

## ANALYSIS

"Genial Host" (1942)

Mary McCarthy

(1912-1989)

"Pflaumen, the central character of 'The Genial Host,' a character sketch in the second person, is less complex than Mr. Sheer [in "Rogue's Gallery"] and Mary McCarthy is able to find the key to his personality more easily. Put very simply, Pflaumen is an emotional and intellectual bore whose particular function in life is that of a host. During the parties that he stages, his well-appointed apartment serves as 'a house of assignation, where business deals, friendships, love affairs were arranged, with Pflaumen, the promoter, taking his inevitable cut.'

The key to Pflaumen's personality is the price that he exacts as host. 'The hawklike mouth was not deceptive, for he was a true bird of prey--he did not demand any of the trifles that serve as coin in the ordinary give-and-take of social intercourse; he wanted something bigger, he wanted part of your life.' His 'inevitable cut' is information concerning the 'deal' arranged through his genial auspices. Margaret Sargent knows: 'Sooner or later you would break with him.... But not yet, not while you were still so poor, so loverless, so lonely.... The time after the next, you promised yourself, you would surely refuse.' The relationship, commercial and hypocritical, is therefore symbiotic, for Pflaumen is a perfect host."

Barbara McKenzie  
*Mary McCarthy*  
(Twayne 1966) 80-81

"Pflaumen, the 'Genial Host' of the next story, is related to Mr. Sheer in Mary McCarthy's continuing study of society's trolls. Like Sheer he is an outcast, a nonentity in himself; like Meg, he is searching for an identity, trying to establish it by the use of his dinner guests. These carefully selected persons are to him not so much real as allegorical, figures whom he has creatively matched and set down beside each other in his own meaningful microcosm. He entertains in order to make serious inroads into the lives of his friends, to become inextricable parts of them, to form alliances that will define *his* personality for him. Mr. Sheer lives on the illusions of danger, Mr. Pflaumen creates a vision of himself by means of his visitors. Later, in *Cast a Cold Eye*, these become allied to the ephemeral Francis Cleary, the 'Friend of the Family,' and to the viscount of *A Charmed Life*, all memorable, compassionately conceived social orphans, themselves closely related, one would guess, to the actress in their creator as much as representative of the company she kept."

Doris Brumbach  
*The Company She Kept*  
(Coward-McCann 1967) 101-02

"In 'The Genial Host' we see this new Miss Sargent again. She is now the dinner guest of one Pflaumen, who is shown as having repressed both his natural tendency to far and hairiness and his natural personality of a Jewish paterfamilias to become the elegant familiar and host of clever, fashionable, successful people. Moreover, this reality-avoider collects his guests for their 'allegorical possibilities,' that is, for the chic intellectual positions to which they have sacrificed their own reality. Thus, Margaret, hotly defending Trotsky against the party's Stalinist, and delighted at the effect she is making, is horrified to note that Pflaumen is beaming at her for performing as expected, while the party's one honest man, a poor young Jewish lawyer, is applauding ironically. The story ends in another capitulation: she dare not yet rebel against Pflaumen and the falsenesses by which she sings for her suppers, she is still too 'poor, loverless, lonely.' But in the next, 'Portrait of the Intellectual as a Yale Man,' though she is still in need, she has ceased to capitulate."

Irvin Stock  
*Mary McCarthy*

"In 'The Genial Host,' Margaret goes to a party. Pflaumen, the host, is a dull man brilliantly portrayed, right down to the carefully assembled art objects which adorn his apartment and await the notice of his guests. The guests, too, are carefully assembled, being variously 'interesting' or successful. Margaret is interesting. The story is told in the second person, the 'affectionate, diminutive "you",' a rare and in this case peculiarly effective narrative device. The heroine has been 'she' and 'I'; now she is 'you,' and the reader is drawn willy-nilly into the character: 'He held out his arms to help you with your coat.... If you did not know him well, you did not realize that he loved you for that patched fur. It signified that you were the *real thing*, the poet in a garret....'

