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# “Rude Intercourse”: Uncensoring Wordsworth’s “Nutting”

IN THIS ARTICLE I OFFER AN INTERPRETATION OF THE LONGER versions of William Wordsworth’s “Nutting”—versions which begin with *Lucy’s* nutting experience, rather than with the speaker’s. The poet himself published “Nutting” only in its shorter versions, consisting mostly of the speaker’s recollection of a boyhood nutting expedition. In the longer versions, this recollection serves primarily as a response to Lucy’s quite immediate violence, and these versions in fact both begin and end with her violence. The opening of one of these longer versions has been available to readers for half a century now, and to my knowledge no critic has yet undertaken a reading of “Nutting” (for the longer versions, though existing only in manuscript, are in fact titled “Nutting”) which accounts for both William *and* Lucy’s nutting experiences.<sup>1</sup>

The short version, which depicts a boy’s “ravage” of a virginal hazel grove, has engendered both positive and negative critical responses. “Romantic” critics have seen the ravage or rape as a metaphor for the male poet’s healthy and necessary entry into imaginative self-consciousness (at the expense of a female figure called “nature”), while feminist critics have read the poem as a typical enactment of male dominance. Once we acknowledge the longer versions, however, we must give up these alluringly simple paradigms. For the opening lines of these versions respond to a young *woman* (identified as “Lucy” in the later manuscripts, and probably based on Wordsworth’s sister Dorothy) committing her own act of rape or “rude intercourse”:

1. The opening of MS. 16, down to line 46 where the published version picks up, has been widely available ever since Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire printed it in the notes to their 1946 edition of vol. 2 of the *Complete Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon).

Ah! what a crash was that! with gentle hand  
 Touch these fair hazels—My beloved Maid!  
 Though 'tis a sight invisible to thee,  
 From such rude intercourse the woods all shrink  
 As at the blowing of Astolpho's horn.—

(1-5)<sup>2</sup>

If we doubt that this “rude intercourse” is a figure for rape, the speaker dispels this doubt later in the poem by describing a similar act from his own boyhood as the “merciless ravage” of a “virgin scene.” “Nutting” is therefore the story of *two* rapes—a maiden’s “rude intercourse” and a boy’s “merciless ravage”—and any satisfactory reading of the complete poem must account for both of these acts.

This double rape narrative is composed at a crucial moment of early English romanticism, and I propose to read the complete text (or texts—there are three versions of the long “Nutting”) as a primal scene of “romantic” rape, where rape is represented as a literary phenomenon, an intertextual construction. Wordsworth wrote “Nutting” in Goslar in the winter of 1798–99, originally as part of the “Two-Part Prelude,” the heart of his autobiographical project and one of the signal documents in the formation of romantic individualism and the idea of the romantic imagination. It is striking that at such a moment Wordsworth composed a vision of female sexuality (perhaps even his sister Dorothy’s sexuality, or potential sexuality), and it is worth noting the extreme ambivalence of this vision. Against the socio-cultural norms, “Nutting” asserts that Lucy has independent, transgressive, and not exclusively heterosexual desires—that she is in some sense a rapist, perhaps even a savage or a demon:

A houseless being in a human shape,  
 An enemy of nature, hither sent  
 From regions far beyond the Indian hills.—

(MS. 16, lines 12–14)

*Personally*, however, Wordsworth begs Lucy to renounce these desires in favor of a “gentle” one reserved for himself and “nature.” Rape makes its presence known in “Nutting” as a figure of “gender trouble,”<sup>3</sup> an unsettling of fixed constructions of “male” (as sexually dominant) and “female” (as sexually submissive) which personally unsettles the poem’s speaker.

2. This is the opening of the manuscript version in DC MS. 16, from the transcription in the Cornell Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems, 1797–1800*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992) 305.

3. Judith Butler’s term from *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (NY: Routledge, 1990).

"Nutting" insists on a crucial role for poetry, and poetic history, in both the forming and the *re*-forming of gender, sexuality, and desire. The poem's poet, however, may not yet be prepared for this reformation.

### 1. "Nutting"'s Mutilation

The longer versions of "Nutting" are occasional poems, whose occasion does not appear in any of the published versions. This occasion is, as I mentioned above, a maiden breaking hazel branches, an act which elicits the exclamation which opens the poem ("Ah! what a crash was that! . . ."). The rest of the poem is the speaker's response to the maiden's act of "rude intercourse." He first lectures her about Nature's virtues, then admits to a childhood nutting excursion of his own (an act he represents as a violent rape, which taught him, through guilt, to respect the woods), and finally concludes by instructing the maiden to "think of him, / The ragged boy," and "with gentle hand / Touch." The occasion, therefore, engenders an outcry, a lecture, a childhood memory, and a lesson. But the published versions of "Nutting" omit the outcry and the lecture, and contain only the last two parts—William's account of his own boyhood nutting expedition, and his moralizing conclusion—leaving an isolated and decontextualized memory. He does, however, begin the published version with a half-line (in later editions preceded by a long dash) and retains the final warning (or plea) to the "maiden," in order to mark the memory of Lucy's assault on the grove, the *occasion* for the poem's existence.

