

Comedy at its “Prime:” Comic Elements in Muriel Spark’s *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*

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Muriel Spark has been alternately called “the reasonable recorder of unreason” (Barreca 223), and “the surrealist Jane Austen” (126) by Charles Alva Hoyt. Hoyt goes on to call her “a thoroughly mischievous writer...view[ing] the universe itself as mischievous...both aware of individuals and fond of meddling with them for its own amusement” (126). From thence proceed her comic impulses, as seen in her works.

I am, in this paper, commencing by agreeing with Hoyt, but am also going beyond this universalized, “classical-ized” explication by specifying this “unreason” to be more than a cosmological phenomenon in Spark’s fiction. Citing Hoyt, perhaps the operative word we should be focusing on here is *surrealist* rather than the “Jane Austen-ish” qualities that Spark is purported to carry in her texts. At least, in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), I find the Romantic a very comfortable and convenient veneer overlaying what is actually a hard-nosed, almost cynical attempt to deal with the multiple vacuums within the matrix of the “Brodie world”. Hoyt himself debunks this comparison when he says that

although she is *not* a Romantic, Mrs. Spark is perfectly willing, like every other *modern* writer to accept some of the advantages secured by Romanticism, principally those implied in the postulate that individual experimentation is equal or superior to [the] observation of the most correct models. (128, my italics)

Perhaps what Hoyt should be stating, which I underscore here, is that what we find in Spark’s *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* is not only a modern text in the loose sense, but a *modernist* one, marked by experimentations on plot, narrative chronology, and characters that move towards the thesis of disintegrating unities and divisive uncertainties in the Edinburgh of Spark’s life and fiction. It is this “highly inventive chronology” (Hoyt 128, cf. 140), experimentation that she has used also in other novels [e.g., *The Comforters* 1957; *The Girls of Slender Means* 1963], that leads us in *Miss Brodie* to focus constantly on her “prime” as a controlling time marker, a unifying device, however much of an ambiguous one it is, as “we are constantly in motion from the present to the past and back” (140). Regina Barreca cites V. B. Richmond who wrote that “Spark’s fiction mirrors the uncertainty, confusion, infidelity, and violence that are ordinary characteristics of contemporary society” (225), and again I assert here that what we find in *Miss Brodie* are indeed these uncertainties, confusions, infidelities, but all the while weaving in the impulse towards certainty or unity in a world that is slowly losing this, or which has been disabled from providing it, which may account for the indomitability of Jean Brodie’s character or the cohesion of the Brodie set. William McBrien notes the “intensity and manner of Spark’s response to history in her time” (166), and this, I think, is evident in the decidedly modernist bent of this novel.

We can perhaps enter the comic in the text by way of the gravity of the *zeitgeist* elucidated by or searched for in the novel, vis-à-vis the near-caricature of Jean Brodie as the independent feminist who stands out in the Marcia Blaine School, if not in stiff Calvinist Edinburgh. Miss Jean Brodie, the novel’s central character, is vigorous, independent, strangely beautiful, and a Protestant. She teaches at the Marcia Blaine School for Girls, and in the class

she handles, has actually chosen a select group whom she cultivates: “Give me a girl at an impressionable age, and she is mine for life” (PJB 12). This group of six girls, from 1930-1938, would be under her tutelage and influence and would form a coterie who would receive not only her vision of education but given entry into her life. Miss Brodie becomes particularly set on forming them in the manner in which she deems necessary, especially when she reaches what she calls “her prime.” Miss Brodie is not young, and her goal is to educate the “Brodie set,” to take advantage of the years of her “prime.” The “prime” of Miss Brodie is more than a reference to her chronological age; it is a concept that permeates all aspects of her being, a condition which “sets her apart from others and magnifies her power...[and] carries with it a social status that also correlates with her solipsistic tendency to be the truths she imparts” (Whiteley 86):

I have frequently told you, and the holidays just past have convinced me, that my prime has truly begun. One’s prime is elusive. You little girls, when you grow up, must be on the alert to recognise your prime at whatever time of your life it may occur. You must then live it to the full...

‘Attend to me girls. One’s prime is the moment one was born for. Now that my prime has begun—Sandy, your attention is wandering. What have I been talking about?’

