

10-2021

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Recommended Citation

Hosmer, Robert E. () "I'm in full control': Muriel Spark's *The Finishing School*," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 47: Iss. 1, 137–150.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol47/iss1/11>

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**“I’M IN FULL CONTROL”:
THE FINISHING SCHOOL BY MURIEL SPARK¹**

Robert Hosmer

In 2004, Muriel Spark, a grande dame of letters (and life), if ever there was one, published her twenty-second novel, *The Finishing School*, a typically economical, sharp-edged morality tale imbued with wit, irony, and altogether more knowledge of fiction and its methods than most mortals are privy to. In a long, distinguished, and varied career—poet, essayist, biographer, short story writer, playwright, and novelist (her sixth novel, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, 1961, catapulted her to fame)—Spark earned a reputation as a writer of serious, substantial fictions, elegantly constructed and stylistically accomplished.

From January 2001, Spark had been at work on *The Finishing School*. Despite severe, debilitating health problems, chief among them being deteriorating eyesight that allowed her to work but a few hours each day, and then only with high wattage lamps illuminating her composition notebooks, she toiled away, giving everything to the work at hand. Three years later *The Finishing School* appeared in print in the United Kingdom as well as the United States. Brisk initial sales must have pleased the author more than some of the reviews.

Most reviews tended to be positive and respectful: “a minor miracle,” Bryan Cheyette deemed it; “one of her funniest novels ... Spark at her

¹ I am most grateful to Penelope Jardine, Muriel Spark’s literary executor, for kind permission to quote from uncatalogued materials in the National Library of Scotland. My thanks for generous, patient, invaluable assistance in preparing this essay from the staff of the National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, in particular, Kenneth Dunn, Head of Archives and Manuscript Collections, Sally Harrower, formerly Curator of Modern Literary Manuscripts, and Colin McIlroy, Curator of Modern Scottish Literary Manuscripts and Collections. In addition, thanks to Juliet Annan, formerly Publishing Director, Viking, London, and Gerry Howard, Executive Vice President, Doubleday, New York, for permission to quote from correspondence with Dame Muriel, and to Professor Gerard Carruthers, University of Glasgow, for scholarly advice and encouragement.

sharpest, her purest and her most merciful,” declared Ali Smith; “the most sharply original fictional imagination of our time,” wrote Peter Kemp.² A few reviews were less appreciative, but not altogether negative: “reads more like a parody of a Muriel Spark novel than the real thing... a spindly, dessicated production ... less a full-fledged story than a cursory sketch,” noted Michiko Kakutani; while Adam Mars-Jones called the novel “oddly insubstantial.”³ Others were more pointed: as Gregory Wolfe put it, “a few critics have somewhat harshly suggested that the elderly Muriel Spark is losing her powers.”⁴ Among these was Claudia FitzHebert who expressed her dissatisfaction with the novel thus: “this may be partly the old story of the artist, in the last stage of a long career, losing faith in the magic of illusion.”⁵ (Spark might well have been both offended and pleased at that allusion to Prospero.) Susan Eilenberg went farther, declaring that “*The Finishing School* reads like an early draft of the kind of novel she once wrote,” concluding that “this book is bad.... it gives every sign of knowing just how bad it is.”⁶ Even James Wood, one of Spark’s most astute and appreciative readers, was less than enthusiastic, calling *The Finishing School* a “slight book.”⁷ Like many critics, Wood felt no novel by Spark came close to the triumph she had achieved with *Jean Brodie*. A very few reviewers were highly critical, if not downright hostile, none perhaps so severe as Andrew Crumey’s judgment: “The only really positive thing I can say about *The Finishing School* is that I enjoyed its first page, and was never bored during the remaining 154, since I was propelled by the conviction that something interesting would surely happen eventually. I was wrong.”⁸

The issues we are confronted with in evaluating *The Finishing School* are not new. Late novels, especially those by writers with established track

² Brian Cheyette, “An Education in Human Singularity,” *Independent* (March 22, 2004): 28; Ali Smith, “Wave your Hankie,” *Guardian* (March 20, 2004); Peter Kemp, *Sunday Times* (February 22, 2004).

