

MALCOLM'S KATIE: ALFRED AS NIHILIST  
NOT RAPIST

David S. West

In an article in a recent issue of *Studies in Canadian Literature*, "Malcolm's Katie: Love, Wealth, and Nation Building" (2 [Winter 1977], 49-60), Robin Mathews asserts that, at the end of Part VI of the poem, Katie is raped by Alfred:

Alfred intends to take advantage of her in her insensate state:

"Now will I show I love you, Kate," he said,  
"And give you gift of love. . . .  
The hour has come. . . ."

Crawford uses an involved image to suggest the erotic consummation Alfred is planning. He will be taking Katie in lust, into a perversion of the love relation, and so:

The black porch with its fringe of poppies waits,  
A propylaeum hospitably wide,  
No lictors with their fasces at its jaws,  
Its floor as kindly to my fire-reined feet  
As to thy silver-lilied, sinless ones!

A "propylaeum" is a vestibule or entrance to a temple or to an enclosure. "Lictors" are attendants who punish offenders at the order of officials. The "fasces" is a bundle that was carried before a Roman magistrate as a symbol of authority. Alfred is saying, in simpler language than the metaphor the poem presents, that his opportunity has come while Katie is insensible since she will not submit when in her senses, denying him because of her fidelity to Max. When she faints, no one is there to punish him. Fittingly enough, the bundle signifying authority, the fasces, contained rods or sticks with an axe that had its blade extended from the top of the bundle! Just as Alfred is contemplating the seduction, Max reappears "gaunt as prairie wolves in famine time." He saves Katie. Alfred is next, by some means unexplained, in the river, unconscious . . . (pp. 58-59)

Ingenuous as Mathews' interpretation is, it is not correct. The "black porch" that both Alfred and Katie are to enter is the entrance to the underworld, the pagan-classical images of "lictors with their fasces" symbolize the power and dignity of death, and the "poppies" represent the drugged oblivion offered by the river Lethe. By extension, however, the scene is one of rape, but rape in the etymological sense of "being carried away by force," not rape as a sexual assault. This reading is more in keeping with the philosophical debate in the

poem, and it is more tenable in light of the morbid strain of thought which is so carefully made a part of Alfred's character. Alfred takes Katie in his arms and prepares to sink into the oblivion of watery death with her. In part, Alfred seeks death because he has weakened; he feels pangs of remorse and determines to die — to seek the oblivion that has always been the only consolation he would admit. Realizing the pain and anguish he has caused Katie, he decides to end her pain along with his own.

Because Mathews has chosen his quotations from a longer passage, excising lines and even halves of lines that contradict his "explication," the passage should be examined in full:

"Now will I show I love you, Kate," he said,  
 "And give you gift of love; you shall not wake  
 To feel the arrow feather-deep within  
 Your constant heart. For me, I never meant  
 To crawl an hour beyond what time I felt  
 The strange fanged monster they call Remorse  
 Fold round my wakened heart. The hour has come."

The rest of the passage confirms what is already made clear: Alfred seeks oblivion through death. In so doing, he actually wishes to give Katie the greatest gift he has, to share with her the escape from worldly care he has reserved for himself. Interestingly, Alfred sounds sincere. He has at last surrendered to feeling; and, although deranged by the force of emotion, remorse for his evil deeds, he has come to love Katie in his own way and can never give her up to Max. He will end both their lives, sincerely believing that his action is motivated by love.

But Alfred is essentially a spokesman for all that stands opposed to love, and since love is the dominant force in Crawford's world, Alfred is associated with the unproductive desire of mere material objects and with the underworld represented both in terms of oblivion and in terms of classical-pagan myth and ceremony. Furthermore, since love is everything, Alfred's nihilism is appropriate. For by not believing in love, he can believe only in nothingness, in an oblivion of the senses. Consequently, when Alfred and Katie are at the lily pond, the circumstances are different from those of Max and Katie. The images are chaotic and forceful, the images of industry and unruléd passion:

The water rolled between the shuddering jaws,  
 Then on the river level roared and reeled  
 In ivory-armed conflict with itself.

Alfred interprets the noise and turbulence of the water in accord with the kind of "love" he feels, and again the images oppose the placid locale associated with Max and Katie:

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<sup>1</sup>Isabella Valancy Crawford, *Collected Poems*, ed. James Reaney (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), p. 232. All further references to Crawford's poetry are to this edition.

How that but pictures my mad heart to you.  
 It tears itself in fighting that mad love  
 You swear is hopeless.

(p. 231)

But this appeal is the wrong approach to take with Katie, for she is equated with the lily, and the lily blooms only on the calm waters of the pond where she expressed her love for Max. She could not survive in so turbulent a stream as that offered her by Alfred, and so she refuses his advances.

Up to this point, Alfred is antagonistic not only to love, but also to the philosophy of optimistic expansion and the belief in Christian ideals expressed in the words and deeds of Malcolm, Max, and Katie. Alfred wants wealth in order to enjoy life. Malcolm and Max are both socially conscious persons; Alfred is an individualist who exploits in order to gratify his senses. Because he is a sceptic, an atheist, and a nihilist, he lives only for the moment. He does not believe in Heaven or an afterlife, but sees death as the onset of oblivion. Therefore, he will stop at nothing to make his life enjoyable while it lasts:

If all man's days are three-score years and ten,  
 He needs must waste them not, but nimbly seize  
 The bright, consummate blossom that his will  
 Calls for most loudly.