Your prime, Miss Brodie...’ (PJB 15)

Later, when Teddy Lloyd, Miss Brodie’s *grande passion*, is asked by his wife about Miss Brodie, he too will refer to her in terms of this: “Deirdre laughed. ‘Miss Brodie sounds a bit queer, I must say. What age is she?’ ‘Jean Brodie,’ said Teddy, ‘is a magnificent woman in her prime’” (127). Miss Brodie’s story teeters between nurturing the set and engaging in a battle against the other teachers of the Marcia Blaine School who find her teaching most unconventional and who resent her hold over the Brodie set. Talking to her girls, she says:

‘I have to consult you about a new plot which is afoot to force me to resign. Needless to say, I shall not resign...’

Miss Brodie never discussed her affairs with the other members of the staff, but only with those former pupils whom she had trained up in her confidence. There had been previous plots to remove her from Blaine, which had been foiled...

‘It has been suggested again that I should apply for a post at one of the progressive schools, where my methods would be more suited to the system than they are at Blaine. But I shall not apply for a post at a crank school. I shall remain at this education factory. There needs must be a leaven in the lump...’ (12)

The unfolding of the narrative is given us in bits and pieces, and the reconstruction of the lot comes in repetitions and revelations revolving around two poles: first, the progression of Miss Brodie’s “prime” which coincides too with the Brodie set’s adolescent development; and, second, an episodic collage of Miss Brodie’s life and loves intertwined with the girl’s complicity in it, leading to the revelation of the who’s and why’s of Miss Brodie’s betrayal, which eventually leads to her dismissal from the Blaine school.

The Brodie World

As the title suggests, the center of the novel is Jean Brodie, and we, as well as her girls, are immersed in the world she sustains by her beliefs—in Fascism, in Protestantism, in education, in the universals of a classico-Scholastic universe. For her history lesson, for instance, Miss Brodie illustrates:

This is Stanley Baldwin who got in as Prime Minister and got out again ere long...
Miss Mackay retains him on the wall because she believes in the slogan "Safety First".
But Safety does not come first, *Goodness, Truth, and Beauty come first.* (13, my italics)

Hoyt states: "Miss Brodie is a visionary and an admirer of strong systems" (141). Of fascism, Miss Brodie is all admiration because "Mussolini had put an end to unemployment with his fascisti and there was no litter in the streets" (40). She "adhered to the strict Church of Scotland habits of her youth" (45) and believed that education is

a leading out of what is already there in the pupil's soul...*e* from *ex*, out, and *duco*, I lead... To Miss Mackay it is a putting in of something that is not there, and that is not what I call education, I call it intrusion, *in* meaning in and the stern *trudo*, I thrust...
(45)

Miss Brodie lives for a singular world shaped around certainties, which proves to be illusory in the end. Patrick Whiteley states that

all knowledge converges on Brodie...such maneuvers exert a centripetal force: all images from the world outside are pulled to the center, where Brodie appropriates full control over their dissemination. There can be no apparent space between what is deemed true and what Brodie imparts. (86)

Miss Brodie's "brown eyes flash as a meaningful accompaniment to her quiet voice, a mighty woman with her dark Roman profile in the sun. The Brodie set did not for a moment doubt that she would prevail" (12). What Miss Brodie is, is a flawed goddess, the object of awe by her students and lovers, the subject of amateur operettas by Sandy and Jenny. But she becomes comic here because her drive for wholeness is always foiled by the fragmentary, oppositional quality of her life, one that she combats and puts together by her will, and of course by her attempt to create a set of conspirators who will be like her. Her many concerns she keeps at bay either by confronting these up front [as in feeding Mr. Lowther, and keeping house for him, after what she perceived was the failure of the Misses Kerr], or through devious means [instructing the girls to prop up their books in case someone else comes in on their lessons]. Mostly, her single-minded approach to life wins the day, as in her taking advantage of her "prime," her decided interest in things and in her hold on the girls.

