

The Quilting of Narrative: Playful Subversion in *The Robber Bridegroom*

by Marjorie Ingall

The patchwork quilt has been for more than a century an icon of American life, emblematic of a "golden age" in which domestic virtue created orderly, tranquil, thrifty and happy homes across the land. Long before the 19th century had ended, quilts and quilting were accepted symbols of those qualities in art and literature, here and abroad.

The women's movement, roughly coinciding temporally with the quilt revival of the later twentieth century, has brought new sensibilities to the investigation of the symbolic values of quilts and quilting. Women artists and writers find in the subject apt metaphors for their, and their sisters' lives, for their interaction with American culture. Generally the use has been positive, as metaphor for creativity and a perceived feminine way of approaching and organizing life, though some have argued it carries still connotations of the once-inescapable tyranny of sewing and the rigid, sexually-determined roles of which it was a manifestation.

*In the article which follows Marjorie Ingall discusses symbolic parallels between the quilting process and women's writing, using as her central example American writer Eudora Welty's 1942 novel *The Robber Bridegroom*. Ms. Welty, as she points out, was familiar with quilting, and quilts appear in other of her novels.*

—Editors' Note

I propose to illustrate the way in which quilting can be viewed as a metaphor for women's writing. Eudora Welty's *The Robber Bridegroom* is a particularly apt example. In her short novel, published in 1942, Welty incorporates many different genres—fairy tales, myths, legends, ballads and biblical stories—piecemeal, without letting any one element control the narrative. Welty chops up, reorders and chooses which pieces of earlier narratives she wishes to use; her act of truncating and plucking fragments out of older contexts, giving them new meaning, is inherently similar to the quilter's art. It is a way of demonstrating mastery and control of earlier sources.

The Robber Bridegroom is set in and around Mississippi's Natchez Trace circa 1798. Mississippi still belonged to Spain; the Indians presence is waning. The novel tells the story of the courtship of Rosamond Musgrove, beautiful daughter of an "innocent planter," and Jamie Lockhart, who is a New Orleans gentleman by day and "the bandit of the woods" by night. Each is mistaken about the other's real identity; each mislabels and misrepresents the other. The story itself is extremely fragmented, with resonant but ambiguous images that recall more than one genre. And *The Robber Bridegroom* playfully points out its own structure; in addition to references to individual tales, it constantly

compares itself to a fairy tale (for instance, Welty writes, "at first, life was like fairyland"). Rosamond herself deconstructs the act of storytelling; she herself tells elaborate tales containing "lessons" that Welty labels "lies." Welty pokes fun at the notion of being a writer, a tale teller. Isn't fiction merely a form of lying?

As a genre, the novel is extremely receptive to periodic "borrowing" from other genres. As Mikhail Bakhtin writes in *The Dialogic Imagination*:

The novel parodies other genres (precisely in their role as genres); it exposes the conventionality of their forms and their language; it squeezes out some genres and incorporates them into its own peculiar structure, reformulating and re-accentuating them.'

Reformulating and re-accentuating is precisely what goes on in *The Robber Bridegroom*. Welty takes bits and pieces of older narrative and older narrative forms and subordinates them to a new whole, one that embraces all of the old forms without being overly reverent about their sanctity. The amount of incorporation and adaptation in *The Robber Bridegroom* is extraordinarily extensive and overt. This novel calls attention to its acts of theft; that is its point. "In *The Robber Bridegroom* I used fairy tales and real folklore and historical people and everything alike and simultaneously," said Welty in a 1977 interview. "I think it's there; I think it's right there — so why shouldn't I avail myself?"²

"Everything alike and simultaneously" means that no one genre is given more inherent weight than any other. An image lifted from the Bible — that of Jacob wrestling with the angel, for example — is juxtaposed with the blustering figure of Mike Fink, legendary flatboatman on the Mississippi. The timeless fairy tale characters are juxtaposed with the time bound setting of the novel. Welty deliberately allows the reader's awareness of the impending history of the region — the Civil War, ante-bellum life and post-industrialism — to cast a shadow over the putatively happy ending. By chopping up scraps of various sources and genres, shuffling and recombining them in different patterns, Welty creates a narrative pastiche that is irreverent and freewheeling; no one element is inherently more valuable than another.

