The Transfiguration of Edinburgh in The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie

Barbara Keyser
Baruch College, City University of New York

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol12/iss3/3

This Article is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in Scottish Literature by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu.
BARBARA KEYSER

The Transfiguration of Edinburgh in
*The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*

Although Muriel Spark was born in Edinburgh and spent her childhood there, she rarely uses it as a setting for her fiction. Her relationship to Edinburgh, however, has had great impact on her, forming, she asserts, one of the central motifs of her life: "Edinburgh is the place that I, constitutionally an exile, am essentially exiled from. I spent the first 18 years of my life during the Twenties and Thirties, there. It was Edinburgh that bred within me the conditions of exile and what have I been doing since then but moving from exile into exile? It has ceased to be a fate, it has become a calling."¹ This motif of exile recurs frequently in Spark’s fiction, and is one of the central themes of her most successful novel, and the only one set in Edinburgh, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*.

The Edinburgh of *Jean Brodie* is no commonplace city, however, but a city transfigured by Spark’s imagination into a richly symbolic correlative for the major themes of her fiction, the most important of which is the "transfiguration of the commonplace" wrought by religious faith. Spark’s point of view derives from Catholicism, to which she is a convert, but her faith is marked by the Calvinism she discovered in Edinburgh. Thus in her fiction, Calvinism with its concept of uniquely elected individuals is opposed to Catholicism with its concept of grace within the mystical body of the Church. In *Jean Brodie* Edinburgh provides the perfect paradigm for this conflict: the "dark heavy Edinburgh"² of Calvinism, with its heavy stone churches "built so waringly with their upraised fingers" (p. 44) that seem to point the way to predestined damnation, contrasts with the ideal possibility hidden in the city, "the floating city when the light was a special pearly white and fell upon one of the gracefully fasioned streets" (p. 136).


[181]
In *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* Spark explores her recurring fictional themes with subtlety, humor, and beauty. Here more than in any other novel, sparks infuses her intellectual puzzles with warmth and humanity as she portrays the process of education and rejection in a conservative Edinburgh girls’ school, The Marcia Blaine School for Girls, where Miss Jean Brodie teaches in the Junior School. Miss Brodie, a Scottish spinster of independent mind, sets out to create an elite corps of girls, her crème de la crème, who become known as the Brodie set.

In her exploration of the significance of Miss Brodie’s educational methods for the Brodie set, and especially for Sandy Stranger, the novel’s protagonist, Spark successfully uses a complex narrative technique that keeps the novel in constant motion from the past to the present. She varies her masque from the Sandy who is now a Catholic nun to the youthful Sandy who is unaware of a religious reality. As might be expected, this narrative complexity informs many specific acts in the novel, giving an ironic dimension to the amusing and seemingly trivial details of a schoolgirl’s awakening. Spark shows the pubescent Sandy discovering the reality of sex, and the late adolescent Sandy using her sexuality as a tool against Miss Brodie; she presents as counterpoint the celibate nun who grips the bars of the grille that separates her from the world and explains her conversion: “There was a Miss Jean Brodie in her prime.”

In a similar counterpoint, Spark reveals the irony of the title. A flash-forward early in the novel summarizes the entire plot as a former pupil muses to her husband about Miss Brodie: “Her retirement was rather a tragedy, she was forced to retire before time. The head never liked her. There’s a long story attached to Miss Brodie’s retirement. She was betrayed by one of her own girls, we were called the Brodie set. I never found out which one betrayed her” (p. 34). The power of Miss Brodie’s much vaunted “prime,” then, must be considered in the light of the betrayal which ended her teaching and the decay which ended the teacher’s life soon after

---

3 Spark’s delightful portrayal of Sandy’s awakening sexuality includes a superb piece of literary mimicry, a story called *The Mountain Eyrue* written by Sandy Stranger and Jenny Gray (p. 23). As Sandy sums up this story of star-crossed lovers, Miss Brodie and Hugh Carruthers: “There are too many moonlights . . . but we can sort that later when it comes to publication” (p. 25).
her forced retirement: “She had reckoned on her prime lasting till she was sixty. But this, the year after the war, was in fact Miss Brodie’s last and fifty-sixth year. She looked older than that, she was suffering from an internal growth. This was her last year in the world and in another sense it was Sandy’s” (p. 69). Miss Brodie’s last year in the world is the last year before Sandy renounces her worldly preoccupations to become a Catholic nun.