Brodie is a literal subversive, bucking the system especially at a time when women's utility was manifested by way of conformity. We appreciate the juxtaposition of these in her character – the adamant conformity to her beliefs, and her ignorance of entities, material or abstract, that prove a hindrance to these. We could cite the impregnability of Miss Brodie within Marcia Blaine, at least until what she calls her betrayal later on. Brodie remains unassailable though she is not well liked, especially by the headmistress Miss Mackay, because she has made material her beliefs in the formation she provides "her" girls. They become her front, her allies, her disciples, her vestal virgins (though not for long), and their cultivation is both a reflection and an extension of Miss Brodie. But Miss Brodie caricatures learning/education too, once she oversteps the bounds of this paradigm. In fashioning her set to be her conspirators, it is their complicity in her affairs that gives one of them the weapon to undo her. It is this intimacy with the "goddess," *which the goddess allowed*, that deconstructs her myth. Barreca rightly asserts that Spark's comedy

rests on its being able to undermine the valid currency of the dominant ideology by 'shifting the ground' of her narrative discourse...Spark depends on the traditional systematic acceptance of convention, it is true, because otherwise she would be unable to subvert expectations as regularly as she does. (233-234)

Another comic aspect of the Brodie world rests on the people who inhabit it and whose characters/characterizations define Miss Brodie more than these do them. On the one hand, we meet stereotypical characters, especially those connected with the Marcia Blaine School, almost all of whom are anti-Brodie: the rigid headmistress Miss Mackay, who is not above using the girls of the Brodie set, the timid sisters/sewing teachers/later housekeepers to Mr. Lowther, the Misses Kerr, the dour Miss Gaunt, and the unpretty and mysterious Miss Lockhart, the science teacher, with her exploding powders. Again they are drawn like caricatures and therefore prove to be no match against the self-possessed Miss Brodie who is almost an impermeable universe. An exception perhaps to this is Miss Lockhart, who despite her portrayal as “the woman who could blow up the school with her jar of gunpowder and would never dream of doing so” (PJB 139), ends up being “one-up” on Miss Brodie by eventually getting Mr. Lowther, Miss Brodie’s stand-in lover for her real love Teddy Lloyd.

Miss Brodie’s lovers are again another comic category with which we have to reckon. Her erstwhile romance with the now dead Hugh Carruthers is the matter for legend, a mythology perpetuated by the very young Sandy and Jenny who bridge the gaps of their knowledge of a *young* Miss Brodie versus the Miss Brodie who is now in her prime. Her present love is one-armed Lloyd, who unexpectedly is *the* painting master at school. Again this affair is doomed to begin with, as Lloyd is married and is Catholic. He conveniently becomes Miss Brodie’s untouchable ideal, reachable only by way of the Brodie set who have him as teacher and later who sit as subjects for his painting. The “consummation” of Lloyd and Brodie’s love, indirectly and therefore comically, comes by way of Lloyd’s paintings of the Brodie girls, and most specifically of Rose and Sandy, “into likenesses of Miss Brodie” (149).

Teddy Lloyd’s passion for Jean Brodie was greatly in evidence in all the portraits he did of the various members of the Brodie set...a different Jean Brodie under the forms of Rose, Sandy, Jenny, Mary, Monica, and Eunice. (135-136)

The weirder consummation comes by way of Miss Brodie’s expectation of an affair between Rose and Teddy [“I am his Muse but Rose shall take my place”(147)], and the actual sexual affair between Teddy and Sandy, which Miss Brodie later sanctions.

‘Rose tells me you have become his lover.’

‘Yes, does it matter which one of us it is?’

‘Whatever possessed you?’ said Miss Brodie in a very Scottish way, as if Sandy had given away a pound of marmalade to an English duke.

‘He interests me...’

‘Interests you, forsooth...A girl with a mind, a girl with insight. He is Roman Catholic... no insight.’ (150).

Brodie’s other man is Gordon Lowther, the singing master at school. Again, Lowther’s character is marked by contradiction – he is timid, easygoing *and a bachelor*, and is controlled by Miss Brodie, who is in turn his lover and his housekeeper. He sleeps with her [as evidenced by the flagrant nightgown under his pillows], but is virtually emasculated and made effete by her overpowering management of his affairs. This antithetical union underscores the nature of Lowther as substitute lover. Ultimately, Lowther marries Miss Lockhart of the gunpowder fame because “she plays golf well and drove a car” (139). Miss Brodie ends up the icon here in either case; Lloyd’s and Lowther’s withdrawal from her life is in preference for women who would be of more utility /servility to them [Deirdre/Lockhart], thus exiling Jean Brodie to the marginality of a phallogocentric comradeship, albeit unknowingly. Miss Brodie’s defense is again by way of the comic: she is slighted by Lowther’s marriage *until* she remembers that he was

simply a stand-in for Lloyd whom she personally cannot have but who can be accessible by way of her girls.

