

MYSTIC IN THE SAVAGE STATE

by David A. Miller

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CHARACTERS

MARY INIGO CALKINS, Professor of Psychology & Philosophy, Wellesley College

DR. BERTRAM BAILEY, Professor of Neurology, Harvard University

VIOLET THOMPSON, An undergraduate student at Wellesley College

HENRY GREENE, A graduate student at Harvard University

A chorus of synesthetes:

YELLOW, also plays Mrs. Nabokov

ORANGE, also plays young Vladimir Nabokov

RED, also plays Berlioz and Putnam

TIME AND PLACE

Fall of 1892 through the fall of 1912. Wellesley College, Harvard University, Massachusetts General Hospital and New York City.

PLAYING THE PRISM SCENES

The mark “//” denotes an overlap of spoken text. It is not an overlapping interruption (as “/” may be) but an additive overlap.

As a general rule, when first reading the Prism scenes, unless otherwise noted, the voice that overlaps the previous voice should take precedent when it enters and the previous speaker should drop their volume. Actors should not compete to be heard equally. This is a rule that can, of course, be broken once in rehearsal as the company makes choices about how to orchestrate the voices. They will likely be a saturating experience for the audience, but should have only rare moments of cacophony (if at all).

During each of the Prism scenes, the audience should be engaged through sight and sound simultaneously. One may be more dominant than the others at any given time, but always simultaneous. For example, if a single voice is speaking, there should also be the presence of light or sound or movement on stage.

SCENE 1 – FIRST DAY LECTURE

(The fall of 1892. CALKINS at a lectern.)

CALKINS

The tourist in Greece, wandering over the grounds of a recent excavation, sees a fragment of marble, and sees it simply as ‘some part of a temple.’ The trained archaeologist examines the very same bit of stone and finds traces of half-obliterated flutings. Without hesitation, the archeologist sees it as a piece of the triglyph of a particular temple.

The untrained ear hears only a multitude of bird-notes, all singing together, a mish-mash of sound. The naturalist, on the other hand, recognizes this as the notes of the oriole, and the trills of a warbler, hearing them as if simultaneously.

The casual observer sees a scarred rock, but the geologist identifies the marks on its weather-beaten surface as glacial scratchings. The casual observer knows nothing of the close observation of the analytic and systematic classification of the scientist. ⁱⁱ

But this isn’t a science class, you say? Psychology is the *scientific* study of behavior and mental processes. Psychology is the *science* of consciousness.

To be scientific is not the exclusive domain of the hard sciences. These objects, viewed *scientifically*, are changed. Or, rather, they themselves are not changed but the understanding of them is given a greater depth. I challenge you to look at objects—to look at the world—without assumptions. There are *more* than two sides to every coin in our line of thinking.

The bit of stone, the bird-notes, a child’s toy, the letter L, the number 3, happiness. Each of us encounters these objects, but perceives them from a unique point of view. Why? How? Let’s ask questions. Let’s investigate.

VIOLET

(From the house.)

Can you please repeat that Professor Calkins? The phrase—“The casual observer...”

CALKINS

“...knows nothing of the close observation / of the analytic and...”

VIOLET

...of the analytic and systematic classification of the scientist.” Yes. Thank you very much.

CALKINS

Now. As scientific investigators— *(CALKINS sees another hand raised in the house.)*
Yes?

YELLOW

Will this be on the exam?

CALKINS

That is always a possibility. Now. As scientific investigators, of the psychologist variety—and this semester you are not only students, you are not only young women, you are challenged to think like psychologists, to perceive what only the psychologist can see because she has trained her eye to see through a particular, discriminating lens.

Next week I begin a new study on color associations. You can be a subject for the study. If you participate, you will be simply be asked series of questions about how you experience the world. The details are posted outside the department chair's door and—*(Again CALKINS looks to house to see a hand raised.)* Yes?

YELLOW

Is this a requirement?