Welty's seemingly incongruous stitching of many different elements into a coherent whole can be compared to the act of making a quilt. Quilting involves cutting small pieces out of large sources, incorporating the pieces into a pattern, and (often) stitching the result to a backing. According to Jean Taylor Federico's *American Quilts: 1770-1880*, the two most popular quilting methods during that time were "applique (the application of a cut fabric onto the top of the quilt) and piecing (the combination of many small fragments of fabric to form a design)."³ Welty uses both. Her various sources — different genres and, in

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a narrower sense, different fairy tales — are pieced into a design within the novel. The resulting design is appliqueed to a backing of historical time and place — the area from Natchez to New Orleans, circa 1798.

The metaphor of quilting is appropriate for *The Robber Bridegroom* in a number of ways. The pieces from various genres and specifically from various fairy tales are too small to dominate the whole narrative. They are individually but one part of a pattern. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis says, "An art object may . . . be non-hierarchic, showing 'an organization of material in fragments,' breaking climactic structures, making an even display of elements over the surface with no climactic place or movement, since the materials are 'organized in many centers.'"⁴ The pieces are cut free from their associations and placed in a new context. For fairy tales, this means that they are cut free from the confinement of many generations of editors, from Charles Perrault to the Grimms to Andrew Lang, all of whom served as censoring, taming and moralizing influences. Frequently, this meant silencing and civilizing the tale's heroine.

The metaphor of quilting is obviously resonant in terms of women's writing in general. Elaine Showalter discusses the issue at length in her article, "Piecing and Writing."⁵ She argues that the fragmentation of women's time is reflected in the writing they produce.

Because of the structures and traditions of women's time, the dominant genre of American women's writing has been the short story, the short narrative piece. As the novel became the dominant genre of nineteenth-century American writing, women adapted the techniques of literary piecing to the structural and temporal demands of the new literary mode .

Piecing and writing in narrative, reflecting women's perception of time, indicates the many responsibilities (other than writing) of the woman writer. In a 1978 interview with Martha Van Noppen, Welty reflects on the process of piecing together her novel, *Losing Battles*, while facing financial hardship and while taking care of her dying mother:

MvN: I think it took Tillie Olsen a period of twenty years, writing on little scraps of paper which became her first and only novel.

Welty: Well, Losing Battles, which I wrote among difficulties, took about ten years, and it was written—

MvN: On scraps of paper?

Welty: On a combination of scraps of paper and a lot of things. You can write it any way. At the same time, I was doing lecturing to earn money. I just take for granted you have to manage. You have to learn some way!

This little snippet of conversation reflects Welty's determination to create despite the different demands on her time. And in fact, Welty's very writing style is a process of "piecing and writing":

Welty: I never heard of cut-and-pin. I just made it up for myself, but I suppose a lot of other people must have thought

of it too. Have you ever worked on a newspaper?

MvN: No.

Welty: When you throw something away, you just tear the strip across the bar at the top and throw it away. I got in the habit of tearing off the strip, both what I wanted to save and what I wanted to throw away, so that I ended up with strips — paragraphs here, a section of dialogue, and so on. I pin them together and then when I want to cut something, I cut it with the scissors. . . . You can move it, you can transpose. It's wonderful. It gives you a feeling of great mobility.

MvN: How did you get the idea? Were you ever a seamstress?

