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PASSION AND DENIAL IN MARI SANDOZ'S "PEACHSTONE BASKET"

FRITZ OEHLSCHLAEGER

The future reputation of Mari Sandoz will undoubtedly rest primarily on her nonfiction, especially *Crazy Horse*, *Cheyenne Autumn*, and *Old Jules*.¹ Although Sandoz published a considerable body of fiction, it has not generally received critical acclaim. Moreover, she consistently expressed doubts about the quality of her fiction and thought her own strongest achievement was in nonfiction. As Scott Greenwell has noted, Sandoz "viewed herself primarily as a historian who only aspired to be a literary artist, and was struck again and again by the inadequacy of much of her fiction."² When Virginia Faulkner, the editor of *Hostiles and Friendlies*, proposed collecting the short works that compose that volume, Sandoz questioned the wisdom of the idea, arguing in a letter that "anyone with reasonably good literary

standards is going to find these pieces of minor importance."³ Perhaps this judgment is justified for some of Sandoz's stories, but for others, it is decidedly wide of the mark, especially in the case of "Peachstone Basket."

DEFINING A CULTURAL CHOICE

In the remarkably ambitious "Peachstone Basket," Sandoz uses the career of Justin Gillrood—frontiersman, capitalist, judge, and founder of a town bearing his name—to create a mythic interpretation of American character, an interpretation that has affinities with those suggested by Ralph Waldo Emerson and by Leslie Fiedler. In Emerson's terms, Justin Gillrood is preeminently the man who has chosen "works" over "days," public enterprise over private reflection, the analytic reason of the entrepreneur and man of affairs rather than the spontaneous intuition and emotion of the poet.⁴ Gillrood's choice also involves a series of renunciations that Leslie Fiedler finds characteristic of many of the heroes of American fiction.⁵ Gillrood's most important renunciation is of sexual passion and its consequences, fatherhood. The centrality of the story's sexual theme is suggested by its title

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and central symbol, the peachstone basket; the young Gillrood has carved a small basket from a peachstone for Hedi Fessner and also for Connilynne, his wife.⁶

By adopting the basket as a central symbol, Sandoz forces us to recognize that Justin Gillrood's most important choice—the life-determining choice in this typically American story—has been a choice between two women, Hedi Fessner and Connilynne. As in so many American fictions, the choice is between a dark lady, the exotic and evil temptress, and a fair one, the "Protestant virgin" of America's schizoid mythology of the female.⁷ This is not to say, however, that Sandoz perceives women in these bizarre extremes. Instead, "Peachstone Basket" reveals the tragic human cost of the American male's renunciation of passion and fatherhood, of a cultural mythology that too often has stereotyped women as virgins or whores, and of a general American repression of the unconscious. "Works and days were offered us, and we took works," Emerson wrote in 1857, as he sought some central defining choice in American culture. He regretted the choice, and so does Mari Sandoz in "Peachstone Basket."

The mythic intention of "Peachstone Basket" is evident from the setting itself. The story takes place on Gillrood's day of tribute to her deceased founder, Justin Gillrood, whose granite statue is to be revealed at the climax of the day's festivities. Justin Gillrood himself represents two important and closely related American myths: the myth of the frontier and the American dream. He had first come to the West from New York City, ultimately pushing into untamed territory as far as "the new mining camp of Deadwood, deep in the Indian country" (p. 229). There he accumulated enough capital by defending "holdups and murderers" (p. 229) to buy substantial holdings of land in the area that became Gillrood. Much of this land he later sold to homesteaders "looking for a new start" (p. 229). Having founded a town, the public-spirited Gillrood began a "long fight against rustlers, horse-thieves, and murderers" that "carried him through the office of county judge to the

district court and got him called Justice Gillrood long before he reached the state bench" (pp. 231–32). In the meantime Gillrood added status to the fortune he had acquired by marrying an eastern girl, the daughter of a railroad president and a "Saratoga Springs mother" (p. 230). Unlike Jay Gatsby, whom he resembles in many ways, Justin Gillrood marries his Daisy Buchanan—Connilynne Carleton.

