

*Recall Roster by*  
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Recalling forgotten,  
neglected, underrated, or  
unjustly out-of-print works

Rose Macaulay, *The World My Wilderness*. London: Collins, 1950 and Boston: Little, Brown, 1950.

British novelist Rose Macaulay's life-long commitment to pacifism was severely shaken in the aftermath of Hitler's invasion of Austria in March 1938. The event prompted her to resign her sponsorship of the Peace Pledge Union. Like her contemporary and rival, Virginia Woolf, she was forced to concede the inevitability and necessity of war as the only means of resisting Fascism. Nazism, Macaulay stated at the time of the Anschluss, made "pacifism impossibly difficult. I hate it" (qtd. in Babington Smith 145). Imagining "what an awful England it would be under the Nazis," (qtd. in Babington Smith 152) Macaulay supported her country's war against the Axis powers and as early as March 1939 had joined the London Auxiliary Ambulance Service as a volunteer part-time driver. Nonetheless, she gave her support on her terms: she decried the War as an occasion for tub-thumping militarist and nationalist sentiment. As one of Britain's most visible literary figures and weekly pundits, she vociferously fought against the delusion that the War was an ennobling experience for the British people. In 1945, for example, as the war was drawing to a close, she offered a critique in the journal *Time and Tide* of political speeches on the B.B.C. which included

too much self-praise. 'You did not flinch,' etc. But of course we flinched. Why not? One gets tired of this myth of absolute fearlessness that we are building up about ourselves . . . We [have] also blackmarketed and looted bombed houses . . ." (qtd. In Babington Smith 152)

Macaulay's refusal to glorify the War prefigures the thesis of critic Paul Fussell's book *Wartime*, which attempts "to balance the scales" toward a more realistic assessment of the "psychological and emotional culture of Americans and Britons during" the Second World War (Fussell ix). Fussell castigates the "misconstruction" of reality "useful to the rationalizing intellect unable to confront the messy data of actuality" of war (19). This war, in particular, was actually a "savage, insensate affair, barely conceivable to the well-conducted imagination" (132). Most recently in print in Britain by Virago, Macaulay's twenty-second, and penultimate novel, *The World My Wilderness*, is an important, yet now largely forgotten, expression of at least one British woman writer's alienation from the self-satisfied, high-minded, conventional attitudes which prompted Fussell's condemnation. Macaulay's 1950 novel, sombre and questioning, is a potent cultural critique of patriarchy, war, and the capitalist underpinnings of militarism. Another of Macaulay's literary contemporaries, Vera Brittain, described Woolf's suicide in the autumn of 1941 as an "escape from the disorderly barbarism of contemporary life" (qtd. in Fussell 216). By contrast, Macaulay directly confronted the moral and social decay left in the wake of the War's destruction by imagining redemption through a mother-daughter relationship in *The World My Wilderness*.

The novel takes its alliterative title from a poem by that prolific writer Anon, who has encapsulated the central protagonist's existential situation: "The world my wilderness, its caves my home, Its weedy wastes the garden where I roam, Its chasm'd cliffs my castle and my tomb . . ."

Barbary Deniston is seventeen years old and, like the Allied victors she comes to symbolize, is unable and unwilling to adjust to the end of war. Her passage into adult maturity in Macaulay's novel reflects her society's difficult and painful search for a restoration of order and a return to peacetime mores and values. Barbary comes back to a ruined London in April 1946 after spending the duration of the War in blissful rural Provence, thereby leaving her mother, Helen Michel, to rejoin her father, the eminent barrister Sir Gulliver Deniston, for the first time since her parents' divorce in 1940. The delinquent and aimless product of an atomized family, Barbary has spent her entire adolescence in wartime France on the fringes of the Resistance, performing minor terrorist acts. She also has secret accessory knowledge, as it is revealed at the end of the novel, of the drowning death of her French stepfather, a Vichy collaborator. Barbary is "stunted" in every sense of the word: she is physically underdeveloped, an "irregular-featured elf," (Macaulay 17) who

has “something defensive, puzzled, wary about her, like a watchful little animal or savage” (14). A truant from school, she has lacked formal education, spending her days with her French stepbrother Raoul, in “anarchist” activities (20). Barbary’s emotional growth has been hindered by the conscious repression of her rape by a young German soldier who had ordered her beaten after her gang of cohorts had been captured in the Forêt de Sorède. The young woman spent the War “on the margin,” (109) undisciplined by her mother, a woman preoccupied with her second marriage and youngest son, as well as her ambitions to be an artist and writer. The novel’s plot is set in motion when Barbary’s father insists on her return to England, where she can become “civilized” and re-integrated into the center of respectable, upper middle-class society under her father’s control and oversight.

