

Parting the Curtain on Lye Poisoning in “A Worn Path”

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Eudora Welty’s sensitivity to words and images in rural Mississippi during the late 1930s are often reflected in her writings and photographs (Barilleaux 21). “A Worn Path” is evident of this. Written, apparently, in 1940, and published in 1941, it is a short story about Phoenix Jackson, an elderly grandmother who undertakes a heroic journey into town to procure free “charity case” medicine for her grandson’s throat (177–78). The story is predicated on the unfortunate circumstance that the boy’s throat periodically becomes swollen because he accidentally swallowed lye. The doctor’s office that Phoenix returns to “like clockwork” confirms this: “Yes. Swallowed lye. When was it?—January-two-three years ago—” (178). How accurately does “A Worn Path” reflect conditions of the poor of Welty’s time and place, and from where does she draw inspiration for this tale?

The child’s condition is something Welty obviously understood, as her story and its allusions to medicine clearly show. Traveling throughout her native state as a junior publicity agent for the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s, camera in hand, Welty observed the lives of rural people closely and took photographs depicting black life, including several that portray images of women like Phoenix Jackson. Unlike many writers and photographers of her time—for example, Margaret Bourke-White and Doris Ulmann—Welty was not on a Depression era crusade (Black 35), although she is clearly sympathetic to the people whose images she snaps. She explains, “And though I did not take these pictures to prove anything, I think they most assuredly do show something—which is to make a far better claim for them” (*Eye* 354). What Welty did do, however, was to imagine the heroic and difficult lives of those whom she observed. Stories like “The Key,” “The Whistle,” “Death of a Traveling Salesman,” “A Worn Path,” and many others testify to the imaginative interest she added to the static pictures of obscure lives she discovered as she traveled Mississippi for the first time. Her conversion from photographer to chronicler was abrupt. In an oft-quoted remark, Welty states that:

Away off one day up in Tishomingo County, I knew this anyway: that my wish, indeed my continuing passion, would be not to point the

finger in judgment but to part a curtain, that invisible shadow that falls between people, the veil of indifference to each other's presence, each other's wonder, each other's human plight. (*Eye* 355)

What is Welty parting the curtain to show in "A Worn Path"? An elderly black woman negotiates the barriers, threats, and mazes that challenge but do not thwart her annual trip through the countryside to town. Phoenix faces down a ghostly scarecrow and a white hunter with his dog before she must face the condescending nurses in the city doctor's office to which her memory draws her. This story means to reveal the complexity and difficulties in the life of a woman like Phoenix, as Welty signals when she writes, "The shadows hung from the oak trees to the road like curtains" (176).

This is just the first of many curtains that Phoenix Jackson will part. What is often written about is the courage of Phoenix Jackson, her devotion to her grandson, and the obstacles she overcomes on her mythic journey, including the humiliating way she is treated at the clinic. Since Welty played down the realistic elements in the story (and refused to explain whether or not Phoenix Jackson's quest was an old woman's delusion regarding a grandson who is long dead), the issue of accidental lye poisoning has perhaps not received the critical attention it deserves, even though it comprises a compelling chapter in the medical history of America and one that was well-publicized when Welty wrote Phoenix's story.

When "A Worn Path" was published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1941, the plight of Phoenix Jackson's grandson was alarmingly real, especially in the rural South. Esophageal injuries from swallowing the caustic chemical known as lye occurred frequently among children, especially in rural areas like the one from which Phoenix begins her journey. What also rings true is the result of swallowing lye: not instant death from poisoning but a scarred esophagus that might immediately, or later, swell and constrict so that a child could neither eat nor drink. In many cases, the unpredictable swelling of the throat in a child who had previously swallowed lye caused the child to slowly waste away from starvation and dehydration. This episodic condition is called esophageal stenosis or esophageal stricture (if it causes death) and clearly seems to be the problem with Phoenix's grandson. Phoenix describes his condition to the town nurse as a recurrent one: "No missy, he not dead, he just the same. Every little while his throat begin to close up again, and he not able to swallow" (178). So Welty's story of Phoenix Jackson's heroic quest has a stark realistic basis in medical literature and

might be a true portrait of how difficult it was for Depression era rural people like Phoenix to find sympathetic treatment from self-important town people or appropriate remedies for such a common condition among people who had to make their own soap using home-made or commercial lye and animal fat.

