LITERARY STUDIES

Invisible Clothes in Messud's *The Emperor's Children*

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The Emperor's Children by Claire Messud observes many different characters leading up to the fall of the Twin Towers on 9/11. These characters—all writers—seem to be following their own paths, but what they have in common is that of exposing truth. This essay explores the theme of truth being exposed by using the analogy of the children's story *The Emperor's New Clothes* to augment this subject. In this tale, it takes a child to reveal the truth that the emperor is not actually wearing any clothes when he fools the adults into thinking otherwise. Who the emperor and the child are changes repeatedly within each of the characters' given pieces. The novel contains excerpts and descriptions of the characters' writings, which are examined and compared to scholar's writings in our world that cover similar topics. This illustrates the truths that are being revealed about the writers and others through the characters' works. The climactic event of 9/11 is also related to the children's tale proving the overall novel itself to be an additional example of unmasking truth. Each are examples of an external force that exposes the truth of the emperor's nakedness. In comparison, society must strive to recognize the state of its clothing before the truth is glaringly exposed to the world.

The Emperor's Children by Claire Messud covers the lives of three friends, their families, and their associates leading up to the destruction of the Twin Towers on 9/11. Each of these characters are in the journalist world of New York, but they are in different spheres from each other. Despite being close friends for years, the novel shows Danielle, Marina, and Julius all feeling a bit lost as they near their thirties. Marina is writing a book on children's clothing, while her father, Murray, writes about political problems and is currently working on a book entitled *How to Live*. Danielle works in producing documentaries, and Julius writes book and movie reviews. Marina's cousin, Bootie, wants to be a great intellectual, so he reads works like *War and Peace* and writes an article about his famous uncle. Ludo, who ends up marrying Marina, is beginning a magazine designed to critique all the critics. This novel offers excerpts and reasoning behind each of these character's works. Each character uses text—sometimes inadvertently—to reveal themselves or others. *The Emperor's Children* explores the theme of exposing truth through the presented writings of these characters and the materials they read.

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Marina Thwaite's book is what gives Messud's book its title. She began it years before but lost her enthusiasm for it when she could not find a reason for it to be important. Then, when she is with Ludo, it comes to her: "She felt she finally understood what 'clothing' was about... the masquerade, the charade of it all" (Messud, 2006, p. 224). She was able to dive into her book and finally finish it once she realized that the children's clothing was a reflection of the baggage of the parents. She names the book *The Emperor's Children Have No Clothes* in reference to the children's story, *The Emperor's New Clothes*. In the children's story, some mischief-makers convince the emperor and citizens that they cannot see the clothes, and the emperor goes out in a parade believing he has invisible clothes. The Emperor and the people are not willing to admit that he might be naked until a child cries out from the crowd, "The emperor has no clothes!" This analogy is used often by critics to state that while everyone may think or act like this person or group is wonderful, they are not. It is all a facade to hide the fact that they have bad motives or are hollow underneath.

Ludo explains why this is a good title for Marina's book: "Marina Thwaite reveals the forms and patterns that both are and lie beneath the fabric of our society. In so doing, she bares children, their parents, and our culture at large to an unprecedented and frank scrutiny and in her truth-telling, shows us incontrovertibly that the emperor's children have no clothes" (Messud, 2006, p. 227). Marina's book is about more than just children's clothing. It studies children's clothes in a sociological sense and shows how their clothing reveals the adult culture that surrounds the children. A child is unable to choose what clothing their parent buys for them and puts on them. In this way, they reflect their parents and their parent's culture and society.

Olga Boitsova and Orekh Ekaterina (2018) have written an article on the color of children's clothes in the USSR. Their article is one that Marina would have cited in her novel, perhaps devoting a whole chapter to their thoughts on the color pink. In Boitsova and Ekaterina's article, they discuss what colors, especially pink, have to do with social position and gender roles. They agree with other researchers, stating that analyzing a given time period's cuts and hues can allow researchers to "make inferences about their meaning as symbolic markers of social processes" (p. 100). Hence, clothing is not just clothing—a philosophy which Marina strives to make in her novel. Marina's father, however, does not understand this nuance, so he does not appreciate her book. Marina's father does not like her book because he feels it is not of a good subject. He does not let himself see what children's clothing reveals about civilization. He fails to see that Marina's book goes beyond the subject matter and sets out to reveal and expose the parents in society for what they are heaping onto their children with each piece of clothing.

