

## ANALYSIS

"Rogue's Gallery" (1942)

Mary McCarthy

(1912-1989)

"Rogue's Gallery,' the initial character sketch in *The Company She Keeps*, sets the general pattern for those that follow: first, the physical appearance of the character is described and his function in life classified; next, his relationship to Margaret Sargent is analyzed, and then followed by a delineation of the oddities of his behavior; and finally, the 'key' that explains his particular nature and function is presented. The 'action' simply illustrates the behavioral pattern of the specimens Mary McCarthy has categorized ('The Genial Host,' 'Portrait of the Intellectual as a Yale Man,' and so on).

'Rogue's Gallery,' written as a personal memoir in the first person, concerns Mr. Sheer, for whom Margaret Sargent is working as a private secretary and cultural standard-bearer. Although a deal in *objets d'art*, I. F. Sheer, as if to flaunt expectations, is an arrant 'con man' who prefers shady deals to legitimate business transactions. Even his preference in art gives him away, for he delights in ingenuity of any kind--'boxes with false bottoms, cuckoo clocks, oval miniatures or the school of Boucher that opened if you pressed a button and disclosed a pornographic scene.' Art, to him, was 'a splendid confidence game, the craftsman who did not, in some fashion deceive his public seemed to him a sort of stool pigeon, a high-class rat.' Consequently when he achieves outward respectability as a partner in a successful gallery some years later, he resorts to practicing needless deceptions. To succeed in one's own personality is odious even to a successful con man. Mr. Sheer, like most of Miss McCarthy's 'characters,' is a paradox."

Barbara McKenzie  
*Mary McCarthy*  
(Twayne 1966) 80

"Rogue's Gallery,' the second story, is written in the form of memoirs, as if the heroine, now become "I," had recorded what she remembered of a curious encounter. Mary McCarthy-I, the narrator, confesses to an affection for Mr. Sheer, the rogue who owns a specious 'gallery dealing in objects of art.' Mr. Sheer is not unrelated to the heroine of 'Cruel and Barbarous Treatment.' As it was to her, 'masquerade was life to Mr. Sheer. He could not bear to succeed in his own personality, any more than an unattractive woman could bear to be loved for herself.' He is, like the heroine of the first story, enjoying his role and relishing life only when it is played by someone other than his real self.

Like Martha in a later novel, *A Charmed Life*, Mary McCarthy has a distinct taste for frauds, which again suggests the affections of the picaresque novelist. This fondness is allied to her dislike, expressed in her...theatre criticism, of ambition out of proportion to talent, or of success as an end in itself. Success becomes an oddly exotic flower that grows only in fake, pretentious fraudulent gardens.... In this sense, the currents of the eighteenth-century novel run strong in Mary McCarthy. We have seen her use of the quest theme translated into modern terms of a search for self; in 'Rogue's Gallery' we meet a second eighteenth-century taste of hers, a fondness for picaresque subjects, brought to a typically modern turn.

The roguish Mr. Sheer is caught sight of in a series of shady events that bring him to the bottom of his financial resources and to the end of his fancy evasions and promises. At the end of the story he is prosperous, and like the heroine, he finds his success incredible. Because he cannot understand why fate has so suddenly turned on him, he is uneasy. Now that he has reached 'the apogee of his career' he is puzzled by his unhappiness. Personally elusive and slippery by nature, he is made restive by success and bored by legitimate enterprises. He is rejuvenated at the last only by the vitiating prospect of a dangerous operation during which he may die. 'And for the first time in many weeks he giggled irrepressibly.' Mr. Sheer, like his creator, distrusts success and sees a certain virtue in lack of popularity and recognition. It is

the old, comfortable, consolation of the bohemian. The heroine, like the author, is still a bohemian girl, as she is to characterize herself in the next story."

Doris Grumbach  
*The Company She Kept*  
(Coward-McCann 1967) 96-97

"The second chapter, 'Rogue's Gallery,' in which Miss Sargent works for a rogue who runs an art gallery and appears as a naive, good-natured foil for her colorful con man of a boss, seems a mere exercise in the Dickensian picaresque."

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

"The subject is Mr. Sheer, and what we learn of Margaret is what she reveals incidentally in her account of her dealings with him and through her voice as first-person narrator--a point of view explained, however feebly, by an authorial footnote that the piece is an excerpt from memoirs begun by the heroine. Mr. Sheer is a 'dealer in objects of art,' but the only profitable item at his command is miniature portraits of dogs, painted by an elderly Frenchman and set into crystal cufflinks. Rich people take advantage of this unusual means of immortalizing their pets in numbers sufficient to keep The Savile Galleries smelling of the artist's models all the hot summer that Margaret works as Mr. Sheer's stenographer.