CALKINS

No, this is not a requirement of the course. But if you participate, I will be most pleased by your participation. I imagine that you will be pleased as well. Now, no more questions, for the time being. Let's get focused. Let's get to work. When we turn to the contrast // between science and philosophy...

(CALKINS continues to lecture as lights change.)

PRISM A – TESTIMONIALS

(CALKINS walks away from the lectern and through a growing prism of light. Three figures on stage are revealed. They are the chorus of the every-synesthete: YELLOW, ORANGE, and RED. CALKINS pursues them and their answers.)

ORANGE

The letter L.

YELLOW

The number 3.

RED

The high notes.

ORANGE

Happiness.

YELLOW

Golden Yellow.

Green. ORANGE

The colors change. RED

Question One. CALKINS

ORANGE
The letter “L” is not only colored in itself a clear green, but brings with it the actual vision of a green budding tree.

RED
As I play the notes from low notes through middle to high, the colors change for each note in slight gradations.

YELLOW
When I think of the number three, I image the Arabic digit projected into dark space with an explicit golden-yellow color spread around it, as though projected by a spotlight. ^{iv}

CALKINS
Question Two.

ORANGE
Happiness, as a word or an emotion, produces green. All desire is green, storm is green, as is also the letter “A.” // “E” is red, “B” and “C” are purple. ^v

RED
(Overtakes Orange)
The notes go from the purples and blacks and dark browns, through greens and mid browns to bright colors like yellow and white. So as I play, // these colors will be changing in my mind. ^{vi}

YELLOW
(Under Red)
The 20s are gray; the 30s are yellow; the 40s, olive green; the 50s blue; the 60s white; the 70s, gold; the 80s, bright green; the 90s, orange. ^{vii}

CALKINS
Question Three.

RED
To close my eyes is to at once usher in a giant kaleidoscope // with its never ending play of color. ^{viii}

ORANGE

To close my eyes is to at once usher in a giant kaleidoscope // with its never ending play of color.

YELLOW

To close my eyes is to at once usher in a giant kaleidoscope with its never ending play of color.

(The prism of light loses its color. CALKINS and ORANGE are left in stark white light.)

ORANGE

Can I borrow your crayons?

(ORANGE walks away as lights change. CALKINS walks into her office.)

SCENE 2 – VIOLET’S FIRST VISIT

(CALKINS’ office. CALKINS works at her desk. VIOLET, young, eager, smartly dressed, arrives at the open door.)

VIOLET

Dr. Calkins.

CALKINS

Professor Calkins. Yes?

VIOLET

I have been thinking about what you said on Monday. And I want you to know that I am taking this line of study seriously.

CALKINS

Very good. Then you can sign up outside the department office for—

VIOLET

No, I don’t want to be a subject. I want to study the subject. With you.

CALKINS

Well, first we need—

VIOLET

To be your assistant. To assist you in any way possible. I can make coffee—or tea, do you like tea? Whatever it is that you need.

CALKINS

I don't need tea. I need to investigate.

VIOLET

I can do that.

CALKINS

I don't take on student assistants.

VIOLET

Never?

CALKINS

I never have.

VIOLET

Then I shall be the first.

CALKINS

I don't think so.

VIOLET

I have an acute sense of perception.

CALKINS

You do.

VIOLET

I do. I have always noticed things that others do not. At parties, at someone else's party, when the doorbell rings in the host's house, I have been known to hear it before they do.

CALKINS

Very specific.

VIOLET

And I can apply this to the observations of subject responses. I know that I can. Keen perception. That's what I bring. And, or, I can make tea or run errands or whatever it is that needs doing.

CALKINS

A versatile vita.

VIOLET

I am going to be a giant in my field of study.

CALKINS

Ambitious. And you're a fresh—

VIOLET

A freshman. Yes. Violet. Violet Thompson.

CALKINS

Ah, yes. You had one of the highest entrance exam scores.

VIOLET

The highest.

CALKINS

The highest? You are certain?

VIOLET

Yes. I am certain, Dr. Calkins.

CALKINS

Professor. I have no PhD.

VIOLET

But you *should*. You earned it.