The Brodie set is a third group of characters integral to this novel. We follow the tutelage of these six girls, six disparate characters, from being impressionable ten-year olds to young women poised on adulthood. The collective story of these girls is one of captivation, in varying degrees, with Jean Brodie, and the chronology of their stay at Blaine School is a development from awe and fascination to a breaking away from Miss Brodie's influence, a falling out of the captivation woven by Miss Brodie either because adulthood has given them other preoccupations or because Jean Brodie has ceased to be an influence over them.

The fates of the six are to an extent already traceable to their status within the Brodie set. Mary MacGregor "whose fame rested on her being a silent lump" (10) dies at twenty-four, running to and fro in a building fire, much as she did in Miss Lockhart's class when part of the laboratory caught fire (cf. 94). Eunice Gardiner, "small, neat, and famous for her spritely gymnastics and glamorous swimming" (9), had been doing cartwheels in Miss Brodie's class as a "comic relief." She later becomes a nurse and marries a doctor. Monica Douglas, the prefect, pursued a career in mathematics and was famous for this, and for her anger "which drove her to slap out to right and left" (9). As a grown-up, she faced "a crisis in her life... marry[ing] a scientist, and in one of her fits of anger had thrown a live coal at his sister. Whereupon the scientist demanded a separation, once and for all" (148). Jenny Gray, Sandy's best friend, becomes a moderately successful actress, her fame being that "she was the prettiest and most graceful of the set" (10). Rose Stanley became "famous for sex" in Blaine (9), and is later married to a businessman. It was she who was expected by Miss Brodie to pursue an affair with Lloyd. Sandy's character is obviously the most fleshed out of the six girls. She eventually becomes Sister Helena of the Transfiguration, and after having published a book on psychology; she who in her youth "believed in ghosts, [and] felt that the Holy Ghost was a feasible proposition" (45). It is Sandy whom we focus on here because it is she who betrays Miss Brodie. It is this complex relationship that makes for riveting revelations in the novel.

All the members of the Brodie set are set apart from the rest of the Blaine school because

they had been immediately recognisable as Miss Brodie's pupils, being vastly informed on a lot of subjects irrelevant to the authorised curriculum, as the headmistress said, and useless to the school as a school. These girls were discovered to have heard of the Buchmanites and Mussolini, the Italian Renaissance painters, the advantages to the skin of cleansing cream and witchhazel over honest soap and water, and the word 'menarche'; the interior decoration of the London house of the author of *Winnie the Pooh*...the love lives of Charlotte Bronte and Miss Brodie herself...of the existence of Einstein and the arguments of those who considered the Bible to be untrue. They knew the rudiments of astrology but not the date of the Battle of Flodden or the capital of Finland. (7-8)

They were, in Brodie's words, "the crème de la crème," beneficiaries of Miss Brodie's 'prime.' The indoctrination of the Brodie set is assured too by Miss Brodie's devotion to the girls, ascertaining their isolation [i.e., "the lack of team spirit" so decried by Miss Mackay] by replacing this with loyalty to their goddess whose "self-abnegation" ensures the homogeneity of this women's group: "You girls are my vocation. If I were to receive a proposal of marriage tomorrow from the Lord Lyon King-of-Arms I would decline it. I am dedicated to you in my prime" (29).

We note too that the end of the Brodie set becomes an inevitable resort to commonness, or ordinariness, a real consequence of one's fall from the exclusivity of this enclave, as it were, but this is a natural transition from the isolationist tendencies of "competition, envy, existing

