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Treacherous Texts: The Perils of Allusion in Cather's Early Stories

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Willa Cather's recent biographer, Sharon O'Brien, suggests that the "intrusive references to male writers" in "The Treasure of Far Island" display a female author's urge to place herself in a tradition from which she feels excluded. Some of the same literary debts are apparent in "The Professor's Commencement," another early Cather story that also appeared in New England Magazine in 1902. While she does not exaggerate the dominance of such allusions, O'Brien does overlook their suitability to the main characters in these particular stories and to Cather's early exploration of the theme of the artist, a theme she develops extensively in The Troll Garden (1905) and The Song of the Lark (1915). Most of the bookish references in "The Treasure of Far island" and "The Professor's Commencement" are generated by a writer, Douglass Burnham, and by an English teacher, Emerson Graves. Their recourse to other men's works is natural but ultimately dangerous. In exposing the danger, Cather -- near the beginning of her literary career -- defies the very tradition upon which she nevertheless draws throughout her life. Her protagonists accordingly mime Cather's own continuing struggles with inherited texts in her effort to achieve not recognition alone but, more important, artistic independence.

As an author, Cather must have identified with Burnham, the "white-fingered playwright" (267), and with the scholarly Graves, whose "delicate, sensitive hands . . . were exceedingly small, white as a girl's" (284). She mentions hands repeatedly in her writing, often as a symbol of literary expression. Yet she provides both stories with women characters who undercut the self-conscious oratory of their men. Burnham, home in Nebraska for the first time in twelve years, tries to cast his childhood friend Margie as a fairy-tale heroine. "What plays have you been play-

2. Homer, Emerson, and Stevenson, for example, are alluded to in both stories. Virginia Faulkner provides publication details in her revised edition of *Willa Cather's Collected Short Fiction, 1892–1912*, Introduction by Mildred R. Bennett (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1970), pp. 593–94. "The Professor's Commencement" was printed in June (New England Magazine, new series, 26 [1902], 481–88) and "The Treasure of Far Island" in October (New England Magazine, new series, 27 [1902], 234–49). Cather did not include either in her story collection; Faulkner discusses the author's generally critical attitude toward her early short fiction (pp. vii–ix). *Collected Short Fiction* is my source for the stories; pages will be cited parenthetically in the text.
“ing?” he asks her. “Pirate or enchanted princess or sleeping beauty or Helen of Troy, to the disaster of men?” (273). Margie insists that she has left such roles behind: “I have grown up and you have not. Someone has said that is wherein geniuses are different; they go on playing and never grow up. So you see you’re only a case of arrested development, after all.”

When Margie and Burnham repeat their youthful trips on the river, he again resorts to traditional texts, linking their island voyage to Arcady, the Happy Isles, Wonderland, and the Jolly Roger. Leaping from the boat, he echoes The Tempest: “Descend, O Miranda, upon your island!” (278). Implicitly, he assumes the role of Prospero, Shakespeare’s master artificer, who—like Burnham—views his fellow characters as actors in a literary plot. On the island, Burnham’s allusions become increasingly classical as he withdraws ever more firmly into his idyllic past. He compares Margie to “Diana’s women” (278), a dryad (279), and the Thracian women who “flayed unhappy Orpheus” (279). Again he identifies himself with an artist who possesses powers of enchantment, but Orpheus is also a pathetic figure, bereft of his love and his lyre. Margie’s retort is once more deflating as she urges Burnham to rest his imagination.

Ironically, Margie forgets “all her vows never to grace another of his Roman triumphs” (282) and ends the story in Burnham’s arms. Typically moderate in her use of literary sources, she finally seems infected by her lover’s classical references and “rhapsodically” reveals that she has outwaited Penelope; she even describes herself in the third person, as if the epic role has absorbed her, and Burnham realizes that she has “caught the spirit of the play” (282). The narrator, however, is similarly affected, and “The Treasure of Far Island,” which opened with a simple fact of geography—“Far Island is an oval sand bar, half a mile in length and perhaps a hundred yards wide, which lies about two miles up from the Empire City in a turbid little Nebraska river” (265)—ends by depicting the same view with debts to Genesis, Exodus, Hellenic myth, and Romeo and Juliet.

