

"A Real Freudian Classic": Anticipating the Cliché in Mary McCarthy

By Tara Roeder

In "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You," Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick characterizes the paranoid position as anticipatory: "There must be no bad surprises," and reflexive and mimetic: "Anything you can do (to me) I can do first—to myself" (130-131). Margaret Sargent, scanning her utterances for traces of the expected as she lies on the psychoanalytic couch in Mary McCarthy's *The Company She Keeps*, engages in precisely this kind of "always-already second guessing" behavior (Sedgwick 131). To be tacky, to be tasteless—the idea fills her with dread. She asserts that it is indeed "impossible" for her to be "anything but an anomaly" (265), and fulfilling this role becomes a sort of obsession. Margaret Sargent, who reads interpretation as seductive, defends herself against the "advances" of her analyst by wildly anticipating the "classic" (clichéd) interpretations she imagines he will employ "against" her. This strategy mirrors McCarthy's narrative technique of wildly self-anticipating her *own* clichés, defiantly dumping on her reader strings of images she then rejects in an attempt circumvent the categorization of her story as decipherable, as "already been told." McCarthy and Sargent are alike invested in preemptively identifying the clichés that could successfully describe their situations, frantically applying them to themselves *before* their audiences have the opportunity, and ultimately dismissing them in order to preserve their image of being anomalous.

Margaret is embarrassed about the fact that the story of her childhood is "too apropos for acceptance":

"Up to the time her mother had died, she had been such an elegant little girl...Then, after...mamma did not come home from the hospital, Aunt Clara had moved in...and the pretty little girl who looked (everybody said) so much like her mother was changed into a stringy, bow-legged child with glasses and braces on her teeth, long underwear, high shoes, blue serge jumpers that smelled, and a brown beaver hat two sizes too big for her." (263)

Defiantly aware of the possible connections the audience of this tale might make, Margaret hastens to anticipate, and then reject, as many as she can think of: "I reject this middle class tragedy, this degenerated Victorian novel where I am Jane Eyre or somebody in Dickens or Kipling or brave little Elise Dinsmore fainting over the piano. I reject the whole pathos of the changeling, the orphan, the stepchild...I reject all those tableaux of estrangement" (263). The indignity she paints is the indignity of having one's "sense of artistic decorum" (264) assailed by the tacky, the too familiar. McCarthy's ironic narrative policing defies the reader

to fix a pre-existing meaning to her story, to make it fit a pattern, no matter how tempting this possibility might be. That the possibility is too tempting for McCarthy herself to pass up on is not only her justification, but her best defense; “the way paranoia has of understanding anything is by imitating and embodying it” (Sedgwick 131).

Margaret, with her “distaste for the obvious” is simultaneously repelled and amused at the idea of being a “real Freudian classic” (262): “I dreamed I was seventeen,” she said, “and I was matriculating at a place called Eggshell College.” She could not resist a teasing smile and another glance up at him. “I must have dreamed that just to please you. It’s custom-made. The womb fantasy”(250).

Stories that make classic “sense” are embarrassing; they expose too much; they lack originality. On the other hand, Margaret reasons, “You could not treat your life history as though it were an inferior novel and dismiss it with a snubbing phrase” (264). Or, rather, you *can*. Dismissing one’s own story prevents anyone else from being able to dismiss it; the joy of destruction is gone. This is the pleasure of paranoia.

Likewise, Margaret’s best weapon against her analyst is to prove that he, unlike she, is, in fact, a cliché:

"She would spend half a session trying to show him, say, that a man they both knew was a ridiculous character, that a movie they had both seen was cheap. And it would be hopeless, absolutely hopeless, for he *was* that man, he *was* that movie; he was the outing cabin, the Popular Front, the League of American Writers, the *Nation*, the *Liberal*, the *New Republic*, George S. Kaufman, Helen Hayes, Colonial wallpaper, money in the bank, and two cocktails (or was it one?) before dinner." (251)

Attempting to tell him the story of his life in ironic images, her main desire is to be proven “right.” When her analyst won’t satisfy this longing, she cries. The attempt that Margaret’s analyst has frustrated is an attempt at gaining power by turning another’s life into cliché. Consistently afraid that her analyst is trying to “get one over on her” through facile interpretation, her methods of protection lead her both to turn on herself (“I can do it to myself first”), and to undermine the analyst’s interpretive authority by showing that *he* is the one whose story is obvious.

The desire to be “undecipherable” is, in McCarthy, a desire for preservation of her exceptional status, her position as “Diane de Poitiers, Ninon, or Margaret of Navarre” (273). Margaret Sargent mentally anticipates the stories her friends could tell about her: “a shady case, unquestionably, a sordid history of betrayal” (275). “Yet in some way,” she insists, “she

was not like that. She would look at her face in the mirror and recognize something direct, candid, sincere”—something, that is, untold (275). Recognition of a story as cliché is violation; it closes off interpretation. McCarthy insists on subverting this foreclosure on meaning by her insistence on “getting there first,” and thus maintaining the power to name her own story (and, ironically, the stories of others).