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Deeper Than They Thought

Edward Mendelson
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Although Margaret Kennedy has been largely forgotten as a popular writer, in her novels she wielded the most cunning techniques of literary modernism.

Margaret Kennedy; illustration by Grant Shaffer

Reviewed:

The Feast
by Margaret Kennedy
McNally, 324 pp., $19.00 (paper)

Troy Chimneys
by Margaret Kennedy
McNally, 272 pp., $18.00 (paper)

In 1924, at twenty-eight, Margaret Kennedy won world fame for her second novel, *The Constant Nymph*, the story of the unconflicted sexual awakening of Tessa Sanger, the daughter of a bohemian English composer whose legitimate and illegitimate children are scattered across much of Europe, and who lives with some of them, including Tessa, in voluntary exile on a Tyrolean mountaintop. When the father dies, Tessa is banished from her rural Eden and confined to the repressive world of English schools and English middle-class morality. At the end of the book, when she is not yet sixteen, she runs off from London to a *pension* in Brussels, joined en route by Lewis Dodd, her would-be lover, still legally married to Tessa's calculating older cousin Florence, who simultaneously hates him and is sexually obsessed with him. Sitting in the same room with Lewis, shortly before he can join her, as she hopes, in what the *pension* keeper calls "a good bed," Tessa dies of a congenitally weak heart while struggling to open a window—and propriety is preserved.

Sex and bohemianism made the book an instant success: an advertisement called it "the novel that is being talked about all over London." What seems to have driven the talk was the book's clear-sighted account of female sexuality, a subject notoriously simplified or idealized in English fiction. At the time, the most famous British books on the subject were obvious products of authorial fantasy: H.G. Wells's *Ann Veronica* (1909), with its heroine's forthright desire leading to a stable, happy marriage to the older man who represents the author (in real life, Ann's original left Wells after a disastrously chaotic affair), and Edith Maud Hull's *The Sheik* (1919), with its haughty young heroine who, having been kidnapped and kept as the unwilling concubine of the title character, finds

that she is passionately in love with him. Tessa, though obviously stylized and fictional, seemed to represent something real.

Poets and novelists who praised the book included Thomas Hardy, John Galsworthy, and the severe poet-classicist A.E. Housman, who said it was "the best product of this century."[1] In a 1926 stage adaptation, Lewis was played first by Noël Coward, then by John Gielgud. Three filmed versions followed, one with Charles Boyer as Lewis and Joan Fontaine as Tessa. While writing her popular and well-received novels, Kennedy also wrote plays and filmscripts, her authorship blazoned in large letters on the sides of London buses. But her reputation always depended on her first success, with *The Constant Nymph*. After she died in 1967, and as critics and scholars winnowed the hard modernist wheat from the soft popular chaff of the twentieth century, she was more or less forgotten, although the feminist publishing house Virago reprinted four of her novels in the 1980s. In the half-century since her death, academic attention to her seems to have been limited to two sharply intelligent chapters, one in Billie Melman's *Women and the Popular Imagination in the Twenties* (1988), the other in Faye Hammill's *Women, Celebrity, and Literary Culture Between the Wars* (2007), plus a few pages in a book discouragingly titled *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s* (2001).

McNally Editions, the publishing arm of the McNally Jackson bookshops in New York, has now reprinted two of her novels. Both make clear that her reputation as a popularizing middlebrow is entirely wrong. *The Feast*, first published in 1950,[2] wields the most cunningly self-conscious techniques of literary modernism while combining sharp moral intelligence with irresistibly comic storytelling. *Troy Chimneys*, from 1952,[3] is a dark, ventriloquistic triumph, purporting to be the memoir of a once fashionable, later forgotten young man of the Regency period who lived a sort of double life, presenting one kind of personality in one kind of environment, another kind of personality in

another. Among some in his circle, he is an agreeable political and social maneuverer; among others, he is sensitive, recessive, and finally tragic.

