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Life and Death Stuff

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The Emperor’s Children by Claire Messud
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The Emperor’s Children is an expansive novel, with multiple plots recounted from multiple perspectives, but it circles around three friends who met more than a decade before at Brown. Like most graduates of America’s elite colleges, they are filled with a sense of their own promise. But now that they have turned 30 they are beginning to see that promise might not be enough. The book of cultural criticism that Marina Thwaite had contracted to write eight years earlier is still not finished, and Julius Clarke’s ‘devastating but elegant’ book reviews have not been followed by a novel of his own. Reflecting on this failure, he suspects that ‘some actual sustained endeavour might be in order.’ The third friend, Danielle Minkoff, works as a documentary producer, and at first glance seems to have achieved more than the others. But she has not yet managed to get a documentary made and spends much of the novel trying to think of a pitch that will succeed: if not slave reparations or revolution then perhaps the dangers of liposuction. Still, Danielle does at least hold a job, which the other two are reluctant to do. ‘I worry that will make me ordinary,’ Marina explains, ‘like everyone else.’ In a novel where everyone is always talking and thinking about ambition, the three college friends give it another name: entitlement. ‘It all came down to entitlement, and one’s sense of it,’ Julius reflects at the novel’s beginning, and Danielle concludes at its end: ‘We’re all of us entitled. Comparatively, I mean. We’re so lucky we don’t know we were born.’

These are the children of the novel’s title. The emperor to whom they pay homage – cynically, sceptically, wholeheartedly – is Marina’s father, the famous Murray Thwaite. The author of endless articles in the *New Yorker* and the *New York Review of Books* and of a monthly column in a political magazine, Thwaite has also published 12 books on subjects ranging from covert war in Latin America to neo-liberal economics. He views the younger generation with impatience and has to remind himself to treat his daughter and her friends as the adults they are, not as the children they seem to be, and to squelch the urge to tell them to ‘Grow up, grow up!’ He is the standard against which the younger generation measures itself, the example of ambition fully achieved, and achieved early. And yet he, too, has an unfinished manuscript in his drawer, entitled ‘How to Live’.

Into this stalled world come two new characters, young men ready to take the metropolis by storm. The first is the emperor's forgotten nephew, the unfortunately named Bootie Tubb. Admitted to Harvard but unable to afford it, Bootie attended a minor state university for a few months before dropping out to educate himself. He tries and fails to read the longest novels he can find, but the only thing that really speaks to him is Emerson's essay on unrecognised genius. Convinced that he is just such a genius, he decides to move to New York. The other new arrival is Ludovic Seeley, a rising young editor from Sydney. Backed by a Murdoch-like publisher, he comes to New York to start a magazine that will make his name around the world. He passes himself off as a revolutionary, although it is never clear what he takes revolution to mean. He sets out to show that 'the emperor has no clothes, and the grand vizier has no clothes, and the empress is starkers too.' Once these characters arrive, the novel's plots get underway. The new arrivals challenge the emperor's reign, but they also prompt changes in the lives of the college friends. The new magazine provides employment for several, and each of them falls in love. It seems that they might be ready at last to come of age.

An accomplished novelist of manners, Claire Messud writes in the tradition of Jane Austen, Henry James and Edith Wharton. Her first novel, *When the World Was Steady*, even nods to Austen through one of its plots, which involves a vicar and a spinster; its other plot, however, recounts the adventures of an Australian divorcée among the expatriates of Bali: the novel of manners is capacious, after all. Equally interested in tea-drinking and pot-smoking, in chaste attachments and promiscuous sex, Messud looks at the codes that regulate our social worlds with a cool ethnographer's eye. She uncovers the rules that organise the expatriates' seemingly chaotic households, where past and present lovers live alongside hangers-on of all kinds, and smugglers and drug-runners drift in and out. In her second novel, *The Last Life*, she offers a similar analysis of groups of teenagers gathered on the French Riviera and in the Boston suburbs. What looks like friendship, it turns out, is mostly inertia, interrupted by manoeuvrings for status and occasional expulsions.