Thus, Macaulay places the aptly-named Barbary between two starkly oppositional forces in two very different settings: the cold, rigidly conventional father at home in London and the warm, artistic, and unconventional mother who is associated with the lushly fertile landscape around her villa in the South of France. The novel alternates between the two settings as it depicts Barbary’s conflicted efforts to come to terms with the ending of war and the uncertainties of peace. Unable to adapt herself to a life of scheduled art classes at the Slade School and the clockwork discipline of her father’s household, Barbary spends her days in the ruins of East London, manifesting her continuing truancy and rebellion by painting postcards for the occasional American tourist and painting surrealistic frescoes on abandoned walls with titles like “Dies Irae,” literally creating apocalyptic art outside the confines of the respectable academy. She suffers from “culture shock:” after the abundant warmth and freedom of Collioure, the “London streets all seemed very dull and ugly . . . Urged on by a desperate nostalgia [she] could barely endure the meaningless grey city streets and the dull, respectable smoke-dark houses” (50). She only begins to feel comfortable in London when she roams around the tangled wilderness of the bombed-out parts of the city which serve to remind her of her formative years in war-torn France. Of the destruction wrought by the Blitz, she remarks that yes, “it would be nice to see a picture of all this as it was—all houses and offices and shops and streets. [But] I like it better like this. One belongs more” (59).

The ruins of East London, still a landmark on the cityscape as late as the 1960s, take on a strange life of their own in Macaulay’s novel. They become, as they do in Elizabeth Bowen’s short story “Mysterious Kôr,”

a modern-day avatar of the Gothic, fantastic, moonlit landscapes of Ann Radcliffe and Horace Walpole. The ruins are an inverted world where Barbary can roam to her anarchist's satisfaction: "the broken habitations, this stony rubbish seemed natural" (52). Prompted by T.S. Eliot's famous poem, Macaulay writes:

Barbary wondered what the ruined waste lands looked like after dark, with the night lying over the deep chasms, the pits, the broken walls and foundations, the roofless, gaping churches, the stone flights of stairs climbing high into emptiness . . . It had familiarity, as of a place long known; it had the clear, dark logic of a dream; it made a lunatic sense, as the unshattered streets and squares did not; it was the country that one's soul recognized and knew. (61)

Macaulay's novel is set in actually documented bombed-out locales, such as the area around St. Giles Cripplegate, however phantasmagoric they become in Barbary's imagination. Associating with petty criminals—black marketeers ("spivs"), military deserters, "fences," shoplifters, and looters—who evade the established legal order in the labyrinthine ruins and tunnels of the bombed sites, Barbary is able to maintain the sense of herself as a renegade *maquisarde* which she is supposed to relinquish, at her father's behest. The most striking denizen of Barbary's wilderness is Father Roger, whose insanity was induced by seeing his church bombed in 1940, and who wanders among the ruined churches, shouting, with a kind of divinest sense, "We are in hell now . . . Hell is where I am, Lucifer and all his legions are in me" (166-7). Thus, post-war London is, in Macaulay's portrayal, a "wrecked and flowering wilderness" (253) of lawlessness, theft, madness, and moral and familial decay. The city has ultimately reverted, in the final paragraph of the novel, to a state of Nature, described thus:

The questionable chaos of broken courts and lanes lay sprawled under the October mist, and the shells of churches gaped liked lost myths, and the jungle pressed in on them, seeking to cover them up. (254)

Macaulay's vision of post-war England is so bleak that even established religion seems unable to provide its traditional redemptive power;

and capitalism is also inevitably relegated to the dustbin of mankind's destructive history in *The World My Wilderness*. "Eight centuries of property and substance" (193) were obliterated by aerial bombardment, she points out. The commercial neighborhoods of East London are now solely inhabited by

the ghosts of the centuries-old merchant cunning [which] crept and murmured among weeds and broken stones, flitted like bats about dust-heaped, gaping rooms. But their companion ghosts, ghosts of an ancient probity, honourable and mercantile and proud and tough, that had lived side by side with cunning in the stone ways, and in the great blocks of warehouses and offices and halls, had deserted and fled without trace, leaving their broken dwellings to the creeping jungle and the crafty shades. (159)

The only real economic energy suffusing the background of Barbary's failed re-integration into British society is the decadent and perverted capitalism of Mavis, Jock and Horace, the petty criminals of the ruins who become her friends and lead her into a new life of crime. This dark vision of outlawry in postwar Britain is present, too, in contemporary British film noirs like *They Made Me a Fugitive* (1947), *Brighton Rock* (1947), and *The Blue Lamp* (1950). "Commerce, begun in peddling and piracy, slinks down into peddling and piracy, slinks guiltily among the shadows of the moon," Macaulay writes of their petty thievery (183). Hence the secure foundation of Britain's imperial and national glory is astutely and presciently called into question:

Poor merchants, poor agents, poor warehousemen, where are they all now? Blown sky high, burnt up by that horrid, malicious flame, many have seeded themselves again elsewhere, struggling against extinction. (182)

In such vivid and probing prose, Macaulay presents a sustained and powerful evocation of the truly apocalyptic force of the Second World War on British society, bourgeois capitalism, as well as the resultant moral corruption and confusion which the expediency of war fosters.