Troy Chimneys seems to have been a concealed allegory of Kennedy's double life as a celebrated popular novelist and an inwardly conscience-driven scholar and moralist. She read history at Somerville College, Oxford, and her first book, *A Century of Revolution, 1789–1920* (1922), was commissioned for a series intended for educated nonspecialists. The book concludes with a judgment both practical and moral on the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, which punished Germany for World War I:

> Economic laws have, unfortunately, very little connexion with the principles of human ethics. The fate of the innocent has become inextricably involved with that of the guilty. The European nations have become...an economic unit; if it were ever possible for one member of the group to be treated as an outcast, it is so no longer.

Kennedy seems to have had all of English poetry, from Chaucer to William Plomer, in her head, and she quoted it everywhere in her novels, often with trivial errors that show she was quoting from memory. She favored allusive titles for her books and plays: *Escape Me Never*, from a poem by Robert Browning; *Where Stands a Wingèd Sentry*, from a poem by Henry Vaughan. Her knowledge went deep. The title of *The Constant Nymph*—and possibly its theme of a young woman loyal to a man she believes is lost to her forever—is also the title of an anonymous pastoral drama published in 1678 and never reprinted.[4]

After the initial rush of praise for *The Constant Nymph* subsided, European readers seemed better able than Anglophones to perceive its complexity and depth. Antonio Gramsci recommended it to his sister-in-law: "I don't know why, but it reminds me of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*." Jean Giraudoux adapted the stage version into French. Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex* (1949), wrote at

length about Tessa's power to love even while she "remains perfectly autonomous":

> She refuses to abdicate anything of herself: finery, makeup, disguises, hypocrisy, acquired charms, caution, and female submission are repugnant to her; she desires to be loved but not behind a mask; she yields to Lewis's moods, but without servility; she understands him, she vibrates in unison with him; but if they ever argue, Lewis knows that caresses will not subdue her: while authoritarian and vain Florence lets herself be conquered by kisses, Tessa succeeds in the extraordinary accomplishment of remaining free in her love, allowing herself to love without either hostility or pride.

But, Beauvoir added, Tessa's autonomy is doomed by forces larger than her own:

> George Eliot had Maggie Tulliver and Margaret Kennedy had Tessa die for good reason.... The girl is touching because she rises up against the world, weak and alone; but the world is too powerful; she persists in refusing it, she is broken.

No one writing in English had ever thought of naming George Eliot and Margaret Kennedy in the same sentence.

Jean-Paul Sartre had also praised Kennedy in a letter to Beauvoir, and as one scholar has suggested, he had her in mind when he chose the title of his three-volume study of Flaubert, *L'Idiot de la famille*.[5] This was the French title of *The Fool of the Family*, Kennedy's 1930 sequel to *The Constant Nymph*.

Another European, the Austrian filmmaker Berthold Viertel, exiled in England in the 1930s, saw through Kennedy's sentimentalizing reputation. His studio had hired her to write the screenplay for *Little Friend*, a film based on a novel about a knowing adolescent girl, but she withdrew to work on one of her plays. Underestimating the literary cunning that shaped *The Constant Nymph*, Viertel described Kennedy (to Christopher Isherwood, who finished the screenplay she had abandoned) as "a crocodile who wept once in her life a real

tear."

After *The Constant Nymph* Kennedy published six more novels of domestic disorder, until 1938, when she seems to have stopped writing fiction for a dozen years. During that time she wrote magazine articles, many of them reporting on the British experience of World War II for an American audience, and an introduction to the art of filmmaking, *The Mechanized Muse* (1942). Her pre-war novels had been mostly straightforward narratives, occasionally interrupted by a character's letter or memoir. The two postwar novels reissued by McNally have no single narrator and declare from the start their self-conscious literary artifice, each in a different way. Tessa Sanger presided over the first half of Margaret Kennedy's career, the expert artificer herself over the second half.

