

# Forum

*Forum Policy:* Members of the Association are invited to submit letters commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of scholarly and critical interest generally. Decision to publish will be made at the Editor's discretion, and authors of articles commented on will be invited to reply. Letters should be fewer than 1,000 words of text; footnotes are discouraged.

## Lovelace and Impotence

To the Editor:

Judith Wilt's article "He Could Go No Farther: A Modest Proposal about Lovelace and Clarissa" (*PMLA*, 92 [1977], 19–32) opens with a reference to the most preposterous passage in Richardson's *Clarissa* and then proceeds to deal with a "perhaps outrageous hypothesis." The preposterous passage is Lovelace's daydream about raping Anna Howe and her mother on a leased ship in the Irish channel. The "perhaps outrageous hypothesis" is that the actual rape of the drugged Clarissa either was incomplete because Lovelace was impotent—he could go no farther—or was completed by Sinclair and her attendant whores.

Most of the article is very interesting and not very outrageous, but two matters stand firm against the prime thesis. "I could go no farther" is not Lovelace's declaration of incapacity at the moment of truth but a leitmotif governing much of his thinking. How far could he go to curse all womankind by the violation of its purest member?

The motif appears again and again, and though I did not mark all occurrences during my recent rereading of *Clarissa*, I marked half a dozen to serve as a caveat to the Wilt thesis. For example, long before the ultimate rape, Lovelace had carried two important points: he had made Clarissa pass for his wife, and he had made her take up lodgings of his choice. "But having succeeded thus far, he cannot forbear trying, according to the resolution he had before made, *whether he cannot go farther*" (Everyman ed. [New York: Dutton, 1964], II, 207; all italics mine). Lovelace acknowledges Clarissa's perfections and merits but, in answer to Belford's opinion that even such as she can be overcome, declares: "Am I not therefore *obliged to go further?*" (II, 252). "She will have reason to think herself *obliged to the man who has saved her from further reproach*" (II, 253). Anticipating that what had started out as only sexual thievery might well lead to murder, Lovelace declares: "Yet already have I *gone too far?*" (III, 146). Next follows the passage that provides the title for the Wilt article: "And now, Belford, I can *go no farther*. The affair is over. Clarissa lives" (III, 196). The words "Cla-

rissa lives" seem a clear reference to Lovelace's earlier fear that the rape would be her death—as, of course, it eventually was. Another passage that seems a part of the leitmotif occurs when Lovelace, fearing that Clarissa "was *insensible* in her moment of trial," writes to Belford: "Have I *come so far*, and am I afraid *to go farther?*" (III, 279).

The second matter standing firm against the Wilt thesis concerns the paradox that the dying Clarissa is breeding life. Wilt writes: Lovelace's "brilliant flippancy about Clarissa's 'breeding' is profoundly significant for the structure of the last third of the novel," but she holds that "the model for that is not human pregnancy" (pp. 29–30). Lovelace disposes of this last observation by reference to one of Clarissa's meditations, that of 15 July (IV, 6), which contains, among other observations from the Book of Job, the following two passages: "For the arrows of the Almighty are within me; the poison whereof drinketh up my spirit. / For the thing which I greatly feared has come upon me." Of these lines, Lovelace writes to Belford: "But now I have cleared myself of any *intentional* levity on the occasion of my beloved's meditation; . . . I cannot help expressing my pleasure that by one or two verses in it [the *arrow*, Jack, and *what she feared being come upon her!*] I am encouraged to hope, what it will be very surprising to me if it did not happen; that is, in plain English, that the dear creature is in the way to become a mamma" (IV, 38; Richardson's brackets and italics).

Depend upon it, that with an arrow and plain English Lovelace can do great damage to Clarissa and to Wilt. But perhaps Wilt's Modest Proposal about Lovelace and Clarissa is, like Swift's defense of an outrageous hypothesis, intended to self-destruct.