Welty: Oh, I have cut out things with patterns. No, I'm not a seamstress, but I have made things, and that is the way you make things, of course. On a dining room table, too.⁸

Like quilting (also an act often performed in the midst of a domestic setting, at the dining room table — not to belabor a parallel) women's writing often fails to receive due respect as an art form. As Alicia Ostriker has pointed out, certain diminutive, condescending words are often used to describe women's writing: graceful, subtle, elegant, delicate, cryptic. Seldom does one hear forceful, masterly, violent, large, true.⁹ That is certainly reflected in the critical response to Welty's work. When *The Robber Bridegroom* was first published, *The New Yorker* called it "gay, soaring, without a breadth of nightmare,"¹⁰ in spite of the fact, that, like fairy tales, it is full of rapes, murders and chopped-off fingers and heads. Perhaps because Welty used older, established sources — and because those sources were viewed as essentially frivolous in and of themselves — what she accomplished is not seen as true "art."

Welty uses quilt images in several works. In *The Robber Bridegroom*, Rosamond finds the silk dress that Jamie has stolen from her, "rolled up into a ball like a bundle of so many quilting pieces." In *Losing Battles*, Granny Vaughn's quilt features the "Delectable Mountains" pattern, indicating a sense of place. In *Delta Wedding*, a quilt is a wedding gift from family members, a positive symbol of continuity. In *Livvie*, old Solomon huddles under his quilt, clinging to the past and neglecting his young wife. His quilt is pieced in the "Around the World" pattern, though narrow, pinched Solomon has never been anywhere. In a 1972 interview with Charles T. Bunting, Welty announces that she knows at least 30 quilt names." For Welty, writing as quilting fits in with her identity as a Southern woman writer. Quilting stands for continuity, a sense of place, a skill passed down through time, a communal — and quintessentially female — activity. "The urge to create a thing of beauty from scraps of fabric is a challenge, plus a tactile reminder of past generations. My hands are moving the same way as my mother's and grandmother's did years before," says a present-day quilter, Karey Bresenhan, head of the International Quilt Festival.¹²

Showalter's article ends with a very brief caveat about being too quick to welcome quilting as a feminist metaphor; quilting

may indeed be a burden, a symbol of a dead time and bad for the eyes to boot. I like the idea of keeping quilting ambivalent, though. Quilting was indeed difficult and frequently unpleasant:

*Saliva was used to stop bleeding if one's finger was pricked and alum was used by a few to help toughen the tips of the fingers in anticipation of frequent jaggging. Cold water and soap were applied immediately to any blood stain on the quilt, those on the backing or underside sometimes being missed.*¹³

The often painful process produces powerful-looking, beautiful results. The same might be said for the act of writing. The blood is there, both in the process and in the product, but when reviewers look at Welty's work, they often ignore the blood on the backing. They run for their "delicate" imagery instead. In fairy tales too, the dark side has been ignored in favor of moralizing (often with anti-feminist sentiment).¹⁴ Beauty and violence are stitched together.

To some extent, however, the violence in *The Robber Bridegroom* is problematic and disturbing from a feminist perspective. It seems to blame the victim. Jamie rapes Rosamond at their first meeting; he does so repeatedly throughout their life together in the robbers' den, until she learns his true identity. "But when she tried to lead him to his bed with a candle, he would knock her down and out of her senses and drag her there. However, if Jamie was a thief after Rosamond's love, she was his first assistant in the deed, and rejoiced equally in his good success."¹⁵ It is unnerving that Welty seems to blame Rosamond for confusing rape with love, as much as she blames Jamie for raping Rosamond. In her view, men can be reformed, but it is up to women to do the reforming. This is an essentially conservative view of the role of women: to tame and control an uncivilized environment and an undomesticated man.

Quilts made with worn scraps of fabric can be seen as essentially conservative too, for three reasons. They literally conserve the past; their patterns are often prescribed and familiar; there is no getting around the fact that the material (like Welty's narrative material) has been used before. Of course, there is always the potential for wildness in creation, even when using an established pattern: Creativity can come in combining fabrics and colors. And doing so, using the scraps one has to beautify a harsh environment, is intricately tied to the notion of women's role as civilizing influence. Quilting can be a form of empowerment; it can also be a form of limitation and subjugation.

