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**BOSWELL'S FIRST MEETING WITH THE INFAMOUS
MARGARET CAROLINE RUDD:
A STUDY IN DRAMATIC TECHNIQUE**

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Among the many notables of the age who attracted James Boswell's attention is the infamous Margaret Caroline Rudd, a celebrated courtesan and self-proclaimed forger who had charmed an entire British jury into a verdict of "Not Guilty" while her former lover, Daniel Perreau, and his brother, Robert, were hanged at Tyburn on the same forgery charge of which she had been acquitted.

When Boswell visits her lodgings for the first time on the evening of 22 April 1778, he is celebrity-hunting; when he leaves her that same evening, he has been enchanted by her considerable charms. The interview is a dramatic scene worth recording. How amusing that Boswell chose to reconstruct his first conversation with the notorious Mrs. Rudd in a letter to his wife. Once written, he thought twice of sending the account to Mrs. Boswell, posting it instead to his friend Temple with an endorsement on the letter: "To my wife—but not sent."¹

As is so often his custom, Boswell uses detailed exposition and antecedent action to introduce the main action of his drama. Explaining his motives for the visit, Boswell's opening sentences enthusiastically introduce his leading lady:

Before I go to bed, and while the impressions of the extraordinary scene which I am going to mention are fresh and lively, I sit down to write to you. Many a time you heard me rave with a strange force of imagination about the celebrated Mrs. Rudd—Margaret Caroline Rudd—and how I should certainly see her while I was in London. My curiosity did not go off, and I resolved to gratify it.

On 7 December 1775, less than five months previous to Boswell's first meeting with Mrs. Rudd, she had been tried and acquitted. Then on 17 January 1776, Daniel and Robert Perreau were hanged at Tyburn, protesting their innocence to the last. Boswell's trip to Mrs. Rudd's Westminster lodgings on 22 April 1776 is indeed a bold plan.

When he first knocks at the door, a woman of the house appears:

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"Does Mrs. Rudd lodge here?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Is she at home?"

"I'll call her maid."

The maid enters and tells Boswell that her mistress is not at home but will be at home in the evening or any morning. Asked if he desires to leave his name, Boswell replies that it is unnecessary, instructing the maid to "be so good as to tell her mistress that a friend of Mr. Macqueen's from Scotland" has called and will call again.

This brief encounter with a woman of the house and Mrs. Rudd's maid delays the "extraordinary scene," heightening the expectations already set in motion by Boswell's introductory commentary about the "strange force of imagination" which compels him to gratify his intense curiosity. When Boswell returns to the lodgings of this infamous femme fatale at "a quarter after nine in the evening," the maid says,

"She is just gone out, Sir, but will be home in half an hour. You will oblige me if you will walk up stairs. I told her that you called."

Deciding to "call again in half an hour," Boswell saunters calmly to Westminster Bridge, and does not return "till about ten." The third time Boswell knocks at No.10 Queen Street, he feels "a sort of palpitation" of his heart. Once again finding she has not yet come home, he agrees "to walk up stairs" and wait.

Each time the appearance of the mysterious enchantress is delayed, expectations increase, suspense intensifies, and tension mounts. Just how dazzling an appearance and charming a personality does she really possess? If, as rumor has it, she had enchanted a whole jury, could she also work her magic on Boswell? Will Boswell follow in the footsteps of Daniel and Robert Perreau? Where is his curiosity going to leave him?

One thing is clear: he is consciously courting danger. Sir Joshua Reynolds was later to warn Boswell that "if a Man were known to have a connection with her, it would sink him."²

Shown into Mrs. Rudd's dining-room, which is "decent enough," Boswell thinks it "poor in comparison of her former magnificence." Skillfully using the details of this dining room setting, Boswell creates

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a mood and atmosphere which reinforce the dramatic suspense and tension already established. With the only light that of "a couple of tallow candles," the ominous environment no doubt influences Boswell's fancy which forms "fearful suppositions in this solitary situation."