ROBERT M. SCHMITZ  
*Washington University, St. Louis*

*Ms. Wilt replies:*

Yes, indeed, I was under the impression I had argued that "I could go no farther" was a leitmotif governing much of Lovelace's thinking; I am grate-

ful to Robert Schmitz for assembling still more references on the subject. About whether these references point to a fear of capacity, or incapacity, we may just have to agree to disagree. I am, of course, properly alarmed at Schmitz's taking Lovelace so fully at his word all along, and about the pregnancy issue. Schmitz quotes Lovelace as ready to be surprised if a pregnancy does not happen, but then Lovelace is no stranger to surprise, for most of the things he expects to happen do not happen. As for the witty conceit that opens the letter's final paragraph, though I am not surprised that Lovelace has confused himself with the Almighty, I am surprised that Schmitz seems to have done so. Wilt's hypothesis, qua hypothesis, lives.

JUDITH WILT  
*Princeton University*

### Misrepresenting the Eighteenth Century

To the Editor:

After propounding the thesis that, "when Blake was a child" (presumably in the 1760s and 1770s), "the ideal of perfect order had dissolved into the asymmetry of the sublime," "mathematical order" was shifting "to the balance of unequal masses as determined by taste or inspiration," and "it was generally accepted that the arts were becoming more natural," Carl Woodring ("Nature and Art in the Nineteenth Century," *PMLA*, 92 [1977], 194) adds some puzzling remarks: "In the gardens at Versailles every alley hath a brother; it is not so in the Alps. To the rebellious children of the nineteenth century, it seemed just like Enlightened Pope to think that the essence of brotherhood was parallel lines destined never to coalesce."

What Pope complains of in his famous denunciation, in the *Epistle to Burlington*, of the mathematical order and unnatural symmetry of Timon's Villa is that

No pleasing Intricacies intervene,  
No artful wildness to perplex the scene;  
Grove nods at grove, each Alley has a brother,  
And half the platform just reflects the other.  
The suff'ring eye inverted Nature sees,  
Trees cut to Statues, Statues thick as trees.

(ll. 115–20)

The way to do it, Pope says, is rather,

Consult the Genius of the Place in all;  
That tells the Waters or to rise or fall,

. . . . .

Spontaneous beauties all around advance,  
Start ev'n from Difficulty, strike from Chance;  
Nature shall join you, Time shall make it grow  
A work to wonder at—perhaps a stow.  
Without it, proud Versailles! thy glory falls;  
And Nero's Terraces desert their walls.

(ll. 57–58, 67–72)

If one is a specialist in the "rebellious children of the nineteenth century," I suppose one has to see that they are provided with something to rebel against. And if this requires misrepresenting the fact that it was Pope and his contemporaries who initiated the English revolt against the symmetrical French and Dutch garden and led the way in "natural," asymmetrical landscape design, misrepresented they must be. Such are the exigencies of maintaining the "periodization" of literature. Though I don't quite know what Woodring's purpose was in changing Pope's colloquial, "natural" *hath* to the artificial, "Romantic" *hath*, as though he were Keats or Wordsworth.

When I and others have protested at the continuing currency of the bizarre legends about the eighteenth century propagated by nineteenth-century (and later) literary historians and textbooks, we have sometimes been charged with flogging a dead horse. Our thanks to Carl Woodring for demonstrating how full of life and vigor the poor beast still is.

DONALD GREENE  
*University of Southern California*

*Mr. Woodring replies:*

I apologize to Donald Greene for inability to transmit his message to writers of the early nineteenth century or to the Wartons before them. As for our day, I would not wish to obstruct a spirited flogging of error, even when the horses are dead and the donkeys exist only in the eye of the flogger. But assuming a poet as imaginative as Pope who honored reason and order, would he need in 1777 a lingeringly romantic rescue from those who charged him with sanity? Surely Pope supplies the answer: "Let it be seldom, and compell'd by need."

CARL WOODRING  
*Columbia University*

### The Beckett Hero

To the Editor:

The argument of Laura Barge's "'Coloured Images' in the 'Black Dark': Samuel Beckett's Later