The mythicizing of Justin Gillrood is, in fact, precisely the function of the celebration in Gillrood that Sandoz describes. For weeks prior to the event, "the paper had been running stories about the town's great man, of his honor and his courage, his stern allegiance to duty and his loyalty to his community" (p. 229). Significantly, these stories occasion considerable mirth among the oldsters down at the blacksmith shop, who remember the judge as a "heller" who "cut the liveliest figure in the square dances" during his first summer in the West (p. 229). Sandoz's stressing the judge's past career as a "heller" is notable for several reasons: first, it begins to suggest the lie that lurks beneath his public personality, and second, it provides an essential element of his archetypal story as successful pursuer of the American dream. For it is commonly a part of the myth of male success in America that the hero should have sowed his share of wild oats before settling down to the serious business of taming frontiers, building fortunes, and establishing outposts of justice and light. It is particularly appropriate that Sandoz emphasizes the judge's early wildness, for the tradition of male oat-sowing is directly dependent upon the sexual double standard that stems from the schizoid treatment of female sexuality in American culture—itsself a major theme in the story revealed through the contrast of the fair and dark ladies, Hedi Fessner and Connilynne Gillrood. Despite the judge's days as a "heller," however, the town of Gillrood recognizes only his public personality as man of duty and devotion. His mythicized image in the town parade is one of a young man who has already chosen works over days: "on the float today he was already the determined young judge, with a

miner's pick in one hand, a lawbook in the other, and his eyes lifted over the heads of his fellows" (p. 229).

Although the figure of Justin Gillrood dominates the action of "Peachstone Basket," much of the story focuses on Hedi Fessner, the "goatwoman" and pariah whose coming to the town parade represents the first time she has walked "free outside of the alleys . . . in thirty years" (p. 226). As the story unfolds, Sandoz progressively reveals Hedi's history as the mother of the "town's one executed murderer" (p. 228). She had come to Gillrood sixty-three years before the parade, "'in trouble' as it was called—carrying Big Gillie Fessner" (p. 228). She reared the boy alone, except during a three-year period spent in the penitentiary under a sentence imposed by Judge Gillrood. Later Big Gillie served time himself in a reformatory for "trapping muskrats" on the land of Justin Gillrood's law partner (p. 232). When he returned from serving his sentence, he found himself held suspect "every time a storekeeper missed a stick of candy or somebody lost a dominick hen" (p. 232). Years of continued harassment only increased Gillie's contempt for the appointed guardians of law and justice in Gillrood. Finally he "ended just as everybody had predicted: he killed an officer who tried to bring him in for questioning" (p. 232). For this offense he was sentenced by Justin Gillrood to be hanged. The judge answered Hedi's plea for clemency for her son by telling her that "her very presence in the streets of man was an offense" (p. 232).

After Gillie's hanging, the chambermaid at the Commercial Hotel was found dead of iodine poisoning and her fatherless boy was discovered at Hedi Fessner's. The boy, Lunky, was the son of Big Gillie, whose marriage to the chambermaid had been kept secret in order that she could continue in her job at the hotel owned by the "gallant" Judge Gillrood, who "kept his jobs for single girls" (p. 233) and thus perhaps, in accord with the classic double standard, supplied his visiting male clients with female flesh without violating the sacred institution of marriage. The care and rearing of Lunky

became Hedi Fessner's, and he is with her thirty years later on the day she again appears in Gillrood to see the town honor the man who sent her to prison and condemned her son to death.

A number of the details of Hedi's history suggest her connection with Justin Gillrood: the name of her son, Gillie; the timing of her arrival in town soon after Justin, then still unmarried, had built a small house and made repeated trips to "the Black Hills somewhere" (p. 230); even the very intensity of Justin Gillrood's persecution of Hedi and her son. But it is part of Sandoz's strategy that she withholds to the end of the story the information that Justin had been Hedi's lover and Big Gillie's father. These facts are revealed only when one of the townsmen looks into a Gillrood window display along the parade route and identifies a peachstone basket carved by Justin for Connilynne as a twin to one owned by Hedi Fessner. An orgy of violence then breaks out among the people of Gillrood as they recognize what has perhaps been a long-suspected connection between Judge Gillrood and Big Gillie Fessner. At the story's end, the mob tears down and tramples the banners and posters mythicizing Judge Gillrood amid cries of "Son-killer!"