The long version of "Nutting" survives in three manuscripts, designated DC MSS. 15, 16, and 24.<sup>4</sup> The first known *short* version of the poem appears in a letter written jointly by William and Dorothy to Coleridge. All four of these documents date from the winter of 1798–99, when William and Dorothy were alone in Goslar; no certain order has been established among them. In the letter to Coleridge, Dorothy seems to suggest that the short version came first, describing it as "the conclusion of a poem of which the beginning is not yet written" (*Early Letters* 206).

4. DC MS. 15 (the "Christabel Notebook"), DC MS. 16 (formerly "MS. Verse 18A"), and DC MS. 24. Mark L. Reed, *Wordsworth: The Chronology of the Early Years, 1770–1799* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1967) 331–32. Reed conjectures that the "latest surviving state of the poem in its long form" is probably the one in MS. 24, which is a loose sheet among the Dove Cottage Papers, probably copied out in June 1800, after the Wordsworths returned from Germany. I base my reading centrally on MS. 16, which is available (along with MSS. 15 and 24) in the Cornell *Lyrical Ballads* volume. There are also three versions of the boy's story alone. The earliest of these appears in a letter from William and Dorothy (in Dorothy's hand) to Coleridge in December 1798 or January 1799 (*The Early Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth [1787–1800]*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt [Oxford: Clarendon, 1935] 206–8).

The version in DC MS. 15, sometimes held to be the earliest complete version,<sup>5</sup> also suggests that the second half was written first, for although the two parts of the poem appear in their proper order in this manuscript, the first part ends with a half-line (“ . . . Are idle sympathies”) before the end of page 64—*verso*, and the rest of the poem (the part that later becomes the published poem) picks up with a complementary half-line (“It seems a day . . .”) two-thirds of the way down the next page (65—*recto*), suggesting that Wordsworth wrote the second part first, leaving blank pages before it for the opening, which he later wrote but which did not fill up all of the allotted pages.

The problem with this composition-scenario lies in the ending. Unless the long poem—the occasional poem, which begins with Lucy’s assault on the grove—predates the short version, there is no explanation for the final address to Lucy, who does not even *appear* in the rest of the short version:

Then dearest maid move along these shades  
In gentleness of heart with gentle hand  
Touch, for there is a spirit in the woods.

(MS. 15)<sup>6</sup>

This ending appears in every version of the poem, short and long, including the published versions. The generally accepted explanation has been that Wordsworth first wrote a poem with a meaningless and irrelevant ending, and then afterward composed a beginning for the poem, in order to provide an occasion for and make sense of this ending. Later, it is then presumed, he cut the added beginning, but retained the original (and now once again irrelevant) ending. According to this story, which the *Cornell Wordsworth* seems to endorse, the long version of “Nutting” was never more than a tentative and temporary experiment; the real poem was always the short version (*Lyrical Ballads* 391–92, 551).

I would like to offer a different chronology. I suggest that the encounter with Lucy predates the rest of the poem, either in a written version unknown to Dorothy (or known to her but concealed from Coleridge at first<sup>7</sup>), or in a version as yet unwritten by Wordsworth (he preferred composing in his head, even large numbers of lines), or perhaps as a scene conceived of but not yet composed. This sequence of composition makes

5. The other manuscript versions, in MSS. 16 and 24, show no gap between the two parts of the poem. See Reed’s discussion of the manuscripts.

6. Wordsworth later expanded this ending, in MS. 15, to six lines.

7. Coleridge certainly saw the complete poem at some point, but if Wordsworth and Dorothy were extremely anxious about the opening, it would not have been odd for them to hide it at first from the person who knew best of their peculiar intimacy.

sense both of the ending itself (a natural return to the poem's opening) and of Wordsworth's insistence on retaining the ending in the shortened versions as a mark—a textual memory—of the poem's occasion. Furthermore, the first two versions of the poem to bear the title "Nutting" are *long* versions, in MSS. 16 and 24. The first known short version, the one in the letter to Coleridge, is *untitled*, and is described as unfinished.

It is also worth noting that the long, titled version in MS. 24 is in Mary Hutchinson's hand, and must therefore post-date the Wordsworths' return from Goslar in May 1799. Reed dates it to c. June 1800 (332). What this means is that from some time in the winter of 1799 up through (and probably past) the summer of 1800, Wordsworth cared enough about the short version to publish it *and* cared enough about the long version to put it through at least two significant revisions, both retaining Lucy's "crash" as their occasions. Clearly, whether the long version predates or postdates (in whatever literal or conceptual sense one prefers) the short one, the drafts of the long version were anything but fleeting transition-pieces. Wordsworth lavished work on both versions of the poem, and ultimately chose to publish only the short one; this much is indisputable, and ought to form the ground for our readings.

