

## ANALYSIS

"Cruel and Barbarous Treatment" (1939)

Mary McCarthy

(1912-1989)

"The trite phrases, which are also capitalized, are the language of the heroine and her acquaintances and become a secular refrain. Like the ecclesiastical and the classical allusions, they provide a frame of reference. But instead of deepening the character, they limit the young woman by revealing what is superficial in her nature and in her milieu.

Mary McCarthy is describing a new kind of courtship, one that has become increasingly a pattern of contemporary living. For divorce is usually no longer a scandal, but a way of life. As documented in 'Cruel and Barbarous Treatment,' the courtship assumes three distinct phases: the Pre-Announcement, the Announcement, and the Post-Announcement. The Pre-Announcement Period is the most exciting of the three for the heroine and the Young Man, for secrecy lends enchantment and affords superiority. Since only she and the Young Man know of their affair, public appearances entail certain calculated risks and test each participant's ability to dissemble. After one particularly effective performance, the heroine gloats over her virtuosity, telling the Young Man that she should have been an actress or an international spy or a diplomat's wife.

Soon, however, the excitement of the Pre-Announcement period begins to wear thin, and the lovers agree 'that The Situation Was Impossible, and Things Couldn't Go On This Way Any Longer.' The heroine realizes that to be a 'Woman With a Secret' is not satisfying enough, if to acquaintances she appears to be a woman without a secret. Promptly, close friends are informed and their reactions judged. 'It was a pity, she reflected, that she was so sensitive to public opinion,' knowing that she could not love a man unless everyone else thought him wonderful too. Finally, the time arrives for her to make the Announcement. The confidences to friends appear 'like pale dress rehearsals of the supreme confidence she was about to make,' and she becomes unbearably curious about 'How Her Husband Would Take It.' Only when love is faced with its own annihilation, she reasons, can it reveal itself completely. Accordingly, she considers that the Announcement is a test of her husband's love. Judging that her husband would be able to control his feelings better in public, she chooses to make the Announcement at breakfast and selects a fashionable restaurant as the setting.

The staging is effective. After the Announcement, he calls for the check immediately; and, hand in hand, they hurriedly leave the restaurant. With tears streaming down their faces, they walk to a public park where, in a nicely ironic mock-pastoral setting, they watch ducks swimming about in an artificial lake. When, at last, her husband responds to her protests of love by saying that he understands, she feels that, through his forgiveness and surrender, she has drawn him into a 'mystical union' and that their 'marriage was complete.'

By comparison, the Post-Announcement Period proves flat. From the onset, her husband behaves calmly, and she senses in his detachment an irony indicating that the Announcement has, in some way, revealed her to him. Her final leave-taking is strained and uninspired. But caught in a world of her own making, she has to abide by its unwritten code and, however unwillingly, go through with the divorce and make the trip to Reno. En route westward, knowing that she would never marry the Young Man for she had grown to detest him, she contemplates her future as a single woman and wonders how she could have forgotten the terror of spinsterhood. She knows that she will always stay a little too late at cocktail parties, hoping to be invited for dinner afterwards. If no invitation is given, she will have to face the prospect of walking out alone while trying to give the impression that she has another engagement. Her imagination stirs up images of dinners in tearooms with women who are also single because women alone look less conspicuous in tearooms than they do in good restaurants.

Finally optimism replaces depression and she envisions herself a *femme fatale*, a woman of the world for whom provisions against old age and loneliness appear Philistine and irrelevant. Enlivened by this new self-image, she examines the other passengers on the train and contemplates what reply she would give if questioned as to her destination. Reno, she decides, would be too direct and leave her cheapened and vulnerable... 'She might go so far as to say "Nevada." But no farther'."