with warmth/sisterliness” (Michie 8-9) of virtual sisterhood. The superficially comic intra/extra mural activities of these girls are actually episodes reflective not only of their struggles to create an identity for themselves within the prescriptions of the group even if, for some of them, this becomes a negative identity [for Mary, Sandy, or Joyce, for example], but are reflexive of the vagaries of Jean Brodie’s person/personality which they end up mirroring. Helena Michie goes back to Roland Barthes’ articulat[ion] of the entwined images of the mirror and the spectacle in *Mythologies*: “In the mirror, any otherness is reduced to sameness...the spectacle or the tribunal, which are both places where the Other threatens to appear in full view, become mirrors” (3). In Spark’s novel, Jean Brodie’s creation of a select set encourages this psychological/mental/even biological mirroring, but the girls are not static entities that passively throw back the Brodie image. They end up developing, moving away from, distorting the Brodie image, paralleling, extending, mutating the Brodie beliefs in Faith, Art, Education, thus creating a spectacle that is the Barthesian “clown,” that is, their post-Brodie set selves, remnants or survivors of this created sisterhood. Each of the girls emerge as “other-ed” within and outside of the Brodie set, emerging as “a spectacle, a clown” by way of their quirks and individual flaws, through which or because of which they enter into, first, the favor or displeasure of Miss Brodie, and later, the favor or displeasure of the world. Obviously, the more bizarre the reduction is—as in the ridiculous death of Mary in the fire, the silly heroism of Joyce, a Brodie-set-wannabe who goes off to fight in the Franco war but who ends up in a train wreck, the transformation of Sandy into Sister Helena, and the “betrayal” of Miss Brodie, and her eventual powerlessness—the more the female becomes a spectacle, becoming what Barthes calls “the clown...the irreducible other” (Michie 4). We may think the other girls are exempt from this, but they are effaced as well. They dwindle into non-entities, subsumed as Others within marriages, families, second-rate careers, and are, too, textually effaced. The stories of their adulthood are left unmarked beyond the prime of the novel’s central “clown,” Miss Brodie. Their “otherness-reduced-to-sameness” (4) signify two things: they are little Brodie icons in Blaine school, but they are also rendered “same” in conformity to the expectations of the patriarchy which they join as adult females. Apparently, the way out of this “sameness,” the “insist[ence] upon [one’s] difference from the “hegemonic” woman, is either through death or through the construction of the self as spectacle/clown” (4).

I earlier raised the character of Sandy Stranger as the most fleshed out among the Brodie set for a number of reasons. First, Sandy’s identification with Miss Brodie is most evidently drawn, and articulated by Miss Brodie herself:

‘Do you know, Sandy dear, all my ambitions are for you and Rose. You *have got insight, perhaps not quite spiritual, but you’re a deep one*, and Rose has got instinct... I ought to know, because my prime has brought me instinct and insight, both’. (PJB 131-132, my italics)

Sandy shares with Miss Brodie the quality of insight, which we can trace to her vivid imaginary life—an interior disposition removed from that of the other girls, which accounts too for the varying degrees of identification with Miss Brodie. Again, the farther removed one is from Brodie’s approval/confidence, the more proportional this is to the life of the mind integral to the Brodie world. Again, a good example of this is Mary MacGregor, the most pathetic within the group, lacking both common sense *and* insight. Sandy, on the other hand, manifests the liveliness of this mental life, as illustrated by her romanticization of the Jean Brodie/Hugh Carruthers doomed love affair, enough for her to aestheticize this, however amateurishly, by writing a musical about it. Also, her continual imaginary conversations with literary characters [like Alan Breck, the hero in Stevenson’s *Kidnapped*, or the Lady of Shallott] whose approbation she sought, and whom she animates by weaving them in her ordinary life is part of this mental agility that Miss Brodie recognized and respected. Whiteley supports this: “Sandy’s daydreaming is a hidden component of the insight for which Brodie praises her, and Sandy’s

capacity to abstract herself becomes her leverage for establishing the limits of her loyalty" (92). Whiteley also cites Berger and Luckmann's concept of a "marginal situation, an experience always at least potentially disruptive," of which Sandy's tendency to daydream is an example. They go on to note death as the "extreme instance" of this, inspiring a general response to control inconsistency by way of acts of tradition and ritual in order to recover balance in a milieu of shared experiences (91). And it is this "excursion to marginal reality" (91) that we underscore, as this identification with Miss Brodie escalates into shared confidences. Where the other girls are slowly being attracted by other intellectual concerns and scholastic pursuits away from the rigid tenets of a Brodie world, and where later their status as Brodie girls are being erased by these new preoccupations, "Miss Brodie, their mentor, fragments herself, disperses herself into her students who gradually draw away" (Hoyt 141). Sandy, however, transcends her status as student/disciple, becoming Miss Brodie's confidante:

Miss Brodie started to confide in Sandy after the next summer holidays. They played rounds of golf in the sunny early autumn after school.