Sandy’s conversion follows her betrayal of Miss Brodie, a betrayal symbolic of her rejection of old loyalties in her discovery of a new reality which “transfigures the commonplace.” Sandy, now Sister Helena of the Transfiguration, has in fact written a psychological treatise on the nature of moral perception called “The Transfiguration of the Commonplace,” a title which suggests that her discovery of religious faith, of an eternal order, changes completely her perception of the temporal order. In the title of Sister Helena’s treatise, Spark provides a description of her own fictional method: viewed in the light of eternity, the accidents of existence, the commonplace, are “transfigured” as they take on a significance in an eternal design that includes heaven and earth. Spark’s fictional transfigurations, like her protagonist’s, involve making patterns with facts; accepting as absolute truth the existence of God and eternity, one can then see meaning and purpose in life.

Sandy’s discovery of the method of making patterns with the absolute fact of eternity has brought her not peace, but agony: “She clutched 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 their rare visitors, well back in the darkness with folded hands. But Sandy always leaned forward and peered, clutching the bars with both hands, and the other sisters remarked it and said that Sister Helena had too much to bear from the world since she had published her psychological book which was so unexpectedly famed” (pp. 43–44). While Sandy’s agitation does provide, as some critics have pointed out, an important insight into her character, it does not suggest, as Derek Stanford incorrectly assumes, that the transformation she has seen has remained a paper one.

\[4\] Derek Stanford, Muriel Spark: A Biographical and Critical Study (Sussex: Fontwell Centaur Press, 1961), p. 133. Charles Alva Hoyt also misconstrues Spark’s presentation of the two characters, seeing Miss Brodie
protagonists find in the Catholic Church, and recalls Caroline Rose's
description of Christianity in *The Comforters*, Spark's first novel:
"The demands of the Christian religion are exorbitant, they are
outrageous. Christians who don't realize that from the start are not
faithful." Sandy, who possessed the indicative name of Stranger
before she entered the Church, has not lost the isolation which
characterizes Spark's heroines, an isolation suggestive of the condition
of exile Spark sees for Christians in a materialistic society.

Sandy's isolation has come as a result of her rejection of Miss
Brodie's fascistic order and her discovery of the mystical body of the
Catholic Church. Miss Brodie offers Sandy participation in a group
with the teacher as the uniquely elected leader at the head. The
young Sandy cannot reject this false body: "She was even more
frightened then, by her temptation to be nice to Mary Macgregor,
since by this action she would separate herself, and be lonely, and
blameable in a more dreadful way than Mary who, although officially
the faulty one, was at least inside Miss Brodie's category of heroines
in the making" (p. 38). Only later does Sandy discover a truth
which enables her to reject Miss Brodie's false communion; the novel
is a parable of her discovery of this truth through a vision of falsity
and evil. Early in the novel we see Sandy with a visitor who ques-
tions her about her youth:

"You weren't a Catholic then, of course?"
"No," said Sandy.
"The influences of one's teens are very important," said the man.
"Oh yes," said Sandy, "even if they provide something to react against."
"What was your biggest influence, then, Sister Helena? Was it political,
personal? Was it Calvinism?"
"Oh no," said Sandy, "But there was a Miss Jean Brodie in her prime." (p. 43)

as Spark's conception of herself and Stranger as a symbol of Spark's own
self-destructive tendencies. "Muriel Spark: The Surrealist Jane Austen," *Con-
temporary British Novelists*, ed. Carl Shapiro (Carbondale: Southern
Illinois University Press, 1965), pp. 141–42. While, as Karl Malkoff points
out in *Muriel Spark* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), Sandy
and Miss Brodie are essentially similar characters (p. 32), Sandy's choice
of Catholicism over individualism represents the only valid choice in
Spark's framework.

5 Muriel Spark, *The Comforters*, in *A Muriel Spark Trio* (New York:
Spark’s repetition of this scene at the end of the novel highlights its importance and completes the circle of the plot.

Muriel Spark thus shows her protagonist finding Catholicism only after an agonized rejection of the birthright Miss Brodie provides her. As Sandy makes her adolescent search for identity, she learns she must first understand Miss Brodie before she can “react against” what the teacher represents. As Sandy gains this understanding, she realizes that the teacher represents a kind of perverted Calvinism, what Francis Hart aptly terms the “psychotic end of cultural Calvinism.” The central tenet in Miss Brodie’s faith, as Stanford notes, is a belief in her own election, but the belief in a prohibitive God is missing from her canon. Only when Sandy begins to understand the archetypal Calvinism from which Miss Brodie gains her peculiar faith in herself does she begin to understand Miss Brodie: “In this oblique way, she began to sense what went to the makings of Miss Brodie who had elected herself to grace in so particular a way and with more exotic suicidal enchantment than if she has simply taken to drink like other spinsters who couldn’t stand it any more” (p. 134). Miss Brodie’s belief in her own independent grace is the cause, then, of her excessive actions: “She was not in any doubt, she let everyone know she was in no doubt, that God was on her side whatever her course. . . . Just as an excessive sense of guilt can drive people to excessive action, so was Miss Brodie drawn to it by an excessive lack of guilt” (p. 105).