Barbara McKenzie  
*Mary McCarthy*  
(Twayne 1966) 86-88

"Separation from [Harold] Johnsrud was followed by a week in June which she spent with [John] Porter at Watermill, Long Island. Then she took a train for Reno (an adventure on this trip is the source of the short story 'The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt'), leaving both Porter and her husband of three years behind.... The breakup with Johnsrud and the trip to Reno is the subject of one story, 'Cruel and Barbarous Treatment,' which, it may be assumed, is an account, within the movable boundaries of fiction, of her feelings during this period.

The heroine is 'she,' the prospective husband is called only the Young Man, and the husband appears in his lower-case, common-noun designation, except for his pronominal appearance when he becomes Him or His. The story concerns the husband and the Young Man only peripherally. It is a witty and stinging narrative about Her herself, and about her motives for divorce, which seem unattractive, egocentric and fanciful. She is actually not so much getting a divorce as enjoying enormously the *role* of the Young Divorcee. She sees her life in its most dramatic form, she is the star of the play, the 'drama of the triangle' entralls her; men have roles in the drama she is playing only so far as they support her vision of herself....

The real-life actress that Mary McCarthy says she was (and it is only fair to note that she was the first to call attention to this trait in herself in *The Company She Keeps*) took the only action that seemed compatible with her feelings at the time. She was, apparently, bored with Johnsrud, among other things, disillusioned at his failures and weaknesses, incompatible with his moods; having been unfaithful to him, she felt she ought to leave him. She divorced him and then discovered she was equally bored with her fiancé. She writes (of Meg Sargent), 'This interlude was at the same time festive and heartrending: her only dull moments were the evenings she spent alone with the Young Man.' And again, in the autobiographical 'Ghostly Father, I Confess,' and in the guise of Meg Sargent again, we are given a glimpse of other causes for the terminus of her own marriage, indications of a growing instability, almost a hysteria, to which the conditions of the marriage had brought her....

'Cruel and Barbarous Treatment' is the first story, and we have already noticed that it contains some interesting autobiographical revelations about the state of its author's mind and emotions during and just after the termination of her first marriage. The heroine, 'she,' is a self-dramatizing young woman, and her emotional tangles are accompanied by postures which, often, she enjoys more than she suffers. Indeed, whatever suffering might have been involved in a love affair, a break with her husband, and a departure for Reno, is buried under the frank delight she feels *playing* the role.

'She had an intense, childlike curiosity as to How Her Husband Would Take It, a curiosity she disguised for decency's sake as justifiable apprehension.' And later: 'Terrified, she wondered whether she had not already prolonged the drama beyond its natural limits, whether the confession in the restaurant and the absolution in the Park had not rounded off the artistic whole, whether the sequel of divorce and remarriage would not, in fact, constitute an anticlimax.' In her emotional life the play's the thing, and she moves from role to role, speaking her lines, and thinking in terms of the recognized clichés of dramatic marital situations.

An interesting technical device in this story is the use of capital letters to set apart the clichés of social intercourse which are the vocal manifestations of how people then thought. So we come upon Public Appearances, Woman with a Secret, The Situation Was Impossible, Things Couldn't Go On This Way Any Longer, and so on. The device reminds the reader that the *character*, not the *novelist*, is thinking, at least at the moments that the clichés are used to formulate thought. That we suspect, outside of the novel, that occasionally it is also the novelist's view does not detract from the effectiveness of the technique. For the

moment we are thinking as Meg Sargent is thinking, or better, as the world around her shaped her way of thought. The technique provides us as well with certain, exact, historical data for the story, the data of verbal currency, and thus, subtly, of the thought of the time. Capitalized words become period indicators, speech clichés common to the late Thirties....

'Cruel and Barbarous Treatment' is about the dramatic roles that love makes possible to a woman, the performance-nature of her behavior in relation to men. The heroine acts under the conviction that her life and emotions take on meaning only as they are presented to the outer world, and as that outer world would approve of them. ('I couldn't really love a man,' she murmured to herself once, 'if everybody didn't think he was wonderful.') Somewhat like Madame Bovary, who found near the end of her affair with Leon that 'adultery could be as banal as marriage,' she realizes that 'the virtue of marriage as an institution lay in its public character. Private cohabitation, long continued, was, she concluded, a bore.' And while she concedes the difficulties of her new role as Divorcee we leave her at the end boarding a train, imbued with a sense of her new importance, and determined to deal appropriately with the other travelers who might talk to her in the club car."