³ Michiko Kakutani, “The Envious Prime of Mr Rowland Mahler,” *New York Times* (October 8, 2004): 41; Adam Mars-Jones, “The Beauty of Brevity: Muriel Spark’s New Novel Proves that her True Metier is the Short Story,” *Observer* (March 14, 2004): 16.

⁴ Gregory Wolfe, “Finished: *The Finishing School* by Muriel Spark,” *First Things*, no. 153 (May, 2005): 43 ff.

⁵ Claudia FitzHerbert, “Sharp as a Needle,” *The Telegraph* (March 6, 2004).

⁶ Susan Eilenberg, “Complacent Bounty,” *London Review of Books*, 21, no. 24 (December 15, 2005).

⁷ James Wood, “The Prime of Miss Muriel Spark,” *Atlantic Monthly* (November 2004): 150, 152-157 (152).

⁸ Andrew Crumey, “*The Finishing School*: Long Past the Prime of Miss Spark.” *The Scotsman/Scotland on Sunday* (February 29, 2004).

records, are sometimes damned with faint praise or complimented with false sympathy ("not his best, but given his age a considerable accomplishment, nonetheless") or just dismissed out-of-hand ("so far removed from her great novel, X, that if the manuscript did not bear her name, no publisher would have taken it on"). Such critical condescension and hostility demand persuasive textual evidence, unless one simply and uncritically accepts a model of inevitable loss and decline applicable not only to the body but to the mind as well. It assumes that the irreversible weakening of the body *must* be accompanied by a relentless atrophy of intellect and creativity in every case.

Manuscript evidence available in the Spark Archives at the National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, reveals the extent to which Spark deliberately pared this novel down to essentials and that the three major reservations critics expressed were matters she had considered at various stages of the writing and editing process. What she wanted, she got: a comic novel of parabolic brevity and concision.

In a perceptive review of *The Finishing School* John Lanchester mentions Edward Said's influential essay, "Thoughts on Late Style," which offers an approach to considering this novel.⁹ Said cited two categories into which an artist's late work might be slotted. Acknowledging what he called "the accepted notion ... that age confers a spirit of reconciliation and serenity on late works," Said gathered works by Shakespeare (*The Tempest*, *The Winter's Tale*) as well as Sophocles (*Oedipus at Colonus*) and Verdi (*Otello*, *Falstaff*) here. These could be considered the crowning achievements of an artist's career. In the second category Said placed late works that failed to achieve harmony or closure, those that only made matters more turbulent, often disturbing the audience with questions unanswered (Ibsen's *When We Dead Awaken* and Beethoven's late works—the last five piano sonatas, the Ninth Symphony, the *Missa Solemnis*, the last six string quartets, and the seventeen late bagatelles). Said's thinking about Beethoven had been informed by Adorno's musings on Beethoven; for Adorno, Beethoven's late work illustrated the principle that synthesis could not be achieved, that the coherence, harmony and teleology he had achieved in a work like the *Eroica* Symphony could no longer be realized. Deterioration is inevitable. It is all about process. Late work imparts a sense of what might be called "the anxiety of the incomplete."

To which category might we assign this late work by Muriel Spark, *The Finishing School*, that of harmony and reintegration or that of "the anxiety

⁹ John Lanchester, "In Sparkworld," *New York Review of Books* (November 18, 2004): 21-23; Edward Said, "Thoughts on Late Style," *London Review of Books*, 26, no. 15 (August 5, 2004).

of the incomplete"? Consideration of this topic brings to mind a character in one of Spark's earlier novels, *Memento Mori* (1959), a classic consideration of ageing and its effects on a group of "senior" characters. When Godfrey Colston, eighty-seven year old retired businessman, is told about a woman who might be a suitable housekeeper, his immediate response is "does she still have her faculties?"¹⁰

The Finishing School shows that Muriel Spark still had her faculties. Her biographer, Martin Stannard noted that well into her ninth decade, "her mind was as sharp as ever."¹¹ While this novel may not eclipse *Jean Brodie* or *The Driver's Seat* or *The Girls of Slender Means*, it is, nevertheless, an engaging, accomplished, substantive work crafted by an experienced writer in full control.

