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KATHERINE ANNE PORTER'S
USE OF QUAKERISM IN
SHIP OF FOOLS

by Gerald Walton

Since its publication in 1962, Katherine Anne Porter's Ship of Fools has been the subject of many scholarly articles and reviews. One of the postulations generally mentioned in the inspections is Miss Porter's skilful character creation. While David Scott has not been "singled out for special praise by the reviewers" as has his traveling companion, Jenny Brown,1 the purpose of this article is to relate some of the activities of David and to suggest that the religion of his youth might be an important concern in his adult life. In short, I hold the opinion that all of David's actions are possibly caused by what he calls his "Quaker conscience."

Although more than a fifth of this "study in despair"2 is presented before there comes the notification that David Scott is fraught with a "Pennsylvania Quaker conscience,"3 an alert reader effectually acquainted with traditional Quaker emphases might already have suspected some Quaker tendencies in some of David's actions. Certainly no religious sect would be proud to claim this almost incorrigible character as one of its better members, but it does seem significant that Miss Porter chooses to point out that David has been reared as a Quaker. Besides the travelers who are Catholic, Lutheran, or Jewish (and so designated for obvious thematic purposes), David is the only one whose religious background is mentioned. Miss Porter spent a good part of twenty years in the

3Katherine Anne Porter, Ship of Fools (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1962), p. 129. Subsequent references to this work will be cited in parentheses in the text.
execution of this book, and nearly all of the critique writers have commented on her character development. It does not seem to me that she accidentally or arbitrarily refers to David’s early religion, although his actions are now in many instances almost toto caelo at odds with the prevalent tenets of Quakerism.

Rochelle Girson has quoted Katherine Anne Porter as remarking about the characters of the novel, “I am not trying to make anybody out a saint or a sinner, but just showing human beings with failings and prejudices or with burdens a little more than they can bear, burdens that have made them what they are and through which they are trying to struggle.” No careful reader would dispute Granville Hicks’ observation that “As we come to know these characters . . ., we find ourselves involved in a vast, polymorphous struggle of wills.” Howard Moss has found one of Miss Porter’s major themes to be that of order versus need, and he avers that “Every major character is magnetized in time by the opposing forces of need and order.” Glenway Wescott, a close friend of the novelist, maintains that “. . . there are warring forces in Katherine Anne,” and he sponsors a theory that “the great dichotomy” has played a part in her Ship of Fools. In an additional statement about her work and its themes, Wescott writes: “Things are what they are; and what people do directly results from what they are. Everything is for the portraiture, inner portraiture mainly . . . .”

What, then, have these struggles of the will, these “opposing forces of need and order,” this “great dichotomy,” and these acts of people themselves to do with the character of David Scott? Is it true that the name of the ship, Vera (Latin for true), has a sym-

4Solotaroff, p. 279.
9Ibid., p. 47.
bolic meaning and that David, like the other passengers, is struggling to find the truth?¹⁰

It appears to me that the first, and only, allusion to David's Quaker conscience is important as a partial answer to these questions. He keeps assuring himself that his sins do not annoy him, "... but those tight-mouthed, tight-handed, tight-souled gaffers had left some kind of poison in his blood that kept him from ever really enjoying his life..." (p. 129). In many ways he goes against all that Quakerism would suggest, but these acts invariably trouble his conscience. And in many instances he cannot help, I contend, regulating some of his activities by the Quaker principles.

Enumerating the many nefarious affairs in David's life serves no purpose in this study, but his feelings about certain of the base deeds seem significant. For example, there are many arguments between David and the girl with whom he is traveling. It seems that "The quarrel between them was a terrible treadmill they mounted together and tramped round and round until they were wearied out or in despair" (p. 43). But in one of the early quarrels it is evident that David does not like the arguments. Even after a cutting remark to Jenny, he realizes that "it gave him no satisfaction" (p. 42). In one conversation with Freytag, Jenny tells him that David usually argues "for the sake of the argument" (p. 90). Perhaps his real character is seen when he avoids understandable disputes, as can be observed near the end of the novel when he has ample room for anger at a purser who has made a switch in David's ticket so as to alter his destination. Jenny wishes to reprove the purser, but David stops her and avoids an argument (p. 487).