Spark portrays Miss Brodie, then, as a kind of Ubermensch who with absolute faith in herself elevates the individual above moral judgments. This lack of moral awareness in Miss Brodie finally awakens Sandy to an awareness of the reality of evil, a realization that drives her to the Church. The “vision of disorder” Sandy sees in Miss Brodie obscures the positive aspects of Miss Brodie’s character: “All the time they were under her influence she and her actions were outside the context of right and wrong. It was twenty-five years before Sandy had so far recovered from a creeping vision of disorder that she could look back and recognize that Miss Brodie’s defective sense of self-criticism had not been without its beneficial and enlarging effects; by which time Sandy had already betrayed

---


7 Stanford, p. 137.
Miss Brodie and Miss Brodie was laid in her grave” (pp. 105–6).

Miss Brodie tries to put not only herself but the elite group of girls she cultivates outside the context of right and wrong. She sees Rose Stanley, for instance, in the role of “a great lover, magnificently elevated above the ordinary run of lovers, above the moral laws, Venus incarnate, something set apart” (p. 47). Aesthetically as well as morally, she considers herself absolute authority. She asks her class: “‘Who is the greatest Italian painter?’” When a student replies, “‘Leonardo da Vinci, Miss Brodie,’” the teacher corrects the child: “‘That is incorrect. The answer is Giotto, he is my favourite’” (p. 14).

In forcing her own moral and aesthetic point of view onto her girls, Miss Brodie betrays her avowed philosophy of education, which she tells her head should be a “leading out.” Instead of encouraging self-development in her Brodie set, however, the teacher views them as extensions of herself through whom she expresses her own personality. “‘Give me a girl at an impressionable age,’” Miss Brodie says, “‘and she is mine for life’” (p. 12). This statement gains an ironic import, for despite Miss Brodie’s training and cultivation, most of the members of the Brodie set escape or reject Miss Brodie’s plans for them. While she intends Rose Stanley, “‘who was famous for sex,’” to replace her as Teddy Lloyd’s lover, it is Sandy who actually becomes her stand-in in a deliberate attempt to overturn Miss Brodie’s plans. Sandy’s attempts to subvert Miss Brodie’s power reveal her rejection of Miss Brodie’s godlike assumption of authority while her ability to understand Miss Brodie suggests a basic similarity between them. Sandy resents Miss Brodie’s power while trying to assume it: “She thinks she is Providence, thought Sandy, she thinks she is the God of Calvin, she sees the beginning and the end” (p. 147).

Miss Brodie’s assumptions of absolute authority and infallibility ally her not only with Calvinism but also with fascism, Spark suggests. Sandy tells Miss Mackay that Miss Brodie is “a born fascist” (p. 152). Miss Brodie admires the individuals who have achieved the power she herself desires; she tells her class that “Mussolini is one of the greatest men in the world” (p. 53), and she finds Hitler even more reliable. She is going to Germany, she tells her class, “where Hitler was become Chancellor, a prophet-like figure like Thomas Carlyle, and more reliable than Mussolini; the German
brown-shirts, she said, were exactly the same as the Italian black, only more reliable" (p. 120). Sandy sees Miss Brodie’s fascia as a threat to her own identity when she looks at the Brodie bunch and sees it as “a body with Miss Brodie for the head” (p. 38). Spark provides here a counterpoint in this mystical temporal body to the valid mystical body of the Church which Sandy later discovers.

Before Sandy can discover the authentic religious reality of the Catholic Church, Spark suggests, she must understand and reject the Calvinism that underlies Miss Brodie’s character. It is, Sandy learns, a terrible concept of God which abolishes the possibility of joy. She gets hints of this aspect of Calvinism in her early days with Miss Brodie, who strictly observes Edinburgh decorum on Sundays, “for in many ways Miss Brodie was an Edinburgh spinster of the deepest dye” (p. 33). Miss Brodie herself suggests the gloomy nature of Calvinism: “John Knox,” said Miss Brodie, “was an embittered man. He could never be at ease with the gay French Queen” (p. 41). As she matures, Sandy investigates for herself the tenets of Calvinism, finding it even more “dark and terrible” than her childhood impressions have indicated. In a superb passage, Muriel Spark summarizes the significance of the birthright Sandy discovers in Calvinism:

