drunken husband (in contrast to Maria Rosa, who submitted to such beatings from Juan) marks Maria Concepcion out as one of Katherine Anne Porter's feminist heroines.... Porter's 'conception' of herself and of her literary art is, therefore, the genuine subject of 'Maria Concepcion'."

James T. F. Tanner
The Texas Legacy of Katherine Anne Porter
(U North Texas 1990) 133-36

"'Maria Concepcion' opens with the tension between the traditional life of the Indians and their Roman Catholic faith existing in a strained but relatively stable balance, much as it was in 'Children of Xochitl'.... The title character...is...a devoted Christian.... She is also a woman with a deep instinctual life that teems with the richness of Nature. Although the intensity of Maria Concepcion's faith separates her in some ways from the traditional life of the village (she refuses, for instance, the traditional medicinal cures concocted by Lupe, the village's medicine woman), she nevertheless remains an active member of the village and glows with natural splendor.... Maria Concepcion straddles both traditions, giving herself entirely to neither. She is a good Catholic who remains closely tied to Nature and an instinctual woman who puts her faith in the otherworldly. On her errand in the opening scene, she walks carefully down the middle of the road, which indicates her balancing two ways of life. She remains close to Nature, walking with the grace and demeanor of an earth goddess, but not too close; she specifically avoids the 'maguey thorns and the treacherous curved spines of organ cactus,' images in the story of Nature's primal power....

Maria Concepcion's balanced life flies apart when her husband, Juan, runs away with his mistress, Maria Rosa, and when her baby dies shortly after birth. In response to her shattered life, Maria Concepcion forsakes the traditional life of the village and her own instinctual life for that of the Church. Her commitment to Catholicism becomes consuming.... She bitterly spurns offers from the villagers to help her deal with her loss.... 'Keep your prayers to yourself, Lupe... I will ask God for what I want in this world'.... In wholeheartedly embracing the ways of the Church, Maria Concepcion turns from the vital forces of her instinctual interior life. She shows no emotion when Juan leaves her or when her baby dies, instead repressing her raging feelings of anger and grief with the power of her Catholic faith... She now has a sickly pallor.... Had she not been so devout the villagers would have suspected her of being possessed by the devil. 'She is mere stone,' says Lupe....

Outwardly Maria Concepcion may appear stonelike, but inwardly her emotions still rage, repressed by the rigor and resolve of her Catholic worship. When Juan and Maria Rosa return to the village, however, her emotions burst forth from their constraints.... She gives herself completely to her pent-up emotions.... A woman now of Nature rather than the Church, Maria Concepcion looks not to God for guidance but...instead becomes her own goddess, passing judgment on Maria Rosa and carrying out the sentence. Her shelter now is not the altar but the thorny bush beside which she huddles—an image of Nature's spirit and law.... She seeks restitution in the here and now rather than in the afterlife. With her murder of Maria Rosa, a sin by Catholic judgment, Maria Concepcion takes the first step in rejoining the traditional Indian community.

She takes the second step when she returns home to Juan. When Juan hears what she has done, he immediately acts to protect her from the inevitable investigation. [His] actions resemble...a ritual readmitting of Maria Concepcion into the home and married life. Maria Concepcion's first act upon returning is to get down on her knees and to crawl 'toward [Juan] as he had seen her crawl many times toward the shrine at Guadalupe Villa.' Juan then proceeds with a rite of purification: he cleans the blood off the knife with which she has killed Maria Rosa... Maria Concepcion bathes and puts on one of her old dresses, described as 'soiled,' suggestive of her return to a life closer to the earth. They then finish their ceremony by lighting candles and sharing a meal, eating 'from the same dish'...

Maria Concepcion's full acceptance back into the larger community comes with her questioning by the gendarmes and the villagers' defense of her. The gendarmes represent a code of justice based on the power of the state, a code alien to that of the traditional community. To the villagers, Maria Concepcion's killing of Maria Rosa is just retribution for Maria Rosa's adulterous acts. Instead of disrupting the village's order, the killing reestablishes it, returning Maria Concepcion to her rightful place as wife to Juan. To protect

Maria Concepcion from the gendarmes' charges, the villagers crowd 'around her, speaking for her, defending her, the forces of life were ranged invincibly with her... The gendarmes stand helpless before the villagers and the woman they protect. They leave without arresting Maria Concepcion, even though they are certain that she killed Maria Rosa.

With the departure of the gendarmes, Maria Concepcion and Juan take Maria Rosa's baby home to start their new life together, the order of family and community restored. That night Maria Concepcion receives communion from the Catholic church, whose rituals drew her away from the vital forces of her deepest self and of the traditional community... 'Maria Concepcion' celebrates the deep-seated powers of the instinctual self and the traditional community to resist the usurping forces of modern civilization."

Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr.
Katherine Anne Porter's Artistic Development
(Louisiana State 1993) 44-48

"A number of her stories indicate...that the moral and legal orders must be separated and that the people are the final arbiters of both orders. The clearest indication of this belief emerges in 'Maria Concepcion,' Porter's story about an Indian woman who murders her husband's lover. When the police question Maria's husband and her neighbors, everyone comes to her defense.... A smiling young mother, Anita, baby at breast, delivers the crowning blow to the police investigation: 'If no one thinks so, how can you accuse her?' So the police must leave without a shred of evidence, even though they feel certain that Maria Concepcion committed the murder.... The justice administered by the community...is often explained as a kind of primitivism.... Although I do not wish to suggest that Porter condones murder—indeed, in commenting on the actual incident upon which her story was based, Porter stated that the Indian villagers possessed 'deep layers of crossed emotions that are chilling to contemplate'—her point seems more complex...

At the heart of her story is the question of who has the authority to punish, a question that has been problematic for both retributionists and utilitarians.... The climax of 'Maria Concepcion' turns upon [a] paradox. In the actions of Maria's neighbors, Porter suggests that the people must have—and must act on—the right to resist a legal system that they find unjust, especially, perhaps, when they did not establish that system themselves. In essence, this is what Maria Concepcion's society does. They intercept the official agents of the law, a law that has been imposed on them by a conquering country, and try her themselves as a jury of her peers. They do not find her innocent, for everyone knows that she killed Maria Rosa, but they do not believe she should be punished for her act. In addition, they approve Maria Concepcion's declaration that Maria Rosa and Juan's baby now belongs to her. The ending of Porter's story affirms this community's judgment that justice has been served and the moral order restored. The final view is Maria Concepcion and the child breathing in harmony with the rhythms of Nature. Porter's story thus shows a primary principle of the retributivist scheme: criminals are punished on behalf of the people, not on behalf of the state."

Debra A. Modellmog
"Concepts of Justice in the Work of Katherine Anne Porter"
Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature 26.4 (Fall 1993) 37-52

"The story is startling and almost inexplicable in its artistry. Its detached narrative perspective and visual clarity, developed in part through her admiration of such Modernist masters as Henry James and James Joyce but also from her acquaintance with Mexican genre painting, crafts, and caricature, seem to 'spring full-blown into life,' unsigaled by any of her apprentice work....Committed to the idea that the Indian population of Mexico constituted the real Mexican identity but that it had been exploited and mistreated, she presents her Indian characters as being strong and somewhat enigmatic, and she stresses their harsh lives. If the...Indian characters...come close to implying a condescending stereotype of the primitive, her sympathetic respect for her subjects is nevertheless clear. Moreover, her insistence on the absolute contrast between whites and Indians can be attributed, in part, to the intellectual currents of the time in Mexico. A revisionist view of Mexican identity emphasizing the Indian's native authenticity, repressed by a foreign and utterly uncomprehending Spanish power, was deeply implicated in the thinking and the appeal of the revolutionary party after about 1910....

Although the plot chronicles the desperate jealousy of a woman for her man, and thus would seem to place her in a role of abject need, it is not the male who is elevated in the story but the female. She is a canny but also intense woman capable of managing her own affairs and exacting her own vengeance, and it is her power that gives the story its motive force. Structurally, she is validated by the reaction of the community to her murder of her husband's lover, Maria Rosa, shortly after the birth of their child. When gendarmes come to take her for questioning, she maintains her self-control and outfaces them. Symbolically, she defeats the instrument of an alien and exploitive culture, casting them out of the restored social order of which she is the center. But she could not have done so alone. Her victory is attained with and through the complicity of the townspeople, all of whom, even the godmother of the dead woman, vouch for her, leaving the gendarmes no basis for pursuing their suspicions. She is acknowledged as the symbolic center of the village, the powerful agent whose continued presence is worth maintaining even by lying.

Very specifically, that center is a maternal one. After her act of murder and her vindication by the townspeople, Maria Concepcion takes the child home... She is at one with Nature and with her people—a primitive matriarch. The unacknowledged children's stories Porter had published prior to 1922 had also depicted a theme of the clever woman who outwits her rival. If is the woman who grants absolution to her lover is she chooses. In 'Maria Concepcion,' the female hero makes her own living through the sale of fowl, imposes not only her vindictive wrath but her very will on the village, and receives her amazed male on her own terms by resisting when he would have beaten her to reassert his authority. To be sure, toward the end of the story she adopts the behaviors of the subservient woman, walking behind her man and serving him food, but it is nevertheless true that she has impelled the course of events and it is she who, at the end, enjoys satisfaction, while he sleeps exhaustedly....