*The World My Wilderness*, therefore, is a sombre, yet not completely nihilistic, work of post-war fiction. The one significant recuperative force

offered to the young female protagonist is the certainty and primacy of the mother-daughter bond, a conflicted relationship at the center of the narrative, which is, alone of all the forces rent by the war, restored to cohesive unity and order at the novel's end. Barbary's actual reunification with Helen Michel at the denouement signifies the feminine values by which, Macaulay strongly implies, British society can recover a securer sense of itself from the havoc and exploitation of war and its immediate aftermath. The primacy of the mother-daughter bond is the one certainty, then, offered by Macaulay's novel about the aftermath of the Second World War.

Strong mother figures are at the heart of all Rose Macaulay's novels about war. Daphne Sandomir in *Non-Combatants and Others* (1916), the pacifist and suffragist activist of Macaulay's World War One novel, provides the enabling force for her cynical and disillusioned daughter Alix's commitment to helping end war. Dr. Kate Marlowe, the intrepid protagonist of Macaulay's Spanish Civil War novel, *And No Man's Wit* (1940), travels through Franco's brutally repressive Spain, searching for her son, missing among the defeated International Brigades. Helen Michel in *The World My Wilderness* continues this succession of powerful, and fiercely independent, matriarchs. Helen is a willfully unconventional, yet symbolically restorative, force—as a mother figure, she is interestingly problematic. She accedes to her former husband's desire to re-acquaint Barbary with her native country, openly ignores Barbary's needs as an adolescent daughter, and is, by traditional standards of motherhood (what Sara Ruddick calls the “myths of matriarchy” [345]), a “bad mother.” She abandoned her marriage to Sir Gulliver by remaining in France on the eve of war in 1939, now openly lives with her murdered husband's brother, and unethically indulges her creative ambitions by translating her own forgeries of medieval Provençal troubadour poetry. Helen Michel is, according to her eldest son Richie, someone who “always did precisely what she liked” (34). She is an independent and self-confessed “lotos eater” (89). Even more remarkable, according to the third person omniscient narrator:

She was one of the rare women who are almost as highly sexed as a man; yet she took sex casually in her stride; it was not an aim of existence, but a pleasure by the way, to be taken simply, directly, frankly, then laid aside for some other pleasure . . . (36)

Men admire her “enormously, finding in her a woman’s beauty and the mind, grasp, and wit of a man . . . a masculine freedom and sensuousness . . .” (36). She is a woman who loves with her senses and not her sentiments (37). Helen Michel is, in short, an androgynous and powerful life force, one with redemptive qualities. Her eventual retrieval of her daughter from the “hell” of a London in physical, economic, and moral ruins recalls an important feminine mythic archetype: namely, the story of Demeter and Persephone.

American poet and critic Adrienne Rich regards the myth of Demeter and Persephone as the story of the mother–daughter bond, a relationship which, she asserts, has been “minimized and trivialized in the annals of patriarchy” (226). Rich speculates on the purpose and origins of the story in these terms:

Each daughter, in the millennia before Christ, must have longed for a mother whose love for her and whose power were so great as to undo rape and bring her back from death. And every mother must have longed for the power of Demeter . . . the reconciliation with her lost self. (240)

Macaulay’s novel suggests many of the elements of this myth, from its very opening which clearly establishes Helen Michel as proprietor and ruler of her own domain. The garden of the Villa Fraises “was crowded with shrubs and flowers and orange and lemon trees, and pomegranates and magnolias and bougainvillea and vines” (7). In contrast to Gulliver’s embodiment of post-war Austerity Britain and its continued rationing and shortages, Helen Michel is fertility incarnate. She has three children by three different men. Her youngest child, by Maurice Michel, was born when she was in her early forties. This Demeter-figure has a “lost” daughter whom she must rescue, and Barbary’s unceasing yearning for a return to France and her mother’s warm, fertile domain is at the root of her unhappiness in London. The complete primacy of the mother–daughter bond is affirmed by the interfusion of their psyches. Alone of all the characters in the novel, Helen comes to realize “How much at home Barbary must have felt, hiding and being chased about the ruins with . . . spivs and deserters: the *maquis* is within us, we take our wilderness where we go” (210).

