

## ANALYSIS

"A Reasonable Facsimile" (1957)

Jean Stafford

(1915-1979)

"In a...humorous vein, 'A Reasonable Facsimile' (1957) relates the story of a famous professor emeritus's unwanted disciple. When Henry Medley instigates a correspondence with Dr. Bohrmann, the professor is enchanted with the 'princely lad.' And when the twenty-four-year-old orphan arrives for a visit at his own invitation, Dr. Bohrmann finds him 'respectful, responsive, articulate, enthusiastic, astoundingly catholic in his information.' He lacks, however, an essential quality; he is unable to express any aspirations or feelings of his own. He is 'so unself-centered that Dr. Bohrmann began to wonder if he had a self at all.' The professor's concern is confirmed by Medley's becoming the 'most sedulous of apes' during his three-week visit. He appropriates Dr. Bohrmann's manner of dress, as well as his politics, his tastes in food and music, even his conversation. The professor's attitude toward the young man moves from boredom to detestation, his first such response to anyone in his life. The professor is finally rescued when Medley asks him to get rid of his cat, to which Medley is terribly allergic. Dr. Bohrmann chooses the at and Medley must leave.

Stafford says of this story that she was reading the Holmes-Laski correspondence and found there the 'kernel' for the story. Nonetheless, she writes: 'I cannot tell you how many people have been positively identified as my wholly fictitious Holmes and Laski.' No doubt Stafford found the kernel where she indicated, but it is also quite likely that many people assumed, and probably correctly, that Stafford built much of her characterization of Medley from her knowledge of the youthful Robert Lowell, who, at his own invitation, tented out on the lawn of his self-identified mentor Allen Tate for two months the summer that Stafford first met him. It also seems likely that she included the story in the collection called *Bad Characters* as a subtle stab at her former husband."

Mary Ellen Williams Walsh  
*Jean Stafford*  
(Twayne 1985) 17-18

"'A Reasonable Facsimile'...humorously describes the relationship between the retired chairman of the Philosophy Department at Adams's Neville College and a 'bright pushy whelp' who teaches at an obscure finishing school in Florida. The young man in question is so infatuated with D. Bohrmann that he begins to mimic Dr. Bohrmann's every gesture. Stafford claimed the idea for this story came to her when she was reading the Holmes-Laski correspondence, though she observed, 'I cannot tell you how many people have been positively identified with my wholly fictitious Holmes and Laski.' But if the idea for the story originated in the Holmes-Laski correspondence, as she claimed, she probably had other models as well for the professor and the ambitious young man who idolizes him.

She told Mary Lee that her portrait of the old professor was a composite portrait of her own former professors Wolle, Cohen, and West; and Mary Ellen Williams Walsh has suggested that in portraying the sycophantic graduate student it is quite likely Stafford was also drawing a satiric portrait of the youthful Robert Lowell, who had once pitched a tent on Allen Tate's lawn. Walsh observes that when Stafford later included this story in a collection called *Bad Characters*, she was subtly mocking her former husband, about whom she wrote in the Author's Note to the volume, 'The strenuous young man in "A Reasonable Facsimile" is not bad, he is merely poisonous.' Although this story is not as memorable as some of Stafford's other ones, 'A Reasonable Facsimile,' which was one of the O. Henry Award winners for 1959, is witty and amusing nevertheless."

Charlotte Margolis Goodman  
*Jean Stafford: The Savage Heart*  
(U Texas 1990) 263

"Even 'A Reasonable Facsimile,' the story that had appeared along with Liebling's piece in the August 1957 *New Yorker*, showed a certain strain as Stafford groped for material, skirting autobiography. Set in Colorado, it was an unusual story, about an old professor whose peace was destroyed by a predatory acolyte who invaded his life. It was far from her Vanderpool vein, and she explained to the Thompsons that it was pointless to mine it for personal clues: the model was not a teacher from her alma mater--or, for that matter, one of her subsequent mentors. The story was born of more detached inspiration: she had been reading the correspondence between Harold Laski and Oliver Wendell Holmes. In retrospect, Stafford tentatively traced her creative block to contentment: 'During our marriage, which was short, I was *extremely* unproductive. It was a source of woe to Joe. I could never figure out why it happened. Perhaps it's too simple an explanation, but I was happy for the first time in my life'."

