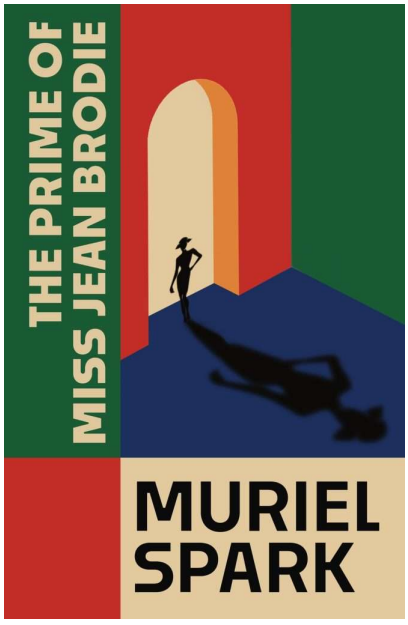
Teaching Tyranny: The Crime of Miss Jean Brodie

By Kaiyue He

Muriel Spark's most celebrated work is set entirely in her hometown of Edinburgh. The Marcia Blaine School in the novel is modelled on James Gillespie's, which Spark attended from the age of eleven, while the protagonist, Jean Brodie, bears some resemblance to Spark's former teacher Miss Christina Kay, who, in Spark's words, was a 'character in search of an author'.[1]

Spark later incorporated an account of her time at Gillespie's into her memoir *Curriculum Vitae* (1992). According to Spark, Miss Kay was 'the ideal dramatic instructor, and it is not surprising that her reincarnation, Miss Brodie, has always been known as a "good vehicle for an actress"'.[2] According to Alasdair Roberts: 'Spark described Christina Kay's classroom as "pure theatre", and throughout the book there has been a sense of drama, of events which linger in the mind'.[3] This remark is also true to Miss Brodie's role as a dramatic and seductive performer and director of a small, select coterie of pupils, rather than a responsible teacher.



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The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie (1961) centres on the battle between the

disciplinarian headmistress Miss Mackay and the unconventional Jean Brodie. Miss Mackay allies herself with other conservative schoolteachers like Miss Ellen, Miss Alison and Miss Gaunt. Brodie, more vulnerable with her precarious teaching position, but distinctive with her 'soaring and diving spirit', educates her half-dozen disciples to rally round her.[4] In the face of hostility from her colleagues and threats of resignation, Brodie 'empowers' herself through pimping her girls to male teachers and acting as the accomplice of patriarchal authority to rule over schoolgirls.

The Marcia Blaine School is not an ivory tower. It is as steeped in politics as the single women's hostel in *The Girls of Slender Means*(1963) and the convent in *The Abbess of Crewe*(1974). Schoolgirls at Marcia Blaine are not immune to the religious atmosphere of Calvinism and Catholicism, the rise of fascism in Italy and Germany, and the economic depression in Western Europe, reflected by the slums in the Old Town of Edinburgh. Spark ingeniously weaves these religious, political, and social elements into her portrayal of Brodie and her extracurricular activities. For instance, after selecting her trusted pupils, Brodie leads these girls on a guided walk through the Old Town, 'a misty region of crime and desperation' (p. 30) on a cold day to strengthen their sense of insularity. The shabbiness of this area is shocking to the half-English, half-Scottish, middle-class girl Sandy Stranger: 'It was Sandy's first experience of a foreign country, which intimates itself by its new smells and shapes and its new poor' (p. 31).

Spark presents the inner growth of Sandy, particularly her awareness of class disparity and gender inequality in her home city, reflected by the poor living conditions of the unemployed and casual violence towards women. Meanwhile, through depicting Mary Macgregor's staring at an Indian student, or in Sandy's words, 'the brown man' (p. 28), on the way to the Old Town, Spark exposes racial exclusion in 1930s Edinburgh. As Sarah Townsend remarks, this novel 'secures its insular romance only by writing out both its racial and racist discontents'.[5] By exposing the girls to the racial, sexual and social inequalities in their home city, Brodie tightens her rule over the group. But the anxiety and shock experienced by Sandy also propels her to dissent from the groupthink and outsmart her teacher.

