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Anneliese H. Smith

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Finding Marian Forrester: A Restorative Reading of Cather's A Lost Lady

by ANNELIESE H. SMITH

RECENT studies of *A Lost Lady* have found Niel Herbert, or perhaps it is more accurate to say they have found him out: he is an unreliable narrator. His view of the heroic days of the railroad aristocracy is a gross distortion; the communal narrator of the novel's opening chapter presents a contrasting picture of that past against which to measure Niel's. That narrator also prepares us for the sexuality of Marian Forrester, the lady who knew herself "attractive in deshabelle," and asks us to sigh "alas" with him for the losses of her life.¹ When Niel cannot accept her sexuality and can make his peace with her only as "a bright, impersonal memory" (p. 171), we must recognize that his needs and deficiencies stand between us and the Forresters. My purpose here is not a character study of Niel Herbert.² My subject is Marian Forrester; I hope to find her and to restore her to possession of her life—and Cather's novel.

Readers who accepted Niel Herbert as reliable narrator, as author's surrogate, found Marian Forrester charming but shallow, weak, and traitorous to the memory and ethical excellence of her heroic husband. If only her potential for nobility had equalled her charm and beauty! If only her *ladyship* had survived the death of her *lord*! Marian Forrester's tragedy was her deficient sense of honor: she chose sexual and material gratification above sacrifice, even though she knew the high value of sacrifice. In this reading Marian Forrester is at the center of Cather's novel, but she stands there in the shadow of her noble husband and she stands condemned by Niel Herbert's judgment. If, however, Niel's judgment is suspect, if he is not Cather's spokesman, then surely Marian Forrester is not guilty, less guilty, or guilty in a different key. Recent criticism is tolerant of Marian Forrester's sexuality, but finally this criticism seems more interested in Niel Herbert's reasons for rejection of Marian's sexuality than in Marian herself. I believe that only as efforts to uncover Niel result in our seeing Marian Forrester more clearly are we actually coming closer to the novel of Willa Cather's intention and execution.

1. Willa Cather, *A Lost Lady* (New York, 1923), pp. 12-13. Subsequent references are indicated in the text.

2. For studies of Niel see especially David Stouck, *Willa Cather's Imagination* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1975), pp. 58-69; Richard Giannone, "Willa Cather and the Human Voice," pp. 21-49, and John J. Murphy, "Willa Cather: The Widening Gyre," pp. 51-74, both in *Five Essays on Willa Cather: The Merrimack Symposium*, ed. John J. Murphy (North Andover, Mass., 1974).

Cather's statements about *A Lost Lady*, in an interview by Flora Merrill, suggest that understanding of Niel's role in the novel is indeed essential to full appreciation of Marian Forrester:

A Lost Lady was a woman I loved very much in my childhood. Now the problem was to get her not like a standardized heroine in fiction, but as she really was, and not to care about anything else in the story except that one character. And there is nothing but that portrait. Everything else is subordinate.

A Lost Lady was written in five months, but I worked with some fervor. I discarded ever so many drafts, and in the beginning wrote it in the first person, speaking as the boy himself. The question was, by what medium could I present her most vividly, and that, of course, meant the most truly.³

We are left to ponder why Cather rejected the first-person narrative. Certainly it had worked well for her in *My Ántonia*, where she had also sought to recreate a woman she remembered vividly from her childhood; but whereas Cather wanted in that novel to focus on the memory—i.e., *my Ántonia*—in *A Lost Lady* she consciously chose to subordinate memory and interpretation. Niel Herbert's Marian Forrester was an incomplete or partial portrait. Nevertheless, Cather chose to retain Niel as the point-of-view character for most of the novel: something about Niel as observer suited Cather's intention. I believe it is his youth and sexual innocence and naiveté. Because his response to Marian Forrester is, at least initially, free of undertones of adult sexual game-playing, he can put us in the presence of an essential Marian Forrester. Cather's belief in the authenticity of the pre-puberty personality is relevant here. In *The Professor's House* she wrote: "The Professor knew, of course, that adolescence grafted a new creature into the original one, and that the complexion of a man's life was largely determined by how well or ill his original self and his nature as modified by sex rubbed on together."⁴ Niel Herbert's earliest apprehensions of Marian Forrester are of *her* "original self," much like Cather's childhood apprehension of Mrs. Silas Garber, the model for Marian Forrester, of whom Cather said, "I wasn't interested in her character when I was little, but in her lovely hair and her laugh which made me happy clear to my toes."⁵ Then, as Niel gradually grows to concern for his lady's character, his very naiveté helps to focus that character, while at the same time holding before us his powerful and truthful, but partial, apprehension.

Consider the scene in which Niel learns of Mrs. Forrester's liaison with Frank Ellinger. As he bends to place his bouquet of wild roses upon her bedroom window sill, he hears "from within a woman's soft laughter; impatient, indulgent, teasing, eager. Then another laugh, very different, a man's. And it was fat and lazy,—ended in something like a yawn" (p.

3. From an interview by Flora Merrill, *New York World*, April 19, 1925, quoted in Mildred R. Bennett, *The World of Willa Cather* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1961), pp. 69-70.

4. *The Professor's House* (New York, 1925), pp. 266-67.