Marilyn Arnold finds the closing description “shot through with celestial fire and furbished with romantic profusion,” an example of the “excesses” that are hard to justify in the story.4 Her criticism is appropriate to the final paragraph, where Cather overstates the pastoral-romance element of the resolution. Through most of the story, though, such rhetoric belongs to Burnham, whose nostalgic effort to avoid adulthood disillusionment by regaining “the land of lost content” (282) drives him back to familiar and comforting books. Margie’s analysis of his literary fantasies as arrested development and her fear that Burnham’s proposal of love in terms of the Edenic myth is “only a new play” (281) invest the story with a distrust of the derivative eloquence that troubles Arnold, O’Brien, and many other readers of Cather’s earliest fiction.5

5. David Stouck remarks that pastoral gains its effect “through suggestion” and that “The Treasure of
While Margie and the narrator of "The Treasure of Far Island" both surpass Burnham in the hyperbole of their closing allusions, this triumph of secondhand texts remains comic, and Burnham in fact gives signs of outgrowing literary dependency. In his final speech, he again plays Prospero's part, but just long enough to bid farewell to the island and to his artifice: "the pirate play is ended" (282). Moreover, Burnham has achieved national fame by creating his own varied texts, which include a political farce, the historical drama *Lord Fairfax*, and *The Clover Leaf*, a play that wins Margie's praise.

In contrast, Emerson Graves of "The Professor's Commencement" has little hope of producing a new text, and he twice fails to recite a memorized one. On the eve of retiring, the professor tries to convince himself that he should complete his long delayed history of modern painting, yet he lacks the energy. Exhausted by his teaching efforts, Graves compares himself to "one of those granite colossi of antique lands, from which each traveller has chipped a bit of stone until only a mutilated torso is left," and he realizes that "all his decrepitude was horribly exposed" (289). Unable to compose a new work, the professor turns to an old one, but again he is silenced. At his retirement dinner, where he plans to make good his boyhood failure, Graves is vanquished by the same passage of poetry that had cut short his commencement oration thirty-five years ago. The final words of the story are the professor's lament to his sister, who has drilled him on both occasions: "I was not made to shine, for they put a woman's heart in me" (291).

This conjunction of sex, art, and betrayal (insinuated, perhaps, by the image of the mutilated torso) frames "The Professor's Commencement" and highlights the theme of the treacherous text. Its first occurrence is a description of the professor's library in the opening paragraph. A bachelor, Emerson Graves is introduced as a man bound by two loves: his bookshelves hold equal shares of literary and scientific works, "suggesting a form of bigamy rarely encountered in society" (283). Cather further yokes sex and art by praising the professor's skill in creating a room "as dainty as a boudoir and as original in color scheme as a painter's studio" (283). In this charged setting, Graves approaches a virginal text, an uncut volume of *Huxley's Life and Letters*, whose pages he absentmindedly taps with a paper knife. Half an hour later, he is "caressing his Huxley" (284) as his sister enters the study. The professor's intimacy with the printed word, established thus early in the story, gives him a unique vulnerability.

"Far Island" is overly explicit. On the other hand, he considers the final scene to be effective because "the emotion is genuinely felt but, at the same time, recognized by the protagonists to be a hopeless cliche, a romantic parody. . . . "See *Willa Cather's Imagination* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1975), p. 43.

6. A similar figure occurs later in the story when the professor straightens his schoolroom desk and bookshelves for the last time: "The room had been connected in one way and another with most of his intellectual passions, and was as full of sentimental associations for him as the haunts of his courtship days are to a lover" (288).
More than Douglass Burnham, he is a victim of his exaggerated attachment to the literary tradition, and his inevitable downfall signals Cather's distrust of such devotion.

When Miss Agatha intrudes, she is described as a textual (and a sexual) variant, "a sort of simplified and expurgated edition of himself" (284). A more "masculine" character than her brother, she has no patience with his long struggle to share his knowledge with high school students. She undercuts Graves's borrowed eloquence much as Margie undercuts Burnham's, accusing him of sentimentality and childishness. Miss Agatha's figures owe little to books; she points out that Emerson's "best tools have rusted," that his colleagues are "as envious as green gourds," and that he is "goose enough to accept it all" (285). Graves defends his students by reminding Miss Agatha that "it is in the very nature of youth to forget its sources, physical and mental alike" (285). Ever mindful of his own sources, the professor, unlike Burnham, is never able to separate himself from the works that surround him. Cather stresses the identity of scholar and text: "To an interpretive observer nearly everything that was to be found in the Professor's library was represented in his personality" (283). As Graves surveys the banquet table at his retirement dinner, he reflects that his fellow teachers, bound to their own texts, are still discussing the same subjects that have occupied them for twenty years: "They were cases of arrested development, most of them. Always in contact with immature minds, they had kept the simplicity and many of the callow enthusiasms of youth" (289).