Murray Thwaite, meanwhile, has written many books and articles and has given many speeches and lectures, but he also has a book he is working on secretly—his life's work. He has entitled the book *How to Live*. Murray admits his title is a bit pretentious, but he believes it goes beyond the government reforms and social movements that he usually covers, and he focuses on every

and all people in their regular lives. We only learn the title of one chapter, "Talking to a Grown Child," which he begins to pen after a conversation with his daughter on what she should do with her life. The conversation goes well, but it seems ambitious to believe that after a single talk, he can now authoritatively write about how best to do it.

Neil Postman was also a scholarly writer and lecturer who is described as a culture critic. Janet Stenberg (2017) was his assistant and has shared one of his lectures, entitled "How to Live the Rest of Your Life." He called it his "Final Lecture," just as Murray calls his book his life's work. In the speech are 27 points which range from "Do not go and live in California" to "Seek significance in work, friends and family" and "Under no circumstances ever vote for Republican. Unless you're rich. Period" (p. 529-533). In these, the author combines humor with sound wisdom and shows what sort of man Postman was.

Murray's book, however, would not be as jovial, and he would want it to be taken much more seriously. Stenberg states, "If we boost Postman's ideas up the abstraction ladder... I think you will discover, as I have, that Postman offered us wise advice indeed" (p. 535). Postman names off several ways on how to live, but they are described as abstract guidance. Murray's would be specific advice for specific occasions, as shown through his chapter on talking to his daughter. His endeavor would not have been as well received as Postman's.

How to Live reveals Murray's character. Bootie, his nephew, knows this from the first moment he sees the manuscript: "Murray Thwaite was here revealing himself—not his ideas, but his thought; himself—and this, if only Bootie could read it, would prove the measure of the man" (Messud, 2006, p. 216). Ultimately, this disappoints Bootie because he sees the novel as "pretentious and trite" (Messud, 2006, p. 242). To Bootie, Murray's novel shows that he is an arrogant fraud. On the surface, he is famous and extremely well liked, an emperor. Underneath he is not a great genius; he is filled with hollow intelligence. His response to Marina's book is also telling of his character. He tells her that different topics can be important to different people. Then, he recommends her to not publish her book, as it is trivial (Messud, 2006, p. 73, 322). He proclaims high notions, but in practice, Murray is high-minded and cares only for his own pleasure. The maid sees this without the help of his writing, saying, "Wasn't it funny that everyone pretended that Mr. Murray was an easy man. Even with one another, they pretended" (Messud, 2006, p. 222). Everyone pretends that the emperor is wearing clothes.

Bootie decides to write an exposé on Murray because of his disappointment. Readers receive only a few excerpts from his article, but we also gain knowledge of what is said through the giant reactions of his mother, Marina, and Murray. In the excerpts, we learn that he is not a terrible writer, but he does tend to use confusing words and phrases.

In an attempt to make it less partial, he changes the title from "Murray Thwaite: A Disappointed Portrait" to "Murray Thwaite: A Portrait" (Messud, 2006, p. 282, 330). Milind Tullu (2019) wrote an article about how to write

titles. He would have described the first title as a declarative title: "This title states the main finding of the study in the title itself; it reduces the curiosity of the reader, may point toward a bias on the part of the author, and hence is best avoided" (p. S13). The second title would be described as a neutral one, and it avoids the bias inherent in the former. Bootie removes his bias out of the title but, based on other characters' responses, it is still viewed as firmly placed within the text. Bootie believes this is a great piece and that it is the truth; but, his opinion is wrapped so tightly within, and his facts are so confusingly strung together, that his article and he, himself, lose any credibility they might have had. Bootie has grand visions of being an emperor like Murray but desires to be wearing clothes. His clothes are not invisible or false, but are like fake, gaudy jewelry. His article reflects his true thoughts, but they are cheap and without substance or validity.

Bootie's article also acts out the part of the child who shouts that the emperor has no clothes. Though the people who read it do not like it, they begin to think about it. Marina says, "I found myself wondering whether his criticisms are legitimate, and maybe actually in this book the great Murray Thwaite really does reveal himself to be, I don't know, less thoughtful, or less interestingly thoughtful—I mean, he suggests he's even a little bit shallow" (Messud, 2006, p. 340). Even Murray keeps thinking, "What if this kid is right?" (Messud, 2006, p. 344). Bootie sets out to tell the truth, and, while nobody is happy about it, they cannot help but pay attention.

There are two other articles in the book that are written about the Thwaites. One is by a college student called "Introducing Murray Thwaite," and on the first page it describes him as "versatile," "erudite," "handsome" and "dynamic" (Messud, 2006, p. 53). The other went into *The New York Times* and is about Marina's wedding. It lays out the beauty and glamour of the event while describing Marina as a "second sun in the glorious late summer afternoon" (Messud, 2006, p. 371). These articles show how the world views the Thwaite family's clothes as resplendent. Bootie's article seeks, and succeeds in a small way, to reveal the holes in their clothing and the emperor's nakedness.