Dr. Leila Denmark, who in February of 2009 is 111 years old and a practicing pediatrician in rural Georgia since she graduated from medical school in 1928 until 2002, has given a firsthand report on lye swallowing and its severe consequences. When interviewed in 20002, she explained why lye poisoning was so common: "Back then, everybody had a box of Red Devil Lye in their kitchen." Lye, chemically known as sodium or potassium hydroxide, had once been made in rural homes by leaching water through wood ashes. Lye was used in many homes not only to make soap and unclog drains, but to clean floors, outhouses, and toilets, to peel peach skins, to make hominy, and to spray vegetable and food crops (*About the House* 6-27). Home-made lye was dangerous enough, but commercial lye, usually more caustic than the home-made variety, was often kept in the kitchen with the smiling devil face displayed on the front of the bright red can. Purchased dry, lye looks like sugar, and in its powdery form, it would have been kept within handy reach wherever laundry was done or soap was made, indoors or outside. When mixed with water and stored in a clear glass bottle for use as a drain cleaner or disinfectant, it looks like milk. And unsuspecting mothers and grandmothers, if they could read at all, would have read on the box or in advertisements for Red Devil Lye that it was safe to use on sensitive skin and would not damage fine fabrics. In truth, however, lye is



so powerful that although drinking it is not fatal, when swallowed, it dissolves the tender lining of the esophagus.

The misfortune that has befallen Phoenix's grandson is therefore all too real and was still extremely common during the 1930s, the era when Welty first began her explorations of rural Mississippi and her photography and writing careers, all well before she wrote "A Worn Path." *The Index Medicus*, a yearly index of published medical papers, contains many entries for this period about esophageal stenosis and stricture. One 1939 study in the *Southern Medical Journal*, just a year before Welty wrote her story reported that although esophageal burns from lye were very common throughout the southern region, sixty percent of patients seen by doctors were black, and almost all of the remaining white patients were children of tenant farmers. The authors of the study, Martin and Arena, noted that these "charity cases" (their wording) were always a severe budget strain on local medical services. They surmised that these cases occurred as a result of poverty, a lack of both education and information on the dangers of lye poisoning. In "A Worn Path," the attendant in the doctor's office calls Phoenix "A charity case, I suppose" (177), and after bringing the old woman a bottle of medicine, repeats the judgment with a negative tone: "'Charity,' she said, making a check mark in a book" (179). Phoenix's grandson could be plucked right out of Martin and Arena's 1939 study.

As the daughter of an insurance company president and a widely traveled publicity agent for the Mississippi branch of the federal relief agency that was addressing the health, hygiene, educational, and economic problems of the rural poor, Welty clearly indicates in "A Worn Path" that she knew something about the problem. Surely she would not have failed to notice the widely publicized efforts of another heroic crusader named Jackson to seek relief for those who suffered from the malady that afflicts Phoenix's grandson. This person, a man, was a medical doctor who set out on a path of his own during the 1920s to stop these accidents of lye poisoning and, as a specialist in laryngology, to relieve swollen throat symptoms among the many charity case children brought regularly to him, children who had swallowed lye.

Because of his interests and his success, *The New Yorker* magazine identified him in June of 1938 as "the most famous doctor in the world for extracting foreign bodies—coins, nails, safety pins—out of patients' lungs, esophagi, etc." ("Review" 60). He was as aptly named as Welty's character: Chevalier Jackson.