Few readers would fail to recognize *The Finishing School* as one of Spark's novels, in its its major concerns (jealousy, betrayal, fraud, hypocrisy, murder, revenge, manipulation, presumption, and violence, dreamed, latent, planned, executed); its severely limited cast of characters (perhaps a dozen or so, only several much more than shades); its economical, elliptical construction with a narrator who does not hesitate to intrude, whether to cite "the catechism of the Roman Catholic faith" on the subject of jealousy, or to shut down the narrative ("he went to Istanbul where he met with many problems too complicated to narrate here"), or to offer a comment about a character ("he was in a muddle, which was not to say he would not eventually get out of it, as in fact he was to do by writing a different sort of book").¹² This is vintage Spark.

The plot of *The Finishing School* focuses on the evolving relationship between Rowland Mahler, a twenty-nine year- old novelist who suffers from writer's block, and Chris Wiley, a precocious seventeen-year old novice writer who has no such difficulty working on his novel-in-progress. Chris has chosen a subject dear to Spark herself: Mary Queen of Scots. The shadow of her dark, regal presence fell over the landscape of Muriel's childhood. Like Sandy in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), she likely "had been taken to Holyrood ... and had seen the bed, too short and too broad where Mary Queen of Scots had slept, and the tiny room. . .where the Queen had played cards with Rizzio."¹³ Though the ill-fated monarch is mentioned but once again in the novel, when Miss Brodie leads her

¹⁰ Muriel Spark, *Memento Mori* (London: Macmillan, 1959), 19.

¹¹ Martin Stannard, *Muriel Spark: The Biography* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2009), 527.

¹² Muriel Spark, *The Finishing School* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 93, 179, 19; subsequent quotations referenced in the text by page number.

¹³ Muriel Spark, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (London: Macmillan, 1961), 39; subsequent quotations referenced in the text by page number.

students on a walk through Edinburgh's Old Town, "the gay French" (40) is an important and relevant cultural icon for Jean Brodie; as she tells the girls, "We of Edinburgh owe a lot to the French. We are Europeans" (40). Furthermore, as Martin Stannard records, in 1945 Spark "was writing a surrealist verse play about Mary Queen of Scots."¹⁴ With stereotypical Scottish thrift, Spark returns to the subject in *The Finishing School*, where a red-haired creative writing student Chris Wiley is writing a novel about Mary, though Stannard is perhaps straining a point when he suggests that Chris is "thus completing another of Muriel's unfinished works: that surrealist play on Mary Queen of Scots abandoned when she was herself a struggling author in London during the late 1940s" (528).

Along with eight other students, Chris has enrolled at College Sunrise, the finishing school run by Rowland Mahler and his twenty-five year old wife, Nina Parker. One year the college settles at Brussels, the next at Vienna; this year it is at Ouchy, near Lausanne; it will later transfer to Ravenna, then Istanbul (manuscript evidence indicates that one of Spark's working titles had been *The Mobile Finishing School*). Students take instruction in subjects that include creative writing, under Mahler's tutelage, and etiquette, "taught" by Parker, who prefers to call the class "*comme il faut*," offering advice on all sorts of topics from how to eat a plover's egg ("your left hand should hold the plover's egg. . .between the folds of a tiny paper napkin," 7); how to dress appropriately for an outing to the races ("For Ascot you will need warm underwear in case it's cold," 110); to how to behave ("if it can be said of you that you've got 'exquisite manners,' it's deadly.... try not to look very well brought up, it's awful," 111).

In several ways *The Finishing School* recalls *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, and some critics, comparing this last novel to her famous sixth, found it wanting. Rowland Mahler is no Jean Brodie; Spark never bothers to develop him in the ways she constructs Miss Brodie. He does less, he speaks less, his influence is less, and he does not live on in the memory of readers: in sum, he never achieves Jean Brodie's iconic status. So, too, the students at College Sunrise are nowhere near as memorable as the Brodie Set; they are lightly sketched and lack the identifying epithets Spark gave to each of Miss Brodie's girls. College Sunrise is certainly not the Marcia Blaine School for Girls. And modern Lausanne is not 1930s Edinburgh.