Often Miss Porter makes it clear that David has guilty feelings about many of his despicable acts. He has, for instance, had these feelings so often that Jenny has termed them his Methodist hangovers. One of his experiences after a night of drinking discloses the perpetual culpability: "He turned away from the sight of his hang-dog face in the mirror, and the dreadful muddled feeling of moral self-reprobation which Jenny called a Methodist hang-

¹⁰Moss, p. 172.
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over clutched him, not for the first time, in the vitals" (p. 130). He is likewise beseeched with similar thoughts regarding his illicit relationship with Jenny. "They had agreed," the authoress writes,

in the beginning not to marry because they must be free, marriage was a bond cramping and humiliating to civilized beings: yet what was this tie between them but marriage, and marriage of the worst sort, with all the restraints and jealousies and burdens, but with none of its dignity, none of its warmth and protection, no honest acknowledgment of faith and intention. (p. 145)

David tells himself that "He should marry Jenny, or offer to marry her, anyway ..." (p. 130). And although he refuses to talk about love to Jenny, saying that he hates love (p. 169), he clearly shows his desire to love her, his desire that she return his love, and his jealousy because she appears to care for many besides him:

Who wouldn't she take up with, he wondered. She'd run off with just anybody—if a band passed playing in the street, she'd fall in step and march with them... would say just anything she pleased to the merest stranger—did she ever really see a stranger? Listens to just anybody, as interested in the idlest silliest chatter as she is in the most intelligent talk—more so, damn it! ... Yet there had been a time when he felt so close, so nearly identified with Jenny, so tenderly in love with her, she could have done anything with him, have made him understand anything no matter how preposterous: or so he believed now; and why had she refused to become that part of him which was missing, which would make him whole—why had she been so strange and wild and made their life together so impossible? It occurred to him bitterly for the first time that, in fact, Jenny seemed to get along on the simplest terms with anybody, everybody, but himself. (p. 22)
In fact, he exhibits the inconsistency to the point that Jenny is confused. He has told her that he does not believe in love, and yet when she mentions her affinities with other men, she realizes that David would feel better had the relationships been because of love: “... for him, the whole wrong lay precisely there. It should have been love, it was a disgrace to her that it was not love...” (p. 149). His own remembrances of nights spent with prostitutes suggest the frustration: “And slowly there poured through his veins again that deep qualm of loathing and intolerable sexual fury, a poisonous mingling of sickness and deathlike pleasure: it ebbed and left him as it always had before, merely a little sick” (p. 281). Many of the activities that might be purely pleasurable to other people are once more performed by David in a way that connotes the frustration. Whether it be sleeping, sunning, drinking, or making love, “He practiced all these dull excesses in a methodical, uncommunicative frenzy of cold yet sensual enjoyment...” (p. 147). The reader might even sense that David is protesting too much when he demands that Jenny not use certain words. The word soul... was one of David’s tabus, along with God, spirit, spiritual, virtue—especially that one!—and love. None of these words flowered particularly in Jenny’s daily speech, though now and then in some stray warmth of feeling she seemed to need one or the other; but David could not endure the sound of any of them, and she saw now [after using the word soul] the stiff, embarrassed, almost offended look which she had learned to expect if she spoke one of them. He could translate them into obscene terms and pronounce them with a sexual fervor or enjoyment; and Jenny, who blasphemed as harmlessly as a well-taught parrot, was in turn offended by what she prudishly described as “David’s dirty mind.” (p. 55)

Thus far I have cited only cases wherein David commits acts that seemingly go against his conscience. I believe that there are equally as many acts to be cited for support of the contention that David is in several ways at least partially guided by his Quaker
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Conscience. Even though he is participating in an unsanctioned romance, he feels remorse for his behavior. Miss Porter makes it plain that the conduct of Denny, David's cabin mate, in regard to sex is objectionable to David: "There seemed nothing much wrong with Denny except he was a bore. His mind seemed to run monotonously on women, or rather, sex..." (p. 75). As Denny unfolds his plans to pursue Pastora, one of the Spanish dancers aboard, David warns him against such conduct and makes his final reply on the subject "with malice" (p. 78). Perhaps Denny finally becomes aware of the basic benevolence underlying many of David's performances or speeches. Denny "suspected often that David Scott disapproved of any number of things, though he could never be quite certain what they were" (p. 275).

Since the early days of the religion, Quakers have been noted for their benevolent acts. Young Scott's sympathy and kindness are demonstrated in several situations in the novel. He is hardly pleased to find that one of his cabin mates is a sickly hunchback, but at their first meeting he offers Herr Glocken the divan bed instead of his assigned upper berth and is even able by gentle persuasion to secure for Glocken the more comfortable lower berth supposed to be Denny's (p. 26). It is David who helps Herr Glocken by handing him his medicine and water; and one can almost sense a feeling of compassion in David at his realization that "perhaps Herr Glocken was never altogether without pain" (p. 76). Even when both David and Denny awake with dreadful hangovers after a night of too much drinking, it is David who rolls off his couch and ministers the hunchback his medicine (p. 128).