Early in the novel, Helen had willingly allowed Barbary to return to London, but by its close, she resolutely tells her daughter: “I’m not

going to let you grow up without a mother" (232). The two return to France, leaving Sir Gulliver with the startling revelation, and confirmation of every patriarch's worst fear, that he is not Barbary's father and that his efforts to assert control over her, therefore, have been completely misdirected. At all events, Sir Gulliver was never able to establish a bond with the young woman, insisting, "You know, my dear child, you'll have to learn sometime to fit into the society about you" (135). He tells her, "I think it's best that you should stay here [in London] . . . learning to behave like a properly brought up young woman" (136). Barbary rejects these educative efforts, and matters are brought to a head when she is seriously injured in the bombed-out ruins, falling into a cellar while evading the police on a shoplifting charge. Under this adversity, Helen comes to recognize, fully, the depth of her maternal feelings for her daughter and flies to London. There she rescues Barbary from the legal and familial constraints of conventional patriarchal control—from Sir Gulliver's attempts to teach her to be what he calls "a normal, nicely got up, pretty mannered girl" (39).

In psychoanalytic terms, then, the secure relationship between mother and daughter in *The World My Wilderness* is marked by intense "positive cathexis." That is to say, Helen and Barbary both fully invest their relationship with such a concentration of psychic energy and mutual ego identification that the intrusive paternal figure is simply excluded from it—this a reversal of a child's normal development. For example, Sir Gulliver's efforts to force Barbary to reveal details of her war-time rape to the eminent psychologist and family friend Sir Angus Maxwell are, in the terms of the novel, as powerful an indictment of Establishment medicine's insensitivity as anything in Virginia Woolf's writings. Barbary responds by fearing

the searching eyes that looked into her mind, trying to read it, questioning and surmising, dragging her thoughts as with a deep-sea net . . . Things would be dragged up that must lie forever in the deep, secret pools of the sea . . . (109-110)

Barbary's intense and cathected desire for reunification with her mother is an oppositional force, valorized by the novel's resolution of its plot, against Sir Gulliver's enactment of the Lacanian "Nom du Pere." In Jacques Lacan's influential post-Freudian theory, the "Name of the Father" is a law which stands outside of the mother-child dyad, until a



point in time when it interposes itself forcefully, creating a third term in the family, linking the family to the established patriarchal social order. According to Carolyn Burke's lucid definition of this concept, the Law of the Father "intervenes in the mother-child relationship to establish difference [via the Oedipus Complex] as a concomitant of identity, to initiate the child into the culture of patriarchy" (110). This Law, in theoretical terms, forces the child to situate itself in reality through the recognition of relational differences, and an identification with the parent who is not-Mother. In terms of Macaulay's novel, however, Barbary's rejection of the dominant culture of patriarchy, to be "a normal, nicely got up, pretty mannered girl," as Sir Gulliver insists, is a paradigm of her rejection of the dominant culture which has created and sustained the ideologies of militarism and bourgeois capitalism, and the post-war ethical and moral vacuum they have created.

Instead, Barbary longs for a pre-Oedipal world of sameness, not difference, and a reunion with the mother's body. Early in the novel, the narrator informs the reader that, as an infant, Barbary had been a nervous sleeper,

waking in terror, screaming at shadows, then, when her mother arrived, hiding her face in her breast, and clutching her with both arms. Barbary had been a wild baby, a nery excited child, her mother her tower of refuge. (19)

Significantly, this "tower of refuge" rejects the dominant culture's conventions, remarking of her "desire not work . . . As to one's country, why should none feel any more interest in its welfare than in that of other countries?" (142). Such a heretical remark closely parallels Virginia Woolf's now famous declaration in *Three Guineas* (1938) that as a woman, she had no country, and no need or desire for one. Helen's rejection of nationalism, the bourgeois work ethic, and even the traditional myths of ideal motherhood—every last one a patriarchal construct—is presented in the novel as attractive and compelling. Helen's last words in *The World My Wilderness*, after a sly remark about the frailty of "male virtue," express her ironic, yet maternally protective, resolve that Barbary would not, and could not,

make a fit inhabitant of the rarefied air that Gully breathes. She would freeze in it and wither up. She must have sunshine,

geniality, laughter, love; and if she goes to the devil, she shall at least go happily, my poor little savage. (251)

This post-war Demeter has triumphantly reclaimed her Persephone, albeit in an ironically inverted manner, characteristic of much of Macaulay's fiction. Helen muses to herself at the novel's end, "I am taking my child away from the higher to the lower . . ." (250-1). Of course, the novel asks the reader to see the irony in this: the mother makes possible the daughter's return to a feminist utopian state unencumbered by the destructive forces of male chauvinism, capitalism, nationalism, and imperialism.

Barbary's retrieval from the post-War "underworld" is the one significant redemptive act in a culture fragmented by war and its inability to recover from war. The primacy of the mother-daughter relationship in *The World My Wilderness* represents one possible way to save, as Macaulay urged in 1939, "some few frail strands from the rot, that they may in the end be woven into a cord which shall lift us to some sanity above the howling bear pit" of the Second World War ("War" 539).

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