Dr. Chevalier Jackson invented several medical instruments to examine and treat patients who had obstructed esophagi or who had inhaled or swallowed dangerous objects. The first of these was the esophagoscope (1890), a device that discovered and extracted foreign objects in children's throats when they had swallowed or inhaled small toy parts, safety pins, broken teeth, nails, or similar sized objects. He in fact kept a collection of the odd things he had extracted that can be viewed at the Mutter Museum in Philadelphia. The esophagoscope was also used to treat victims of lye poisoning.

But Chevalier Jackson was increasingly moved by something he treated much too frequently: the accidental lye poisoning of children. In *The Life of Chevalier Jackson: An Autobiography*, Jackson writes of the heartbreak of seeing emaciated children literally dying of thirst and hunger because their throats were too constricted to allow anything to pass through. Most of the poisoning victims brought to Jackson were poor charity cases. But he never condescended to them or complained about dispensing charity. He remembered especially one seven-year-old, the motherless child of a drunken coal miner, who was brought to him near death because of her constricted throat; she had not swallowed anything for so long, she was dying of thirst and hunger. After he was able to dilate her throat with an esophagoscope and give her a drink of water, her health was eventually restored. But he recalled her response when he gave her the first sip of water: "That wan smile and kiss of the hand from the grateful child whose swallowing was restored after a week of water starvation," he wrote in his widely reviewed memoir, "meant more to me than any material remuneration; the memory of it now, over forty years later, still yields dividends of satisfaction" (Jackson 107). Her case was one in hundreds that motivated Chevalier Jackson to tread a worn path of his own, which would blaze a trail around the country.

In the early 1920s, Chevalier Jackson began a mission that would take more than twenty-five years and cost him considerable personal expense. The reason so many accidental lye poisonings occurred was that no warning labels appeared on the packaging for commercially sold lye. Jackson wanted not only to increase public awareness of the dangers of lye but to persuade lye packers to print warning labels on their packages. He worked relentlessly to convince the federal government to require such warnings on all poisonous merchandise, using his own money to travel from his home in Philadelphia to Washington, DC, to crusade against lye

poisoning. He first tried to persuade lye manufacturers to put warnings on their packaging. For marketing reasons, they adamantly refused. In spite of his own poor health due to tuberculosis, he began his own campaign to speak at medical conferences, organize committees within the American Medical Association, lobby politicians, and seek publicity in every state to change this (Bartlett 124).

A small, frail man raised in poverty, Jackson achieved his first success on his mission in 1927, when President Calvin Coolidge signed the Federal Caustic Poison Act into law. By 1937, poison warning labels were required on all lye packages, but the problem of accidental lye poisoning continued in rural areas because of widespread illiteracy and lack of knowledge about the danger of what was still an inexpensive, common household product (Martin 289). Phoenix Jackson, Welty's story makes plain, cannot read: she comprehends that she has reached her goal in the doctor's office by a visual memory of the medical diploma on the wall, a document she can decipher only because the "gold seal" and the frame "matched the dream that was hung up in her head" (177).

But it is doubtful that the ability to read would have helped Phoenix avoid the accident with lye that has led to her grandson's problem. Like many rural people in America, Southerners had used homemade lye for generations in such diverse activities as scouring the bristles from slaughtered hogs, making soap from lye and animal fat, clearing grease from clogged drains, and washing clothes stained with the sweat of agriculture and the stain of the earth. Thomas D. Clark writes in *Pills, Petticoats, and Plows: The Southern Country Store* that after the Civil War, "when the South was regaining its balance," soap was made at home from wood ashes in a big soap kettle, and later, from lye purchased in boxes. It was used mainly for washing clothes, much the way present day householders use relatively powerful spray-on products or chlorine bleaches to remove heavy stains (145).