In fact, it was the religion of Calvin of which Sandy felt deprived, or rather a specified recognition of it. She desired this birthright; something definite to reject. It pervaded the place in proportion as it was unacknowledged. In some ways the most real and rooted people whom Sandy knew were Miss Gaunt and the Kerr sisters who made no secret of their belief that God had planned for practically everybody before they were born a nasty surprise when they died. Later, when Sandy read John Calvin, she found that although popular conceptions of Calvinism were sometimes mistaken, in this particular case there was no mistake, indeed it was but a mild misunderstanding of the case, he having made it God’s pleasure to implant in certain people an erroneous sense of joy and salvation, so that their surprise at the end might be the nastier. (p. 133)

When Sandy understands the truth of Calvinism, she can see that Miss Brodie’s attenuated form of the religion has made the Scottish school teacher “neither one thing or another.” Spark introduces in Sandy’s conception of her teachers one of her favorite

---

8 Spark notes that she herself has had to put up a “terrible struggle” for her spiritual joy. “My Conversion,” *Twentieth Century*, 170 (Fall 1961), 60–63.
fictional themes, that of confused identity. Sh: shows Miss Brodie as neither committed to Calvinism nor completely free from it. While Miss Brodie does not accept the terrible and malevolent God of Miss Gaunt and the Kerr sisters, neither has she been able to reject completely and consciously the Calvinism of her birthright. While she admires strong, fascistic leaders who ignore the moral laws, she herself can never achieve complete freedom from these laws. She encourages in her students the freedom which she herself cannot grasp. Thus, while she will not indulge in a love affair with a married man, she encourages one of her girls to do so. Her personal support of Franco’s government is purely conversational; under her influence, one of her pupils goes to fight for his forces.

Miss Brodie’s self-professed “dedication” to her girls, then, Sandy sees as only selfish misuse of them to express her own confused identity. Realizing Miss Brodie’s betrayal, Sandy rejects her teacher’s individualistic concept of power and chooses the discipline of the Church. Her betrayal of Miss Brodie is a symbolic assertion of this transfer of loyalty to the religion she has discovered in her affair with Teddy Lloyd: “... she extracted, among other things, his religion as a pith from a husk. Her mind was as full of his religion as a night sky is full of things visible and invisible. She left the man and took his religion and became a nun in the course of time” (p. 151). The Roman Catholic Church, in Spark’s terms the absolute and infallible authority, thus provides for Sandy the discipline Miss Brodie lacked. Miss Brodie, who tolerantly approved of all forms of religion except Roman Catholicism, rejects, like Robinson in Spark’s earlier novel of the same name, the superstition of Catholicism in favor of a private morality. She thereby rejects, Spark suggests, the only authority which could have given direction to her quest for meaning and order, a quest expressed in her support of fascist regimes and in her establishment of her own fascistic order. Miss Brodie’s Edinburgh birthright expresses itself in her adamant rejection of the Catholic Church:

Her Miss Brodie’s disapproval of the Church of Rome was based on her assertions that it was a church of superstition, and that the only people who did not want to think for themselves were Roman Catholics. In some ways, her attitude was a strange one, because she was by temperament suited only to the Roman Catholic Church; possibly it could have embraced, even while it disciplined her soaring and diving spirit, it might even have normalised her. But perhaps this was the reason she shunned it, lover of
Italy that she was, bringing to her support a rigid Edinburgh-born side of herself when the Catholic Church was in question, although this side was not otherwise greatly in evidence. (p. 101)

Sandy Stranger’s betrayal of Miss Brodie, like January Marlowe’s repudiation of Robinson, is a rejection of a part of herself as well as of another individual. Sandy, like Miss Brodie, has anarchistic tendencies which must be disciplined by the Church, and neither Sandy nor January achieve this repression of their primitive selves without an emotional struggle. Both Robinson and The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie are imbued with a slight nostalgia for the “lost and guileless delight” of anarchistic childhood where one is filled with a “sense of the hidden possibilities in all things” (Jean Brodie, pp. 99–199). This lyrical reality, however, must in Spark’s terms give way to the world of absolute truth where the four last things ever to be remembered are Death, Judgment, Hell and Heaven.

Muriel Spark provides a beautiful interplay of these two realities in The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie, balancing the delightful comedy of her school scenes with the serious implications of her theme. She creates the most memorable characters of her fiction in this novel, including the eccentric Miss Brodie and the various members of the Brodie set, and recreates through the eyes of her schoolgirls life in Edinburgh during the 1930s. The charm of the detail in this novel, however, does not obscure the design; the reader is constantly reminded that because there “was a Miss Jean Brodie in her prime,” Sandy Stranger is now Sister Helena of the Transfiguration. The “dark and terrible” monuments of Calvinism Sandy has seen in Edinburgh have led her into the Catholic Church, whose eternal reality provides Spark’s ideal against which the events of the novel are measured.

Baruch College
City University of New York