Mr. Sheer--whose name is rich with associations of elusiveness, transparency, imperiled tenacity--intensely admires his stock. He loves 'any kind of ingenuity--boxes with false bottoms...little statues that became fountains, Victorian banks made to resemble birds' nests.' He deplores modern art and is 'puzzled and annoyed...that anyone should, for example, make a set of book ends that looked, simply, like themselves...art was in his eyes a splendid confidence game.' Margaret gradually learns that the business is founded on nothing; the cherished 'possessions' are on consignment, but Mr. Sheer thrives on dangers which unnerve Margaret.

His 'business tragedy' is that 'he was continually being forced, by the impatience of a creditor, to see somebody else's property below cost. In order to make good in the Bierman case he had had to sell an eight-hundred-dollar bronze for six hundred, and to make good for the bronze he would have to sell a thousand-dollar tapestry for eight hundred.' As the summer wears on, the supply of stationary runs out, the telephone is disconnected, and the typewriter is taken away. Margaret, without the means of performing her duties, quits.

She returns from time to time, partly to collect back pay, but finally Mr. Sheer is gone without leaving a forwarding address. More than a year later, Margaret runs into him. He now specializes in horse sculptures and, fearing immediate ruin, is in 'buoyant spirits.' Two days later he calls from jail, but the next day she can find him neither in jail nor at the fine new gallery, which is being dismantled. Several years later, however, Mr. Sheer reappears, having achieved success. He now has his own department of a thriving business; his specialty is objects relating to sport. His clientele of rich dog and horse people is a valuable market, and his associates keep careful watch over him.

He is not happy in his new status. 'It's a funny thing,' he tells Margaret in the course of their renewed friendship, 'but you're the only person I have a good time with any more.' Only when Margaret sees him off to the hospital for a gall bladder operation does his old 'calamitous humor' revive: 'It's a very dangerous operation, Margaret; it may be the death of me,' he tells her. 'And for the first time in many weeks he giggled irrepressibly.'

Mr. Sheer is indestructible though surely besieged. Dishonest, ineducable, impatient of 'picayune distinctions between period replicas and originals by a master,' he recognizes the uselessness of his real talents when he can sell things 'on their merits.' In his eyes, the price being equal, it was better to sell a Gobelin tapestry as a Beauvais than to sell it as a Gobelin.' He is a fraud, but this is not a defect but rather an affirmation of character. He needs Margaret because only she can enjoy with him the contrast between his shady past and his respectable present.

Margaret, too, is a fraud, but in this story her other life is mentioned only fleetingly: she wonders how to describe this 'dreary job' to her family and friends, and the fact that the often-unpaid employee sometimes buys her employer's meals signals another world to which she belongs, another stage on which she performs, another Margaret. Here, indeed, she is not performing. She need not impress Mr. Sheer. Their first bond was honest economics: she needed a job, he needed a stenographer, and she took the job and did her best with it. She is motivated by conscientiousness, good will, amusement, and finally affection.

Although superior to Mr. Sheer, Margaret is his sympathetic and loyal friend. Unlike him, she can use long words and see the difference between Byzantine and baroque, but so much the better; he admires these abilities and finds them useful. The two of them appreciate each other. Margaret's is the greater awareness, to be sure; she is capable of a self-knowledge and growth that simply would not interest Mr. Sheer, but these picayune distinctions are irrelevant to their common good, the ease they find in each other's company. In her account of Mr. Sheer, Margaret is without superciliousness or self-consciousness. But Mr. Sheer challenges only her ingenuity and tolerance, which she can extend without risk. The friendship, sexless and nonpolitical, even asocial, is private."

Willene Schaefer Hardy  
*Mary McCarthy*  
(Frederick Ungar 1981) 34-37

"'Rogue's Gallery' was rejected by both *The Southern Review* and *Partisan Review*. *PR*'s editors had failed to find any 'large significance' in Sheer as a social type. Philip Rahv, who always wanted to know 'who's in it' before he published a story, may have decided that Sheer was too small a fish to fry; or maybe the story ran to too many pages, as Dwight Macdonald suggested."