Before long, he imagines "the ghosts of the Perreaus might appear" or "that there might be murderers or bullies in the house," all the while consoling himself with the idea that "the street was too public for that." Like the small *copia* which emblematically and symbolically contribute to the dramatic effect of Hogarth's moralities, various details in this particular setting are noteworthy because of their ability to strengthen the characterizations and themes of the scene. For example, while Boswell waits for Mrs. Rudd, he notes among her books

a Court Calendar, Duncan's *Logic*, Watts' *Logic*, *Johnsoniana*, two copies of her *Genuine Letter to Lord Weymouth* and a defense of her around it, a letter to her from Mrs. Christian Hart, Pope's *Essay on Man* and his *Essay on Criticism* bound together, and *The Small Talker*, a very good novel against the practice of some men in gaining the affections of young ladies only for conquest, as they soon neglect them.

What could such a curious private collection of books possibly contribute to the dramatic scene itself? Most important, it supplies some significant information about the yet unseen Margaret Caroline Rudd.

The rules of logic and the process of the law are obviously of great interest to her. Perhaps it should be remembered, as Charles Ryskamp and Frederick A. Pottle explain, that Mrs. Rudd "conducted her own defence with remarkable skill, handing her lawyer more than fifty notes during the progress of the trial."³ The *Genuine Letter to Lord Weymouth* and the letter to her from Mrs. Christian Hart are both directly related to her own trial and the trials of Daniel and Robert Perreau. Perhaps the presence of *Johnsoniana* and Pope's *Essay on Man* and *Essay on Criticism* implies that Boswell is about to confront an educated woman who is quite capable of philosophical and literary conversation? And the novel, *The Small Talker*, with its plot concerning love's conquests and neglects—does it not appropriately foreshadow the drama of courtship soon to be enacted? Echoes of Shakespeare's Beatrice and Benedict, Congreve's Millamant and Mirabell, and Goldsmith's Kate Hardcastle and young Marlow may be

found in this scene of sexual flirtation between Margaret Rudd and James Boswell. High comedy seldom achieves such greatness.

Hearing her "coming up stairs," Boswell is "all impatience and trepidation." As so often is the case, reality now dramatically overturns expectations. "A little woman, delicately made, not at all a beauty, but with a very pleasing appearance and much younger" than Boswell had imagined enters. Could this seemingly fragile creature, who fails to strike Boswell "with the awe either of dignity or of high elegance," possibly be the infamous sorceress he has heard so much about? Even her "black clothes, with a white cloak and hat" are so modest and conservative that they in no way fit Boswell's conception of a present-day Circe.

Needless to say, this is only the first of many surprises awaiting Boswell. Appearances and realities are frequently found to be at odds throughout this curious dramatic scene.

After begging pardon "for intruding upon her" and stating his friendship with Mr. Macqueen and his family, whom he knew "would be glad to have accounts of her," Boswell, sitting opposite Mrs. Rudd "at a little distance," listens to her "unhappy story," which she tells "with wonderful ease and delicacy and an air of innocence quite amazing when one thought of what had been proved." The appearance of things is so deceptive that Boswell feels it necessary to remind himself of the *proven* truth—Mrs. Rudd had confessed to forging one of the bonds.⁴

Describing the Perreau family as "a little commonwealth," which "was so numerous and so spread over England and Ireland," Mrs. Rudd accuses "all the connections" of endeavoring to "throw the guilt upon *her*." When Boswell mentions how shocking it is that "the Perreaus had died denying as they did," she responds,

"Yes, ...it must shock everybody who has any tenderness of conscience. They should have died in silence."

Continuing the conversation along the lines of the various injustices she has suffered at the hands of her persecutors, she tells Boswell that "she was to carry on a suit against Sir Thomas Frankland by which, if she got the full value of what he carried off belonging to her, she would recover £5,000 besides high damages." As Ryskamp and Pottle explain, "It was on Admiral Sir Thomas Frankland's charge that Mrs. Rudd was committed, and he was the nominal prosecutor at her trial." Upon apprehension, Daniel Perreau "attempted to secure Sir Thomas's silence by giving him a bill of sale of his house, whereupon Sir Thomas carried off Mrs. Rudd's jewels and clothes."⁵

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In telling her story to Boswell, the “little woman” subtly and skillfully solicits his concerned interest. Her charm beginning to work its effect, she further reinforces the image of her personal integrity by speaking “with much earnestness of her anxiety to know whether her husband, Mr. Rudd, is “alive or not.” It seems the question of whether “his long neglect of her” sets her free from him is of considerable concern to her. Obviously, this is a “moral dilemma” to a woman of her high principles. Twice unlucky in marriage, she feels she should not consider wedlock again unless it is to “a man of rank and fortune that could bear her up notwithstanding what had happened to her.”