The crucial question, then, is not which manuscript is the earliest, but rather why Wordsworth stripped the poem of its occasion—whether original or acquired—when he published it. And there are several plausible answers to this question. Since the figure "Lucy" in "Nutting" and the other Lucy poems was based on Dorothy, the violent and erotic innuendo (which we shall examine) at the beginning of the long version of "Nutting" might have seemed inappropriate either to Wordsworth or to Dorothy.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps Wordsworth (or Dorothy, or both) felt anxious about publishing a poem in which he invites "Lucy" to lie down with him in the heath and recalls lying with his head in her lap. Finally, Wordsworth may simply have shocked himself by depicting, even metaphorically and by analogy, a violent expression of female sexuality. Further, Wordsworth was wooing Mary Hutchinson in 1800 (they were married in 1802), when "Nutting"

8. Being in Germany would have exacerbated such anxieties, since, as Coleridge (also in Germany at the time) noted in a letter to his wife, the Germans probably assumed that William and Dorothy were lovers:

His taking his Sister with him was a wrong Step—it is next to impossible for any but married women or in the suit of married women to be introduced to any company in Germany. Sister is considered as only a name for Mistress. (14 January 1799). *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, v. 1, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956) 270.

was first published, and there appears to have been some jealousy, even erotic jealousy, between the two women.<sup>9</sup>

We can understand, then, why Wordsworth would have shied away from publishing the long version of “Nutting,” even though he kept working on it after the publication of the short one. The critics’ indifference to Lucy’s “rude intercourse” is, however, more difficult to understand, especially since the longer “Nutting” provides the *only* textual transition between the “Lucy poems” and the “Two-Part Prelude.” The amputated first part of “Nutting” contains (in MSS. 16 and 24) both Wordsworth’s identification of the maiden as “Lucy” (“Thou, Lucy, art a maiden ‘inland bred’ . . .”) *and* a passage later transferred to the 1805 *Prelude*, thus linking “Nutting” to both the most gnomic and the most excursive of Wordsworth’s great poems. This double link is made graphically clear in the letter to Coleridge containing the first shortened version of the poem. This letter actually contains versions of five major poems or passages, in the following order:

1. She lived among the untrodden ways” (a Lucy poem)
2. “Strange fits of passion” (a Lucy poem)
3. “Nutting”
4. skating episode from the “Two-Part Prelude”
5. boat-stealing episode from the “Two-Part Prelude”

“Nutting” is framed by a pair of Lucy poems and a pair of passages from *The Prelude*. The point could not be more clear: “Nutting” is both a “Lucy poem” *and* a part of *The Prelude*—though in its short versions it will show no clear signs of being either.<sup>10</sup>

It is strange that critics have shown so little interest in the only intersection of the Lucy poems and *The Prelude*’s “spots of time.” We have universally embraced other early manuscript versions that Wordsworth deliberately withheld from publication—the 1805 manuscript version of *The Prelude*, for example, and the earlier “Two-Part Prelude”—and yet

9. F. W. Bateson points out that a later Lucy poem, “The Glowworm,” which was clearly written to Dorothy, exists in a version in the hand of Sara Hutchinson, where “Lucy” has been replaced by “Mary.” Bateson speculates, reasonably, I think, that Wordsworth might have tried to placate his jealous wife by pretending that the poem had been written for her. *Wordsworth: A Reinterpretation* (London: Longman’s, 1954) 152n. We know that “The Glowworm”’s “Lucy” is Dorothy because we have a version of the poem in Wordsworth’s hand, in a letter to Coleridge, in which the woman is called “Emma” (his usual poetic name for Dorothy), and which is followed by the following note: “The incident of this Poem took place about seven years ago, between Dorothy and me” (16 April 1802; Reed 288).

10. Wordsworth acknowledges to Isabella Fenwick that “Nutting” was “intended as part of the poem on my own life, but struck out as not wanted there” (*Poems*, v.1, ed. John O. Hayden [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983] 956).

every substantive reading of "Nutting," even those by critics preoccupied with the ending, ignores the longer poem's self-censored opening. By neglecting or refusing to acknowledge the original opening, critics continue to misread its ending, as if they preferred obscurity or nonsense to the more complicated (but in many ways more lucid) text.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. Recent Criticism: Keeping the Maiden Gentle