'All my ambitions,' said Miss Brodie, 'are fixed on yourself and Rose. You will not speak of this to the other girls, it would cause envy. I had hopes of Jenny, she is so pretty; but Jenny has become insipid, don't you think?'

This was a clever question, because it articulated what was already growing in Sandy's mind. Jenny had bored her this last year, and it left her lonely. (PJB 129)

Indeed, this identification escalates to actual substitution as Sandy becomes the virtual Jean Brodie in Lloyd's life. Sandy becomes an "alter-heroine" when she becomes Lloyd's mistress (cf. Hoyt 140), with Jean Brodie's acceptance if not her approval. For Sandy, while sexually available to Lloyd, is so only as a Brodie stand-in, a look-alike, as proved by Lloyd's paintings. Sandy invites this supplantation in order to rebut Lloyd's conception of her as a freak, "just about the ugliest thing I've ever seen in my life" (PJB 126). One can imagine Sandy's defiance at turning into *just* a likeness of Miss Brodie, and she seeks to triumph over this by engaging in a game of "one-upmanship" against Miss Brodie herself, doing what Jean Brodie is unable or unwilling to accomplish (cf. 149). This initiates the change in their relationship—"Sandy, [Miss Brodie's] most intelligent girl...has taken the most from her...their relationship gradually quickening into a duel...a one-sided one, for Miss Brodie knows nothing about it" (Hoyt 141).

Sandy becomes Miss Brodie's betrayer, and Miss Jean Brodie, past her prime,

was forced to retire at the end of the summer term of 1939, on the grounds that she had been teaching Fascism...

'Of course...this political question was only an excuse. They tried to prove personal immorality against me on many occasions and failed...It was my educational policy they were up against which had reached its perfection in my prime...But they used this political excuse as a weapon. What hurts and amazes me most of all is the fact, if Miss Mackay is to be believed, that it was one of my own set who betrayed me and put the enquiry in motion.' (PJB 153)

Miss Brodie, to the end of her life, can only speculate on who really betrayed her. Sandy had set herself against Miss Brodie at the end of her Blaine school life: "I'm not really interested in world affairs... only in putting a stop to Miss Brodie" (152). This betrayal is not born out of malice, but arises from Sandy's disenchantment with Jean Brodie, who is now, to her, a broken idol, found to be irrelevant. Where "Miss Brodie was always a figure of glamorous activity even in the eyes of the non Brodie girls" (137), Sandy's affection for Miss Brodie solidifies only when she affirms Miss Brodie's "*silliness*" (cf. 136). Sandy's disenchantment with the fascinating Brodie

and her realization of “this woman’s folly” (cf. Stanford) signals her maturity, and her separation from her mentor. And, for John Glavin, Sandy’s breaking away from Jean Brodie can be explained by using Harold Bloom’s paradigm of influence, where Jean Brodie becomes the strong poet/influence replaced by the *ephebe*/pupil, Sandy Stranger (cf. 223). Sandy cracks Miss Brodie’s untouchability in Blaine School by refuting her influence in order to assert herself in the world conceived and occupied by Miss Brodie. But this betrayal is itself a comic inversion, for Sandy’s bid to combat what Bloom calls “throwiness” [the outrage of the *ephebe* at being thrown into the distance by the strong poet/influence, the outrage being proportional to the distance from the influence] becomes a failure. This inversion fails because while it rejects Jean Brodie, we find an ultimate rejection too by Sandy of herself, which evinces itself in her concealment of her self, erasing the Sandy Stranger of Blaine School to emerge as Sister Helena later on. While this appears to be a true repudiation of the Brodie influence, and is farthest from the Brodie-set-self she carried, it is in fact a reversion to another Brodie-sque character—untouched, independent, forever the observer, wielding influence by joining yet another sisterhood, this time an almost literal one. Where in youth, she is told by Brodie that she is “not quite spiritual,” her entry into the nunnery literally belies this previous assessment of herself. Sandy seems to have been most successful in shedding the Brodie influence, but is, in fact, the most trapped by it. The other girls leave the fold either as a natural consequence of adulthood or absorbed by other influences, “[shaking] off Miss Brodie’s influence as a dog shakes pond-water from its coat” (PJB 145).