Ludo Seeley wants to publish Bootie's article in his magazine to get the public talking. He wants his rag to be the voice that reveals the nakedness of the emperor. In fact, Ludo is the one who introduces the metaphor into the book when explaining his magazine to Danielle. At the beginning of the novel, Danielle is working on a documentary about reparations with the Aborigines in Australia, but her boss says it is not "timely enough" (Messud, 2006, p. 40). She tries other ideas in an effort to reveal issues going on. In America, the Aborigines might not be important, but in Australia they are. Danielle is in a losing effort of exposing matters.

Julius writes to reveal whether a book or movie is worth it to read or watch. When asked to do an exposé, he slightly considers doing one of himself: "*Julius sera exposé. Julius a été exposé. Julius a voulu être exposé*" (Messud, 2006, p. 250). From French this roughly translates to "Julius will be exposed. Julius was exposed. Julius wants to be exposed." He is able to reveal bits of media for what

they are but is unable to expose himself. His relationship is not going well, but he refuses to see it—even though he wants to. He pretends he is wearing clothes.

Julius and Bootie both read and talk to others about the novel, *War and Peace*. For Julius, he tries to decide whether he is more of an intellectual, like Pierre, or more of a social butterfly, like Natasha. Leo Tolstoy, the author of *War and Peace*, is very good at exposing human nature, and Julius hopes that, through the characters within his book, he can find himself. However, by trying to fit himself into one box or the other, Julius missed some of Tolstoy's teachings. One lesson that can be learned from the Russian novel is that “people are never entirely consistent, that character includes acting out of character” (Morson, 2019, p. 6). If he uses this book as a guide, Julius should have realized that no one can entirely be the socialite or bookworm. His feelings, thoughts, and self can be complex and complicated. Aleksandr Genis (2007) states that Tolstoy's novel contains “the sense that in it, life is completely, even exhaustively, depicted” (p. 81). Julius attempts to use this depiction of life to expose and discover himself.

War and Peace reveals life just as it reveals Bootie's character. After reading it, Bootie attempts to write a paper on the wandering of Pierre after the fall of Moscow, but he does not feel he can relate. He does not know what it is like to “be alone and at the limit in the middle of a historic event” (Messud, 2006, p. 206). Then it does happen to Bootie: At the fall of the World Trade Center he has to decide what to do. Pierre runs to help people; Bootie runs away. He lets his family believe he is dead and begins a new life. This comparison reveals how selfish Bootie can be.

In addition to the characters literary activities within the book, *The Emperor's Children*, itself, is set as a work that reveals and exposes through its climactic event. When the planes hit the Twin Towers, everyone is suddenly exposed. The whole country is not as safe as the citizens previously thought. Before 9/11, they called the United States the Virgin Land—there had been no foreign attack on its soil. This very idea already reveals some inconsistencies, such as 1812, which is considered too long ago to count, and Pearl Harbor, which was in Hawaii, not the mainland. “The myth that America was a Virgin Land endowed the historical fact that US soil had never before been subjected to foreign violation with a moral rationale: Virgin Land was inviolate because the American people were innocent” (Pease, 2010, p. 639). The US people believe that they are innocent of any wrongdoing, and that is why they have a land clean from foreign attack. They set up not one, but two towers to be the tallest in the world. Through those towers, the US channels the world trade in order to show their domination. They are a symbol of pride and might in their empire. 9/11 shouted out, “The Emperor has no clothes!”

The emperor's children—the people of the US—think they are innocent. They ignore the contradictions to their title of the Virgin Land. They forget how most of their European ancestors are the foreigners who fought the native inhabitants of their land. The US can be subject to attack just as any other

country. The title of Virgin Land and the rationale of their innocence are false clothes. Just as Murray Thwaite is not as good a man as he seems, the Virgin Land is not as clean.

The Emperor's Children delves into the theme of exposing truth. Marina's book explores what children's clothing reveals about society. Murray's book exposes his grand ideas but inability to live them. Bootie writes a poor, but intriguing, exposé on Murray to reveal the state of his clothes. Ludo, Danielle, and Julius attempt to reveal different issues but have little success. *War and Peace* exposes some of Julius and Bootie's character. 9/11 reveals the holes in the United States' clothing of exceptionalism.

In each case, it takes some outside force to make the truth known. Hopefully, in our own lives, we may be able to see the true state of our clothes before that outside force steps in. As Amy Greer (2006) states, "The emperor may have no clothes, but when I hold up a mirror to my soul, I want to be wearing some" (p. 26). As we place ourselves into the world, let us make sure that our clothes are real and genuine.

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