One of the major reservations that some critics expressed about *The Finishing School* is the issue of character. Spark never went in much for fully developed, detailed, traditional characters in her fiction. Even her most famous character, Jean Brodie, remains (deliberately) something of a mystery. James Wood accurately points out how little we really know

¹⁴ Stannard, 74.

about Jean Brodie beyond her famous instructions (“I won’t have to do with girls who roll up the sleeves of their blouses, however fine the weather. Roll them down at once, we are civilized beings,” 12) or her infallible judgments (when the girls suggest that Leonardo is the greatest Italian painter, she declares, “No, that is incorrect. The answer is Giotto, he is my favorite,” 10). Readers would be hard-pressed to give a detailed, substantive description of the “inner” Jean Brodie; once she has stopped talking, we know precious little about her. The girls remain shades sketched by epithets, each one famous for one thing or another (sex or doing mathematics in the brain or being stupid). In no sense could any of them be considered “round” or full-dimensional; haunting memorability is achieved, for Jean Brodie and for her girls, through other means.

In point of textual fact we know *more* about the interior life of Rowland Mahler than of Jean Brodie. His mind is severely limited, pathologically focused and roiled with jealousy. At a number of points we gain access to that mind and his intentions. Sometimes the Narrator provides that insight: “Rowland could have stabbed the boy for his modesty and calm” (56). At other times, we hear Rowland speak for himself, as when he tells Nina: “I could kill him [Chris] but would that be enough?” (95). Or we are in Rowland’s head: “I wish he [Chris] could die peacefully in his sleep” (63). That access gives dimension to Mahler’s character and a certain emotional/psychological plausibility to the evolving relationship between himself and Chris.

Criticism of Spark’s characters in *The Finishing School* saw them as deficient. The main characters, Rowland and Chris, were viewed by James Wood as “disembodied allegorical integers rather than achieved sums ... [about whom] we don’t care enough.”¹⁵ Another critic described the novel’s characters as silhouettes, noting “a silhouette only works as a portrait when its outlines are sharp-edged.”¹⁶

And that may well be just what Spark wanted.

From all characters, Spark’s Narrator maintains a characteristically astringent emotional detachment essential to her greater purpose. Christopher Ricks’s unfortunately well-known judgment about Spark and her characters, “as a novelist she rather likes seeing people in tears” (33), missed the point.¹⁷ In *The Finishing School*, as elsewhere, Spark ridicules those who would allow emotion to interfere with judgment: at one point Rowland expatiates, “my characters are so real, so very real. They have souls. If you are writing a novel from the heart you have to deal with hearts

¹⁵ Wood, 157.

¹⁶ Wolfe.

¹⁷ Christopher Ricks, “Extreme Instances,” *New York Review of Books* (December 19, 1968): 31-34 (33).

and souls. The people you create are people" (56). To be unaware of the fictionality of the enterprise, including characters created, is to misread Spark's fiction. For Spark, they are not "real people" (whatever that means), but fictional figures in a fictional landscape, to be treated as often as not with ridicule. In "The Desegregation of Art," a lecture delivered to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters (May 26, 1970), Spark had articulated the essential tenets of her aesthetic credo, none more prominent than the understanding that "ridicule is the only honorable weapon we have left."¹⁸ She never abandoned that principle.

In all of Spark's novels it seems as though she has represented elements of the writer herself in the text; it may just be that the writer herself *is* the main character. This is no less true of the *The Finishing School* which offers so much advice on writing that excerpts might well serve as a primer on the subject. From the first page of the novel, instructions are issued ("You begin by setting your scene," 1; "When one writes a book, one has to think," 41; "Watch for details," 77). Perhaps the most authoritative advice emerges, ironically, in a conversation between Rowland and Chris on the subject of character:

Rowland: "Your characters don't live their own lives?"

Chris: "No, they lead the lives I give them."

Rowland: "They don't take over? With me, the characters take over."

Chris: "I'm in full control.... Nobody in my book so far could cross the road unless I make them do it." (55-56)

"I'm in full control." The clarity, force and conviction of Chris's assertions effectively grant them an undeniable resonance and authenticity. They are Spark's own and as such they reinforce fundamental aesthetic principles that were manifest from the beginning to the end of Spark's career. Her characters are always under the absolute control of the writer. To care about them, to identify with them, to demand to know more about them than what she offers, would violate those principles and detract from the novel, indelibly imprinted with her own stamp.