Sandy, who fought hardest against becoming an alter-Brodie, takes on the real connotation of her name “Stranger”—it is as a *stranger* to herself that she lives her life; her inclusion in a collective [the convent] does not turn out to be a positive enriching thing but is seen as the enemy of truth and of the individual (cf. Stanford 134). In becoming Sister Helena of *The Transfiguration*, Sandy does *not* recover herself. Instead, we see her carrying her guilt “clutching the bars of the grille as if she wanted to escape from the dim parlour beyond, for she was not composed like the other nuns who sat, when they received the rare visitors, well back in the darkness with folded hands” (PJB 43-44). Derek Stanford calls this a “neurosis taking the form of ‘Different from’” (134). In addition, Sandy overtly delineates “a Miss Jean Brodie in her prime” as “the main influence of her schooldays” (PJB 156) when asked about this, proof that try as she may, she has not, and perhaps will not, be able to rid herself of her inscription in the Brodie world.

Sandy’s book, “The Transformation of the Commonplace,” “her odd psychological treatise on the nature of moral perception” (43), a work that merited attention and reputation for her from the public, is affirmed thus by Stanford:

The whole endeavor of Muriel Spark’s art is towards the “The Transfiguration of the Commonplace”. Plenty of strange happenings are to be found in her novels from *diableries* to eccentricities, under whose operations the commonplace appears to be transfigured. (137)

In *Miss Brodie*, however, “the transformation has remained a paper vision, for Sister Helena remains a restless, discontented woman” (133), echoing the controlled kinesis of her mentor Jean Brodie. Perhaps a last point to address here proves to be the crux of Sandy’s judgment of who Jean Brodie really is, that Jean Brodie “is an unconscious Lesbian” (PJB 147). The “unconsciousness” of this gendered identity we may interpret following Glavin’s argument, that this is “not the affirmation of apologetic fictions but the deconstruction of *both* affirm[ation] and den[ial], the unhappy mechanics of closure, including the affirmations and denials of those gifted with and/or burdened by the “Faith” (224). I contend, however, that although Faith seems to be the morally correct alternative chosen by both Jean Brodie [the Calvinist] and Sandy Stranger [the Roman Catholic], the limbo created here “between affirmation and denial”

is set along the matrix of sexuality/gender and not of morality. The "prime" of Miss Jean Brodie in the novel is spent creating an enclave marked by a "sisterhood...depending on a trope of similarity" (Michie 9) singled out by what Janice Raymond discusses as "a familiar specialness to feelings that women have for each other" (Michie 9). This she calls *Gyn/affection* and defines it as "the personal and political movement of women toward each other...expressing a *continuum* of female friendship" (Griffin 120). Although this gyn/affective relationship does exist within the Brodie set, it is true too that this exists more as an abstract exclusionary bind than it does as a real relational tool. Also, the Brodie set's connections to each other are tenuous at best; it is Miss Brodie, and their connection to her, that vivifies and empowers this group. The dissolution of this gyn/affective microcosm as its members end their Blaine School existence may have happened "naturally," as we have earlier offered. But as Raymond posits, it is "hetero-reality," women's relationship with men, whether abstractly or concretely, that provides "this discontinuity and transgression in women's lives and friendships with each other" (Griffin 121). All the girls—Monica, Eunice, Rose, Jenny, and even the dead Mary and Joyce—enter this heteroreal universe away from the Brodie world in which they were figuratively weaned. Only Sandy makes "a deliberate choice to continue lead[ing] a gyn/affective existence—that of being a nun" (cf. Griffin 121).

It may be difficult to conceive of *Miss Brodie* as a lesbian text because there is nothing remotely approaching female sexual relations here, except perhaps in Jenny's fixation with and hero-worship of the female sergeant who helps her when she was accosted in the park by a flasher. However, this does not discount this text as one especially when we situate it in terms of Adrienne Rich's "influential lesbian-feminist notion of a *lesbian continuum*," which

includes a range – through each woman's life, and throughout history – of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or has consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support. (Michie 106)