Edwin Muir makes a similar description of the poverty and shabbiness in 1930s Edinburgh in his book *Scottish Journey* of 1935:

> *That first half-blind glimpse of Edinburgh happened by chance to catch one thing about it which anyone accustomed to cities would probably not have seen: that it is a city of extraordinary and sordid contrasts. The tourist's eye is a very specialised mechanism, and it is quite capable of such apparently impossible feats as taking in the ancient monuments and houses of Edinburgh without noticing that they are filthy and insanitary. Yet the historical part of Edinburgh, the part most frequented by visitors, is a slum intersected by ancient houses that have been segregated and turned into museums and training-colleges. Most of the Canongate is a mouldering and obnoxious ruin. The stone of the houses looks diseased, as if it were decaying not with old age, but with some sort of dirty scurvy produced by poverty, filth and long-continued sorrow.*[6]

Spark also presents Edinburgh as a city of contrasts. In the 'small, almost non-existent eyes' (p. 5) of her most trusted pupil Sandy, the charismatic and foolish Brodie embodies the contradictory nature of Edinburgh:

> *It was then that Miss Brodie looked beautiful and fragile, just as dark heavy Edinburgh itself could suddenly be changed into a floating city when the light was a special pearly white and fell upon one of the gracefully fashioned streets.*[7]

In her childhood, Sandy emerges as a creative pupil who wrote 'The Mountain Eyrie' with Jenny as a sequel to Brodie's narratives of her love story in their history lessons and fabricated Brodie's letter to the singing master Mr Gordon Lowther about her love for the art master Mr Teddy Lloyd. Sandy is later famous for her 'odd psychological treatise on the nature of moral perception called "The Transfiguration of the Commonplace"' (p. 33), written after she converts to Roman Catholicism and becomes Sister Helena. Like Mr Lloyd's paintings that all look like Brodie, all of Sandy's writings explore Brodie's treachery and her ways of transfiguring their everyday life into materials for her self-mythology. Sandy avenges herself against Brodie through her betrayal, but this act displaces Brodie's moral burden upon her own shoulders so that she 'clutched the bars of her grille more desperately than ever' (p. 125).[8]

As 'an Edinburgh spinster of the deepest dye' (p. 24) Brodie pours her passions into her pupils. She brings her interest in trendy thoughts and ideologies, her fashion sense, her love of art exhibitions and performances, and her travel

experience and souvenirs into her classroom. Brodie pays no attention to the school syllabus; textbooks are props to ward off 'intruders' like Miss Mackay.

Instead of enjoying freedom under her leadership, Brodie's girls are criticised for trifles, like having rolled up their sleeves, opened the window wider than six inches and read comic books in her class. Brodie instils in the girls blind obedience to her will and whims. She cares more about their allegiance to her than their ability to acquire knowledge and pass exams. Although Spark explains that Brodie is not a fascist in her interviews, she mocks fascist self-conceitedness, egomania, and the desire to play God through constructing a Mussolini-admiring schoolteacher who desperately seeks to assert her authority in absurd ways.[9] Unlike the pacifist Miss Mackay who puts up a large poster of former British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin in her office, Brodie teaches her pupils to imitate the marching troops of Mussolini in their walk through the Old Town, fight for Franco at the Spanish Civil War and admire Hitler as a 'naughty' but more 'reliable' figure than Mussolini (pp. 95, 120). Brodie has spent a term teaching the girls stories about the dancer Anna Pavlova's anecdotes to inspire 'Eunice to become at least a pioneer missionary in some deadly and dangerous zone of the earth'[10]. But this plan has failed. One of Brodie's pupils, Joyce Emily Hammond, is encouraged by her to fight for Franco, even though Joyce's brother at Oxford had already fought in the war and 'everyone, including Joyce Emily, was anti-Franco if they were anything at all'[11]. Embarked on a dangerous mission under her teacher's influence, Joyce dies prematurely in a train accident, which thwarts Brodie's plan for her to be a war heroine.[12] The meaningless sacrifice of a young girl proves Brodie's absurd efforts in imposing patterns upon life and her irresponsibility for urging her pupil to go to a dangerous war zone. Like the uninvited visitors who are struck by lightning in front of the castle in *Not to Disturb* (1971), Joyce is killed as a non-selected pupil to maintain the exclusiveness of 'the Brodie set'.

Through creating Brodie as a cartoon character, Spark mocks political propaganda and the encouraging of teenagers to become soldiers and war heroes to satisfy the vanity of political leaders. In her lecture 'The Desegregation of Art' delivered in 1971, Spark expressed her view that ridicule is 'the only honourable weapon' against fascist ideology and violence in any form:

> *We have all seen on the television those documentaries of the thirties and of the Second World War, where Hitler and his goose-stepping troops advance in their course of liberating, as they called it, some city, some country or other; we have seen the strutting and posturing of Mussolini. It looks like something out of comic opera to us. If the massed populations of those times and in those countries had been moved to break up into helpless laughter at the sight, those tyrants wouldn't have had a chance. And I say we should all be conditioned and educated to regard violence in any form as something to be ruthlessly mocked.*[13]
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> *In a novel published thirty years after the 1930s, Spark looks back at the popularity of fascist ideology at that time in Italy, Spain, and Germany, and criticises the inefficiency of public education in its exposure of the tyrannical leaders' hypocrisy. Later, Spark attended the Adolf Eichmann trial in Jerusalem from 1961–2 as a reporter for theObserverand incorporates this into her novel The Mandelbaum Gate (1965). Alongside her descriptions of terrorist groups in Territorial Rights (1979) and The Only Problem (1984), Spark's writings can be read as critical reflections on the banality of evil.*

Spark deals with school education in other works. In her fiction, teachers are not dignified people, but comic figures who get entangled with extramarital affairs, intelligence networks and political controversy. School headmasters and headmistresses are noted for their dogmatism, infidelity, and moral weakness. Spark is sharp in her sarcastic portrayal of these self-conceited educators who fail to educate themselves.