Before Chevalier Jackson's success in 1937 of requiring warning labels on lye packaging, Red Devil Lye was the dominant brand, and its maker, the William Schield Manufacturing Company of St. Louis, as early as 1923 printed a small color pamphlet showing how to use Red Devil Lye with old kitchen grease and table waste to clean clothes with "practically no expense" in a large iron kettle. Store-bought lye was advertised as both strong and gentle, and advertisements would often contain "criminally misleading statements" about its safety, stating that it could be used on sensi-

tive skin and fine fabrics (Jackson 108), as well as to remove paint and clean silverware. "LIKE WASHING IN RAIN WATER, Red Devil Lye Makes Hardest Water Soft" reads one ad titled *About the House and on the Farm*. The genial, smiling red devil on the lye can was a pictorial reinforcement of this strong-but-gentle paradox. Many advertisements show the product being used by housewives for everyday cleaning purposes, as if lye were the most wholesome way to clean a house.

Touching perhaps the mystical aspects of Welty's story, folklorists have reported that the packaging was quite appealing to parts of the rural population, in fact, that the distinctive Red Devil Lye package became a "hoodoo" object: "to protect your property from intruders or from people who may want to lay a trick or put powders down for you to step in or step over, simply bury three unopened containers of Red Devil brand lye at the four corners of the property with the Devil images facing outward to guard the premises" (Yronwode). Lye was an integral part of southern culture while Welty was writing *A Worn Path*, and matters surrounding the subject would not have gone unnoticed.

Whether Welty knew about the role of Red Devil Lye in hoodoo, she certainly knew something about the practice of washing clothes outside over an open fire in a large pot, a practice that in those early days invariably involved some form of lye soap. Among Welty's early photographs are pictures of two rural Mississippi washerwomen who might well have used lye. One portrays a Jackson woman with a scarf tied on her head and is entitled "washwoman" (P 86), and the other shows a Hinds county woman—Jackson's home county—with a boiling pot on her front porch (P 21). Washing, lye, and the town's name of Jackson were clearly connected, however unconsciously, in the writer's mind.

Welty once said that she based the character of Phoenix on a woman she saw walking to town one day. If the character is based on an image, where did Phoenix's narrative come from, and how did she come to bear her distinctive name?

It is easy to assume that Phoenix's last name came from Welty's hometown, but what significance does the town of Jackson confer upon a woman whose given name is as noble and rich with allusions as Phoenix? She lives, apparently, off the Old Natchez Trace somewhere near Natchez, Mississippi, not Jackson, and her story does not address the political or military history that derives from Jackson's namesake, Andrew Jackson. It seems far more likely, then, that Welty associated what she knew of the

famous Dr. Chevalier Jackson and his efforts against lye poisoning with her story and chose Phoenix's surname to reflect contemporaneous accounts of the doctor's mission of ending the bane of lye poisoning in children.

Certainly Percy Hutchison's 1938 review of *The Life of Chevalier Jackson: An Autobiography* could have caught Welty's eye in the *New York Times Book Review*, since she reviewed books for the NYTBR and read it regularly (Polk 448). Welty had, by this time, lived and visited New York often, was an avid reader, and kept pace with the literary news there. Jackson's autobiography was also reviewed in *The New Yorker*, *The New Republic*, *Books*, and the *Christian Century*. Hutchison's eye-catching and emphatic title in his *Times* review of Jackson's book, "Doctor! Baby's Swallowed A Pin!" in fact sounds like the title she gave a later work of her own, the 1941 essay: "Women!! Make Turban in Own Home!" As the daughter of an insurance company executive, she would have been aware of actuarial and medical issues. According to prominent Welty scholar Suzanne Marrs, Welty contributed photographs for two stories about Mississippi doctors to *Life* magazine in 1937 and 1938 (Marrs 13). One photograph is of a Dr. Logan McLean who was involved with the Mississippi Tuberculosis Association ("Doctor" 57). The other is a group of six photographs Welty took for a story on a series of deaths in Mt. Olive, Mississippi, caused by the prescription drug sulphanilamide ("Newsfront" 33). Given her involvement with these medical stories, Welty would have had a familiar interest in a story like Chevalier Jackson's, and she would have had a hard time missing news of his book and his accomplishments. It is perhaps not a stretch to believe that this well-covered accomplishment could have piqued Welty's interest to the extent that she built a short story around it two years later and named her main character for its modern-day hero.