When Margie, in very similar terms, charges Burnham with failing to grow up, she blames his arrested development on his continued "playing," another way of repeating given scripts. Emerson Graves too enacts many parts. His looks are ideal for the stage: "He had the bold, prominent nose and chin of the oldest and most beloved of American actors," and his thick white hair and clear skin give him "a somewhat actor-like appearance" (284). In one of the story's early allusions to betrayal—the Celtic legend of King Marc, his betrothed Isolde, and her lover Tristram—the professor appears to be a moving speaker: "given certain passages from Tristram and Isolde or certain lines from Heine, his eyes would flash out at you like wet cornflowers after a spring shower" (284).

Graves frequently views himself as a participant in similar sad dramas. He fails to sustain relationships with the students he most loves. Early in his professorship, a pretty senior rejects his timid proposal and marries the Greek teacher. Graves's one brilliant student, a young man, dies at twenty-three in the professor's arms, "the victim of a tragedy as old as the world and as grim as Samson, the Israelite's" (290). The allusion to Delilah reinforces the hint of emasculation in the student's "gentle eyes and manner of a girl!" and, at the same time, prefigures the professor's closing assessment of his own defeat as due to his woman's heart. Immediately after recalling the loss of his prize pupil, Graves reflects upon
the loss of his youth and that of his colleagues. His illustrations again allude to an absence of virility:

Like the monk in the legend they had wandered a little way into the wood to hear the bird's song—the magical song of youth so engrossing and so treacherous, and they had come back to their cloister to find themselves old men—spent warriors who could only chatter on the wall, like grasshoppers, and sigh at the beauty of Helen as she passed. (290)

The beautiful treachery of song and Helen, the celibacy of monk and "spent" soldiers of the Trojan War repeat the familiar pattern of art, sex, and betrayal.

The part of exhausted warrior is the one in which the professor most often casts himself. O'Brien remarks that Cather "surrounds him with martial imagery that links him with Bunyan's spiritual warriors rather than Rome's military ones." The professor's allusion to The Holy War is certainly crucial. Characterizing their city as "a disputed strategic point" (285), he reminds Miss Agatha that they read Bunyan's book nightly when he was a boy, and he describes his own long battle against "the reign of Mammon" (286). Graves sees himself in a key defensive role as guardian of the first of the five entrances to Bunyan's allegorical city of Mansoul. He tells his sister that, in his teaching, he has been tending the Ear Gate, "and I know not whether the Captains who succeed me be trusty or no" (286).

In Bunyan's book, Captain Resistance originally guards the Ear Gate, and he is the first to die in the attack of the demonic Diabolus, whose subtle oration deceives the city's lords and gains him access to the gate. Fortunately for the terrified Mansoul, the savior-prince Emmanuel sets a new guard at the end of The Holy War. A courageous man, Captain Self-denial often ventures forth against the violent Bloodmen, who leave "several of their marks in his face; yea, and some in some other parts of his body." The captain's name and his unspecified wounds may indicate that he resembles the professor not only in courage and idealism but also in sexual impotence. They are more obviously allied by their mutual responsibility for apprising their townsmen of words received from beyond their boundaries, a job they take very seriously.

Emerson Graves identifies so completely with the valiant captains that his high school becomes Bunyan's embattled but persevering Mansoul. Walking to class, he fantasizes that the building is "a fortress set upon the

8. Philip Gerber, who describes "The Professor's Commencement" as Cather's "first overt step" toward the theme of the artist in conflict with a materialistic society, says: "Emerson Graves is the first of the 'trustey Captains' who hold the Ear Gate of Mansoul." See Willa Cather (Boston: Twayne, 1975), p. 96. Gerber notes that Cather's final treatment of the theme is forty years later in Sapphira and the Slave Girl, where she "returns to the source of thematic statement" (pp. 132-33) by having Henry Colbert read about Diabolus's attack and Prince Emmanuel's triumph in his well-worn copy of The Holy War. Susan J. Rosowski, in The Voyage Perilous: Willa Cather's Romanticism (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1986), p. xi, observes that Cather's early essays and stories "lay out the terms of her lifelong commitment to vindicating imaginative thought in a world grown material.
dominant acclivity of that great manufacturing city, a stronghold of knowledge in the heart of Mammon’s kingdom” (286). Cather emphasizes the spiritual nature of the professor’s struggle. He tells Miss Agatha that he sees a “call to arms” in Vedder’s painting of the enemy sowing tares at the foot of the cross (286), and he cries out against Mammon as the Hebrew prophets cried out against proud Tyre. But the professor is also frequently aligned with legendary secular heroes. As a young man, he was “resolute and gifted, with the strength of Ulysses and the courage of Hector, with the kingdoms of the earth and the treasures of the ages at his feet” (291). Hector, however, fell in the Trojan War, and his defeat is more consonant than his promise with the professor’s mood on his final day of teaching.