Most critics who have noticed "Nutting" have either minimized its violence and sexuality or reduced them to a simple demonstration of cultural patriarchy. In 1964, for example, when "Nutting" is by most accounts a minor curiosity, Geoffrey Hartman declares its mutilated bower the "summarizing emblem" for his book on Wordsworth, but then offers only three pages of commentary on the poem, in which he empties it of all but metapoetic content.<sup>12</sup> The rape allegory fades to a mere "overtone of sexuality and hunter's lust," revealing that the poem's true subject is an encounter with the romance genre, through which romanticism (in the person of Wordsworth) must pass on its way to "the human heart" (74). In order to relate the allegorical rape to the human heart, Hartman denies that there is any human activity at all in the poem, converting the obvious metaphors for rape into a fable about the progress of poesy. The story about ravaging the hazel grove turns out to have almost nothing at all to do with rape, sexuality, or even gender. Instead it describes, very quietly and much more loftily, the process which Hartman makes the theme of his book: "how the child's willful consciousness matures into the sympathetic imagination" (75). By leaping directly from the literal (the boy in the hazel grove) to the metaleptic (the figurative rape re-figured as a literary-historical or phenomenological event), Hartman strikes out the vital middle term, the human act which gives the poem its force. He finds the rape insufficiently literal, since the boy did not *really* rape anyone, but also insufficiently figurative: nutting-as-rape is mere metaphor, whereas nutting-as-rape-as-growth is an elegant metalepsis.

A decade and a half later, two careful readers of Hartman offer psychological readings of "Nutting" which resist his displacement of the action

11. David Ferry, for example, calls the last three lines "quite inadequate, in tone and feeling, to the rest. . . . The lines seem to have missed the point, or to have got only part of it, and so to have oversimplified the rest of the poem" (*The Limits of Mortality: An Essay on Wordsworth's Major Poems* [Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1959] 24–25). David Perkins repeats this judgment in 1964, declaring the poem's final lines "a mistake" because they reduce its "rather complicated attitude" to "an explicit proposition in general terms" (*Wordsworth and the Poetry of Sincerity* [Cambridge: Belknap/Harvard UP, 1964] 185). One might list a dozen similar comments from other critics.

12. *Wordsworth's Poetry: 1787–1814* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1964) 73. In its paperback edition the book did in fact acquire an emblem—a Turner engraving of Stonehenge.

into the realm of pure poetics, but which nevertheless conspire to preserve Hartman's suppression of the poem's violence. Leslie Brisman's Freudian reading begins by admitting of a "little rape committed on the hazel nook," but when Brisman goes on to speak of this act as a "sexual assault" he immediately corrects himself: "These explicitly sexual terms do a delicate text more violence than the child ever did that bower."<sup>13</sup> Michael Cooke's more idealistic reading recognizes that violence is done to the bower, but he emphasizes the metaphorical nature of the assault over its content, arguing that by means of this figuration the poem avoids "trauma and fixation, thus allowing the *growth* which is basic to the poem to continue. . . ."<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Cooke argues that the pain which the boy feels after the assault on the bower indicates that William has injured his hidden "feminine aspect," which he can now recognize and integrate into his personality. Brisman's reading comes to a similar though less idealistic conclusion: by means of his "little rape" of the bower, the poet "nontraumatically" begets a belated (male) superego which, on account of its belatedness, gives way to "the maternal figure on whom the vision is begotten"—a soothing creature who bridges "all gaps of oedipal conflict" and "survive[s] as the poet's romantic originatrix and symbol of all originality" (299–300).

While Brisman and Cooke address the violence and sexuality which Hartman politely evades, they nevertheless curiously replicate the shape of his argument. If Hartman dehumanizes the poem's allegory in order to demonstrate how humanizing it is, these two revisionists acknowledge the boy's act of rape only to show how salutary it turns out to be. (Lucy's assault on the grove is never dealt with, as none of the three critics addresses the longer versions of the poem.) As in Hartman's version, the rape is a "natural" part of the boy's life and of the bower's life as well. It helps both of them to "grow" into their proper roles. Like the forcing of a virgin on her wedding night, it is best for all concerned, and any trauma actually experienced is retrospectively swallowed up in a myth of continuity, whether literary, phenomenological, or psychological.

After Brisman and Cooke, several critics offer new readings of "Nutting" which essentially share their vision of the poem, though they give it a negative value rather than a positive one. Marlon Ross, Jonathan Arac, and Mary Jacobus all see in the poem a typical male figure assuring the continuity of his growth into self-conscious manhood by confirming the socio-historical subordination of women.<sup>15</sup> What Hartman construes as a

13. *Romantic Origins* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1978) 298.

14. *Acts of Inclusion: Studies Bearing on an Elementary Theory of Romanticism* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979) 140. Cooke's emphasis.

