

Issues in Kennedy Suit Enjoining Publishers

*The writer is the author of
"The Making of a President."*

To the Editor:

It saddens me to disagree with James Reston, who usually writes with such clarity and eloquence.

But in a rare lapse from excellence, the Dec. 18 column in The Times "The Death of Camelot" confuses where it should most clarify.

The courts will determine the legality of Mrs. Kennedy's suit to enjoin publication of the Manchester manuscript. But beyond legality there are larger questions of morality and obligation—on her part as well as Manchester's. Mr. Reston argues that she should accept the inevitability of fact, and rest silent while her honor and taste are brought in question.

I see the matter otherwise.

By signing an agreement with the Kennedys, Mr. Manchester undertook to write an authorized story. Those of us who write of public affairs would do almost anything rather than sign such a contract. Most of us shrink even from "off-the-record" statements. Yet all who do write professionally of public affairs must on occasion agree to accept confidences—recognizing that once we give our word it is a binding oath of honor.

Commitment Accepted

Mrs. Kennedy admitted Mr. Manchester to the privacy of her memories with the explicit understanding, written and oral, that she would have control of those memories in final form before publication. This understanding has been broken. Mr. Manchester accepted special privilege but repudiated the special obligation that comes with it. Such a commitment, once accepted, removes any writer from pleading freedom of the press or the imperatives of history.

There is a further set of facts: Mrs. Kennedy, whether wisely or not, undertook to make available to Mr. Manchester memories and material from other people, in order to make sure the story of the tragedy would be fully told, while retaining for herself final control of the final manuscript. Many people supplied material at her request which they would never have dreamed of making public except for their trust in her final authority over their use. Since it is widely known that this is an "authorized" story, she is responsible to all

those whom she made available to Mr. Manchester.

If private conciliation could not restore Mr. Manchester's obligation, there was no recourse left to her but to sue. Only thus could she be absolved of her responsibility for what she cannot fully control, or her control be re-established over an account of her private anguish and the confidences of those people she delivered to Mr. Manchester. With great courage and honor she has accepted the pain of this confrontation rather than shirk her responsibility to herself, her children, her friends.

Pledged Word

The issue is not whether Messrs Canfield, Cowles and Attwood—all of them men of the highest integrity—are to be denied freedom of the press. They are victims, too, though in a lesser sense than Mrs. Kennedy. Nor is the issue whether the public has the right morbidly to examine the intimacy of her sorrows; nor yet again whether bootleg publishers publishing bootleg copies of the book around the world make the present argument an exercise in futility.

The issue is whether Mr. Manchester be given an exemption from pledged word, while Mrs. Kennedy is left to bear public responsibility for what she cannot control.

THEODORE H. WHITE

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*An editorial on this subject
appears today.*