David's commiseration is likewise evinced in his feeling of tenderness for one of the lowly steerage passengers, apparently noticed only by David and Frau Schmitt, a German widow. The scene is described thus:

A man, very bony and ragged and worn, but perhaps young, it was hard to tell, his tousled hair on end, was sitting, back to the rail, his knees drawn up and his bare toes curling and uncurling with sorrow; he was crying openly and bitterly like a child. He wept and scrubbed his eyes with
his fists, his mouth was distorted like a howling dog's, and at his feet were several small objects. Frau Schmitt could not quite make out what they were. The other people paid no attention to him; they sat near him with stony indifferent faces; men stood in groups over him with their backs turned, women almost stepped on him going about their own concerns. He seemed completely alone in the world . . . . (p. 175)

David explains to Frau Schmitt the cause of the poor man's sorrow: the man is a wood carver whose knife has been taken from him (p. 175). The German widow's thoughts later point clearly to the young American's charitable sensitivity:

She could not help but remember Herr Scott and his good feeling for the poor little woodcarver in the steerage—it was all very well to be stern and cold and right about everything, as the Captain most certainly was [he had commanded that all weapons be taken from the passengers in steerage], but it was also touching to be human, to love one's fellow creature, to have mercy on the poor and the unfortunate. (p. 388)

David's tastes for simplicity of dress may be observed throughout Ship of Fools. As he boards the ship, he wears "a proper-looking white linen suit and an ordinary Panama hat" (p. 13). By the beginning of the twentieth century (the novel is set in 1931) many Friends no longer strictly adhered to the plainness of dress advocated by early Quaker leaders; but David's objection to "unplain" dress seems no mere chance protestation. When he discovers that Herr Glocken wears a bright red silk pajama coat, he is disturbed; for

Profusion of color in anything was offensive to David; it offended more than his eye—he distrusted it on moral grounds, and nowhere more so than in dress. His own neckties were black knitted strings he bought by the half dozen from
sidewalk peddlers, his socks were black cotton, his suits were mottled gray, dark gray, light gray, Oxford gray and blue-gray, besides the chaste white linen and canvas he wore in summer. His favorite palette was a mixture of grays, browns, ochers, and dark blues with a good deal of white; and his favorite though not original theory was that persons who “expressed themselves” by wearing color were merely attempting to supply its inner lack in their own natures, adding a facade that fooled nobody. (pp. 76-77)

He attempts, with some success, to pass on his discrimination to Jenny. She is slovenly dressed as they board the ship together, and he shows his displeasure (p. 13). He seems much more pleased when she appears “... very beautiful in one of her plain white frocks that looked well at any time of day. She had the severity and simplicity of a small marble figure, smooth and harmonious from head to foot, no rogue or powder visible, no varnished nails, fresh and sweet, as a field of roses...” (p. 416). In one scene David is pleased at seeing Jenny’s features assume “the sweet serenity and interior warm light (italics mine)” (p. 339). David is even partially successful in persuading Jenny to abandon some of the excessive color in her art work: “Her palatte lowered in tone; gradually, too, she had taken to dressing in muted colors or black and white, with only now and then a crimson or orange scarf, as she was not painting much, but working almost altogether in charcoal or India ink” (p. 77).

I would not foolishly assert that anyone who is habitually quiet has a Quaker tendency. Because of the Quakers’ disapproval of superfluous talk and because of the nature of their worship services, though, silence is quite often associated with Quakerism or termed a Quaker characteristic. David most assuredly fits the desired mold in this instance. He is repulsed by “Jenny’s lack of discrimination, her terrible gregariousness, the way she was always ready to talk to anybody anywhere” (p. 126), and she is worried at his silence (p. 396). She complains that “my man won’t share with me” (p. 92) and that “he would not share her moods or allow
her to share his” (p. 145). When he drinks, he prefers silence (p. 127); when he is angry, he seems “silently enraged” (p. 138). Near the beginning of the novel “David lapsed into what Jenny called his speaking silence” (p. 53), and on several other occasions Jenny refers to her companion’s “recurring fits of long silence” (p. 146), his “silence and sulkiness” (p. 185), his “singular gift of hardening instantly into silence” (p. 222), and his “‘passive resistance’” and “‘superior silence’” (p. 347).

I again remark that I have not attempted definitely to establish David Scott as a Quaker in the “vast portrait gallery”\textsuperscript{11} of \textit{Ship of Fools}. I have not endeavored to prove conclusively that any of his actions would necessarily cause a member of the Society of Friends even to recognize him as a frustrated Quaker. I do agree with critics, however, who point to the characters as being people who outwardly struggle with some burdensome inner will; and I hold the view that Katherine Anne Porter consciously selected Quaker-ism, the religion of David Scott’s early youth, to be the cause of David’s struggle of wills.

\textsuperscript{11}Wescott, p. 48.