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Dr Spark, I presume? The return of Muriel Spark's forgotten drama

By Willy Maley

The success of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961) proved a double-edged sword for Muriel Spark. Its landmark status and international impact drew attention away from her other novels, as well as eclipsing her gifts as a poet, short story writer, critic and dramatist. A crucial feature of the Spark Centenary, then, has been the agreed need to push beyond *Brodie*.

Only a year after the inimitable Edinburgh teacher appeared on the scene, Spark put out a much less renowned piece of work: a play, staged in London, entitled *Doctors of Philosophy* (1962). There was puzzlement and perplexity among reviewers who didn't quite know what to make of this weird comedy about a family of academics. Kenneth Tynan, writing in *The Observer*, said it was "one of the most baffling plays I have ever witnessed [...] One seems to be listening to a late Eliot play extensively rewritten by an adolescent Iris Murdoch". Another distinguished theatre critic of the time, T. C. Worsley, writing in the *Financial Times*, was more enthusiastic: "Miss Muriel Spark's debut as a dramatist at the Arts Theatre Club was a considerable success. Two of her most peculiar qualities translate most effectively to the stage – her witty dialogue and her sense of the bizarre. Her audience was kept constantly tickled by the former and constantly on tenterhooks by the latter".

The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie and *Doctors of Philosophy* arose from the same creative whirlwind of the early 1960s, when Spark produced her most dazzling work. *Brodie* survived and thrived as novel, play, film and classic text, thanks to being catapulted to attention first through publication as a single issue of *The New Yorker*, then in a transformational adaptation as a realist text stripped of some of its wizardry; whereas *Doctors of Philosophy*, by contrast, despite some positive responses, has virtually disappeared.

Brodie, adapted for stage by Jay Presson Allen in 1966, set the tone for Spark as a novelist whose work could be dramatized rather than a dramatist in her own right, despite her experience of writing for radio and the eminent adaptability of her work for that medium (<http://www.scottishbooktrust.com/blog/reading/2016/12/hearing-voices-muriel-spark-on-the-radio>). Indeed, Spark's versatility with voices made her an ideal author for adaptation, as a string of successful page-to-stage productions attest. Her ear for dialogue – for the performance of speech in all its forms – was vital to her development as an artist (<http://www.scottishbooktrust.com/blog/reading/2017/08/muriel-spark-sports-commentary-and-the-spoken-word>).

Doctors of Philosophy first came to my attention in 2008 when I was reading through Spark's body of work for my book *Muriel Spark for Starters*. I found it remarkable for its blend of wit, playfulness, experimentalism and surrealism, and wondered why on earth it had been so neglected. In 2013 I approached Laurie Sansom, then Artistic Director at the National Theatre of Scotland, and Nick Barley, Director of the Edinburgh International Book Festival, with the idea of doing a rehearsed reading of *Doctors of Philosophy* at the Festival, with a view to sparking a full production at a later date. Although there was some dialogue between us, the idea never got off the

ground. I did however manage to persuade Zoe Strachan and Louise Welsh to read a scene from the play as part of Aye Write! Glasgow's Book Festival, at the Mitchell Library in Glasgow in April of that year, and it was very well received.

Two years later, in 2015, Spark's own favourite novel, *The Driver's Seat* (1970) – she called it her “creepiest” – was adapted for the stage for the first time by Laurie Sansom for the National Theatre of Scotland, the latest in a long line of successful transitions from fiction to theatre (http://national-theatre-scotland.tumblr.com/post/121182003585/all-personality-is-performance?utm_content=bufferb5393&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer). It was a terrific production of a Spark novel that had already enjoyed a cinematic adaptation, but I still hankered after an outing of her forgotten stage play.

In 2016 I drew *Doctors of Philosophy* to the attention of David Greig, since I felt that his work as dramatist and director made him a perfect fit for Spark. In *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart* (2011) Greig had explored the Border Ballads through the eyes and ears of a female academic. He was a writer who, like Spark, had lived in Africa, and he shared with Spark a sense of the poetic possibilities of playwriting, with an ear fine-tuned to the vibrancy and vividness of voice in all its humour and humanity. I was delighted to find I was pushing at an open stage door. David saw the magic in Spark's play, the sparkling dialogue and intellectual sharpness, and he wanted to pursue a production. But the wheels turn slowly in the theatre world, and there is always the issue of funding. A polished and professional rehearsed reading could not be supported in time for the centenary in a manner that would be likely to trigger a touring production.

In 2017, together with Dr Fiona Jardine of Glasgow School of Art, I tried to secure funding for a rehearsed reading of *Doctors of Philosophy* from the Royal Society of Edinburgh, as part of a project which would have brought together theatre practitioners and critics to mark the full range and richness of Spark's achievements in her centenary year. Alas, that application proved unsuccessful. She may be on a par with Burns, Scott and Stevenson but Spark has still to win the degree of recognition enjoyed by her male predecessors.