15. Marlon Ross, "Naturalizing Gender: Woman's Place in Wordsworth's Ideological Landscape," *ELH* 53.2 (Summer 1986). Jonathan Arac, "Wordsworth's 'Nutting': Suspension

dialectical emergence into the transhistorical fullness of male consciousness, these critics see as a static replication of existing gender-categories.<sup>16</sup> Ross, Arac, and Jacobus all see William using his subordination of the feminine bower (and "her" alter-ego Lucy) as a stepping-stone to manhood, though they see this happening in different ways. As they read it, "Nutting"'s general purpose is to confirm and repeat the current myths of gender distinction, which involve the passive role of the (objectified) female in the male maturation process.

Thus Marlon Ross argues that "[t]he impossibility for physical aggression (as sexual assault) on the part of either the maiden or nature" in the poem "is transformed into the possibility for total psychological harmony between the two . . ." (394). But the ending of the published "Nutting" (" . . . with gentle hand / Touch . . .") reminds us that the maiden *is* capable of physical aggression—why else would Wordsworth need to warn her to be gentle?—and sends us back to the beginning of the longer versions, where the boy has just witnessed her aggression ("What a crash was that!"). In fact, the maiden seems if anything *more* capable of "physical aggression (as sexual assault)": her attack on the hazels is after all the immediate occasion of the poem, whereas William's attack took place in his childhood and was never (presuming he learned its lesson properly) repeated. Furthermore, the speaker has no great faith that the "intruding sky"—whether as a sign of remorse or as a threat—will prevent the maiden from repeating her attack, as it has prevented him. For all he knows, "rude intercourse" is a regular pastime for her.

In one way at least, Michael Cooke gives the poem a more radical reading than any of these avowedly progressive critics do, for Cooke recognizes that Wordsworth's description of the grove leaves its gender in doubt. This recognition does not, it is true, lead him to question the poem's conceptions of gender and sexuality (141–42). But the feminist critics that follow him also fail to follow these leads, assimilating all of the poem's figures into a dominant paradigm of male-centered heterosexual-

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and Decision," *Critical Genealogies: Historical Situations for Postmodern Literary Studies* (New York: Columbia UP, 1987). Mary Jacobus, "Behold the Parent Hen," *Romanticism, Writing, and Sexual Difference* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989).

16. Cooke recognizes that the "gender boundaries" in the poem are "richly subtle"—that the grove is part male and the boy is part female, for example—but he reads the poem as a containment of these ambiguities. "[T]he feminine element in him and [the grove's] masculine element represent sidelong possibilities, not active capacities," and the poem manifests these possibilities, in this reading, chiefly in order to re-absorb them non-threateningly into conventional gender divisions. Cooke ignores the original opening of the poem and thus does not address the *maiden's* maleness and sexual aggressiveness (141).

ity.<sup>17</sup> These oversights only point to a far more glaring omission: the only versions of “Nutting” to receive serious critical attention are the shorter ones from which the opening sixty lines—and the poem’s provocation—are absent. Although the suppressed first half of the longer “Nutting” receives cursory mention in various readings of the published version, no critic has yet offered a reading of the longer versions.<sup>18</sup>

### 3. Rude Intercourse and Merciless Ravage

Lucy’s violent destruction of the hazel bower at the beginning of “Nutting” is described as “rude intercourse.” Though in the eighteenth century “intercourse” primarily signified exchange, social or economic, the word was already being used to refer to sexual intercourse. The OED records Malthus’ 1798 *Essay on Population* as the first use of the word with a sexual sense (“illicit intercourse between the sexes”), but in fact Wordsworth uses it in this sense five years earlier, in the “Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff,” where he speaks of a time when

. . . the miseries entailed upon the marriage of those who are not rich will no longer tempt the bulk of mankind to fly to that promiscuous intercourse to which they are impelled by the instincts of nature, and the dreadful satisfaction of escaping the prospect of infants, sad fruit of such intercourse . . .<sup>19</sup>

If Wordsworth uses “promiscuous intercourse,” and on second reference, “such intercourse,” to mean “sexual intercourse” in his prose, then surely

17. One partial exception is Rachel Crawford’s Lacanian analysis of the poem. She argues, rightly I think, that the virgin at the end of “Nutting” is “produced” by what has gone before. We also agree that the nook and bower at the center of the poem contain both male and female genitalia. She goes on to establish, through a rigorous Lacanian symbology, that the boy’s assault destroys both a mother figure *and* a father figure, thus allowing the poet to shift his allegiance from a vertical relation of parent/child to a horizontal one of brother-youth/sister-virgin. But Crawford’s sophisticated analysis ultimately leads to a conclusion similar to the three summarized above: the sister figure is “repressed” in the service of the “production” of the male poet’s subjectivity (211). “The Structure of the Sororal in Wordsworth’s ‘Nutting,’” *SiR* 31.2 (Summer 1992): 197–211.