The text for the last lesson of the professor’s career is Arnold’s “Sohrab and Rustum,” a narrative poem in which the heroic Rustum kills the equally heroic Sohrab in battle, not realizing that he is the son he has never met. The professor is too moved to comment on the ending and must ask a student to read the stirring last lines about the Oxus. Typically, Graves associates himself with the allusion; he is stupefied by his “kinship to that wearied river” (288). The Oxus, which crosses the battle-plain, is like the “clogged channel” that straggles through the professor’s dreary city:

It was difficult to believe that this was the shining river which tumbles down the steep hills of the lumbering district, odorous of wet spruce logs and echoing the ring of axes and the song of the raftsmen, come to this black ugliness at last, with not one throb of its woodland passion and bright vehemence left. (286-87)

In the poem too, the river is “[b]rimming, and bright, and large” until split by sands that make it strain, “shorn and parcell’d,”

... forgetting the bright speed he had
In his high mountain-cradle in Pamere,
A foil’d circuitous wanderer. ... 10

Emerson Graves, another such foiled wanderer, could relate to much else in Arnold’s tale of disappointed hopes. The professor’s sexual confusion has parallels in the tragedy of Sohrab and Rustum. Like the professor, Sohrab finds his heroic valor betrayed by a woman’s heart. Touched in his soul, Sohrab is reluctant to attack the disguised Rustum during their duel, a hesitation he cannot explain. His delay precipitates Rustum’s scorn:

“Girl! nimble with thy feet, not with thy hands!
Curled minion, dancer, coiner of sweet words!
Fight, let me hear thy hateful voice no more!”11

Ironically, at Sohrab’s birth, Rustum was deceived by his distant lover,

who feared the father would have a son trained in arms and so lied that the baby was a girl. Sohrab goes on to display his fearlessness but falls defeated. He is a harbinger of the professor, whose own sweet words likewise provoke a downfall from which there can be no recovery.

Another battleground is the setting for the most important of the many texts in "The Professor’s Commencement," Thomas Babington Macaulay’s "Horatius," first of the four Lays of Ancient Rome. K. R. Prowse cites debts to Homer and Virgil in the ballad and suggests that the main appeal of the story for Macaulay was Rome’s heroic response to the tyranny of the Tarquins. Throughout Cather’s story, Emerson Graves is equated with the faithful Horatius, who guards the bridge to Rome against the advancing troops of Lars Porsena. A standard recitation piece for turn-of-the-century high school commencements, Macaulay’s poem is Graves’s nemesis. The first reference to the Lays occurs as the professor, on his last day of class, helps seniors practice their orations. He wonders how many graduates of the past thirty years have kept their noble pledges. This thought of betrayed vows provokes the memory of his own graduation in the same chapel and his shameful failure to remember any word after “Then out spake bold Horatius / The Captain of the gate” (287). Tricked by the text, Graves becomes the unwitting hero of a new legend. His pupils “delighted to tell this story of the frail, exquisite, little man whom generations of students had called ‘the bold Horatius’ ” (288).

When Miss Agatha learns that many of her brother’s old classmates and former students will attend the retirement dinner, she decides that Horatius should be heard at last. Having coached Emerson for the “fatal exploit” of his youth (289), she again directs his rehearsals, which he approaches “valiantly” (288). Among the audience at the chapel on both occasions is Dr. Maitland, the eminent theologian. The military-religious references once more identify the professor with the heroes of his texts, and two allusions to palms intensify the identification, hinting also that he is experiencing the agony of a personal Passion Week. In the morning, the professor meets boys bearing palms to the chapel for class-day exercises, and he realizes that this is “his last commencement, a commencement without congratulations and without flowers” (287). Graves’s mood that evening is similar; when he takes his seat in the dim chapel, “green with palms for commencement week,” he is deeply depressed (289).

The professor makes a final effort, and his audience responds with approving laughter when he recites the opening lines of the ballad. But the professor is overcome by emotion at the end of the twenty-seventh stanza; he wavers as he declaims: “Outspake the bold Horatius, / The Captain of the gate” (291). Cather stresses his fragility as he gives up the struggle. His white hand nervously reaches toward his collar, his glasses, and his hand-

kerchief; with “a gesture of utter defeat,” the professor sits down. Only the theologian—“his face distorted between laughter and tears”—breaks the silence: “‘I ask you all,’ he cried, ‘whether Horatius has any need to speak, for has he not kept the bridge these thirty years? God bless him!’” (291).