The Feast, the comedy in McNally's comic-and-tragic pair of reissues, is the story of a modern counterpart to the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, a run-down coastal hotel in Cornwall that is demolished by a falling cliff. The cliff has been cracking ominously for months, but it finally collapses at a moment when only seven people remain in the hotel, each embodying one of the seven deadly sins. Everyone else, penitent for imperfections that extend even to murderousness, has left the doomed hotel to join in a feast—an agape or love feast—on solid moral and physical ground: "The penance was over and they might have their supper."

Much of the book is a virtuoso display of Kennedy's ventriloquism—including a riotous reproduction of someone's bad typing. A brief prologue, in which a clergyman fails to make a start on a memorial sermon about the disaster, gives away the ending. The rest of the book goes back to tell the story of the hotel's final week, with chapters written partly in various styles of letters and diaries, partly in the voice of an impersonal narrator. The first edition's dust jacket, in a blurb obviously supplied by the author, reports that the germ of the story emerged in 1937 when Kennedy and some

novelist friends (unnamed) got the idea of writing a series of short stories about the seven deadly sins, with each sin personified by a modern character. The project fell through, the blurb explains,

> but Miss Kennedy found that the idea possessed her and it smouldered over the next ten years. She had imagined the seven collected in an inn run by the unhappy wife of Sloth, but she resisted the story as she did not want to concentrate solely on these unpleasant people. It was not until she began to consider the other people in the hotel that the story broke into flame.

The published novel personifies the sins of wrath, sloth, and pride as men; women personify covetousness, gluttony, envy, and lust. The men in Kennedy's books are at worst greedy, unthinking, and angry, never calculating monsters, a type that she represents only as women: Florence in *The Constant Nymph*; Mrs. Cove, the mother eager to sacrifice her children for financial gain, in *The Feast*; and the characters in all her other novels whose corrosive resentment is only half concealed by their conspicuous displays of virtue.

Commenting online, a few readers were disappointed not to find characters who represent the seven cardinal virtues. But Kennedy was too morally and psychologically adult to rely on simple binary contrasts. The "other people in the hotel" are all more or less flawed, but are not as committed to their flaws as the representatives of the deadly sins are to theirs. The downtrodden daughter of the embodiment of wrath, Canon Wraxton, has been grinding glass with the idea that she might use it to murder him, though she could never actually do so and is startled into love by the attentions of the hotel keeper's son. A rich young girl, cynical and domineering in reaction to her shame at having been adopted, almost causes the drowning death of a poor younger girl, and she is gradually provoked into penitence by her own act. The poor girl and her two sisters fantasize about giving a feast for the other hotel guests, a plan that fully takes shape

when the rich girl announces her patronage of it. The rich girl's sister calls it "a forgiveness party," and its meaning as an agape is lightly hidden in someone's remark that the canon, knowing that his daughter slips away at night to meet her lover, forbade her "to attend these agapemones, but she defies him." The Agapemone community was a nineteenth-century Christian sect; Charles Dickens used the word in a general sense in *The Uncommercial Traveller* (1860–1861), as Kennedy did in this and a later novel, *Lucy Carmichael* (1951).

The Feast punctuates its comedy with moments of acute psychological insight, some of them narrated by the character who embodies sloth by refusing to act on his knowledge. At one point he differentiates self-respect and pride: "Self-respect regards independence as a social and moral duty.... But self-respect is not antagonized by sympathy or offers of help.... The proud man is humiliated that anyone should suppose he needs help." The same slothful character, like no one else in the book, thinks in theological paradoxes:

> Perhaps...the sufferings of the innocent are useful. That idea first occurred to me when one of my children said how unkind it was of Lot to leave Sodom, since, as long as he stayed there, the city was safe.... I daresay...that mankind is protected and sustained by undeserved suffering; by all those millions of helpless people who pay for the evil we do and who shield us simply by being there, as Lot was in the doomed city.

Like Sodom, the hotel is destroyed when the innocent have departed and only the unrepentant sinners insist on remaining, all of them having ignored warnings they have seen or heard about the unstable cliff. The story is partly a serious theological joke, partly a still-gripping moral parable of a society that disintegrates when no one cares any longer about love and justice.