Critics of *The Finishing School* also took Spark to task on a second matter, plot. Andrew Crumey expressed his dissatisfaction thus: "when it comes to plot, we are promised much, but get essentially none." Spark never went in much for plot, either, certainly not elaborate, complicated, experimental variations. With her fondness for flashbacks and flash-forwards (someone has tallied fourteen of each in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*), she often gave away the plot early on, indicating that her real

¹⁸ Muriel Spark, "The Desegregation of Art," in *The Informed Air: Essays by Muriel Spark*, ed. Penelope Jardine (New York: New Directions Books, 2014):77-82 (80).

concerns lay elsewhere. The one time that she did experiment a bit with more elaborate plotting, in *The Mandelbaum Gate*, she encountered great difficulties in the composition process and found herself less than satisfied with the results; never again did she attempt another novel with such convoluted plots and subplots.

The plot of each novel could be fully and succinctly summarized in one sentence. For *The Finishing School*, it might be put thus: nine students spend a year at College Sunrise in Lausanne, interacting, while the director and one talented student negotiate an increasingly complex and dangerous relationship. For Spark, plot was simply something that gave edge to the story. It was essential, but it must never be so complicated or so elaborate that it distracts from the greater purpose.

The third major criticism dealt with the novel's ending. Although the fictional novelist Chris Wiley, like John Fowles in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, toys with more than one ending for his novel-in-progress about Mary Queen of Scots, Spark did not. She knew The End – fixed, unalterable, definite. Spark's focus was consistently eschatological: the end justified the means, and the more efficient the means of getting to the end, the better. The post-modernist *legerdemain* characteristic of some of her finest fiction (*The Driver's Seat*, 1970; *Not to Disturb*, 1971; *The Hothouse by the East River*, 1973) had dissipated long ago. She closes *The Finishing School* in Dickensian fashion, dispatching all characters to their future destinations with wry exactness and amused confidence. Each is assigned an appropriate slot in Spark's fictional universe, whether reading psychology at university or taking Anglican orders or working, as one does, "at the restaurant of a skating rink where [she] progressed wonderfully at skating" (181). There is no hesitation, uncertainty or ambiguity here. Although some critics found it "abrupt, implausible and ham-handedly ironic" (Kakutani) or "too broadly comic" (Mallon), the swift, certain, comic disposition of character insures closure typical of Spark.¹⁹ Here, it seems, if anything, more lighthearted than usual, particularly with Rowland and Chris's "Same-Sex Affirmation Ceremony, attended by friends and Chris's family" (179). Certainly that ending to *The Finishing School* is very much unlike the end of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* with what might well be construed as a tragic ending, with the image of a disturbed Sister Helena of the Transfiguration clutching the bars of her grille at the mention of Jean Brodie's name reverberating in the reader's consciousness.

Thus, it would be difficult to deny *The Finishing School* a place in Said's first category: all the elements of the end work towards harmony

¹⁹ Kakutani, as in n. 3 above; Thomas Mallon, "The Finishing School: So Young, So Devilish," *New York Times* (September 19, 2004): 26.

and reconciliation, leaving no disturbing questions unanswered, and the novel, though it may not be the most satisfactory of all twenty-two, is a deliberate, controlled, and satisfying iteration of Spark's best, a remarkable accomplishment for an artist in her ninth decade

A quick survey of the manuscript history of *The Finishing School* and attendant correspondence supplies convincing support for such a conclusion. Spark's characteristically meticulous attention to preparation and to detail stand out in the National Library of Scotland's relevant archival files, which hold everything from boxes of extensive research materials (notes on Mary Stuart; ideas for themes and characters; quotations about jealousy from Shakespeare, George Eliot, Scripture, Françoise Sagan; brochures for Swiss finishing schools; notes about the contents of teenagers' backpacks: NLS 12478.16) to a paper trail that documents *The Finishing School* from preliminary notes and holograph to final proofs.