18. Margaret Homans, for example, notes that in the poem’s suppressed opening “a female figure named Lucy [shares] the boy’s initiatory experience of ravaging the grove.” She argues that Dorothy “would have understood herself to be the ‘dearest Maiden,’” and “would thus have seen her active presence in the poem canceled out and replaced by a passive one” (*Women Writers and Poetic Identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Brontë, and Emily Dickinson* [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980] 53–54). Dorothy may in fact have responded in this way to the suppression of the opening—though as I have argued, I think it more likely that she actually had a hand in the censorship—but I read Wordsworth’s intentions as ambivalent. His retention of the poem’s final warning or plea to the maiden seems, at least, to signal a desire to *remember* Dorothy/Lucy’s activeness.

19. Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff (1793), in *Selected Prose*, ed. John O. Hayden (London: Penguin, 1988) 153.

"*rude* intercourse," in a lyric poem filled with sexual metaphor and innuendo, can suggest sexual intercourse.

Furthermore, Milton gives the word a sexual charge in verse two hundred years earlier, in a passage familiar to Wordsworth. During one of Adam's speeches to Eve in *Paradise Lost*, Adam explains that God made the two of them "not to irksome toil, but to delight,"<sup>20</sup> and that they should therefore indulge themselves whenever they need anything:

Refreshment, whether food, or talk between,  
Food of the mind, or this sweet intercourse  
Of looks and smiles. . . .

(IX.237–39)

Adam begins listing kinds of refreshment, beginning with food and conversation and proceeding to "this sweet intercourse." "This" seems to indicate that Adam is making a gesture of some kind, or that their bodies are close and that they are aroused, so that "this sweet intercourse" suggests *sexual* intercourse, a perfectly natural kind of refreshment for Adam to list after "food" and "talk between." When we cross the line-break, however, we discover that Adam is not talking about sex at all: "this" turns out to be proleptic, referring forward to "looks and smiles." We are caught jumping to conclusions.<sup>21</sup> But Milton has already gone out of his way to assure us that Adam and Eve had sex, and that their sex was not at all sinful:

. . . nor turned I ween  
Adam from his fair spouse, nor Eve the rites  
Mysterious of connubial love refused:  
Whatever hypocrites austerely talk  
Of purity and place and innocence,  
Defaming as impure what God declares  
Pure, and commands to some, leaves free to all.

(IV.741–47)

Milton's chastisement is therefore gentle: sex is of course *one* legitimate form of conjugal intercourse, but not the *only* form. As Adam goes on to remind us, one can have too much of any kind of intercourse. "For solitude sometimes is best society, / And short retirement urges sweet return" (IX.249–250). We know that Wordsworth paid close attention to this passage, because the second part of his "Two-Part Prelude" (composed

20. *Paradise Lost*, IX.242–43, ed. Alastair Fowler (Burnt Hill: Longman, 1968).

21. John Hollander explains and partially catalogues Milton's uses of enjambment in "Sense Variously Drawn Out': On English Enjambment," *Vision and Resonance: Two Senses of Poetic Form*, 2nd. ed. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1985) 91–116.

twelve to eighteen months after “Nutting”) quotes and plays on Adam’s words:

Hence life, and change, and beauty, solitude,  
 More active even than “best society,”  
 Society made sweet as solitude.<sup>22</sup>

Wordsworth was always alert to Milton’s tricky enjambments, and he would have had no difficulty hearing the sexual resonance with which Milton charges the word “intercourse” suspended at the edge of line 238. I pause this long over one word only to make it clear that Lucy’s “rude intercourse” is erotic, if ambiguous, from the very start.

Lucy’s “rude intercourse” disappears in the censored version of the poem, but the answering rape, the boy’s “merciless ravage” of the hazel grove, remains. Even in this version, though, the grove’s figurative sexuality is not simple. Though it “patiently gives up its quiet being” to a sexual assailant, and should therefore by convention be female, the grove is also “tall and erect,” and therefore male.<sup>23</sup> We might simply say that the grove figures a “virgin scene” or *virgin seen*, a potential target for transgression, whether by a maiden or a boy. What is the difference, then, between Lucy’s “rude intercourse” and William’s “merciless ravage”? “Ravage” is a poetic term, clearly denoting rape in its modern sense (i.e. “sexual assault,” not “abduction”) yet pointing to romance rather than to contemporary criminality. “Ravage” is what, for example, Emily is spared in “The White Doe of Rylstone” (1807–8), Wordsworth’s own pseudo-Medieval romance. More specifically, “ravage” is a poetic term denoting a *man’s* rape of a female, especially a female virgin. In its place, or at least as a stronger complement, Wordsworth offers, in the complete version of “Nutting,” a new poetic term, *rude intercourse*, which seems to denote a *woman’s* (or “maid’s”) rape of a *male* virgin (or virgins). The figure connecting these two ideas of rape will turn out to be, as we shall see, yet another literary figure for intrusion.

