
Unraveling Katherine Anne Porter's French Murder Mystery: New Clues to Her Life and Art

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Abstract

In the 1930s, while she was living in France, Katherine Anne Porter began to think about adding a murder mystery to her list of planned works. She already had on her plate a number of unfinished works, some under contract, and a string of works-in-progress that would come to fruition before the decade was out. But she was seriously intrigued by some medieval French histories that touched her to the core and coincided with a satiric slant that was evolving in some pieces of her uncompleted work. The histories revolved around her lifelong heroine, Joan of Arc, and Porter began to see a way to conflate Joan's story with the histories in a way that was especially satisfying to her evolving aesthetic. Porter discovered the histories in the *Journal de Clement de Fauquembergue*, scribe to the Parliament of Paris 1417-1435, and in some overviews of fifteenth-century France. The historical characters in her murder mystery were to be Joan herself in the background, one Blanche d'Overbreuc, her husband, Guillaume de Flavy (who tried unsuccessfully to have Blanche drowned), and Blanche's lover, Pierre de Louvain, a lieutenant in the French army. The focus was the trial and acquittal by a sympathetic jury of Blanche and Louvain, who were arrested for the murder of Flavy after two men they enlisted carried it out. According to Porter's notes for the planned work the trial was to be an index to the Fifteenth Century, which she called "one of the most tremendous in human history." In her notes for her unfinished "French Murder Mystery" Porter's entwining of purely historical figures and events with fictional transformations of others reveals a vision of a complex satire that sheds yet more light on her artistic values and techniques that were finding root in her mature psyche.

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