There is nothing casual or careless or slapdash about the genesis and multi-draft preparation of this novel for publication. Altogether, seven boxes (NLS 12478.3;.8;.10.14;16;.17;.24) hold the relevant materials. The paper record documents four important stages of work on *The Finishing School*.

Stage 1: Bothwell Spiral Notebooks (NLS 12478.10): Only slightly faded, these seven Bothwell Spiral notebooks, now nearly twenty years old, contain the undated holograph of *The Finishing School*, a complete handwritten draft recorded in fountain pen ink, skipping every other line, as was Spark's lifelong practice. (She always said that she left alternate lines empty in case she wanted to revise, smiling mischievously, since few revisions were to be seen in most notebooks.) This first version of the novel shows extensive but minor corrections, most at the word and sentence level, in Spark's own hand and in the same ink as well, perhaps done at the time of composition, rather than afterwards.

Stage 2: Typescript of *The Finishing School*: Corrected First Draft (NLS 12478.10). This typescript shows a limited number of minor corrections and an inserted yellow legal sheet with minor stylistic corrections of paragraphs three and four from Chapter Two.

Stage 3: Corrected First Proofs (NLS 12478.17). The "Corrected First Proofs," one hundred twenty-five typed 8 ½" by 11" pages, show extensive corrections at the word and sentence level, but few of a really substantive nature.. Spark has struck out a couple of paragraphs in Chapter Two, a

passage that begins, “The Catholic Catechism asks, what is the deadliest sin? And the answer is, the sin from which there is no salvation is the envy of another’s spiritual good. Surely this presupposes not only the emotion of envy, but the acting upon it. Surely...” (12478.10) Spark has struck; and though the point is essential to the spiritual scaffolding of the eventual novel, the text as given here does not resurface. What does appear is a forceful declaration of principle opening Chapter 11 of the published novel: “According to the catechism of the Roman Catholic faith, into which Rowland had been born, six sins against the Holy Spirit are specified. The fourth is “Envy of Another’s Spiritual Good,” and that was the sin from which Rowland suffered. (93)

Other, minor corrections, some in Spark’s hand, others in that of Penelope Jardine, Spark’s longtime assistant who faithfully followed the author’s instructions, appear here and there. In one case, a yellow legal-sized sheet lists four corrections in Spark’s own hand, each one carefully executed by Jardine.

Stage 4: The “Second Corrected Proofs” incorporate Spark’s final changes to *The Finishing School*: four pages setting forth corrections, none of them major. These were made after contentious exchanges with her British and American publishers and show Spark’s tenacious efforts to preserve her work *as she had written it*.

Something of that history needs fuller consideration. Early on, in February 2001, Gerry Howard, Executive Editor at Doubleday, Spark’s American publisher, had written to encourage her to change the title of the new novel, since it had already been used for a best seller written by the American novelist Gail Godwin. Spark did not contest the point: on 19 February 2001, she wrote Howard to tell him what she had done: “For the time being my new novel is *Mr Mahler’s Finishing School*, which I feel will hardly conflict with Gail Godwin’s title, and from my point of view could be an improvement” (NLS 12478.14).

After more than two years’ work, Spark sent the typescript of *The Finishing School*, the “Corrected First Draft,” to Juliet Annan, Publishing Director of Viking Penguin (May 31, 2003). On June 6 Annan acknowledged receipt. Within ten days she had read the novel and responded enthusiastically (“so funny and sharp and full of your hallmark suppressed hilarity and ironic tone,” June 17, 2003, NLS 12478.14). She did, however, express several reservations (most notably about the ending).

In response, Spark wrote to say that she was unwilling to change the ending; but her faxed response did include a list of eleven minor corrections she wished to make. On June 24, 2003 Annan wrote to Spark: "I think we both agree that we will leave it [the novel] as it is—and it is splendid" (NLS 12478.14).

These things rested, temporarily.

