

ANALYSIS

"Caveat Emptor" (1956)

Jean Stafford

(1915-1979)

"The real Jean Stafford did find a teaching position at Stephens College. 'Caveat Emptor' (1956) is based on her experiences there. In the story she expresses the same scorn, in almost the same words, for the fictional Alma Hettrick College for Girls that she does for Stephens in her essay 'What Does Martha Mitchell Know?' The stated aim of Alma Hettrick was 'to turn out the wives and mothers of tomorrow.' These nubile girls, all of them dumb and nearly all beautiful, knitted in class (that is how they would occupy themselves in their later lives when they attended lectures, said the dean when Malcolm complained of the clack of needles and the subordination of the concept of doubt to purling); they wrote term papers on the advisability of a long engagement and on the history of fingernail polish...'

Against this background, Victoria Pinckney, twenty-two, from Maine, and Malcolm Kirk, twenty-three, from the Rockies, fall charmingly in love. At first, engaged to other people, they simply become attached as friends in alliance against the Alma Hettrick philistinism. Stafford placed their story in *The Collected Stories* as the last of the group under the heading 'The Innocents Abroad.' These innocents are abroad, however, 'in the middle of the Middle West.' They find sanctuary each Sunday in a small town, Georges Duval's Mill, whose original French settlers had been little touched by the twentieth century and barely by the nineteenth.

The relationship between the two young people is closely scrutinized by the Alma Hettrick crowd. The latter considers them in love (when they are not), estranged (when they are in love), and finally hopeless dry-as-dust intellectuals when Victoria and Malcolm profess that they are engaged in an academic study of Georges Duval's Mill after they are spending the whole of each weekend there at a hotel.

Stafford wittily satirizes academics in her description of the Georges Duval's Mill Project, which is undertaken by various Alma Hettrick faculty members when that crowd decides that Victoria and Malcolm 'had no right to stake a claim on such a gold mine.' After Miss Firebaugh of the Personality Clinic discovers that most clothes in the town are from Sears, Roebuck; the Child Study Group discovers rampant incest and cretinism; the American History people discover that no one knows anything about the origins of the town; the Political Scientists find no politics; the Appreciation of Art people find no art; and the Community Health class finds head lice and a doctor who practices phlebotomy, the Alma Hettrick crowd leaves the town alone: 'It wasn't a question of missing the boat--the boat wasn't there.' When Malcolm and Victoria announce that they plan to continue their own philological and philosophical studies, a guise for continuing their weekend trips, Alma Hettrick washes its hands of them and plans not to renew their contracts--leaving Malcolm and Victoria exactly as they wish to be, alone.

'Caveat Emptor' stands out in Stafford's stories of young women for its lighthearted satire and its happy, but far from saccharine, ending. These innocents are among American philistines, presided over by a Babbitt-like President Harvey, who prefers that the young women students call him Butch.' The people Victoria and Malcolm encounter are not evil, simply foolish and misguided. They are academicians who scorn intellectuals--and are proud of it."

Mary Ellen Williams Walsh
Jean Stafford
(Twayne 1985) 48

"In a short story called 'Caveat Emptor,' which deals in part with her experience at Stephens College, Stafford describes a young teacher at the Alma Hettrick College for Girls who falls in love with a fellow teacher. On Sundays, she accompanies him to a quaint town where they dine on creme brulee at the Hotel Dauphin...In contrast to the protagonist of 'Caveat Emptor,' however, Stafford did not fall in love with her

fellow teacher, though Mock did fall in love with her and insisted that he wanted to marry her after the school year was over."