A FAIR AND A DARK LADY

In her symbolic role in "Peachstone Basket," Hedi Fessner appears as an avatar of the fair lady, the Protestant virgin who has figured repeatedly in American literature—from Hawthorne's Priscilla to James's Daisy Miller to Fitzgerald's corrupted version of her, Daisy Fay Buchanan. As a young girl, Hedi exhibits the determining physical characteristics of her type, the fair skin and blue eyes. When she first came to town, "she had been pretty . . . her cheeks paper-white, her blue eyes disturbed as the April sky" (p. 233). Her essential innocence is suggested, too, by her age (she is barely sixteen when she arrives) and by her association with the West, that unsophisticated, undefiled area of freedom where pioneers like Justin Gillrood were coming for a new start.

Hedi Fessner does, of course, differ from many of her literary fair sisters in that she comes to town pregnant. It is important to recognize, however, that it is not her pregnancy alone that causes the vicious process, psychological and social, by which the fair lady from the Black Hills is transformed into the degraded and outcast goatwoman. Instead Sandoz shows how Hedi is victimized by the psychological phenomenon of projection: she becomes an image of the guilt and degradation Justin Gillrood feels as a result of his sexual involvement with her. Gillrood's denial of Hedi, whom he has clearly planned to marry, signifies a retreat from passional sexual involvement and its consequences, fatherhood.

Gillrood's hanging of Big Gillie represents his killing of the passional part of himself, for Gillie is the living reminder of his sexual involvement with Hedi. To hang Big Gillie is to forever destroy his sexuality, his contamination by contact with the forbidden and despised female flesh. Or in Freudian terms, Justin Gillrood's killing of his son represents the destruction of the id by the superego. As such it is the entirely consistent act of a man who has defined himself as superego—the official morality—of the town which bears his name. It is not surprising, then, that Hedi incurs Judge Gillrood's wrath especially when she pleads for her son's life, for in doing so she attempts to keep alive precisely that part of the judge that his public career denies. From his public position as town superego, Justin Gillrood projects his own loathing of sexuality, his own debased fear of his libido, upon the fair lady: "This time the Judge got his name into all the papers, even made an inch in the *New York Times* with his instructions to the jury. It was later, to the mother's plea for clemency for her son, that he told Hedi her very presence in the streets of man was an offense" (p. 232).

Hedi is banished from the streets of "man," and the transformation of fair lady into degraded whore is complete. Indeed, it is part of Sandoz's remarkable psychological insight that she suggests the ease with which these roles are interchanged. Precisely because our culture

sentimentally enshrines her as virginal, the fair lady becomes the foul whore when her sexuality is revealed. Hedi's banishment from Gillrood symbolically suggests the casting out of adult sexuality and its concomitant responsibility of parenthood. Everything about Hedi suggests her vital involvement in the life-giving processes of sex and nurturing. She rears her son alone and then rears his son Lunky when his own mother, the chambermaid whom Gillie has secretly married, chooses against life and parenthood. Even Hedi's one offense against the state, for which she spends three years in prison, is a kind of vicarious parenting: she has "harbored" cattle rustlers, probably quite without knowing and perhaps without caring about their crimes. Furthermore, as the goatwoman she is associated with one of the ancient symbols of sexuality; our first glimpse of Hedi busily at work "stripping" one of her nanny goats associates her with basic life-giving processes. Later we learn what she has done for years with the milk: with her adopted son, Lunky, she drives through the back alleys of Gillrood to deliver it to the hospital. Thus it is clear that the cluster of details surrounding Hedi associates her with fertility, sexuality, affection, responsibility, and nurturing. In short, she is one who maintains the human community of love, a community that exists only in the back alleys and outskirts of Gillrood.