So I am delighted that finally a rehearsed reading of Spark's play directed by Marilyn Imrie, following a successful hearing at the Usher Hall in January, will be a highlight of this year's Edinburgh Book Festival (<https://www.edbookfest.co.uk/news/rehearsed-reading-of-muriel-spark-s-doctors-of-philosophy-to-be-presented-at-book-festival>). At a time when a female doctor in the shape of the new Dr Who can still provoke a storm on social and corporate media, Spark's *Doctors of Philosophy* is a play whose day has finally come round again. Some things take time, but that doesn't matter when the timing works out as well as this has done. Joseph Farrell, writing in the *Scottish Review of Books*, praised the play's “the intellectual and spiritual style which is distinctively Spark's” (<https://www.scottishreviewofbooks.org/2018/02/doctors-of-philosophy/>).

The play's alternative title, as suggested by Michael Codron – *Charlie Is My Darling* – has its merits, but *Doctors of Philosophy* gets to the heart of Spark's meditation on gender and education. It is vintage Spark, bubbly as a witches' brew, a very modern

drama in the tradition of Beckett, Orton, and Pirandello. There are shades of Pinter there too – Codron was an early producer of Pinter’s plays and no doubt saw the same edginess in Spark. *Doctors of Philosophy* explores with characteristic stylishness and subtlety the interplay of knowledge and power, and it punctures the very snobbery, sexism and elitism that beset Spark as an emerging author in the 1940s and 1950s.

Unlike some of her contemporaries, after leaving school, Spark did not go to university. Instead, she went to Heriot-Watt College to study précis-writing. (In 1995, Heriot-Watt, by then a university, would award her an honorary doctorate). The reasons behind her decision are complex, and bound up with class as well as gender. She reflects on her decision in her memoir, *Curriculum Vitae* (1992): “I would have liked to have gone to a university but merely in order to obtain a degree, and that only for the uncertain purpose of getting a better job. I was studious, but I liked my own form of studies, picking and choosing books in the public library [...] But I don't know if I would have made a good academic scholar. The chance of finding another inspiring teacher like my later ‘Miss Jean Brodie’ in the form of Christina Kay was very slight. Anyway, there was really no money for me to go to a university”. Spark was, she says, “a young woman without means”, and that meant even with a scholarship she would struggle to make ends meet, so her ambition to go to university became “something of a luxury”.

There were other reasons too why university did not appeal to Spark: “I noticed that many older girls who were studying at Edinburgh University in those days were humanly rather dull and earnest, without adult style or charm, indeed there was a puritanical atmosphere. Charm was shunned like a work of the devil. [...] I doubt if many of those university students could have told you who Gary Cooper was, Conrad Veidt (my pin-up), Madeleine Carroll, Marlene Dietrich. They could on the other hand write a dissertation on John Donne by the time they were twenty. (But so could I.)”

And so she could. For she showed herself to be a critic, editor and biographer of the first order. And all this without a first degree, never mind a PhD. Ironically by 1965 Spark was teaching Creative Writing at Rutgers University, on a course she called “Symposium – Amours de Voyage”; but she was teaching this on her own terms, and providing inspiration rather than seeking it. Her ambivalence about academia and teaching are crucial to *Doctors of Philosophy*. Among other things the play is a cynical look at the academic “road not taken” by Spark, about the roles that are open to women, ideals of femininity, identity, vocation, education in its broadest sense, and much more. It is absurd, surreal, postmodern, self-referential, philosophical, and unlike anything else she wrote. It was probably also her biggest personal challenge, the piece which she worked hardest to complete, not to mention her only attempt at working in the stage play format.

Despite not going to university, Spark was awarded a total of eight honorary doctorates for her contribution to literature. She was herself “Doctors of Philosophy”. I’m sure she would be delighted that her playful meditation on academic life is now poised to emerge from the shadows. *Doctors of Philosophy* thoroughly deserves its revival. News of its reappearance has already sparked wide interest (<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/aug/08/a-thoroughly-entertaining-failure-return-muriel-spark-flop-doctors-of-philosophy-edinburgh-festival>). An article by

Charlotte Higgins in *The Guardian* prompted one of the original cast from 1962, Fenella Fielding, to write expressing her delight that the play was on again (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/aug/10/challenged-in-a-good-way-by-muriel-sparks-only-stage-play>). Fielding, now ninety and clearly still in her prime, said: “I would be fascinated to see the new version, but in the meantime I’ll be digging out my copy of the original script just to see how it reads now”. Hopefully the resurfacing of this lost classic onstage will be accompanied by a fresh publication of the script. Maybe Ms Fielding, who carries on regardless and is evidently imbued with the zestful spirit of Spark, would write a foreword?

Willy Maley is a Professor of English Literature at the University of Glasgow. He is the author of *Muriel Spark for Starters* (Capercaillie, 2008) and co-editor, with Michael Gardiner, of *The Edinburgh Companion to Muriel Spark* (Edinburgh University Press, 2010). As a playwright, Willy is also a former Fringe First winner and has had work performed at the Arches, Pavilion, Tramway and Tron theatres.