Macaulay’s lay epitomizes the texts of treachery and conflict that the professor draws on throughout the story. Like the stalwart protectors of Bunyan’s Ear Gate, Horatius at the gate to Rome is the main champion of his city. The congruence of sex and warfare seen in the tales of Tristram, Samson, Helen, and Sohrab is also repeated in the ballad. In his discussion of Macaulay’s classical sources, Prowse mentions some important allusions which Cather does not cite, references to the Vestal Virgins who tended the eternal fire and to Lucretia’s rape by Sextus Tarquinius. These are allusions that Emerson Graves cannot articulate. The words on which the professor twice stumbles are Horatius’ assertion that a man can die no better than by risking great odds to save his family, his Gods, and, finally, “the holy maidens / Who feed the eternal flame” from “the false Sextus / That wrought the deed of shame.”

Macaulay’s preface to the poem explains that the ballad is supposed to have been made a century after the Tarquins’ attack and just before the Gauls’ taking of Rome. At the time of the telling, Rome is again in desperate need of leaders like Horatius. The poem concludes with a scene of Roman families at their firesides perpetuating the legend:

With weeping and with laughter
Still is the story told,
How well Horatius kept the bridge
In the brave days of old.

The closing stanzas resonate in several details of “The Professor’s Commencement,” from the students’ legend of Horatius/Graves to Dr. Maitland’s teary laughter.

Neither Rome nor Emerson Graves is saved by a knowledge of heroic stories. O’Brien blames the professor’s downfall on a “somewhat servile approach to the classics; he regards them as texts to be memorized.” The professor’s texts indeed prove treacherous, but his problem is more serious than O’Brien suggests. Like Douglass Burnham in “The Treasure of Far Island,” the professor does not simply read scripts; he reenacts them. While Burnham humorously abandons his texts for Margie’s love, Graves is tragically betrayed by his. O’Brien believes that Cather herself was betrayed by her sources, and she links the abundant allusions in these

15. Macaulay, p. 54.
early stories to Cather's sexuality. By imitating men's texts, she says, Cather uses a "verbal or stylistic costume" to disguise lesbian feelings.\(^\text{18}\) The obsessive pattern of sex, art, battle, and betrayal in the professor's references may indeed reflect such a tension. On the other hand, Cather's struggle with inherited texts does not end with her discovery of a "woman's voice," a breakthrough that O'Brien identifies in *O Pioneers!*

Although she dedicates *O Pioneers!* to Sarah Orne Jewett, Cather owes her title to Walt Whitman and her epigraph to Adam Mickiewicz, the Polish Romantic poet. Many of her subsequent novels are highly referential. *The Song of the Lark,* the story of Thea Kronborg's formation as an artist, cites Byron, Ovid, Balzac, Coleridge, Walter Scott, Tolstoy, Robert Burns, and several other writers. In the World War I novel *One of Ours,* Cather again draws heavily upon her male antecedents, from Homer to Shakespeare to Longfellow. Sometimes Cather's sources have a wide-ranging impact on her books. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* was inspired by her reading of William Joseph Howlett's *The Life of the Right Reverend Joseph P. Machebeuf,* and several histories of Quebec provided material for *Shadows on the Rock.* Susan J. Rosowski proposes that *Lucy Gayheart* is a retelling of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* "from a woman's point of view."\(^\text{19}\)

By resorting—often openly—to such literary models, Cather risks the charge of arrested development that "The Treasure of Far Island" and "The Professor's Commencement" direct against men too bound by their books. Yet, at the same time she relies upon the male tradition, Cather clearly warns against over-dependence. The most obvious caution in the two short stories is the reproof of Margie and Miss Agatha when Burnham and Graves cite literature sentimentally. The happiness of the one man seems assured when he eventually relinquishes his sources and turns to Margie's kisses. The despair of the other becomes permanent as he finally sits, unmanned by a Victorian rendering of a classical legend. At such moments, Cather challenges her masters. In some of her novels, the challenge becomes more direct. Although the woman as independent author and storyteller is often located on the periphery of Cather's fiction, she nevertheless performs crucial functions in shaping texts. One woman writes an introduction for Jim Burden's manuscript and so transforms an informal reminiscence into *My Antonia;* Nellie Birdseye relates Myra Henshawe's story in *My Mortal Enemy,* and an unnamed newspaper woman at the end of that book is instrumental in evoking memories from Oswald Henshawe; the epilogue of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl,* Cather's last novel, suddenly presents a narrator who, as a five-year-old girl, participated in the final scene of Nancy Till's story. Like these skillful framers of her fictions, Willa Cather artfully avoids the doom of Emerson Graves.

\(^{18}\) O'Brien, p. 141.

\(^{19}\) Rosowski, p. 224.