At the opening of the censored “Nutting,” William recalls a day in his boyhood when he dressed up in ragged clothes provided by his “frugal dame” and set forth to gather hazel-nuts. Forcing his way through resistant

22. *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, et al. (New York: Norton, 1979) 2.343–45.

23. Rachel Crawford argues that the poem differentiates between *male* hazels and the *female* bower beneath them, noting that it speaks of “shady nook / Of hazels, *and* the green and mossy bower” (her emphasis). I agree that both male and female genitalia are indicated in these lines, but I do not think the poem operates in this sort of rigidly schematic way. The doubling strikes me as classically Wordsworthian, functioning more as a hendiadys than a genuine pair: the shady nook of hazels *which was at the same time* a green and mossy bower. Compare, several lines earlier, “the murmur and the murmuring sound.”

underbrush, he arrives at an untouched hazel grove. A voluptuous sense of opportunity overcomes him, and he swoons with pleasure. Then he leaps up and destroys the hazel nook, an act of "merciless ravage" which leaves the "virgin scene" "deformed and sullied." Afterwards, when the sky intrudes through a gap left by broken branches, he feels "a sense of pain." He concludes by warning a maiden that she should touch the woods more gently.

As William describes the grove that tempts him, he seems to retain Lucy's *female* sexual perspective: "The hazels rose / Tall and erect, with tempting clusters hung, / A virgin scene!" The tumescent hazels and their tempting nuts are almost comical in their obscene maleness. William reinforces this impression by noting that there is no droopiness in the grove when he arrives, the implication being that *after* the harsh encounter the hazels are droopy indeed—not only because the attack is savage, but also because an erect hazel once relieved of its milk-white load droops of necessity, for a while at least, no matter how gently it may have been coaxed to give up its little gift. At least one of two shifts in identification has occurred in this scene: either William has borrowed Lucy's aggressive female sexual persona in order to experience the temptations of another aroused male body, or "nature," usually female for Wordsworth, has become a reflection of his own virile masculinity. (It may be, of course, that William identifies with Lucy through a homoerotic appreciation of male youth and beauty—a possibility which the text seems to insist on, but which is beyond the scope of the present argument.) Let us simply assert here that the grove is a locus—both a literal and a figurative "place"—of gender confusion, one might even say gender *plenitude*.

Confronted with these tall, erect, virginal hazels, William hesitates for twenty lines before beginning his assault, a textual and erotic dilation which emphasizes the *transgressive* nature of his desires. "A little while I stood," he reports, "Breathing with such suppression of the heart / As joy delights in." We expect the Wordsworthian heart to signal sympathy—for humanity, or more likely for nature—as it does, for example, in "Tintern Abbey." But here the heart is full of lusty blood, as full of blood as the erect hazels are full of autumnal sap. The suppression of his heart is linked to joy and delight, because it is a strategic restraint of desire calculated to increase the slightly deferred satisfaction. What William suppresses is more than just his sexual lust, however, though it includes that; it is the entire vital force which he will soon unleash upon the grove.

The rhetorical technique known as "dilation" is therefore given a sexual and ultimately psychological dimension. We know that "Nutting" was intended for the "Two-Part Prelude," apparently as one of the mischief episodes near the beginning of the poem (nest-robbing, trap-robbing,

boat-stealing).<sup>24</sup> In those episodes, as in the manuscript versions of “Nutting,” William is “led” by various spirits to commit these small transgressions; he is filled with “strong desire, resistless.”<sup>25</sup> In the boat-stealing episode, a version of which is included in the letter to Coleridge containing the first known shortened version of “Nutting,” Wordsworth calls the incident “an act of stealth / And troubled pleasure.” It is this sort of desire, the desire to violate boundaries, that fills the heart of young William as he reclines in the grove. In DC MS. 15, the earliest complete version of the poem, William further describes these urges. He is so gentle, he claims, that he “would not strike a flower”—*unless* overtaken by “the wantonness in which we play / With things we love,” or by a “freak of power,” or simply by “excess of life” (DC MS. 15: 29–32).<sup>26</sup> With so many exceptions to choose from—and when was Wordsworth not filled with “excess of life” as a boy?—it is hard to imagine that they do not overwhelm the rule.

This momentary dilation, postponing not only the violent act itself but even the *anticipation* of satisfaction, is familiar, Wordsworth asserts, to anyone who has ever, “after long / And weary expectation, been bless’d / With sudden happiness beyond all hope.” But how long and how weary can the young country boy’s expectation have been? There is a Wordsworthian humor in the catachresis—the boy’s morning jaunt compared to a lifetime of desperation. The desire represented in “Nutting” is experienced from the very beginning as the result of endless deprivation and temptation. Our earliest erotic impulse, Wordsworth insists, whether sexual or not, has all the urgency of long-delayed desire. In order to produce a textual dilation analogous to the physical and affective hesitation during which the young rake savors his imminent “joy,” the poem repeats its description of the moment in several different ways, both comparative and metaphorical. The boy becomes a rapist, for example, who is immediately re-figured as a gourmand: with “wise restraint, / Voluptuous,” he eyes his immobile victims “fearless of a rival,” eyes them as if they were a “banquet.”