The tragedy in McNally's reissues, *Troy Chimneys*, is the dark story of Miles Lufton, a clergyman's son, later a member of Parliament,

whom everyone in his social world calls Pronto because of the quick, witty attentiveness that he cultivates in order to survive and prosper in the years of the English Regency. Miles/Pronto dies in a needless duel provoked by one of the most heartless of Kennedy's female monsters. He is then entirely forgotten, and his story is told through diaries recovered decades later from country house attics by late-nineteenth-century descendants who are curious about someone else. As Anita Brookner observed in her introduction to the 1985 Virago reprint, Kennedy evidently took the diaries-framed-by-letters technique from Benjamin Constant's *Adolphe* (1816). Brookner added that Kennedy "is disconcerting in her preoccupations, disconcerting in her methods, and technically more learned and experimental than many of her successors in the 1980s."

The diaries that make up the bulk of the book are written in the voice of Miles, the sensitive and morally alert private self, observing from an ethical and emotional distance his public self as Pronto. Pronto is welcomed in rich houses and loud company; Miles feels more at home among antisocial eccentrics and shrewd gentlewomen. (Troy Chimneys—a corruption of *Trois Chemins*—is the name of the house he buys in hopes of a married life.) At one point he is embarrassed to find himself at a dinner table where some of the guests know him as the mild, courteous Miles while others, though they know his name, see him only as Pronto. At another point, he asks a friend to tell him a story, and she responds, "And to which of you am I to tell it?" As he protests incoherently, she replies, "I have known you both for eleven years."

In the book's unacknowledged autobiographical allegory, Pronto stands for the best-selling writer celebrated everywhere for what was taken to be the tear-jerking titillation of *The Constant Nymph*, Miles for the same writer's less visible probings into psychological and philosophical depths and linguistic complexities supposedly reserved for modernist masters. Simone de Beauvoir perceived Margaret Kennedy's aspect as Miles; an English

biographer of Beauvoir, Margaret Crosland, seeing only Kennedy's Pronto aspect, was puzzled to find that Beauvoir "seems to have admired" *The Constant Nymph* "more than one might have expected."

Double portraits of the same person are fairly common in novels: Dickens typically portrays himself as both innocent victim and canny exploiter, David Copperfield and Uriah Heep; Mary Shelley portrays her husband, Percy, as both the grandiose Victor Frankenstein and the generous Henry Clerval. *Troy Chimneys* is a rare portrait of a novelist's doubleness within herself. One hint of the hidden authorial allegory occurs when Miles Lufton names *Emma* and *Mansfield Park* as his favorite novels; Kennedy had published a book about Jane Austen two years before *Troy Chimneys*.

Kennedy's double self-portrait seems to be partly a rebuke to her own wish for success; her biographer, Violet Powell, alludes to her needless and insistent money worries. Powell's biography says little about Kennedy's marriage to Sir David Davies, who was obliged, as a county court judge, to spend much of his time away from home, but Miles Lufton's self-inflicted failures in love, from opportunities not noticed or not taken, may point toward secret regrets. The deepest regret hidden in the novel seems to be Miles's choice of an entertaining Pronto life that was doomed to later oblivion. When the memoirs in which he records his inner life are discovered by accident sixty years later, his family, shamed by his death in a duel, seems ready to destroy them. W.H. Auden wrote a poem—its first line is "Will you turn a deaf ear"—about someone who perceives the hollow injustice of his society but, with polite diffidence, does nothing about it. What he leaves behind is a failure that someone else may succeed in learning about after his death:

> A neutralizing peace
> And an average disgrace
> Are honour to discover
> For later other.

Kennedy probably never read the poem, but *Troy Chimneys* is an extended variation, by another conscience-driven writer, on the same theme.

A few years after *Troy Chimneys*, in 1958, Kennedy wrote a detailed technical account of the novelist's craft, *The Outlaws on Parnassus*. The point of the title is that the novel is the only art that has not been governed since classical times by a codified set of rules like Aristotle's *Poetics*, and that true novelists are responsible only to themselves and their readers, not to any cause that might be pursued through politics or religion or anything else that has not been transmuted by a novelist's imagination. The outlaw-novelist's "purpose is so to present his imagined thing that the reader will recognize truth in it."