Doris Grumbach  
*The Company She Kept*  
(Coward-McCann 1967) 70-72, 93-94

"She begins far enough from any truth. In the first chapter, 'Cruel and Barbarous Treatment,' which is not so much a story as a witty satire on nameless generalized types and their typical behavior, she is a married 'Woman with a Secret' delighting in an affair with a 'Young Man' chiefly because it 'was an opportunity, unparalleled in her experience, for exercising feelings of superiority over others.' Play-acting irresponsibility with life's realities, she reduces them to fashionable clichés that minister to her vanity."

Irvin Stock  
*Mary McCarthy*  
(U Minnesota 1968) 15

"This young woman takes her roles ready-made, choosing the ones that are daring yet fashionable and in good taste and hoping to elicit the slightly shocked admiration of her friends. Investing nothing of herself in the events of her life, she is free to play to whatever she perceives as the expectations of her audience--whether by fulfilling or surprising them--on the basis of aesthetics uncomplicated by emotion. She does not recognize this selflessness as a regrettable defect; her belief that it is 'more amusing and more gratifying to play herself than to interpret any character conceived by a dramatist' is sadly ironic.

There is little to know about the company she keeps, restricted as we are to the young woman's view of the other characters. The husband sadly lets her go; the young man seems rather frantic in his devotion. Of the friends whose opinions are so important we see nothing, but references to 'two or three' of her closest friends and 'these luncheon companions, her dearest friends,' suggest more 'closest' friends than real ones. They matter so much, however, that the young woman begins to lose interest in the young man when she suspects that they do not share her enthusiasm for him.

She is at last very much alone with a broken marriage and a ruined affair. But what should be a recognition scene is incomplete, for when she recoils from the vision of her future as a spinster, berates herself for 'burning her bridges,' and sees that the young man simply will not do, she is inspired not to self-knowledge but to self-justification.... We see Margaret as she hopes her friends see her."

Willene Schaefer Hardy  
*Mary McCarthy*  
(Frederick Ungar 1981) 33-34

"John Porter figures only briefly in McCarthy's life as a 'fiancé,' but the infatuation inspired her to antic heights in 'Cruel and Barbarous Treatment.' The first of the stories collected in *The Company She Keeps*, it is as archly sardonic as 'Ghostly Father, I Confess' (the last) is unsparingly analytic. It also captures something of McCarthy's affinity for the clandestine life. 'She could not bear to hurt her husband. She

impressed this upon the Young Man, on her confidantes, and finally on her husband himself... 'Cruel and Barbarous Treatment' is McCarthy's anatomy of infidelity, sans retribution, whose sequel, divorce and remarriage, presents the romantic heroine with the usual anticlimax. After the tingling sensations of deception, a public engagement subjects her to second thoughts, mutual distrust, boredom. For McCarthy herself, the affair with John Porter was mainly a passport to the single life, heretofore feared and avoided. The young newspaperman (he also worked for the Paris *Herald-Tribune*) is remembered in later life as 'an absolutely worthless person,' who was very attractive, 'like Fred MacMurray.' The episode, nonetheless, led her to pen some interesting speculations about women--about herself and her tangled relations to men....

In the club car on the train to Reno, 'she felt gratitude toward the Young Man for having unwittingly effected her transit into a new life. She looked about her at the other passengers. Later she would talk to them.' One of them, as it happened in real life, was a man in a Brooks Brothers shirt who came from Pittsburgh, with whom Mary McCarthy would have her next affair."