In *Territorial Rights*, the headmaster of a boy's school, Arnold Leaver has an affair with his wealthy colleague Mary Tiller, who taught cooking, and this affair prompts his wife Anthea to seek help from a global intelligence network, 'Global-Equip Security Services', to investigate his betrayal.[14]

Arnold's career is derailed and his son Robert, affected by the disloyalty and hypocrisy around him, transitions from student-prostitute and amateur blackmailer into a professional terrorist.

In *The Mandelbaum Gate*, the possessive headmistress and forty-two-year-old spinster Miss Rickward of South African origin chases her English colleague

Barbara Vaughan to Jerusalem to prevent Catholic convert Barbara from marrying her boyfriend, Harry Clegg, unless the Catholic church permits the annulment of his previous marriage. Although Rickward used to be 'a keen promoter of Scripture-reading at school', she ends up selling the school and living as a mistress of an elderly Arab smuggler Joe Ramdez.[15] Spark ridicules Rickward's dogmatic preaching of religious doctrine and philosophical theories of existentialism and her disregard for their influence in life.

In her last novel, *The Finishing School*(2004), Spark sets her novel entirely in an elite and mobile school, College Sunrise. It is, according to the founder Rowland Mahler, 'a place where parents dump their teen-age children after their schooldays and before their universities or their marriages or careers'.[16] Five students, hardly 'la crème de la crème', take a creative writing course, but invest their imaginative energies in sexual affairs with the gardener, the cook, and the domestic helper. Rowland's wife and colleague Nina Parker teaches her students table manners in the subject that is ironically called 'Etiquette', or 'Comme il faut':

> *When you finish at College Sunrise you should be really and truly finished […] Like the finish on a rare piece of furniture. Your jumped-up parents (may God preserve their bank accounts) will want to see something for their money. Listen: when you eat asparagus in England, as everyone knows, you take it in your fingers, but the secret of exquisite manners with regard to asparagus is to eat it held in your left hand. Got it? (p. 5)*

Nina's dissemination of useless information to her students at an exclusive fee-paying school indicates Spark's satire of the exploitative nature of the education system. The novel also features the complex relationship between teacher and student. Obsessed with his jealousy for his seventeen-year-old student Chris's literary progress, Rowland develops a toxic and long-term relationship with Chris, like that between Brodie and Sandy. Despite their lack of talent, they eventually do publish books. Rowland's is entitled *The School Observed*, 'published satisfactorily, as was Chris's first novel, highly praised for its fine, youthful disregard of dry historical facts […] After a year they engaged themselves in a Same-Sex Affirmation Ceremony, attended by friends and Chris's family'.[17] They continue to run the finishing school together, but what type of student would they

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Spark also satirises the clichés of dialogue in her poem entitled 'The Creative Writing Class' (2003), but her experience of attending and teaching writing courses are enjoyable. After leaving Gillespie's, Spark took a course in précis-writing at Heriot-Watt College (now a university) in Edinburgh.[18] The change of study environment helped her economical style: 'The idea of a more scientific atmosphere in general, and a more scientific approach to English, in contrast to the broad, humane, poetry-loving approach of Gillespie's, appealed to me when I started attending classes at the college'.[19] This love of plain, tightly expressed language carried forward to her novel-writing career, imbuing her writing with a poetic precision: 'I find 'managerial' speech unpretentious, direct, quite expressive enough' [20]

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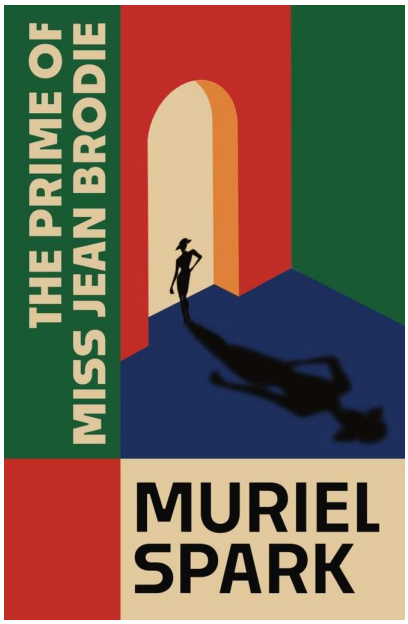

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