Like Porter's early essays and her later major work on Mexico, 'Hacienda,' though less overtly, 'Maria Concepcion' conveys a sense of social class and class struggle and manifests her sympathy with the oppressed. The theme of class struggle and in particular the oppression of the Indians was her primary preoccupation during her early years in Mexico. Her disillusionment with the revolution that failed to achieve justice for the repressed Indians would be a preoccupation during her later period of residence there... That disillusionment would be expressed most powerfully in 'Hacienda.' In 'Maria Concepcion' the traces of class struggle are evident in the harshness of the Indians' lives and in their subjugation to both white and mixed-blood groups...and there is a silent hostility evident between them and the representatives of social authority, the gendarmes. They successfully resist the gendarmes' authority. If the theme of class struggle is not obvious or intrusive, it is because Porter had learned the distinction between politically committed art and propaganda.... The reader is hard-pressed to label Maria and Juan good; yet, because of the subtle balancing of narrative detachment and narrative sympathy, their lives are clearly valued and they are affirmed as representative characters. Maria Concepcion...is shown to possess an impressive dignity....

Even more forceful than the theme of class struggle, but related to it, is the theme of religious conflict between the old, indigenous ways and the new ways of Catholicism brought by the Spanish. Maria Concepcion is, most emphatically, a Catholic. Unlike other women in the village, she has insisted on being married by the priest, and she regularly practices penance, kneeling 'for hours' with her arms stretched out in the form of a cross and crawling on her knees to the shrine at Guadalupe. Specific incidents or tableaux in the story can be read as approximations of incidents in the story of Christ that were often represented pictorially in Mexican churches. Thus, as she holds the baby, Maria Concepcion resembles the Madonna, and the many wounds in Maria Rosa's body are reminiscent of the gory figures of the wounded Christ in many Mexican churches... Not incidentally, the *pulqueria* where Juan celebrates is the Death and Resurrection Pulque Shop.

Yet it is not her Christianity that restores Maria Concepcion to her proper and satisfying role in life, but her blood vengeance against Maria Rosa and her courage in outfacing the gendarmes and the villagers. It is through blood 'sacrifice,' recalling the sacrifice practiced in Aztec religion, that she gains a kind of resurrection. Thus, as she does in her early articles, Porter argues the exploitive nature of the Catholic presence in Mexico and the pervasive survival of an earlier and presumably more authentic Indian ethos."

Janis P. Stout

“‘Maria Concepcion,’ the earliest work Katherine Anne Porter claimed as part of her canon, was written as a direct result of her first two visits to Mexico (November 20 to autumn 1921 and April to June 1922)... What came before is either apprentice work or journalism... Part of this difference can be attributed to her contact with Mexican art...the pre-Hispanic art she helped excavate in Azcapotzalco...the folk art she observed... Porter also sophisticatedly used the customs and festivals of the Indians of the Anahuac valley that she had seen or studied... Porter began to employ a technique of delineating, or ‘painting,’ a series of verbal pictures similar in content and focus to some of the Mexican art she began to observe in Mexico... What is remarkable is how skillfully she weaves all these elements together in her story. Porter’s previous published fiction had given no clue that she could produce fiction this powerful....

The story opens with a series of completely realized portraits of the indigenous peasant woman Maria Concepcion Manriquez depicted against the backdrop of an authentic Mexican landscape.... These are followed by verbal portraits of...Maria Rosa, the local beekeeper, who is being chased by Maria Concepcion’s husband, Juan de Dios Villegas.... Maria Concepcion, as her name with its reference to the Virgin of the immaculate conception implies, is a ‘good Christian’ and an ‘energetic, religious woman,’ unique among the native women of her village for having actually been married by a priest in the church.... The force of these verbal pictures is to emphasize the continuity of Indian life and traditions into contemporary times. In contrast to these native traditions, the practice of Roman Catholicism and the elements of Spanish colonial culture are a mere veneer on the real life of contemporary Mexican Indians.... The events must be taking place during the period of roughly 1918 to 1920... Maria Concepcion’s practice of Roman Catholicism and the references to her marriage immediately after Holy Week roughly place the events of the story from Easter to Easter of one calendar year....

