

## ANALYSIS

"Maggie Meriwether's Rich Experience" (1955)

Jean Stafford

(1915-1979)

"In 'Maggie Meriwether's Rich Experience' (1955), Stafford displays another 'innocent abroad.' Maggie has more in common with Judy Grayson than she does with the other young women in Stafford's stories. 'A simple country-club girl from Tennessee,' a member of Nashville's 'young set,' and a recent graduate of Briar Cliff, Maggie is on a year's tour of France. Her 'rich experience' is an encounter with the superficial nastiness of a collection of Europeans gathered for a party at the fabulous Palladian demesne of Karl von Bubnoff, M. le Baron.

Maggie is suffering a psychological aphasia, which has left her mute in French, and the other guests refuse to speak to her in English. In fact, they ignore her completely. Only twice does Maggie attempt to retaliate. After listening to the women discuss their favorite narcotics, she recoils: 'Have you-all ever tried snuff? You can lip it or dip it or sniff it. It's mighty good with sour mash or chips.' Still ignored, she attaches herself to a nondescript man and delivers a bragging commentary on Vanderbilt University and the folk music of the Cumberland Plateau.

Maggie's American innocence and simplicity prove to be an undentable armor--as well as a substantial blinder--against which beat the decadence of M. le Baron's 'marriage' to his estate, the casual discussion of drugs by the sophisticated women, the psychotic prince, the 'French' lunch where 'though the din was monolingual, it was that of Babel...' Flustered, but unscathed and equally unenlightened, Maggie regales some young American friends with her day among the decadent and receives in reply their boisterously mistaken toast--to 'the most sophisticated, the most cosmopolitan, the prettiest raconteur of Middle Tennessee'."

Mary Ellen Williams Walsh  
*Jean Stafford*  
(Twayne 1985) 45

"Stafford wrote a funny story, called 'Maggie Meriwether's Rich Experience,' about a young woman who thinks she has mastered French in school; upon her arrival in Paris, to her dismay, she finds herself unable to utter a word. In 1936, however, such a mortification was no joke. Jean had left the United States planning to write breezy letters home full of cavalier accounts of her exploits abroad. Instead she was so wretched and homesick that she did not even try to camouflage the fact in her letters. 'I wish I had never heard of Heidelberg,' she wrote Andrew Cooke, 'though the town itself is quite lovely.'... 'Maggie Meriwether's Rich Experience'...details the mortification of a well-bred young lady who has studied French for years but on her first trip to Paris finds herself (as Stafford had in Heidelberg) unable to understand the language."

David Roberts  
*Jean Stafford: A Biography*  
(Little, Brown 1988) 106, 311

"Though Stafford's 'Maggie Meriwether's Rich Experience' is set in France and 'Beatrice Trueblood's Story' is set in Newport, it is evident that the groups of wealthy, sophisticated, but often tedious people she describes so wittily and venomously in these stories were types she observed firsthand at the parties she and Oliver [second husband] regularly frequented in Westport."

Charlotte Margolis Goodman  
*Jean Stafford: The Savage Heart*  
(U Texas 1990) 211

"A...comic distance liberated Stafford to conquer other terrain that had proved difficult in the past. In two of her lighter non-Adams stories of these years, 'Maggie Meriwether's Rich Experience' (1955) and 'Caveat Emptor' (originally published as 'The Matchmakers' in *Mademoiselle* in 1956), she turned to themes that she had tried to treat in, respectively, *Autumn Festival* and her Neville novel. Now that she had the satiric perspective that she had lacked then, and she was able to draw on two ironic genres--the tale of the innocent American abroad and the campus spoof--in putting resistant autobiographical material to fictional use. In fact, Stafford demonstrated a kind of double distance: at the same time that she drew on the conventions of the genres, she stood back and satirized them.

Admittedly, Stafford's comic approach meant domesticating the themes that had overwhelmed her novelistic efforts years before. Nashvillian Maggie Meriwether's mortifying afternoon among decadent European aristocrats was an echo of Gretchen Marburg's ordeal among the Germans. But Maggie's identity crisis was a mere superficial episode, where Gretchen's disorientation led to a radical convulsion of consciousness. That was precisely Stafford's point: the richness of Maggie's experience was not really in the experience itself, but in the telling of it. For in this verbally acrobatic story, the central subject was language. High-spirited Maggie, off on a European lark, was unexpectedly 'bamboozled into muteness by the language of France,' which rendered her an embarrassed outsider among the voluble guests gathered at M. le Baron's manor house.

But the story's happy ending declared Maggie's alienation on this outlandish afternoon to be the perfect source for lighthearted storytelling, once 'the most sophisticated, the most cosmopolitan, the prettiest raconteur of middle Tennessee' was back among her fellow Americans and in command of her tongue. By then Stafford had already shown how to tell the tale with a display of her stylistic repertoire. She mocked the varieties of vacuous chatter, relishing the occasion for exotic words, serpentine sentences (she opened with a ten-line extravaganza), colloquialisms, and daringly manipulated similes and metaphors."

Ann Hulbert  
*The Interior Castle: The Art and Life of Jean Stafford*  
(Knopf 1992) 303-04

"'Maggie Meriwether's Rich Experience' dramatizes a young Nashville belle's first trip to Europe and how she navigates the treacheries and snobberies of a Paris garden party.... The story...is a verbal tour de force whose sentences are sprinkled with foreign and obscure words and phrases, and whose tone is a masterful blending of the genteel and the colloquial. If, as Ann Hulbert maintains, its real subject is language, then it allows Stafford to both showcase her own stylistic quirks and see them as such. It also evokes Mark Twain's comic stylistic treatise 'How to Tell a Story,' which highlights the manner and not the matter of telling a tale.

Like Twain's piece, Stafford's story is a self-conscious examination of the craft by the crafter. Her heroine, miserably homesick and overdressed, finds herself 'bamboozled into muteness by the language of France,' but she has her final victory as the story ends, with 'the prettiest raconteur of middle Tennessee,' recounting her European adventure to sympathetic American friends. The story we have just read is Maggie's witty rendering of what could have been Edith Wharton's glacial social landscape but, recast in a comic vein, emerges as a minor misadventure in a young girl's life. Jean Stafford's comic sense triumphs in this brilliant short story."

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

Michael Hollister (2020)