CALKINS

But I don't. I am *Professor* Calkins. Or Mary. To those who know me. But never "Dr."

VIOLET

Yes, Professor Calkins.

CALKINS

I don't need an assistant. If I should need clerical assistance, I will go to the department pool. If you are so interested in assisting, apply with them.

VIOLET

I am not interested in assisting just anyone on anything. I am deeply interested in the workings of the mind. I know, I know, I suppose you could say that is true of *anyone* taking the course.

CALKINS

I would not say that. As this is the first time the course is offered at Wellesley, I don't know that the common student is as intentional as that.

VIOLET

Now that is hard to believe.

CALKINS

Furthermore, many students here don't believe that they will have any use for their studies beyond graduation day.

VIOLET

That is certainly not what I believe.

CALKINS

No?

VIOLET

No. I am interested—more than interested, I am devoted. I am a psychologist.

CALKINS

You are.

VIOLET

Yes?

CALKINS

You have joined this emerging field at a tender age.

VIOLET

There's no time like the present, as they say.

CALKINS

Perhaps I should be learning from you.

VIOLET

Does that mean that I got the job?!

CALKINS

No.

VIOLET

But I'm ready to start today. Right now. I'll do anything.

CALKINS

Contain your readiness. I work best by myself.

VIOLET

I can stay here all afternoon, if there's anything that you need. Anything at all.

CALKINS

That most certainly won't be necessary.

VIOLET

But one never knows...

CALKINS

I won't be here.

VIOLET

Oh. I'll be back tomorrow then.

CALKINS

Why?

VIOLET

To see if you've changed your mind.

CALKINS

Where did you learn this tenacity, Miss Thompson?

VIOLET

My mother. She always said, "Live with no regrets." And I would hate to have missed out on the chance to work with you, Professor Calkins.

(A moment. CALKINS puts on her coat.)

VIOLET

Are you travelling somewhere today, Professor Calkins?

CALKINS

Yes.

(CALKINS picks up crayons off the desk.)

VIOLET

Are those crayons?

CALKINS

Yes. *(Puts the crayons in her coat pocket.)* Good day, Miss Thompson.

VIOLET

Good day, Professor Calkins. Thank you for your time.

(VIOLET exits. MARY alone for a moment, she takes the crayons out of her pocket. Looks at them. Puts them in her pocket and walks out the door. Lights change.)

SCENE 3 – VIOLET RETURNS

(The next morning. CALKINS' office. CALKINS is at work, VIOLET is at the door and knocks gently, but energetically.)

VIOLET
Good morning, Professor Calkins.

CALKINS
8:00am?

VIOLET
Carp the diem.

CALKINS
Carpe diem.

VIOLET
Yes, seize the day. That's what they say.

CALKINS
Once again, tenacious.

VIOLET
Thank you.

CALKINS
That is an observation.

VIOLET
Yes.

CALKINS
Not necessarily a compliment.

VIOLET
Oh.

CALKINS
Of course, it could be.

VIOLET
Yes.

CALKINS
How do you imagine that working with me would be helpful to you?

VIOLET

Isn't it obvious?

CALKINS

Not at all.

VIOLET

Because you are the trailblazer. You are the *avant garde*.

CALKINS

I don't know that I am. Besides, *I* am not the subject of study.

VIOLET

You might as well be. Mary Inigo Calkins: You *are* Psychology. Why else would you have been asked to be the first professor of psychology in the *country*?

CALKINS

The first was Dr. James McKeen Cattell.

VIOLET

But you are the first woman.

CALKINS

That is—yes. But my being a woman has nothing to do with my appointment.

VIOLET

It has everything to do with it, in my eyes. In all our eyes. I want to be you, Professor Calkins.

CALKINS

Be careful what you wish for.

VIOLET

Why? Why wouldn't I want to have the illustrious career that you have? I can't imagine that I would want anything more if I were in your shoes.

CALKINS

A career is not a life.

VIOLET

Sure it is. It's everything, isn't it?

CALKINS

It is not.