The pagan form of Roman Catholicism [Maria] practices is suggested in the painful, almost inhuman rites of penance she performs both in the period of Juan’s absence and as part of her observance of the church year. Later in the story, her regular practice of crawling on her knees toward the shrine at Guadalupe Villa is mentioned.... The portrait with butchering knife calls to mind not only the ritual sacrifices of the Christian Bible but also the sacrificial rites of the ancient indigenous religions of Mexico, in some of which priests removed the still-beating hearts of victims with obsidian knives. The portrait here foreshadows and suggests Maria Concepcion’s murder of Maria Rosa. The practice of this pagan rite of sacrifice...is effectual: it returns Juan to the marital home and bed and replaces Maria[’s] baby.... Subtle placing of the events of the story in the spring suggests both pagan and Christian rites of sacrifice to appease deities and assure fruitful harvests....

Allusions to elements of Christ’s Passion in the story illuminate the shallow Roman Catholicism of the Mexican Indians. Some of the events of the last part of the story resemble some events of the last week of Christ’s life: his entry into Jerusalem, the Last Supper, his being taken prisoner, his trial and execution, the lamentation or pieta, and the Resurrection. Porter does not connect all of these to one character; she merely uses them as a context to imply that although Christianity is visible in the daily life of the Mexican peon, the pagan spirit and religion have remained ascendant. Although it is Juan who returns and is imprisoned and tried and Maria Rosa who is killed and lamented, it is Maria Concepcion’s resurrection that takes place. When she repudiates her Christian religion, does not turn the other cheek, and in revenge kills Maria Rosa, she reverts to her pagan indigenous religious roots and is reborn as an avatar of a fertility goddess.... The death and eternal resurrection of the pagan spirit of Mexico is an underlying theme....

Depiction of [Maria] very much resembles a clay or stone prehistoric figure, particularly in its masklike, almost stylized face. It calls to mind the faces of sculptures of the ‘jaguar type’ with their grotesque downturned mouths. After Maria Concepcion’s face is formed in this ancient cast, she rises, throws off her face, and sets out walking on her way to murder or, perhaps more appropriate to this context, to perform the ritual sacrifice of Maria Rosa, a scene not described in the story. Porter’s later description of Maria Rosa’s facial expression when she is laid out in her coffin is startling: ‘The mouth drooped sharply at the corners in a grimace of weeping arrested half-way.... Her face, significantly, mirrors the earlier expression on Maria

Concepcion's, the downturned mouth of the jaguar type. It is the ace of the surrogate who has acted the role of the goddess and who has been sacrificed in her stead....

The gods are appeased.... Maria Concepcion, with the baby in her arms, follows Juan out of the clearing around Maria Rosa's lighted jacal, which suggests the flight of the Virgin and Joseph into Egypt. In the second [image] Juan lies on his back, 'his arms flung up and outward,' which suggests a crucifixion. Porter then establishes the return to ancient customs and practices with the scenes of Maria Concepcion with the mother goat and its kid... This signifies a return to the pre-Hispanic culture's ancient customs of agriculture and husbandry and to the consequent harmony with nature that implies. Maria Concepcion takes on the pose of an ancient goddess in the closing scene as she observes the landscape of the Anahuac Valley.... The resurrection of the ancient indigenous religion and spirit of Mexico is implied... It is Porter's way of announcing her sympathy with the aims of the idealists among the Mexican government who felt that the salvation of Mexico lay in turning to art and culture of the indigenous population for values and models....

Porter uses Maria Concepcion to represent the indigenous population of Mexico. The 'perilous journey' she undertakes inscribes a circle. Her initial state of complete contentment is disturbed, and she experiences pain, anger, grief, isolation from the community, sorrow, and suffering that led her to an act of ritual murder and sacrifice. This act brings repentance, a dream, and fear that, in turn, allow the relinquishing of her residual rancor toward her now-dead enemy. Freed from her enmity, Maria Concepcion is reintegrated into the community... Through her dramatic act of ritual sacrifice, Maria Concepcion restores the order to her community that had been disrupted by forces alien to it.

Once again, Porter condemns, as she does in 'The Mexican Trinity,' the foreigners, the church, and the Mexican government or political figures who exploited the...Mexicans, the Indians. The American archeologist Givens is the representative foreigner who patronizes and infantilizes the indigenous men of the community while divesting them of their history and art. The church, here represented by Maria Concepcion's devout Roman Catholicism, seems to serve only to isolate and alienate the individual from his or her community. Mexican government and politics have generated the war that separated Juan and many others like him from the communal agricultural activities that successfully sustained their ancestors physically and spiritually for centuries.... [The] message is 'redemption'."