Carol Brightman

*Writing Dangerously: Mary McCarthy and Her World*  
(Clarkson Potter 1992) 125-26

"The success of *The Company She Keeps* lies in the way that it effects...shifts in perspective and scale through an ongoing interplay between novelistic and short story conventions. As the reviews of her work attest, the different expectations around the structure and content of each of these forms were predicated on their respective sizes--as were the cultural assumptions about their social relevance. Upsetting this neat schema, McCarthy draws the reader into questioning the genre of the collection almost immediately, as the first short story, 'Cruel and Barbarous Treatment' (which is narrated through a compressed third-person voice), moves into the second, 'Rogue's Gallery,' which is narrated in the first person.

Where the earlier story located the reader in a broad, deparicularized scene, moreover, with characters identified not by names but by social function, the second invokes an immediacy and closeness that seems jarring by comparison. Opening with the declaration that 'Mr. Sheer fired his stenographer in order to give me the job,' 'Rogue's Gallery' invites a reading as a separate, even discrete narrative. This destabilization of any traditional novelistic trajectory is coupled with ironic reflections that seem to prefigure McCarthy's technique in *Memories*; while the narrator reflects that being hired 'puzzled me at the time,' she also creates a distance from events by commenting on them as if from a place of superior knowledge--'I see now that he must have owed her money.' This contrasts with the continuity in focus that McCarthy cultivated in the first story. Here, McCarthy juxtaposes the proximity of her narrator's initial observations with a detached reflection, creating the effect of a visual zoom in and out.

McCarthy also suggests a slightly mocking self-awareness, when the narrator reveals her earlier naivety, admitting that 'later on, after I had quit, I, too, would make regular calls to collect my back pay,' encouraging the reader to notice the difference between her earlier actions and words and later reflections. But even though this style seems to provide a closer understanding of Meg's personality and perspective than in the first story, by conveying her recollections through an inflected first-person voice, this nonetheless sits uncomfortably in contrast to the portrait that the first story had prepared. It is hard to reconcile the sincere image that begins 'Cruel and Barbarous Treatment'--'She could not beat to hurt her husband. She impressed this on the Young Man, on her confidantes, and finally on her husband himself'--with the witty, playful tone of the second story, especially as the former seems to convey the sense of free indirect discourse.

In juxtaposing these distinctive voices and inviting the reader to understand them as the same character, McCarthy creates two separate effects. On the one hand, she emphasizes the narrative disjunction between the two episodes, unsettling the work's status as novel. On the other, she invites the reader to consider the possibility that individual identity can appear radically different, depending on perspective and context--a conclusion that the narrator herself reaches."

Sam V. H. Reese

*The Short Story in Midcentury America*  
(Louisiana State University 2017) 81-82

The title should be set in both double and single quotation marks because it is a quotation from divorce law in Nevada at that time, where many people--usually women--went to get "quickie" divorces, as in the play *The Women* (1936) by Clare Boothe Luce (657 performances), adapted into a film (1939) with many female stars. In this story by McCarthy (1939), the title is heavily ironic, just as it was in real life, because "cruel and barbarous treatment" was a stock, catch-all legal term that everybody knew accepted virtually any such claim, no matter how petty--"He raised his voice to me!" The phrase was frequently mocked as meaningless. Applied to this story, it stresses the pretense, artificiality, and dishonesty of this woman. Cold and calculating, she seems more guilty of cruel and barbarous treatment than her husband.

That this woman is making this claim identifies her with its fraudulence. Her insincerity is manifest in her behavior and in her thoughts--one cliché after another. This woman went to Vassar, in the sense that she is comparable to the Vassar classmates McCarthy would satirize in *The Group*: She is what the Existentialists of that day would call "inauthentic," even more conformist than Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*, with no true individuality, playacting her way through life using men as props in her performances. Women often feel liberated and independent after a divorce, but in the case of a woman like this, such a notion is ironic because she is a captive of convention with no independence of mind.

Michael Hollister (2020)