Messud is equally sensitive to the comfort that social rituals can provide. The novella 'A Simple Tale' describes an old housecleaner whose husband is dead and son estranged. The most meaningful event in her life is the lunch she shares with her employer once a week, most of all the tea that brings the meal to an end. She values the familiarity of this ritual, the fact that her employer always offers the tea, and she always accepts it, with exactly the same words. She values too the brief equality it creates, the 'satisfying moment when Mrs Ellington, so imperious, poured the boiling tea from the flowered pot into her, Maria's, waiting cup'. When Mrs Ellington finally enters a nursing home, when the flowered pot is given away, we can see what a loss it is.

Messud employs two distinct styles. *When the World Was Steady* and 'A Simple Tale' are classical. The stately, balanced cadences of their sentences bring dignity to lives that might otherwise seem ordinary or even ludicrous. By contrast, *The Last Life* and 'The Hunters'

(published together with 'A Simple Tale') verge on the baroque. Their self-revising clauses, their self-conscious search for the right word, would be excessive were they not so well suited to their protagonists: graduate students reflecting on their childhoods and literature professors slowly going mad.

In *The Emperor's Children* Messud experiments with new forms. Like the 19th-century urban novelists, she represents the range of city life by means of interlocking characters and plots; like the encyclopedic Modernists, she reproduces some of the reviews, interviews and society-page articles that make up the world her novel describes. (The parody of the *New York Times* 'Vows' column is particularly well done.) She also takes up social satire for the first time, abandoning the ethnographer's neutral view to make clear the corruption of the city's manners. New York, as she describes it, is a place where social rituals have sold out to ambition. There are no luncheons but business luncheons; no dinners but award dinners. Even a wedding is timed in order to advertise the launch of the Australian's new magazine.

Satire requires that Messud paint with broad strokes. In her earlier work she had managed to make even the most familiar character types rich and surprising, but here character verges on caricature: the spoiled princess and her bitchy gay friend; the philandering husband and his loyally oblivious wife. The Australian editor, clearly up to no good, flashes a wolflike incisor whenever he appears. Messud allows these shallow people to speak for themselves, devoting a great portion of the novel to dialogue. The emperor has a ready eloquence, though it's rather worn with use, and the Australian publisher makes enigmatic pronouncements that women find compelling for a while. But all the other characters are strikingly inarticulate, and the three college friends are the worst. Fancying themselves intellectuals and wits, they often sound like teenagers hanging out in a mall. 'This is the weirdest time in my life so far,' one announces to another, who replies: 'Good weird, or bad weird?' 'Just weird.' Even worse is what passes for banter among them. Two gay men refer to each other by women's names, the college friends repeatedly mock an ex-boyfriend for being fat, and they refer to the hapless Bootie Tubb as 'Shake Your Bootie'. Messud's satire of these characters is mildly amusing, but it precludes the sympathy that was the great strength of her earlier work.

And when she recounts the thoughts of these characters, her baroque sentences are balked. We see this most clearly when Marina Thwaite is once again trying and failing to finish her long overdue book:

> At her mother's suggestion, then (her father being someone for whom work was inseparable from society, to whom the isolation of Stockbridge without children or house guests was anathema), Marina had retreated to the quiet of the country for what had been dubbed – not by her; she knew it wasn't so – 'the last push' on the book.

Clause after clause separates Marina from the 'last push' needed to finish, and her recognition of her own incapacities ('she knew it wasn't so') is folded into what her mother suggests and her father does. This is the language of impeded ambition, and Messud sacrifices her own style for it.

Messud's other preoccupation is history and its influence. In *When the World Was Steady*, a mother wonders whether her daughters differ from one another so dramatically because only one of them is old enough to remember London being bombed. She is not entirely serious when she thinks this, but she asks a question that Messud's later works will take very seriously. Are individual lives shaped by historical events? 'A Simple Tale' suggests that they aren't. The old cleaner survived collectivisation in the USSR, Nazi forced labour and Allied displaced person camps before arriving in Canada. She and her husband, who suffered even more than she did, never spoke of what happened to them; they set about making a new life. When he dies, she dedicates herself to preserving that new life in the most literal way possible, putting plastic covers on the furniture and plastic runners on the floor. Towards the end of the novella she realises that something in her has been too long denied. But what has been denied is not, as we might expect, the experience of the past, but rather her aesthetic sense. She buys a painting, and the novella ends with her describing it to her employer in lyrical detail. The past is truly past, and the present is full of beauty.