Ruth M. Alvarez
"Royalty in Exile": Pre-Hispanic Art and Ritual in 'Maria Concepcion'"
Critical Essays on Katherine Anne Porter
ed. Darlene Harbour Unrue
(G.K. Hall 1997) 91-97

"She, like the entranced women of 'The Children of Xochitl,' is more body than mind, drifting in an essentialist dream... Most readers argue that 'Maria Concepcion' continues Porter's idealization of women's lives within a primitive, pre-Christian social order infused with the presence of the mother goddess... Others...identify her as 'an avatar of a fertility goddess.' All find Maria Concepcion's condition at the story's close ideal. For some she has reclaimed an essential primitive identity, shedding the false veneer of Catholicism. Thus she articulates Porter's argument against the Christianizing of Mexico's Indian population. For others, Maria Concepcion's claim of Maria Rosa's baby bespeaks a kind of self-completion....

The Maria Concepcion of the story's first half is a figure of female strength and self-direction, legally married, civilized. Conflict begins when this lawful, self-determining woman strays from her straight and narrow path to follow her body's urgings.... Seeking honey at the hives of Maria Rosa, Maria Concepcion encounters a scene of disorder and lust: her husband Juan, 'laughing strangely,' and Maria Rosa... Maria Rosa's fragrant home suggests Porter's view of women's lives within a primitive culture—sensual, woman-centered, achieving power through nonlegal or precivilized resources. Here we find not only the disheveled young beekeeper but also her 'old godmother, Lupe the medicine woman.' It is this ancient Lupe, and her fellow older women of the village, who finally claim Maria Concepcion at the story's close. Representing a primitive female community, they possess ancient knowledge of healing or ritual. However, Porter makes clear that they are also united by their shared experience in the suffering of women who have no externally

recognized social power. Thus old Soledad urges Maria Concepcion to relinquish her anger and accept her female lot: 'All women have these troubles. Well, we should suffer together.'

In the world of Maria Rosa and the other village women, men have authority.... After Juan and Maria Rosa run off together...Maria Concepcion's gauntness tells us how she is eaten up by her rage and denies her sexual, female self.... Her skill at slaughter—at cutting and reshaping flesh—expresses both her rage and her power.... The woman who binds her sexuality to her purpose gains a terrible kind of power.... Before Juan's betrayal, Maria Concepcion's social power, achieved through her public, legal status, gave her voice and authority in her marriage.... [She] murders Maria Rosa. With this act she assumes her rival's place in the traditional women's community. Returning home after the crime, Maria Concepcion crawls toward her new authority, her husband, 'down on her knees...as he had seen her crawl many times toward the shrine at Guadalupe Villa....

At the close, holding the sleeping baby, united with the natural order both in the world around her and within her own body, Maria Concepcion is as imprisoned as she is elevated. Juan's plan to save her restructures the power relations in their marriage; she must now depend on her husband to protect her, relinquishing her own authority and accepting the coverture of his status. Thus this new private maternal role comes at the cost of Maria Concepcion's hard-won economic and social status.... [Women critics disagree on her social status in the end. This critic is a modern radical Feminist who values independence above marriage and community.] As Maria Concepcion moves toward her final transcendence, she also moves out of independence. Conversation between husband and wife is now a sequence of commands: Juan speaking, Maria Concepcion obeying....

Approved by the listening old women, Maria Concepcion puts traditional women's duties first; the church no longer gives her pride, but instead now endorses her obedience to her husband... Porter...draws from a tradition that exalts women's procreative powers in figures like Xochitl to depict a 'primitive' woman finding community, union with Nature, and peace as she breathes at one with the natural world. Yet at the same time Porter recognizes that this vision of female power does not offer women social authority, economic independence, or voice [debatable]. Maria Concepcion gains her child and breathes in easy harmony with the breathing world, but she also testifies to the authorities that this now obedient woman '[knows] her place' and will not criticize 'the way of men'.... [This critic illustrates the frequent conflict between the priorities of Feminists and happiness.]

The gender relations Porter encountered in Mexico's 'primitive' cultures were solidly patriarchal, despite the celebration of women as fertile goddesses, both representing and nurturing a rich, cyclical natural world.... Conflicts that continue to divide American feminism come to mind here, as we see Porter questioning essentialist or biologically based arguments for women's power and vision [*and* questioning the politically correct absolutism of Feminists.]

Mary Titus
The Ambivalent Art of Katherine Anne Porter
(U Georgia 2005) 42-46

Maria Rosa is the "independent woman" in the story and she ends up dead. She joins the revolution that was supposed to establish women's rights but is killed by the traditional woman (both Indian and Catholic). Maria Rosa is identified with an "evil spirit" because independent women like her are destructive to the community. Feminism would destroy what remains of Indian culture in Mexico.

Michael Hollister (2017)