For the most part, though, I believe quilting and storytelling are both primarily affirmative acts. Karen Rowe, in *The Female Voice in Folklore and Fairy Tale*, writes of the stitching of fairy tale heroines and its relation to female tale-tellers:

*[T]he intimate connection, both literal and metaphoric, between weaving and telling a story also establishes the cultural and literary frameworks within which women transmit. . . folklore and fairy tales. . . When later women became tale tellers or sages femmes, their audible art is likewise associated with their cultural function as silent spinners or weavers, and they employ the fairy tale as a speaking (oral or literary) representation of the silent matter of their lives.*¹⁶

The silent women creating textiles within fairy tales become vocal women creating texts. Quilting is a regional metaphor, a form of storytelling through stitching, which reclaims this activity.

Past quilters' names have gone unrecorded, been lost by collectors or been deleted by museum curators. And the women spinning fairy tales have, through history, been silenced just as fairy tale heroines have been silenced. The Grimms adapted and edited the tales they collected from oral spinners, and the names of centuries of tellers have been lost.

With *The Robber Bridegroom*, Welty creates a pieced narrative that self-consciously encourages the reader to deconstruct it as narrative. Welty has her text point out its own acts of theft, its own structure, through the humor and startling recombinations. In a story about not knowing and not recognizing the self as well as the other, the collision of fairy tale and historical world reinforces the sense of playfully serious disorientation.

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Endnotes

- ¹Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas, 1981), p. 5.
- ²Eudora Welty, "An Interview with Eudora Welty," Jean Todd Freeman, *Conversations with Eudora Welty*, ed. Peggy Whitman Prentiss (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1984), p. 189.
- ³Jean Taylor Federico, "American Quilts: 1770-1880," *The Artist and the Quilt*, ed. Charlotte Robinson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), p. 22.
- ⁴Rachel Blau DuPlessis, "For the Etruscans," *The New Feminist Criticism*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon, 1985), p. 274. DuPlessis is quoting Sheila De Brettville in *Heresies*, May 77:27.
- ⁵Elaine Showalter, "Piecing and Writing," *The Poetics of Gender*, ed. Nancy K. Miller (New York: Columbia UP, 1986).
- ⁶Showalter, "Piecing and Writing," p. 229.
- ⁷Eudora Welty, "A Conversation with Eudora Welty," Martha van Noppen, *Conversations with Eudora Welty*, p. 250.
- ⁸Welty, "A Conversation with Eudora Welty," pp. 244-5.
- ⁹Alicia Susk in Ostriber, *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (Boston: Beacon, 1986), p. 2.
- ¹⁰*The New Yorker*, October 24, 1993.
- ¹¹Eudora Welty, "The Interior World: An Interview with Eudora Welty," Charles T. Bunting, *Conversations with Eudora Welty*, p. 51.
- ¹²Karey Bresenhan, qtd. in Beth Sherman, "Quilt Crazy: A Stitch in Time," *Harper's Bazaar* February 1989: pp. 56-70.
- ¹³Jeannette Lasansky, *In the Heart of Pennsylvania: Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Quilting Traditions* (Lewisburg: Oral History Project of the Union County Historical Society, 1985), p. 28.
- ¹⁴For an extended discussion of the moralizing editing of fairy tales, see Ruth B. Bottigheimer's *Grimms' Bad Girls and Bold Boys* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1987) and Maria Tatar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales* (Princeton, Princeton UP, 1987).
- ¹⁵Eudora Welty, *The Robber Bridegroom* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1942), p. 84.
- ¹⁶Karen E. Rowe, "To Spin a Yarn: The Female Voice in Folklore and Fairy Tale," *Fairy Tales and Society*, ed. Ruth B. Bottigheimer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1986), p. 56.