The process of Hedi's degradation is illuminated further by the antithetical experience of the story's dark lady, Connilynne Carleton, whose marriage to Gillrood transforms her from alluring sexual temptress to ice maiden. Connilynne came to Gillrood as the sensual dark lady, with "hair shiny as a blackbird's wing," a "plum-colored going away suit," and "opera cloak and gown of deep ruby red" (p. 234). In further contrast to Hedi, she is associated with the corrupt East that the settlers of Gillrood have left behind. Moreover, it is an East of illicit sexuality; Connilynne's father seizes upon Justin Gillrood to save his daughter's breaches of propriety: her husband "had some trouble getting the girl's Saratoga Springs

mother to agree" to Connilynne's marriage to Gillroad. That it is Mr. Carleton who urges the marriage is itself significant as well, for he is, like Justin Gillroad, an American dream figure, one who has come "up from track-layer himself" to the railroad presidency (p. 230). In complete fidelity to the East-West myths that Sandoz is exploding, Carleton seeks to save his daughter from the degenerate tradition of her mother by marrying her to the virtuous and heroic westerner, Justin Gillroad.

While Connilynne's marriage is unquestionably respectable, it is also utterly without passion. During her first years in the West, Connilynne retains something of her tempting quality as dark lady of vaguely illicit affairs: "The first year or two Connilynne brought guests out for the fall hunting, a cousin and a couple of his friends that set the town to talking. They were dashing young men with bold eyes, drake-tail curls at their foreheads, and a taste for champagne dinners" (p. 231). "That kind of visiting didn't last long," (p. 231) however, and soon Connilynne's transformation into the pale virgin begins. Her marriage to Justin is childless; contact with Gillroad is life-denying, for Connilynne as for Hedi Fessner. During most of the years of their marriage, in fact, Connilynne is away, "health-seeking, the Judge called it, at the Springs or Newport, or maybe Nice or Florence" (p. 231). She returns once a year, at the time of the earth's regeneration of fertility, to enact what is clearly a ritual recapturing of passion: "she always came back in the spring, between the wind of April and the heat of June, to gallop her sorrel mare over the hills, her hair netted close under a plumed hat, her riding habit a flying cloud of black against the windy sky" (p. 231). The "netted hair" is worth noting here, for of those details given, hair is the one most specifically identified with sexual passion. Her raven hair ought to be let down but is not, perhaps suggesting that, though she rejoices in the general springtime vigor of earth, she has consigned sexual passion to the irretrievable past. Moreover, Connilynne's brief stays in Gillroad seem to turn her into the pale passionless maiden:

"soon her cheeks seemed to pale, her step grow listless, and then she would be gone once more" (p. 231).

What turns Connilynne pale is contact with her husband. Sandoz defines the passionless quality of their relationship brilliantly in a metaphor that contrasts sharply with Connilynne's galloping over the hills: "in the springtime the Gillroads still made the same elegant, high-headed couple behind the bays that the Judge drove with close leather and dangling whip, the tassel dripping lightly to a satin back now and then, just to let the horses know the cutting edge was waiting" (p. 231). Here is passion firmly reined, subordinated to an idea of order, decorum, and respectability—an order based ultimately on sadism, like that established by Hawthorne's grim Puritans in a story that shares many of the concerns of "Peachstone Basket," "The Maypole of Merry Mount." Such judicious reining of passion may well explain why two months in Gillroad each spring turn Connilynne from a dark Zenobia to a wan Priscilla. In his obsessive commitment to establishing public order, Justin Gillroad is guided by what the newspapers praise as a "sternness against the promptings of his own heart" (p. 231). Such sternness victimizes both women whose lives Gillroad touches: Hedi Fessner, the fair lady, banished as a whore and robbed of her son; and Connilynne Gillroad, the dark temptress turned into sickly, passionless virgin. Too great a sternness can make a stone of the heart, and thus it is appropriate that Connilynne and Hedi wait on the day of the ceremonies in Gillroad to see Justin at last revealed publicly as the man they have always privately known: a figure in granite.

SOME CONSEQUENCES OF GILLROOD'S CHOICE

As a decisive cultural choice in Sandoz's story, the Judge's renunciation of sexuality has important consequences for relationships between the sexes in the microcosmic society of Gillroad. Sandoz subtly reveals some of the manifestations of the schizoid American

mythology of women and the male flight from passion and fatherhood to a condition of permanent adolescence.⁸ In discussing Connilynne's frequent absences from Gillrood, for instance, the "wits at the blacksmith shop agreed it would be better to look ahead to Connilynne for a few weeks a year than across the table at the liveryman's slob of a wife every day" (p. 231). This detail incisively presents the male group's process of maintaining its solidarity through humor that combines the fantasy of sex without responsibility with a degraded version of marriage. The men are free to engage in vaguely sexual fantasies about Connilynne precisely because there is no possibility that these will ever be realized. On the other hand, the living and physical intimacy of marriage is reduced to the debased image of the liveryman sitting across from his slob of a wife.

