

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 one thousand words of text; footnotes are discouraged.

Nature in *Wuthering Heights*

To the Editor:

Because I feel that Margaret Homans has opened discussion on the important question of the function of repression and sublimation in Gothic fiction, I commit to paper my questions and misgivings about her recent article ("Repression and Sublimation of Nature in *Wuthering Heights*," *PMLA*, 93 [1978], 9–19).

First, I wonder if we may conclude that the presence of a "figurative" landscape in *Wuthering Heights* simply and necessarily signals repression or sublimation. From the moment when landscape attracted the attention of Gothic-fiction writer Radcliffe, it was always, at least in part, symbolic or figurative. For Radcliffe, it was almost a spiritual text, topographical signs to read for assurance about the awesomeness and yet the benevolence of God. It was, then, a comfort in a sometimes very uncomfortable human world, a point to which I shall return. For C. R. Maturin, of *Melmoth* fame, landscape was a window, sometimes on heaven and sometimes on the soul, a glass through which he caught glimpses—if dark ones—of important moral truths. On storm clouds passing away, for example, Maturin reflects, "Such, perhaps, will be the development of the moral world. We shall be told why we suffered, and for what; but a bright and blessed lustre shall follow the storm, and all shall yet be light." I do not wish to suggest that for Brontë nature shadows forth either divine attributes or the divine order of things; but I do wish to emphasize that symbolic landscape is hardly unusual in fiction borrowing from Gothic conventions, as *Wuthering Heights* clearly does.

Second, I am not convinced that the absence of literal nature in the novel is the most "significant hole" Brontë creates (or fails to create) for us to ponder. Indeed, I'm still shamelessly unconvinced that nature *is* absent in the novel. Must Brontë have her narrators (or heroine) give us Radcliffian eye-witness descriptions of a mountain to make nature present? The rain-soaked corpse of Heathcliff will do, thank you. What is curiously absent in the

primitive world of *Wuthering Heights* is sophisticated forms of human society. There are neither towns nor social institutions nor even social gatherings in the usual sense receiving much attention from Brontë; and surely this is as significant a lacuna as the lack of literal landscape, suggesting rather dismal prospects for persons who cut themselves off from social intercourse. That brings me to my third point.

Can we be sure that Brontë does not consider language to be adequate to the task of representing nature? What if that isn't her primary interest? What if we grant that Brontë is primarily interested in *people*? I agree with Homans that Brontë's use of metaphor may well be symptomatic of a failure of faith in language to express and, further, that Brontë's use of metaphor may well stem from a profound sense of ignorance or inadequacy. (I refer, as did Homans, to Bloom's recent *Poetry and Repression*.) But Homans fails to ask crucial questions at this point. To express what? Ignorance about what? As I see it, it is not nature before which Brontë cowers and shields her face with metaphors, but human nature. I would amend Homans' statement to read, "Brontë does not consider language to be adequate to the task of representing *human* nature." It is Heathcliff's and Catherine's enigmatic and often destructive impulses that are "sublime," "threatening," and, indeed, even sometimes "unspeakable." (Do we utter the word incest often?) And it is in an attempt to understand these "hearts of darkness" in some neutralizing context—a context that will allow us to forgive them—that Brontë reaches out to nature.

Nature provides her with a fund of analogies that help to describe the indescribable; namely, the irrational, magnetic attraction between Heathcliff and Catherine. (Goethe had utilized metaphors from nature in a similar way earlier in the century with his *Elective Affinities*.) But nature does more for Brontë here: it provides her with a fund of metaphor that renders "natural" that which would otherwise seem "unnatural," even demonic. It provides comfort for Brontë, then, as it had a half century before for Radcliffe, though in a markedly more anthropocentric context. Man's darkest im-

pulses seem more palatable when they are allied metaphorically with the amoral, destructive forces of nature.

I have no doubt created a sufficiently Johnsonian picture of myself by now, opposing inevitable developments in literary criticism by kicking up old rocks; so, in closing, may I reiterate my fascination with this analytical approach to fiction and my thanks to Homans for writing one of the most stimulating essays I've read recently.

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Ms. Homans replies:

Were the portrayal of character the novel's only concern, Syndy Conger's arguments would very likely be correct. There is no discrepancy between her final point and my essay's account of Brontë's use of figures drawn from nature. Brontë finds in nature a language for human passions that would exceed less metaphorical terms, and in using these metaphors she limits her characters. What suggests the model of sublimation, to which Conger takes exception, is that nature does not always act as this comforting ground. A few passages, such as the story about the lapwings' nest, reveal glimpses of an entirely different function for nature and suggest a less neutral origin for these figures. The entire letter, but particularly its second and third points, raises a question about critical assumptions. Why must a novelist have a "primary interest" that belittles all other interests? The point about the novel's lack of "sophisticated forms of human society" is fascinating, but there is no reason why this reading should be exclusive. My essay did not claim a thematic priority for the absence of literal nature in the novel, nor did it suggest that nature was Brontë's primary interest, and I see no competition between Conger's reading and mine. I could argue that my point about the function of nature contributes to our understanding of the larger topic of "people," or that we may learn more about a primary interest by shifting it to the periphery of critical vision. But interpretation need not impose extraneous hierarchies. Equally unnecessary is Conger's boundary between people and nature. My essay concerns not nature but what nature represents, and literal meaning and death have as much to do with humanity as does any overt discussion of character. It is an understandable defense against the disturbing diffuseness of *Wuthering Heights* to try to contain it in one interpretive

scheme, but by widening the scope of criticism we may increase our perception of the novel's richness.

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Second Shepherds' Play

To the Editor:

I write in response to the recent article by Maynard Mack, Jr., "The *Second Shepherds' Play*: A Reconsideration" (*PMLA*, 93 [1978], 78–85). Since I am currently directing a production of the *Second Shepherds' Play* for the Medieval Drama Company of Michigan State University, I would like to pursue his interpretation to examine and clarify what seem ambiguities to me. While proposing much that is valuable to my work, Mack's essay seems to gather and mix literary, theological, dramatic, and theatrical perspectives on the structure and meaning of the play. The *Second Shepherds' Play* offers much to discuss in each of these areas, but while these areas complement one another, they must remain distinct. The problems of the dramatist have always been as distinct from those of the literary critic as the work of the actor has been distinct from them both. I feel that the major thrust of Mack's article is literary and that the presentation of his thesis in the guise of theatrical and dramatic insight unnecessarily confuses, even distorts, his meaning.

The essential argument of Mack's article seems to be that Mak, as the play's "energizer," is the principal instrument by which the Wakefield Master prepares not only the shepherds but also the audience for the entry of Christ into their lives. As such, Mak is the most dramatic character in the play; his antics disrupt a static and despairing world and thus prepare it to witness and accept mysteries and events far stranger and more miraculous than any even Mak could expect. Mack presents this interpretation in a threefold manner, characterizing the play's opening as a "largely choric and undramatic" formal complaint, the business of Mak's theft of the sheep as the transition from the "lyric to the dramatic" (p. 80), and the choric adoration of the shepherds at the Nativity as a return to an essentially undramatic, but now sublime, state of being, "the only appropriate response to a message of such incomparable good news" (p. 84).

The strength of this interpretation is in its fundamentally literary tracing of theme through the movement of the play—the shepherds (and the