Carol Brightman  
*Writing Dangerously: Mary McCarthy and Her World*  
(Clarkson Potter 1992) 184-85

"Narrative isolation or fragmentation is reiterated in the stories' structures, which McCarthy has crafted to accentuate their sense of being contained--even in a story like 'Rogue's Gallery,' which covers a large expanse of time, the story is crafted in a way that resists momentum, so that the opening line, 'Mr. Sheer fired his stenographer in order to give me the job,' already implies an end point and a specific bracket of time. This renders the collection, as a whole, more a sequence of static moments than a larger, organic and novelistic trajectory....

Where the [first] story located the reader in a broad, departicularized 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 a 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 bear 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. Considering the way that Mr. Sheer was metonymically 'listed as The Saville Galleries,' she notes that although 'the plural conveyed a sense of endless vistas of rooms gleaming with collector's items,' in reality 'The Saville Galleries consisted of two small, dark, stuffy rooms whose natural gloom was enhanced by heavy velvet drapes,' and of course, ultimately consisted of a diminutive con-artist. In contrast to *The Group*, which creates narrative and thematic flow by leveling the difference between multiple distinctive voices, *The Company She Keeps* disrupts narrative flow by introducing schisms in a singular voice and asking the reader to think about the multiplicity of identity--and the structures that contain it.

Part of the way that she facilitates this kind of structural critique of identity is through the work's adroit blending of genres. Rather than directly contrasting two kinds of prose, as in *Memories*, McCarthy uses subtler prompts to coax the reader into making the kind of judgments about a fictional work that are nominally the domain of nonfiction. 'Rogue's Gallery' is somewhat unconvincingly annotated as 'an extract from memoirs begun by the heroine,' suggesting immediately that the work is meant to be read with an awareness of different literary conventions to those at play in the first. Rather than following the cues of an omniscient third-person narrator, the reader is now at the mercy of a willful and potentially untrustworthy first-person account of personal experiences. Now in the territory of the metafictional, the reader is invited to consider the implication of Meg being in control of her own representation and how this contrasts with a detached observation of her actions. Beyond this particular episode, moreover, this shift in voice inflects the way that subsequent chapters are read. Even on the smallest scale, the use of the word 'heroine' to describe the narrator sounds suspicious. A much grander title than any used in the first chapter, it suggests that the annotation may in fact be attributed to Meg, beyond the story itself--in which case, it can be read as a subtle indication that the anthology as a whole may be a product of Meg's literary efforts. But even if the reader doesn't go so far as to read the entire book as a metafictional act of self-representation, this phrase, 'an extract from memoirs,' nonetheless asks us to question the narrator's truthfulness, and by extension the reliability of the narrative at large.

In this way, McCarthy foregrounds the slim distinction between a deliberate fiction and a subjective memory, providing conflicting cues about which side of this line the story should fall. But more crucially, she forces the reader to reconsider the kind of judgments that are contingent on the classification of a text. From this perspective, *The Company She Keeps* prefigures the dialogic commentary of *Memories*, by working into the fabric of the narrative less coercive and overt prompts to reflect on the process of interpreting a text. In 'Rogue's Gallery,' for instance, Meg exposes the mental processes behind her recollection and narration, through phrases like 'I know this because' or 'for I remember,' which invite us to question the extent of her knowledge and the reliability of her memory on these issues. Inconsistencies within the narrative suggest that she may not, in fact, have had access to certain pieces of knowledge that she claims to possess, and McCarthy emphasizes the limitation of Meg's knowledge through direct reflection on her part--she muses, for example, that certain 'explanations, taken separately or together, do not satisfy me. They may be one or all true, but there must have been something more.'

These prompts do more than force the reader to evaluate Meg's reliability, however, and in fact suggest that her identity is contingent upon her access to knowledge, in much the same way that McCarthy's identity in her *Memories* is tied up in the narratives she can access about her own past. Although, to an extent, this is an external form of limitation--for Meg, it is tied to her status as a woman, not privy to knowledge that society withholds for men alone--McCarthy also stresses that this is an internally driven process. In one of the anthology's more comic moments, Meg notes how Sheer 'had succumbed to the spell of his own salesmanship,' so that the painter of miniatures, Monsieur Ravasse, 'had become interchangeable with the Kaiser in his mind.' This is where *The Company She Keeps* is most distinct from *The Group*: it openly explores the way that individuals are culpable in their own containment."

Sam V. H. Reese  
*The Short Story in Midcentury America*  
(Louisiana State University 2017) 73, 81-84

Michael Hollister (2020)