It is also possible to read this "form of primary intensity" in terms of Jean Brodie as a surrogate mother in this text, where parentage (or mothering, more specifically) remains nearly unmentioned. Again Raymond states that "female friendship provides a continuity to women's first relationship (with their mother)" (Griffin 121), an intrinsic bond broken by relations with men, "maintained at a cost both to the female self who is subjugated and contained and to her relations with other men" (121). Jean Brodie's influence on her girls provides a paradigm of maternal nurture; she does become the virtual mother/model/molder here, engendering the "woman-identified experience" directly or indirectly, especially because this period is a development too of the girls' sexuality. This "virtual maternity" developed later on becomes bonds of awe and amity, but this does not last. In the end, the Brodie set's bond is disrupted by the girls' entry into a world where heterorelational bonds become all too real and all too intrusive. We see this in Jenny's encounter with her flasher, Sandy's affair with Lloyd, even in Rose's rise to sexual fame. We note the almost savage, humorous implication of Miss Brodie's maternal/sororal nurture degenerating into a system of punishment by exclusion when all the Brodie set, Miss Brodie included, are affected by the vagaries of the female-male tussle that disrupts the application of the "lesbian continuum" conceived by Rich, or the gyn/affective bonds Raymond advances, in this text.

Another facet of the comic points to the fact that in this tussle, both Miss Brodie and Sandy end up carrying the burden of this punishment, which Sandy ultimately inflicts first on Miss Brodie and then on herself. Also, the most Miss Brodie can be is a *virtual* mother here, and in many instances in the text is depicted as a caricature of one. Her "maternity" consists of

feeding her “children” the milk of her intellectual, aesthetic, cultural and religious pursuits. Seen in this way, Miss Brodie again is portrayed as a flawed character whose female potencies are perverted and made abstract. Sandy the nun, by a strange parallel, provides a similar reckoning of “motherhood” and “sisterhood,” albeit seen on another level.

Is *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, then, a lesbian text? I say it is. Whether Spark intended this to be one or not, the usage and transfixion of a lesbian subject “as metaphor...achieves presence in discourse and points to the absence of what it names [in this case, an amorphous phallogocentric locus] indicating ‘likeness to the thing but never the thing or the thing in itself’” (Griffin 4). Gabrielle Griffin cites Elizabeth Meese:

Why is it that the lesbian seems like a shadow – with/in woman, with/in writing?...The lesbian subject is not all I am... a shadow of who I am that attests to my being there, I am never with/out this lesbian. (4)

Though we earlier noted the interruptions of and within the lesbian continuum in Spark’s novel, her creation and command of her world and her girls happen within this “lesbian continuum” where

if we consider the possibility that all women – from the infant suckling her mother’s breast, to the grown woman experiencing orgasmic sensations when suckling her own child, perhaps recalling her mother’s milk-smell in her own...exist on a lesbian continuum, [in which] we can see ourselves as moving in and out...whether we identify ourselves as lesbian or not. (Michie 106)

She is textualized by and in it, and Sandy, in identifying her as a lesbian, “informs the stance of the lesbian reader in her identification with or dissociation from a text as lesbian or not” (Griffin 7). It is the creation of, and inclusion, in this discourse, in which “the lesbian subject...instigates and maintains ‘a project of *subversion* of patriarchal discourse’” (cf. Griffin 5; my italics).

The instances of this kind of subversion, too, belong to the comic in Spark’s text. Even the “lesbian” Miss Brodie evokes laughter, however uncertainly, because the lesbian in this text is a spectacle too. She has to be in order to stand out of the mirror, to be the clown of the text, attesting to Barreca’s contention that “the ‘deeply funny’ nature of Spark’s work draws on the power of the *marginal and the magical*” (236, my italics). We deem funny the play of the genteel and the outré in Jean Brodie’s character—so vital, but so different. That she died in 1939, when Europe was embroiled in a war began by Hitler [whom she calls “rather naughty”], past her prime, of an internal growth [Hoyt writes: “Sandy, perhaps?” (141)], is but a punctuation to her dismissal from the Marcia Blaine School which ends her active life. The comedic “happy ending” is almost absent here—except that the text ends with a framing/centering of “Jean Brodie in her prime” by Sister Helena as she looks back to the days when she was Sandy Stranger. Thus does she eternalize Miss Brodie, “Spark’s persona,” “the most memorable figure in Spark’s fiction” (Hoyt 139-140; cf. McBrien 164; Stanford 132) and “emphasizes the *play* of emotions, rather than the unity of emotion, characteristic of Spark, and of women’s comedy in general” (Barreca 238).

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