Ann Hulbert  
*The Interior Castle: The Art and Life of Jean Stafford*  
(Knopf 1992) 319

"'A Reasonable Facsimile' [is] set in the Adams, Colorado of her childhood stories. The main character is a recently widowed, retired philosophy professor, Dr. Bohrmann, who lives in Adams in a modern glass and stone house he has built for his retirement on the prairie. Determined not to waste away in this remote setting, Bohrmann learns Japanese, keeps up a voluminous correspondence, and lives happily with his car, Grimalkin, and his housekeeper, Mrs. Pritchard. But he begins an ill-fated correspondence with a young man from the East, Henry Medley, whose wit and learning impress Bohrmann and make him wish for the son he never had. When Medley proposes a visit to Bohrmann, the professor is delighted and he and his housekeeper begin making preparations.

'A Reasonable Facsimile' is a humorous portrait of discipleship and its attendant, sometimes bizarre complexities. Told from a third-person point of view that accommodates witheringly ironic comments about the young Medley, it may have been based partly on Robert Lowell's similar adoration of his mentor Allen Tate and the reputed episode of the young Lowell building a tent and literally camping out in Tate's yard. Regardless of its biographical links, the story is a comic depiction of a young scholar who at first appears 'respectful, responsive, articulate, enthusiastic, astoundingly catholic in his information,' but who gradually reveals a hollowness at the core--so un-self-centered that Dr. Bohrmann began to wonder if he had a self at all.'

During their two-year correspondence, Bohrmann is annoyed at Medley's 'impassioned, uncritical agreement' with every one of his opinions--even the least carefully thought-out; he chides Medley for his high-handed treatment of college students who don't know Aristotle: 'What sort of world would it be if we didn't have the Philistines to judge ourselves by? God bless 'em.' But the childless professor is also intrigued by the prospect of molding and shaping this young man's mind, making him 'a sort of monument to Dr. Bohrmann after [his] bones were laid to rest.'

Transplanted to the West from Freiburg via Montreal, the professor is a tubercular émigré like his colleagues at the university in Adams--all fleeing more illustrious universities because of their affliction. The town of Adams, which is at first 'dismaying to European eyes that had been accustomed to grandeur on a smaller scale,' gradually seduces Bohrmann and his wife to stay. Stafford is uncharacteristically effusive in her descriptions of the western landscape in this story and of the colony of intellectuals who make up the university. To the Bohrmanns 'the immaculate air was deliciously inebriating and the sun, in those superlative heavens, fed them with the vibrancy of youth.' Despite the fact that their *New York Times* comes four days late, they exult in the beauties of the landscape and in the charm of its inhabitants. It is to Bohrmann's retreat on the prairie that Henry Medley makes his pilgrimage.

Medley, it turns out, is appropriately named--a fact the professor had suspected all along. The only child of a deceased lawyer father and a penniless mother, he learns a melange of information, arcane trivia, esoteric enthusiasms; he writes 'Miltonic epics and Elizabethan songs'; he is indefatigably cultured. Like one of the 'dramatis personae of an allegorical play'--as Dr. Bohrmann refers to him in a letter--Medley is distinctly flat: 'He would discuss his plans, but not his aspirations; he would talk about his ideas on a subject, but not his feelings on it; he would quote from "Voyage of the "Beagle",' but would not say that he longed to go on a voyage himself.'

He is, during the three weeks he occupies Bohrmann's house, 'the most sedulous of apes.' Imitating the professor's language and actions, appropriating his role as host, the voracious Medley makes Bohrmann feel his very identity is slipping away from him; it is as if 'he had attached to his side an unmovable homunculus, who...now spoke German with a Breisgau accent and who mimicked his every thought and every gesture.' Bohrmann's epiphanic realization comes as he ironically sees in Medley exactly what he had wished--a mirror image of himself--but sadly lacking in any redeeming humanity. At the story's climax, when Medley enters the professor's bedroom wheezing and asthmatic from the cat, Bohrmann almost takes pity on the pathetic young man, but remembering 'the sapping tedium of Medley's monologues and interrogations,' he instead advises him to leave. Newly grateful for his house, his cat, and his housekeeper, Bohrmann waves goodbye to this 'reasonable facsimile' of himself and contemplates playing bridge with Blossom Duveen, 'the bursar's blond and bawdy secretary'."

Mary Ann Wilson  
*Jean Stafford: A Study of the Short Fiction*  
(Twayne 1996) 55-56

Michael Hollister (2020)