In August 2003 the story of *The Finishing School* became rather more complicated and likely more contentious than Spark had ever experienced, so fraught that at one point she threatened to withdraw the manuscript from both publishing houses. Greater tensions began to surface with a letter dated August 14, 2003, from Emma Horton, who introduced herself as Viking's copy editor for *The Finishing School*. Spark had rarely, if ever, worked with a copy editor. Indeed, she had expressed her unwillingness to do so as early as July 27, 1967, when, in a letter to her agent, Dorothy Olding at Harold Ober Associates, she had written of her "need [for] protection from copy-readers and copy-editors," admitting that while she could make mistakes, "my work is not in crying need of editing, and publishers must just take it or leave it without bothering me" (NLS 10607.34). She was not about to start now, and certainly not with the apparently somewhat inexperienced Emma Horton. After all, this is the writer who had once responded "If I write it, it is grammatical," to another's writer's criticism that a passage Spark had written was "ungrammatical."²⁰

Horton returned a copy of the manuscript with copious editing notes and five pages of closely written "queries" and "suggestions" about the manuscript. Horton's work enraged Spark (and Jardine). Eventually, after acrimonious exchanges and diplomatic apologies (from Horton, not Spark), the path to publication was smoothed by Annan. Spark returned five legal sheets of corrections. *Finis*.

About half of Horton's suggestions/corrections seem both useful and appropriate. Some have to do with relatively simple matters, like bringing the manuscript into conformity with the Viking house style sheet: indentations, use of single and double quotation marks, numbers written out, not in numerals, etc. Other requests are legitimate corrections at the word level—e.g., places where "said" should be "asked." Disputes over matters like these are settled: the house wins, inevitably. But disputes over matters of style, impinging as they do on aesthetics, creativity, and control, were not so easily resolved.

In some places, Spark did accept editorial suggestions and made revisions. Occasionally, she did make minor revisions on her own. But in matters she considered of greater import, areas where she felt her integrity

²⁰ Stannard, as in n.11 above, 213,

as an artist threatened, she refused to back down. And that may well be because many of Horton's suggestions seem directed at achieving greater economy of expression at the expense of style. If incorporated, they would have resulted in a prose that lacks the poetic economy and rhythm essential to Spark's writing—e.g., Spark retained “the sky over-clouded,” rejecting Horton's “the sky overcast,” and similarly she refused to alter her “the Castle of Chillon, standing, as it does, on the very verge of Lake Lemman,” to Horton's proposed, “the Castle of Chillon, which stands on the verge of Lake Lemman.” (NLS 12478.18).

Spark simply could not abide Horton's tampering with her prose. Matters reached an impasse. Several days in August saw infuriated, focused concentration on the text of *The Finishing School*. On Spark's instructions, Penelope Jardine labeled the proofs edited by Emma Horton as “GARBAGE Being Viking's Copy Editor's Fatuous Changes,” and tipped them into the trash bin (NLS 12478.3).

On August 19, 2003, Spark gave vent to her feelings in a letter to Bruce Hunter, her agent at David Higham Associates in London. After asking him for his help in dealing with Penguin, she laments that the copy-editor's suggestions would produce something “so weird for a book of mine. . . the prose has been changed to a sort of post-office pamphlet jargon-English-for-Everybody.” She informs him that this latest version—excluding “a few valid points”—has been discarded. (NLS 12478.14)

It seems clear that Emma Horton, inexperienced as she was in working on Spark's fiction, found herself caught up in a contest of strong personalities. Trying to do her best, she encountered stiff opposition to her suggestions for revisions to *The Finishing School*.

On August 22, 2003, Spark received a letter by fax from Gerry Howard who had now read the manuscript. Included were three pages of suggestions. Howard had wanted *The Finishing School* to be “a sermon or allegory on the effects of envy in both directions on different sorts of souls.” He had found a number of characters “sketchy” and he wanted “the ambience of the dance more fully developed.” Further, he found it curious that there was “no fallout whatsoever from the murder attempt.” Altogether, he had expected a different, and bigger, book (12478.18)

Incensed, Spark sent word to Hunter, and charged into battle on both fronts. Archival materials contain no direct response to Howard. She may well have thought that none was useful or appropriate. She rejected nearly all of Howard's suggestions. She had already considered a number of the matters he had brought to her attention, e.g., writing a bigger book, as Penelope Jardine had written to Juliet Annan two years previously (October 30, 2001), “she [Muriel] wants it to be a bigger book than usual and it already has twenty-one characters” (12478.10). But that bigger book never became a reality.