(p. 209)

Alfred's belief in oblivion leads him to make his life enjoyable. Yet he is also attracted by the idea that death offers him an escape into oblivion. Should he fail to satisfy his sensual demands in life, he would gladly satisfy them by ending all sensation:

There is no Immortality could give  
 Such boon as this — to simply cease to be! (p. 210)

The passage foreshadows Alfred's later determination to unite with Katie in death and oblivion.

Alfred's ideas oppose the optimistic view of progress not only in matters of religion and philosophy, but also in terms of nation-building; he is even sceptical about progress on the national level. He believes no more in the immortality of nations than in the immortality of the soul: "Nations are not immortal" (p. 216). Alfred dwells on this and similar themes of transience, generally pointing out the smallness and insignificance of man and his nations in the universe. Echoing both the traditional theme of *ubi sunt* and the ironies of Shelley's "Ozymandias," Alfred portrays a mechanistic universe which undergoes cycles of expansion and contraction, in which civilizations flourish briefly before the onset of barbarism occurs, the light of mind goes out, and all collapses but time itself:

. . . . When Time seemed to pause  
 On smooth, dust-blotted graves. . .

She saw no glimmer on the hideous ring  
 Of the black clouds; no stream of sharp, clear light  
 From those great torches passed into the black  
 Of deep oblivion. . . .  
 She dreamed new gods, and reared them other shrines,  
 . . . . re-lit the torch of mind.  
 . . . . Again drew darkly on  
 A night of deep forgetfulness; once more  
 Time seemed to pause upon forgotten graves. (p. 218)

Alfred does not believe in the spirit of man or mankind, the life force which continues to function even in the collapsed state of the universe. His vision is a dark one which does not take into account any idea of continuity in the universe other than the cold clockwork of time. Clearly, Crawford allows him to voice these dark beliefs in order to make her own vision of love's great daffodil shine all the more brightly.

But Alfred is not untouched by love's power. He struggles to choose between life and oblivion. For, although he has driven out pity and remorse, Alfred's feelings are not as dead as he believes. If he begins to feel any sense of love for Katie, he knows he will weaken his position; pity and remorse will become a painful burden:

Said Alfred, in his mind. "O Katie, child,  
 Wilt thou be Nemesis with yellow hair  
 To rend my breast? for I do feel a pulse  
 Stir when I look into thy pure-barbed eyes.  
 Oh, am I breeding that false thing, a heart,  
 Making my breast all tender for the fangs  
 Of sharp Remorse to plunge their hot fire in?  
 I am a certain dullard. Let me feel  
 But one faint goad, fine as a needle's point,  
 And it shall be the spur in my soul's side  
 To urge the maddening thing across the jags  
 And cliffs of life into the soft embrace  
 Of that cold mistress, who is constant, too,  
 And never flings her lovers from her arms,—  
 Not Death, for she is still a fruitful wife,  
 Her spouse the Dead; and their cold marriage yields  
 A million children, born of mouldering flesh.  
 So Death and Flesh live on; immortal they!  
 I mean the blank-eyed queen whose wassail bowl  
 Is brimmed from Lethe, and whose porch is red  
 With poppies, as it waits the panting soul. (p. 228)

Here, then, are obvious parallels to the passage on which Mathews bases his claim of "rape." And here the same images specifically relate to Alfred's longing for oblivion through death. Should the dreaded feelings make inroads against Alfred's will, his only escape is into oblivion. He dreads the "hot fire" and later, when he attempts to carry Katie into oblivion, he feels the pain of his "fire-reined feet." Death is not ending enough for him, "for she is still a fruitful

wife," its marriage producing worms, children of decaying flesh. If even death is too fruitful for Alfred, then surely he would not seek to carry out an act of creativity by raping Katie. Instead, he seeks "the blank-eyed queen" who drinks from "Lethe," and he thinks of her in terms that he later uses when he seeks out the "porch [that] is red/With poppies," choosing to sink into his oblivion, taking Katie along so that no else will have her. Mathews claims that "Alfred is next, by some means unexplained, in the river, unconscious." But, as is apparent from the text, Alfred is standing on the bank with Katie in his arms about to drown both himself and Katie. The rest is not too puzzling. Max arrives and grabs Katie just as Alfred jumps. A moment of spectacular melodrama, and all is again as it should be.

Mathews' main argument is incontrovertible, and it has not been my intention to challenge it. His purpose is to demonstrate that Crawford was addressing "the major concerns of the country in her time" (p. 49), and he does so convincingly. He also recognizes that there is an important philosophical debate in the poem. In his interpretation of the "rape" scene, however, his reading tends to contradict much of the main thrust of his very own argument. I trust that my remarks here resolve that anomaly and confirm Mathews' opinion that *Malcolm's Katie* is indeed "one of the great poems of the English Canadian literary tradition" (p. 60).

University of New Brunswick