The Outlaws on Parnassus is written in a breezy conversational style addressed to the common reader, but one of its running themes is the failure of that reader to perceive the depth of the novelist's professional skills—for example, Tolstoy's almost imperceptible shift in point of view, halfway through a chapter, from Count Alexei Karenin to the lawyer he is consulting about a divorce. Kennedy writes of the typical professional novelist:

> The first thing which he demands from his narrative form is some protective colouring, some camouflage which will enable him to disappear into his own landscape. There have been very few writers, of a calibre to be remembered and quoted, who have not exhibited, in their work, some indication that they are aware of the problem and are seeking a mask.

Miles/Pronto is both a set of masks and a sign of the problem for which masks are the solution.

Kennedy uses the word "faking" to refer to anything in a novel that the novelist has failed to transmute through imagination: "Some minor character refuses to take life. A particular incident does not materialize in vivid detail." Sensing a gap in the story, the novelist is

tempted to fill it with something observed but not transmuted: a real person or incident, like the murder-suicide that Thomas Hardy lifted from a newspaper for the climax of *Jude the Obscure*. Sometimes only another novelist may be able to detect "the change in texture, colour, and climate, which overtakes the narrative" when the novelist fakes something. "In a genuine novel," Kennedy writes,

> the landscape, down to the last raindrop, the last blade of grass, went through some process of transmutation before it was used. Few landscapes could have less in common than those of Kafka and Trollope, but the same alchemy lies behind both.

The chapter titled "Faking" is the only place in the book where Kennedy drops her tone of amused tolerance toward naive readers and earnestly unimaginative novelists. She writes with fierce energy about "these dunces" who want to ask Hardy about "the real Tess," and with something more than annoyance about novelists who resort to faking. Some of her animus appears to be directed toward her younger self, the novelist who wrote the propriety-saving ending of *The Constant Nymph*.

The Outlaws on Parnassus seems to have evolved from an unpublished essay that Kennedy had agreed to write for a collection of essays by novelists explaining the origin of their characters. The collection never appeared, but Kennedy's essay survives in her archives at Somerville College. It anatomizes the strengths and weaknesses of her conceptions of Lewis, Florence, and Tessa—with a clarity of judgment not preserved in the published book—and concludes with the problem that she, and no one else, saw in the ending. Kennedy had originally sketched an ending in which propriety was not preserved: Tessa, after joining Lewis in their good bed in Brussels, is dragooned back to London by Florence, whose family hustles Lewis to America. In this unwritten ending, Tessa dies "nine months later, in a neat spare bedroom, surrounded by every possible attention"—attention, that is, from family

members and medical attendants who couldn't keep her from dying in childbirth.

"But I could not carry this ending out," Kennedy writes in her essay, "though I still cannot be sure if it was not the right one. I did not know how to manage anything so grim without resorting to crude violence.... So I let her die before ever Florence got to Brussels." The passivity of "I let her die" is exactly what *The Outlaws on Parnassus* calls faking—and her faking was plausible enough for Berthold Viertel to mistake it as her one "real tear." The second half of Kennedy's career was her skilled, exuberant penance for the first.

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1. Reported in a letter to Kennedy by Henry Salt, a junior colleague of Housman's at Trinity College, Cambridge. ↩

2. A condensed version, titled "Never Look Back," appeared in the *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1949. ↩

3. McNally lists the date as 1953, the year of the first British edition, but an American edition had appeared in 1952; Margaret Kennedy sold well on both sides of the Atlantic. ↩

4. At least one later novel has a title apparently alluding to Kennedy's: Guillermo Cabrera Infante's posthumous *La ninfa inconstante* (Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2008). ↩

5. Howard Davies, "Sartre et Margaret Kennedy: L'Intertexte maternel," in *Lectures de Sartre*, edited by Claude Burgelin (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1986). ↩