Chevalier Jackson's autobiography recounts his invention of the esophagoscope, a device he adapted from cruder and less useful instruments he had seen when studying abroad. These early tools for examining throat obstructions were developed based on someone's observation that circus sword swallows tilt their heads up like a baby bird waiting to be fed, and by doing so, they open up a clear channel through the mouth and down the esophagus; this way, it was realized, an exploratory tube can safely be lowered into the throat with a patient similarly postured. Phoenix's grandson apparently assumes just such a posture. Phoenix explains at the doctor's office that "He wear a little patch quilt and peep out holding his mouth open like a little bird" (178). Nine years after Chevalier invented

this lifesaving instrument to treat throat obstructions like the one that plagued Phoenix's grandson, he made headlines again with another medical invention that he used primarily to treat the poor.

Jackson repeated his success and gained an international reputation as the founder of a special branch of surgery called bronchoscopy. Until then, foreign objects inspired into the bronchi were fatal unless the victim could cough them up. This happened in two out of every one hundred patients; the remaining ninety-eight would die immediately or after weeks, months, or years of suffering. The only alternative was to take out ribs and surgically remove the item from the lung. This practice carried a two per cent survival rate. Jackson's invention of the bronchoscope enabled doctors to remove even dangerous objects such as open safety pins, nails, and needles from the lungs (136-40). The bronchoscope was to the lungs what the esophagoscope was to the throat. Jackson wrote that "In all of this work there was no remuneration. Curiously, the patients were nearly all the children of the poor. Fully 95 per cent of my entire practice was charity" (138). Because of his invention of not only the esophagoscope but the bronchoscope as well, Jackson's fame spread around the world through medical and mainstream magazines and newspapers. In his autobiography, he expressed his ire over the dozens of newspaper reporters he gave interviews to on the condition that they would educate and urge their readers about the dangers of keeping lye and small items out where children could accidentally ingest or inhale them. Few, if any, kept their promise to him. "The newspapers always wanted to exploit my name and personality, they had no enthusiasm for and little interest in warning mothers to keep lye, drain cleaners, and other caustics out of the reach of children" (186). Jackson's contributions to society and his strong character made him a hot commodity for the press during the time of Welty's writing.

His unusual given name, Chevalier, seemed very appropriate for such a modest but persistent hero. Chevalier means "a knight of the lower order." The import of this is something Welty, steeped in the lore of chivalry and myth from her childhood and reading in *Our Wonder World*, could appreciate. Additionally, in 1938, when *The Life of Chevalier Jackson* appeared, Welty's fellow Mississippi writer William Faulkner published his novel *The Unvanquished*, a cycle of seven stories about Bayard Sartoris during the Civil War. Faulkner's Bayard, who appears as an old man in the writer's third novel, *Sartoris* (originally entitled *Flags in the Dust*), bears a name that is an allusion to the Chevalier Bayard, Pierre Terrail (1473-1524), a

French knight “sans peur et sans raproche” whose exploits—singlehandedly capturing a troop of enemy soldiers—are echoed in *The Unvanquished* in some of the bravura exploits of Bayard Sartoris’s father John, an officer in the Confederate army. These stories also appeared mostly in *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1934, 1935, and 1936, so Welty would have had several chances to meet Faulkner’s Bayard (Meriwether 13–14). The Chevalier in Bayard’s epithet, which translates “without fear or blemish,” equates him with the knights of the round table who were supposed to undertake the search for the Holy Grail but who were repeatedly disqualified for lack of virtue. And that association might be used to link Chevalier Jackson with Phoenix Jackson under the aspect of a heroic journey to seek a remedy for a fatal malady.