On the same day that Howard's letter arrived at Spark's residence in Tuscany, Penelope Jardine dispatched two faxes. The first, to Bruce Hunter, is brief and to-the-point: "Muriel is justly irritated by the attempt to banalize her prose. We do not want to see these 'corrections' incorporated in the proofs" (NLS 12478.17).

The second, sent directly to Emma Horton is likewise to-the-point, but longer. Jardine informs her that no revisions will be forthcoming from Spark. Bruce Hunter will take up the matter of "corrections" directly with Juliet Annan. Jardine is adamant:

your comments are not to be incorporated in Dame Muriel's novel. Dame Muriel is known for the lucidity and beauty of her prose, and she means every word she writes and every comma that she puts in as well as every one she leaves out. (NLS12478.17)

On 24th August 2003 Spark herself wrote to Hunter, informing him that she had already considered one of Gerry Howard's suggestions – expanding the final school dance – but rejected it, and telling him that the novel as it represents her best effort. Further, she notes that

what I have said to Gerry is that it is not too late for him to decline the book altogether if he really can't take it on board. . . Now the same goes for Juliet Annan. I like working with her, but I won't cope with copy-editing.... If she would rather not have this book, ... could [we] refund the money and cancel the contract? In both cases I have to retain my freedom of expression. (12478.14)

Whether ploy or feint or simply shrewd strategy employed by a seasoned and successful tactician, Spark's assault achieved victory.

On August 27th, Bruce Hunter wrote to assure Spark that her novel would be published incorporating her own revisions (she has sent Viking four pages with sixty-two corrections on October 20, 2003), and none of those suggested by Horton and rejected by Spark. On August 28, Annan wrote to Penelope Jardine:

I was sorry to get back from holiday and find that Muriel had found the copy-editor's notes nothing but an irritation. I am extremely sorry: of course she doesn't have to take any of the copy-editor's suggestions, and she can make any of the changes she wants at proof stage. The book is a jewel just as it is and I certainly didn't want anyone to turn [it] into post office pamphletese!" (NLS 12478.14).

Both publishers capitulated, and the novel was published, on March 4, 2004 by Viking, on September 21, 2004 by Doubleday. Within the month Viking had sold nearly six thousand copies and had ordered an additional printing of fifteen hundred copies. (Annan to MS and PJ, March 18, 2004, NLS 12478.14). Even after publication, Spark scrutinized the text of *The Finishing School*: in the copy sent to her she had found a typographical

error and Penelope Jardine faxed Spark's request for a correction in all subsequent printings.

And so we have Muriel Spark's twenty-second and last novel, *The Finishing School*, the product of the writer's steadfast assertion of her own rightful authority to assume and maintain control over her work. The extensive evidence of manuscripts and supplementary materials used in preparation for the final version of *The Finishing School*, and the meticulous attention to all aspects of the manuscript evident in her correspondence illuminates a portrait of the writer in full control. *The Finishing School* deserves a place among Spark's better, not best, works.

In those "Thoughts on Late Style," Edward Said includes the French Fauve artist Henri Matisse among those whose late works achieved harmonic integration. For him, their "late works crown a lifetime of aesthetic endeavor." The case of Henri Matisse may present parallels with that of Muriel Spark. Some of Matisse's greatest work may well have been accomplished in his physically-infirm eighties. His famous cutouts may offer an appropriate, resonant analogy for Spark's late work as well. Just as Matisse distilled pure color into pristine clarity, deftly simplified form, and dislocated subject into space, so Spark distilled language into lyrical clarity, deftly simplified character, and dislocated experience into text that for her was always a poem, until the very end.

Dissatisfaction with elements of the novel led some to consider the title unconsciously ironic, teasing that *The Finishing School* was not finished at all: in James Wood's comment, "*The Finishing School*—surely forgivable from a writer of Spark's advanced seniority—seems not quite finished."²¹ Perhaps so, deliberately. But perhaps quite the opposite. It is finished, on Spark's own terms, as archival evidence attests, and so, too, is the career of one of the great writers of our time.

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²¹ Wood, as in n. 3 above, 157.