The effects of such humor in the male group are two. First, the shared sexual fantasy allows each to demonstrate his masculinity to the group without even the need to undergo contamination by contact with the despised female flesh. Second, the debasement of marriage defines the common enemy, women, and reassures the men that their most essential bond is to one another: they are "the boys" first, the ageless adolescent males of America, and lovers and fathers second, or not at all. (The shared sexual joking has the added, and crucial, function of eliminating any homosexual overtones from the relationships.) What we must note is that this kind of male group behavior derives from the mythic cultural choice Sandoz dramatizes in Justin Gillrood: a choice that denies passionate adult sexuality and its responsibilities of marriage and fatherhood.

Justin Gillrood's retreat from adult sexuality is also grotesquely reflected in a prominent feature of the Gillrood parade, "the finest float of all, representing the World of Tomorrow" (p. 233). Sandoz's bitterly satiric description focuses first on the phallic fascinations of a nation of sexually immature males, the "sons" of Judge Gillrood:

It was built like a chromium rocket with a mounted map of the United States standing across the back, the center of the country covered by a plaque labeled The Constitution and six young men in costume uniforms of the army, the navy and the Marines defending it with machine guns on every side. [P. 233]

What these men seem to be defending, in addition to the Constitution, is American womanhood, presented here in a way that completely divorces sexuality from humanity, turning women into ciphers:

But most people barely noticed the young men. They were looking at the group of pretty girls on the front of the float: Miss Aviation, Miss Streamliner, Miss Air Conditioning, Miss Oil Wells, Miss Hybrid Corn and Miss Certified Seed Potato, all looking pretty chilly in their bathing suits but smiling bravely upon all the town as the band behind them played and the crowd whistled and cheered. [P. 234]

Within the symbolic logic of the story, the reduction of female sexuality to commodity also derives from the choice between Hedi and Connilynne made by Judge Gillrood. Gillrood destroys the passionate life of both women (or at least banishes Hedi's from the story's symbolic microcosm) when he denies his own libido and projects that denial onto them. Moreover, his refusal to marry Hedi and his hanging Gillie signify a reduction of sex to the level of irresponsible adolescent fantasy. Thus the beauty queens offer a sexual product that is well suited to the symbolic sons of Judge Gillrood: sex depersonalized, utterly without passion and also without responsibility. They provide fantasies for the permanently adolescent, the boys at the blacksmith shop who joke about the liveryman's "slob of a wife."

Finally, the consequences of Judge Gillrood's retreat from sexuality are also symbolically indicated by the figures of Big Gillie and his son Lunky. Sandoz's descriptions of Gillie emphasize his massive strength and his defiance of the petty harassments of the social

order. Lunky, on the other hand, grows "into a manhood as powerful as his father's, but without Gillie's straight, defiant bearing" (p. 233). Instead, Lunky "shambled guiltily along, his pale, mild eyes always down before his fellows, the crown hair curling protectively about his ears" (p. 233). Clearly Sandoz invites us to read these portrayals as socially and psychologically allegorical. Gillie's power and defiance derive from his origin in the youthful, passionate love of Hedi and Justin. We might see him as the kind of American prefigured by Whitman in his projections of an "athletic democracy," a race of free, healthy beings born of a sexuality, male and female, that is openly accepted and without shame. Gillie is a prelapsarian figure, conceived before shame entered the garden of the West, before love became perverted to a means of social and economic advancement. He is the expression of Justin Gillroad's passional self, the id, before Gillroad renounces that self to become a public manifestation of the superego, the guardian of public virtue. Gillie's rebellion against public authority signifies the id's resistance to the dictates of the superego. In contrast, Lunky, with his stooped, guilty bearing, suggests the defeat of the id by the superego, the victory of Justin Gillroad over the passional forces he so fears. Lunky is postlapsarian man, born of a concealed sexual relationship between a father hanged by public authority for being defiant and a mother so blighted by shame at her husband's execution that she takes her own life. Such are the bitter fruits of Justin Gillroad's denial of Hedi Fessner and his own passional life.