5. Quoted in Bennett, *World of Willa Cather*, p. 69.

86). This is the moment of Niel's disillusionment, but is the reader's attention wholly on Niel? James Woodress thinks so: "the reader, whatever his age or background, experiences that moment of anguish [Niel's anguish]";⁶ but do not some readers feel here for Marian? Are not some readers aware of the discrepancy between what Marian is offering in love and what she is receiving? Is there not some realization that Marian Forrester is at that moment being twice rejected, once by Niel, once by Ellinger? Are not some readers angered by these rejections? Is this moment not part of a pattern of rejection? One thinks of Ned Montgomery, Marian's fiance, shot by another woman's husband. Frank Ellinger's rejection of Marian culminates in his marriage to Constance Ogden. Ivy Peters clearly seeks her less for her own sake than for the ego satisfaction of reducing a Forrester to his level. Niel turns against her when she refuses "to immolate herself" (p. 169). Much that we learn of her second husband, Henry Collins, suggest preoccupation with his needs more than concern for her: Ed Elliott tells Niel that Collins was "a rich, cranky old Englishman," "married twice before," said to be "quarrelsome and rather stingy." Collins "came to drag her away to dinner" when clearly she was enjoying her meeting with Ed (p. 173). A pattern of masculine self-interest emerges here and reveals Marian Forrester a woman betrayed rather than a woman guilty of betrayal or infidelity.

But what of Captain Forrester? Examination of Niel may reveal his limitations, the other men in Marian's life may be ignoble, but can the Captain's heroic stature be doubted? Surely the Captain's acceptance of his wife's marital infidelity argues his superiority in human compassion. In comparison with the Captain, Marian does appear a weak and shallow creature. Such comparison, however, is unfair, for she is not allowed his scope: in the feudal hierarchical structure of Cather's novel, Marian Forrester is in all aspects of her life dependent on others. Cather suggests that this dependence may violate Marian Forrester's essential being—Marian is not passive, she asserts herself in decisive action and insists upon her life, much to Niel's discomfiture. As the Captain's wife, however, she must fit into his dream—"I planned to build a house that my friends could come to, with a wife like Mrs. Forrester to make it attractive to them. I used to promise myself that some day I would manage it" (p. 53). The Captain is a gracious lord, but a lord nevertheless; and as lord, he has a steward's responsibility. His responsibility to Marian is especially strong because of the age difference between them, which he feels keenly: "It was a habit with him to think of Mrs. Forrester as very, very young" (p. 75). Still, when he must choose between honoring his responsibility to the depositors in the bank of which he was an officer and providing for his wife's financial future, he chooses to impoverish her. His decision is an honorable one, but it is a form of betrayal of the marriage contract,

6. *Willa Cather: Her Life and Art* (New York, 1970), p. 203.

particularly that implied between a well-to-do older man and a beautiful young woman. He chooses to let her pay for his nobility; and although she accepts his choice as a "compliment" (p. 89) to her, again she is subtly betrayed or victimized by masculine self-interest.

Although betrayed, victimized, Marian Forrester wrests a bittersweet triumph from her refusal to assume the role of victim. Her "musical laugh" (p. 41) dominates the novel; years after she's left Sweet Water, Ed Elliott recognizes her by that laugh.⁷ Both Niel and Ed believe her message for Niel: "Tell him things have turned out well for me. Mr. Collins is the kindest of husbands." In their attendant happy confidence "she was well cared for, to the very end" (p. 174), neither man realizes his ignorance of the terms of her life. Neither realizes she has cared for herself rather than been taken care of, and she is, even from the grave, controlling their view of her, ironically binding them in their ignorance. Marian Forrester is thus lost to them, even though lost by them.

As epigraph to *A Lost Lady* Cather chose lines from *Hamlet*, Act IV, scene 5, Ophelia's "Come, my coach! Good night, ladies; good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night." Cather knew *Hamlet* well. In her student essay "Shakespeare and Hamlet," 1891,⁸ her sympathies are with the young prince, "He was very sensitive, he felt intensely, and he suffered more than other people"; but she also describes him as "but a boy." "Frailty, thy name is woman" is "a boy's first glimpse of a thing that he shudders at. It is not light matter to him that women are fickle: his mother is a woman, and Ophelia is one." Parallels with Niel Herbert come easily to mind, as do others. Certainly in *A Lost Lady* "the time is out of joint" and there is "something rotten" in the land. Moreover, in *A Lost Lady*, as in *Hamlet*, women are victims of masculine heroics, self-interest, and ignorance. In 1891 Cather perceived Hamlet's inability to accept his mother as a woman, "committing an error common to women of her day," because he would limit her scope to motherhood. Cather sympathized too with "Ophelia, driven mad." Was Cather perhaps, years later in *A Lost Lady*, playing with *Hamlet*, altering the focus so that its actions must be considered in light of their consequences for the ladies? It is tempting to see in Marian Forrester's dress when she invites Niel to her dinner party for the town boys—"Mrs. Forrester came smiling into Judge Pommeroy's office, wearing a new spring bonnet, and a short black velvet cape, fastened with a bunch of violets" (p. 157)—a subtle variation of Ophelia's "I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died." It is tempting, too, to cite Cather's *A Lost Lady* as answer to the question she raised in a review of *Hamlet* for

7. See Richard Giannone, *Music in Willa Cather's Fiction* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1968), pp. 141-49, for an extended discussion of Marian Forrester's laugh.

8. Reprinted in *The Kingdom of Art: Willa Cather's First Principles and Critical Statements, 1893-1896*, ed. Bernice Slotte (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1966), pp. 426-36.

ANNELIESE H. SMITH

225

the *Lincoln Courier*, November 23, 1895: “Take that one scene in which mad Ophelia metes out to Laertes and the king and queen their destiny in flowers, where else is there anything so delicate?”⁹

State University of New York
Cobleskill

9. Reprinted in *The Kingdom of Art*, pp. 305-08.