At the same time that 'you' are Margaret, individual and unique, you are also one of a succession of actors cast in the part, useful to Pflaumen, being briefed by an old hand: this is the way it goes. In Pflaumen's artificial world, personality becomes 'unequivocal and defiant': 'If you asserted your Trotskyism, your poverty, your sexual freedom, the expectant mother radiated her pregnancy, the banker basked in his reactionary convictions.... Everybody, for the moment, knew exactly who he was.' You terrify and delight yourself with a rude and politically unfashionable outburst, and when Pflaumen 'tenderly' explains that 'Meg is a violent Trotskyist,' you are ashamed because you are just showing off. But you have made an impression: the publisher has some work for you, the Berolzheimers want you to come to dinner, and Erdmann, the Marxist, will, you think, become your lover. Riding high, you snub Pflaumen's tentative question about you and Erdman; you send him to get you a highball, but he turns to ask, 'in a true stage whisper,' 'You're not drinking too much, are you?'

Pflaumen, who lives vicariously, wants 'part of your life' in exchange for the benefits you have reaped from the association with him, and he will punish disloyalty. Still, you feel superior, but as you prepare to leave, he strikes again. Inviting Erdman to come again, he adds pointedly, 'And bring your wife... You ought to meet her, Meg.' You leave alone, knowing that you must break with Pflaumen, but 'not yet, not while you were still so poor, so loverless, so lonely.'

Margaret's friendship with Pflaumen is unpleasantly symbiotic. 'Bought' by his 'wines and rich food and prominent acquaintances,' wearing her shabby fur, she comes, at Pflaumen's direction, to act her part in the little morality play. Pflaumen's pleasure in her outburst justifies a suspicion that with her outspokenness and wit, and her tendency to drink too much, Meg fairly often provides moments of heightened drama, and that this habit enhances her value to her genial host. This is Pflaumen's play, not Margaret's.

Her other friends are glimpsed in contrast to Pflaumen, whose invitations are so ceremoniously issued. They call up 'to demand, "Are you free Thursday?"' before disclosing whether they [want her] to picket a movie house, attend a lecture at the New School, buy tickets for a party for Spain, or go and dance at a new night club.' They sound terribly active--'pink,' of course, as Mr. Breen would say, but the liberal intellectuals' revulsion against Communism came only toward the end of the decade, as the bloodiness of the Stalin regime in Russia became apparent and Margaret's efforts on behalf of Trotsky were vindicated. What troubles her about her political opinions is not that they may be wrong but that she may hold them for wrong reasons."

Willene Schaefer Hardy  
Mary McCarthy  
(Frederick Ungar 1981) 43-44

"In 'The Genial Host,' Meg Sargent is introduced as 'a violent Trotskyist'--although 'you knew you were not a violent Trotskyist, it was just that you were temperamentally attracted to unpopular causes; when you were young, it had been the South, the Dauphin, Bonnie Prince Charlie; later it was Debs [Socialist] and now Trotsky [Communist] that you loved.' When she and another guest raise some question about Stalin's treatment of Communist opposition leaders, Peterson calls a halt to the 'backstabbing' by invoking the shimmering image of La Pasionaria, whom he has just heard sing in Madrid: 'What do these petty political squabbles mean to her?' he demands with a flourish, whereupon Meg, sick of the practiced sentiment, throws back the image of Andres Nin, a Spanish anarchist suspected of having been murdered by the Communists. It isn't one of McCarthy's better stories, but it reveals a heart that by the end of 1936 was

tense with sympathy for the renegade Trotsky, one of the founding father of the October Revolution whose case was soon to be heard in Mexico; at long last, a real human being in the revolutionary movement--not a doctrine, a method of analysis, or a position--with whom she could identify."

Carol Brightman

*Writing Dangerously: Mary McCarthy and Her World*  
(Clarkson Potter 1992) 129-30

Michael Hollister (2020)