The ending of "Peachstone Basket" suggests, however, that the id cannot be repressed permanently. When the Gillroodians at last become aware of the judge's relationship to Gillie, they form a violent mob bent on desecrating the images of their great man. Banners lining the parade route are pulled down and trampled; posters of the judge are ripped down and deliberately torn "across the face"; shouts of "Son-killer" are heard throughout the streets. Indeed, "only the marshal and his deputies

saved the Gillroad windows themselves from being smashed in" (p. 237). The violence on the part of Judge Gillroad's figurative sons represents the assertion of the id against the long dominant superego, transformed in the person of Gillroad into national myth. Denied expression in adult sexual passion, the long-deferred impulses of the libido are channeled into violence instead. Thus the mob violence is itself another bitter fruit of Judge Gillroad's mythic choice to deny his own sexuality.

In its whole myth, "Peachstone Basket" is remarkably similar to another work of the 1930s that comes round finally to a nightmarish vision of mob violence. Although Sandoz's work may seem superficially very different from those of Nathanael West, "Peachstone Basket" bears remarkable similarity to *The Day of the Locust* in its central emphases: the denial of adult sexuality, male or female, in America; the corruption at the heart of the American dream (represented by Hollywood in West's book); and the fear of an explosion of collective violence. The violence of Sandoz's characters is somewhat more specifically directed than the mindless "dreamlike violence" of West's Hollywood crowd, but that is only because they have a more specific image of corruption to fasten upon—Justin Gillroad. In both works the fundamental import of the violence is the same. Both mobs represent the long-deferred rebellion of the passional self against a slicked-up, stereotyped image of success in America that hides an emotional death at the very center of our national experience. Emerson was feeling his way toward a statement of the emotional cost of the American dream when he said that we had chosen works over days. In "Peachstone Basket," Mari Sandoz provides not only a fuller accounting of that cost but also a brilliant mythic explanation of its cause in Justin Gillroad's denial of Hedi and their son.

NOTES

1. Mari Sandoz's major achievement in nonfiction is her Trans-Missouri series, which

includes *The Beaver Men: Spearheads of Empire*; *Crazy Horse: The Strange Man of the Oglalas*; *The Buffalo Hunters: The Story of the Hide Men*; *Cheyenne Autumn*; *Old Jules*; and *The Cattlemen: From the Rio Grande across the Far Marias*. She planned a seventh book on the role of oil in the Great Plains area but did not complete it.

2. Scott Greenwell, "Fascists in Fiction: Two Early Novels of Mari Sandoz," *Western American Literature* 12 (Summer 1977): 134.

3. See letters of August 8 and 10, 1957, from Sandoz to Virginia Faulkner, in *Hostiles and Friendlies: Selected Short Writings of Mari Sandoz* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1959), p. xii.

4. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Works and Days," in *Society and Solitude: The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 12 vols. (1904; reprint ed., New York: AMS Press, 1968), 7:166.

5. The classic discussion of the pervasive denial of love and sexuality in American fiction is Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the*

American Novel (New York: Criterion Books, 1960). I am particularly indebted to Fiedler's analysis of the dark and fair lady stereotypes; see *Love and Death*, pp. 273-369.

6. Mari Sandoz, "Peachstone Basket," in *Hostiles and Friendlies: Selected Short Writings of Mari Sandoz* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1959). Later references are to this edition; they are included parenthetically.

7. The phrase is Fiedler's; see *Love and Death*, p. 224.

8. In its focus on the male retreat from passion to a condition of adolescence, "Peachstone Basket" bears comparison to Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*. For a brilliant treatment of Jim Burden's evasion of mature sexuality, see Blanche H. Gelfant, "The Forgotten Reaping-Hook: Sex in *My Ántonia*," *American Literature* 43 (1971): 60-82. I have analyzed the threatening role of women in works by two popular novelists of the frontier in my "Civilization as Emasculation: The Threatening Role of Women in the Frontier Fiction of Harold Bell Wright and Zane Grey," *Midwest Quarterly* 22 (1981): 346-60.