A lover of reading, she next calls attention to her intellectual abilities by telling Boswell that “if she had not had resources in her own mind, she must have been very unhappy.” As she notes, “her confinement was very severe upon her,” especially since “she had formerly been consumptive two years.” “Almost blind” when she was let out of prison into the light, she still has weak eyes, as Boswell is careful to observe.

Abused innocence, delicate vulnerability, moral integrity—they are, all clearly visible. Could the web be more tactfully spun? How much more obvious could the appeal to a man of rank and fortune, intellect, compassion, and understanding be? Without even a struggle, Boswell allows himself to be ensnared. Or, does he?

One thing is certain: Mrs. Rudd's potent charms are having a positive effect on Boswell. Carefully reconstructing the visual characteristics of this highly dramatic scene, Boswell records:

When I looked at her narrowly she seemed to have some flushy heat on her cheeks, her nose contracted as she breathed, and she spoke through her teeth. Yet there was upon the whole—“Celia altogether”—something so pleasing and insinuating that I could believe her power to be what we have read.

The specific details of her cheeks, nose, and mouth effectively expand into a more generally impressionistic portrait depicting the overall charisma of the total person. Never one to keep his innermost thoughts hidden, Boswell tells Mrs. Rudd that she is “reckoned quite a sorceress, possessed of enchantment.” Her reply to such a direct statement is a smile, followed by a denial of her alleged ability to enchant.

The gamesmanship of a high comedy courting scene is now in full play. Numerous stage directions combine with concrete description,

imaginative imagery, and vivid details to animate the dialogue. Responding to her assertion that "she could enchant nobody," Boswell begs her pardon and, with exquisite flattery, says, "My dear Mrs. Rudd, don't talk so. Everything you have said to me till now has been truth and candour." Telling her he is "convinced" she can enchant, Boswell asks her not to enchant him too much, not to change him "into any other creature," but to allow him "to continue to be a man with some degree of reason." Aware that "the peculiar characteristic of her enchantment" seems to be its "delicate imperceptible power," Boswell proceeds with as much caution as if he "had been opposite to that snake which fascinates with its eyes."

The underlying comedy of this scene involves irony of character and situation. Amidst Boswell's continuous claims of self-control and caution, it is more and more apparent that the hypnotic maneuverings of his cobra are gradually mesmerizing him. The would-be snake charmer is himself being charmed.

In trying to describe precisely the nature of Mrs. Rudd's powers of enchantment, Boswell notes that speech patterns and conversational skills function significantly in her attempt to conceal "her design to charm."

Her language was choice and fluent and her voice melodious....There was no meretricious air, no direct attempt upon the heart. It was like hearing the music of the spheres which poets feign, and which produces its effect without the intervention of any instrument, so that the very soul of harmony immediately affects our souls.

A little less rhetorically inflated and more analytically precise is Boswell's consideration of Mrs. Rudd's conversational skills. Sometimes he remains silent "on purpose to observe how she would renew the conversation." Observing the rules of conversational decorum,

she never let the pause be long, but with admirable politeness, when she found that I did not begin again to speak and might perhaps be embarrassed, said something quite easily, so as not to have the appearance of abruptness, to make me feel that I had stopped short, but rather of a continuation of our discourse, as if what she then said had grown out of what we had talked of before.

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Particularly pleasing to Boswell is the fact that she does not "aim at being witty."

Although she does not "dazzle with brilliance," she does cheer "one with a mild light." Her knowledge of the general laws of human nature enables her to realize that "though pity is said to be akin to love, gaiety is a much more engaging relation." As a consequence, she does not "whine about her distress or affect to be plaintive." Such a thorough analysis of the various characteristics of her conversation aids Boswell's imagination in recreating the visually dramatic scene.

Never "at a loss for chit-chat," Mrs. Rudd talks capably of everything from Miss Macqueen's marriage and Edinburgh's New Town to ideas "on forming a character by habit" and choosing what one wants to be. All the while, flirtatious intrusions seem to be the order of the evening. When Mrs. Rudd says that "she had formerly deluded herself with hopes of enjoying happiness" but that she is now "satisfied with insensibility," Boswell quickly responds, "You must not be insensible," and rises and seizes "her silken hand," and afterwards, "upon the argument being renewed a little," kisses it. Of course, as Boswell explains, "this was all experiment, and she showed neither prudery nor effrontery, but the complaisance, or compliance if you please, of a woman of fashion."