Charlotte Margolis Goodman
Jean Stafford: The Savage Heart
(U Texas 1990) 63

"Stafford called on the same tone and technique [as in "Maggie Meriwether's Rich Experience"] in 'Caveat Emptor,' turning what had been a heavy-handed diatribe against Neville into a deft satire of Alma Hettrick College for Girls--and of two scholarly misfits there, new members of the faculty, who were appalled by the silly school. Standing back from earnest Malcolm and Victoria (whose thesis--*Some Late Borrowings from Provençal fin amour in Elizabethan Miscellanies and Songbooks*--recalled Stafford's own on thirteenth-century love motifs), she identified the problem in her first attempt at a takeoff. 'They were far too young and their principles were far too vernal for them to rise above their circumstance,' she observed of her characters and implicitly of her youthful self; 'their laughter was not very mirthful but was, really, reflexive.' This time Stafford had no trouble rising above the circumstance. Approaching details from her abandoned Neville manuscript, she shaped another comic drama about clashing vocabularies and values, as her two high-minded teachers rebelled against their banal surroundings.

Stafford relished incongruity in these stories, turning it into comedy that was mirthful precisely because it wasn't reflexive. She had the distance to make the most of juxtapositions and tensions that had once seemed threatening. And in writing about language, she was in a sense commenting on her own stylistic experiments, her efforts to intermix the polished and the colloquial, to avoid precious refinement in the first and facile contrivance in the second. Her stories reflect an appreciation of the ways in which style can betray its supposed masters. Pretensions don't last long: appearances can be deceiving, but the way people sound tells more than they may want others to know--or than others may want to know."

Ann Hulbert
The Interior Castle: The Art and Life of Jean Stafford
(Knopf 1992) 304

"'Caveat Emptor' is a withering look at Stafford's ill-fated experience teaching English at Stephens College in Missouri shortly after her graduation from college.... A...satiric foray, this time into the realms of academia, 'Caveat Emptor' pokes fun not only at the philistine environment of the Alma Hettrick College for Girls but also at its two new teachers, Malcolm and Victoria, pale and myopic from their research in philosophy and sixteenth-century English literature. Ill-suited to teach at this girls' finishing school, the two young scholars promptly find each other, fall in love, and escape on Sundays to a rural village not far from the university.

On one level, as William Leary points out, the story is a romantic farce 'played out against a mock-pastoral background whose occupants strikingly resemble the dramatis personae of a Gilbert & Sullivan operetta'; but the fact that Stafford changed its original innocuous title, 'The Matchmakers,' to the more menacing 'Caveat Emptor' before including it in her *Collected Stories* suggests something deeper at work. Leary rightly notes the story's caustic gibes at just the kind of education Jean Stafford deplored: frivolous, anti-intellectual, and aimed at nothing more than pleasing the students and preparing them to become homemakers and society matrons. This clearinghouse for sorority girls, founded on a consumer ideology articulated by its president--'We are here to sell our girls Shakespeare and French and Home Economics and Ballet'--becomes the target of Stafford's acerbic wit.

But the mellowing distance of almost 20 years allows the author to view herself through the double lens of Malcolm and Victoria, fresh from their arcane research much as Stafford was from her thesis on medieval love poetry. Stafford was definitely out of place among these wealthy, beautifully coiffed young women; someone at Stephens even suggested she go to the Grooming Clinic to pick up a few pointers. Her basic fears and insecurities as a new teacher, coupled with the gradual realization that she loathed teaching, resulted in the defensively ironic stance she took to the whole experience.

As in 'Maggie Meriwether's Rich Experience,' language provides the source of much of this story's humor. Throughout, Stafford cleverly mixes levels of diction to deepen contrasts: on their weekend

excursions Malcolm parks his aging Buick in a 'sylvan dingle'; he and Victoria fall in love over the Pernod and the creme brulee and are promptly knocked 'galley west' by the suddenness of the blow; they are both appalled by President Harvey's 'pedagogical fiddlesticks.' Faced with the onslaughts of twentieth-century life and the circuslike atmosphere of a progressive college, they seem curiously out of place."

Mary Ann Wilson
Jean Stafford: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1996) 17-19

Michael Hollister (2020)