The elderly woman with a red rag on her head who is seen by the white community as from a lower order, not only black, but a “charity case” as well (177), undertakes a quest, acts bravely, and returns toward her home apparently with both real and symbolic gifts, a bottle with the precious soothing liquid and a stick on which a red pinwheel spins, cup and lance. It certainly seems chivalric that Phoenix faced the nurses to procure an elixir for her grandson’s throat with a “fixed and ceremonial stiffness over her body ... just as if she were in armor” (177–78).

Chevalier Jackson also lived up to his name. He rose from humble beginnings and disregarded his own fame to work tirelessly as a doctor and a political activist against recalcitrant American manufacturers, never turned down a charity case, and frequently gave money to the families of children he helped so they could buy medicine or have the wherewithal to return to their homes (Bartlett 122–23). Profiled in *Time* magazine in 1932, *Rotarian* magazine in 1939, and reviewed in important publications when he published his 1938 autobiography, Jackson was subsequently honored by inclusion in a series of inspirational biographical essays distributed by the YMCA. Perhaps it is an ironic twist that while Chevalier Jackson was named Chevalier de la Legion d’Honneur (France) in 1927, Welty was named Chevalier de l’Ordre des Artes et Lettres in 1987. Jackson, Faulkner, and Welty were in fact all inducted into France’s Legion d’Honneur.

Chevalier Jackson and Phoenix Jackson are two humble heroes pursuing two worn, difficult paths because of one loathsome malady. They had in common a long journey, a common cause, a surname, and resonant given names that evoke myth and the romance of the quest for a symbolic but true palliative for the miseries of the human race. Is Phoenix driven by the

fact that her grandson ingested lye that was made at home by the common process of leaching water through wood ashes? And if so, do the ashes associate his fate and potential recovery with that of the phoenix that perishes in flame and rises from its own ashes in renewal?

If her grandson has the common deadly swelling of the esophagus as a result of lye swallowing, how could Phoenix get the "soothing medicine" down his throat? And, to further complicate matters, no evidence of any such medicine exists in Chevalier Jackson's account of his life or in the medical literature. A magical elixir to restore life is a staple only of heroic and romantic adventures, from Gilgamesh onwards, and as a story for readers innocent of the very real nature of the grandson's malady, Welty must have decided, the question of an appropriate medicine perhaps does not need to come up. The nurse's understanding with the doctor is that Phoenix can have the "soothing medicine" whenever she comes for it. Or is it possible that somehow Phoenix does know how to contrive relief for her grandson with the soothing medicine—probably paregoric, an opiate frequently prescribed in that era for many ailments, including teething in babies, a relaxant, and a painkiller (Denmark).

All we know is that she periodically makes a long journey for medicine if we regard the story as simple realism. But like so many of Welty's stories, "A Worn Path" is not simple realism and yet not a simple analogue with a common mythic theme. Her first published story, "Death of a Traveling Salesman" for example, parallels John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, a story doubtless more than a little resonant for Welty because her father's given name was Christian, the name of Bunyan's Pilgrim. Welty magnifies the import of Phoenix Jackson's quest by choosing the old woman's given name and placing the mythic and folkloric analogies in the account of Phoenix's journey and the object of her quest. These associations lead us to appreciate the ambiguity and universality of Phoenix Jackson, as well as her dramatization of a genuine medical calamity common among the mostly black rural poor of Welty's South.

That "A Worn Path" reflects the condition of the poor of her time and place is provable with historical evidence. Did Welty know of and draw inspiration from the famous doctor Chevalier Jackson, a knight in shining armor to children everywhere? And what, finally, is that medicine? Although the answers are probable, Welty's story, of course, like Phoenix Jackson, is not saying.

This essay was previously published in the *Eudora Welty Newsletter* XXVI.2 (Summer 2002).

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