The Last Life suggests, by contrast, that our lives are indeed shaped by historical events, but not in any straightforward way. A typical coming of age story unfolds to contain a three-generation saga, the genre through which the 20th century sought to understand immigration and economic change. The protagonist's grandparents belonged to a French family long settled in Algeria; her father, forced to emigrate to France, became an embittered pied noir; and she herself has left France behind in order to settle in the United States. But while there must be some link between these historical shifts and the fragmenting of the protagonist's immediate family, Messud does not allow us to believe that the connection is obvious or clear.

Given her interest in the relation between historical events and individual lives, it isn't surprising that *The Emperor's Children* should take up the subject of 11 September 2001, an event we believe has shaped us all. The novel begins at a moment when history seems to have come to an end. The characters think of themselves as living in a 'criminally uninteresting' time, the 'dullest times ever'. Only the emperor dissents from this view. Addressing a group of Columbia students, he reminds them that history is not over and politics is not a game. 'Ask people anywhere else – Bosnia, Rwanda, the Middle East, sure, but also China, Algeria, Russia, even Western Europe, and they'll remind you of what you ought to know: this is life and death stuff.' But even the emperor thinks of the 'life and death stuff' as happening elsewhere, not in the United States.

A heavy irony hangs over these passages. The emperor is the first person to mention the year,

but earlier references (to the bursting of the technology bubble, Clinton's impeachment, the non-election of George W. Bush) have already made it clear that the novel is set in 2001. As soon as we discover this, we know all too well what lies at the end of the track. The irony increases when a newly arrived character is told to visit the World Trade Center and again when the magazine launch is scheduled for 13 September. And later, in the final weeks of August, when two characters take jobs in the financial district, we wonder which of them is going to die. This is what passes for suspense in the 9/11 novel: not 'what will happen?' but 'to whom?' And if it leaves us worried about the characters and what will befall them, it also leaves us bored. Recognising this difficulty, Messud finds another way to surprise us. When the novel reaches the early days of September, and our attention is entirely focused on what we know is about to occur, a strange act of violence erupts in an entirely unexpected place. She preserves the shock by relocating its source.

The events of 11 September first unfold through the eyes of the emperor. He looks by chance out of a south-facing window and sees the World Trade Center in flames. His companion turns on the television, and they watch bifocally, one eye on the window and one on the screen. There is little difference, his companion realises, between what is happening in New York and what is seen around the world: only the sound of the sirens, which are slightly out of synch, and the stench of the smoke. Messud understands this and doesn't attempt to give us anything we haven't already seen. The events unfold in all their canonical details: the people jumping from the windows, the ash-covered crowds walking north, the 'missing' signs that were everywhere by nightfall.

Where she departs from other accounts is in suggesting that these events don't necessarily transform lives. One character asks another: 'Is it right, do you think, what everyone's saying – all those people, on TV – that nothing will be the same again?' Messud shows that it is both right and wrong. For some people, nothing will be the same. By the end of the day, anti-Muslim bigotry has already found a voice, and a few weeks later the United States will be preparing to go to war. (The emperor will become even more famous by speaking out against these things.) But for other people, privileged people, nothing has changed. In the world of Messud's novel, the most significant difference is that the two new arrivals, the editor and the autodidact, are now gone. As for the college friends, Julius attends a funeral and Marina begins to worry more about a dirty bomb than about her book. But for the most part their lives return to where the novel began. Their love affairs have ended, the new jobs have disappeared, and Danielle redoubles her research into liposuction. Nothing really touches them. 'We've always been fucking lucky,' Julius says, 'and have just kept right on.' In their privilege, in their obliviousness, in their blindness, these children are the true inheritors of a dangerously entitled nation.

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