Who is manipulating whom? How self-aware, or how self-deceived is Boswell? Later in the evening, Boswell observes that her eyes seem weak, so he sets

the candles upon a table at some distance from her, but as she was then in such obscurity that I could hardly discern the pretty turns of her countenance as she talked, I soon brought back one of them to a table near her, saying that I must not deny myself altogether the pleasure of seeing her.

Mentioning once again the subject of her trial and confinement, she shows "a pretty little foot," causing Boswell to get up "in a kind of lively sudden surprise" and say, "I cannot believe that you have gone through all this. Are you really Mrs. Rudd?" Her reply is a smile and a confirmation: "I *am* Mrs. Rudd." Since both Boswell and Mrs. Rudd are consciously manipulating one another, exercising their conversational talents, and using facial expressions, hand gestures, and other body movements to gain the upper hand, it is perhaps not so easy to distinguish the predator from the prey.

Boswell's summary paragraph at the end of the dramatic scene provides some rather significant clues as to who exactly is the

manipulator and who the manipulated. Boswell concludes that during all this interview "I was quite calm and possessed myself fully, snuffed the candles and stirred the fire as one does who is at home, sat easy upon my chair, and felt no confusion when her eyes and mine met."

Obsessed with the idea that an enchantress has eyes capable of charming her intended victim, Boswell notes that "her eyes did not flash defiance but attracted with sweetness, and *there* was the reason of the difference of effect between her eyes and those of more insolent or less experienced charmers." His departing gesture is a kiss, which she accepts "without affectation of any kind."

The following line proves to be the telling one: "I was *then* a little confused." While under the spell of her deceptively sweet eyes, Boswell remains self-confident and composed. Once outside "Circe" Rudd's circle of influence, he becomes confused.

Having "never hinted at an intrigue," Boswell is left wondering what she thinks of him. Why has he failed to figure this out during their conversation? It pleases him that she never asks his name or "anything at all" about him, for it shows "perfect good breeding." Pottle and Ryskamp's interpretation of this incident seems valid:

True she did not ask his name "or anything at all" about him, but it was not, we suspect, because of "perfect good breeding." It was because she knew he would come back and tell her of his own accord.⁶

It is difficult to disagree with Boswell's concluding comment on this extraordinary conversation piece: "I would not for a good deal have missed this scene."⁷

NOTES

¹Boswell's letter to his wife concerning his first interview with Margaret Caroline Rudd may be found in *Boswell: The Ominous Years, 1774-1776*, ed. Charles Ryskamp and Frederick A. Pottle (New York, 1963), pp. 355-361. It is headed as follows: "London, between 12 and 1 in the morning of 23 April 1776." In a prefatory editorial note (pp. 352-355), Ryskamp and Pottle have collected and condensed information on the personal history of Mrs. Rudd previous to her meeting with James Boswell on 22 April 1776. As there is no information on Mrs. Rudd in the *DNB*, Pottle reports that he has relied heavily on two sketches of her career by Mr. Horace Bleackley in *Some Distinguished Victims of the Scaffold and Trials of Henry Fauntleroy and other famous Trials for Forgery*, both books "based on extensive research in

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eighteenth-century periodicals." My information is based on Ryskamp and Pottle's account.

²*The Private Papers of James Boswell from Malahide Castle in the Collection of Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Heyward Isham, ed. Geoffrey Scott and Frederick A. Pottle, 18 vols. (Mount Vernon, N.Y. [privately printed by Rudge], 1928-1934), 16: 122. Regarding Mrs. Rudd, Johnson exercised caution in his own conduct. On 28 April 1778, Boswell recorded:*

We talked of visiting Mrs. Rudd. Dr. Johnson said, "Fifteen years ago I should have gone to see her." SPOTTISWOODE. "Because she was fifteen years younger?"

JOHNSON. "No, Sir. But now they have a trick of putting everything into the newspapers." [*Boswell in Extremes, 1776-1778, ed. Charles McC. Weiss and Frederick A. Pottle (New York, 1970), p. 322.*]

³*The Ominous Years, p. 355.*

⁴*The Ominous Years, p. 354.*

⁵*The Ominous Years, p. 357.*

⁶*The Ominous Years, p. xiv.*

⁷*The Ominous Years, p. 361.*