As if to make certain that we understand just what kind of “joy” he means to describe, and what kind of “heart” it resides in, Wordsworth

24. According to the Fenwick note, “Nutting” was “intended for a poem on my own life, but struck out as not being wanted there” (*Poems* 2.956). Various lines and passages from the long versions of “Nutting” appear in DC MS. 19 (a.k.a. “MS. JJ”), in which the earliest known versions of several passages of Part 1 of the “Two-Part Prelude,” including the bird-stealing and nest-stealing episodes, also appear. The boat-stealing episode is copied into the letter to Coleridge which contains the earliest short version of “Nutting.”

25. Draft of “Two-Part Prelude,” Part 1, in MS. 19: 90–91. *The Prelude* (ed. J. Wordsworth) 488–89.

26. Wordsworth and his childhood friends were “impassioned nutters,” according to the poem’s Fenwick note; apparently this excess of life overtook them more often than not.

slows down the poem even more at this point. Lying next to a sparkling rivulet, his cheek on a mossy stone, he

. . . heard the murmur and the murmuring sound,  
 In that sweet mood when pleasure loves to pay  
 Tribute to ease, and, of its joy secure,  
 The heart luxuriates with indifferent things,  
 Wasting its kindliness on stocks and stones,  
 And on the vacant air.

(MS.15: 78–83)

The joy expected and deferred in this scene is practically *jouissance*, the complete satisfaction of desire; his heart is a reservoir of this desire. This pleasure is the “essentially solitary” sort which Georges Bataille calls “eroticism.”<sup>27</sup> The “murmuring sound” is perhaps the “murmuring sound of waters” which “issue[s] from a cave” in the fourth book of *Paradise Lost* (4.453). In Milton, murmuring waters are *falling* waters (“murmuring waters fall” [4.260], “liquid lapse of murmuring stream” [8.263]), and murmuring also characterizes the fallen angels (2.284, 3.108). Wordsworthian waters, however, murmur with a luxuriance that seems more natural (if erotic) than sinful. In another Lucy poem, “Three Years She Grew” (which Wordsworth placed directly after “Nutting” in the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads*), he fantasizes that Lucy’s “beauty” is “born of [the] murmuring sound” of waters. Furthermore, the cave from which the murmuring waters issue in *Paradise Lost* also appears, in the MS. 15 version of “Nutting,” as a cave in which, as William reminds Lucy, the two of them reposed earlier in the day, when she was in a gentle mood.<sup>28</sup> There may be another unmentioned cave present, which ties these two together: the cave in the *Aeneid* in which Dido and Aeneas make love for the first time.<sup>29</sup> The association of murmuring waters and illicit intercourse is further strengthened by a moment near Acrasia’s Bower, whose destruction is in fact about to be invoked in the next passage of “Nutting.” As Guyon approaches the Bower of Bliss, he is almost seduced by the promiscuous mingling of natural sounds in an unnatural but “most melodious” harmony. One of these unregulated voices is the “base murmure of the waters fall” (II.xii.70–71). John Hollander notes

27. *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality* (trans. of *L’Erotisme*, 1957), trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights, 1986) 252.

28. There are actually three different variants of this passage in MS. 15.

29. They seek shelter there because the storm sent by Juno has set the sky “murmuring”: “Interea magno misceri murmure caelum / Incipit . . .” (IV.160–61). *Magno . . . murmure* means “with loud rumbling [of thunder],” of course, but the coincidence of *murmure* with a cave and illicit sex—especially as it happens to duplicate Spenser’s spelling of the word in *Faerie Queene* II—would have strengthened the poetic association for Wordsworth.

(as quoted by Hamilton in his edition) that the mingling of voices in the bower amounts to “the total undermining of modes of recognition.”<sup>30</sup> “Murmur” and “murmuring sound” thus suggest, for Wordsworth, luxuriance, female beauty, temptation, and fondly remembered illicit sexual intercourse.<sup>31</sup>

William appears to be a sophisticated hedonist, well-practiced in heightening his arousal, drawing out the pleasure of anticipation, and assuring that his final “joy” will be as intense as possible. These twenty lines of verse are themselves a luxurious dilation, languid and negligent. They establish a deep Wordsworthian momentum of the sort that he had recently achieved in “Tintern Abbey,” and this tidal rhythm nearly swallows up the content of the passage which follows. The “merciless ravage” of the bower moves over us like a wave; the deformation and the sullyng, even the suggestion of rape, pass by in a gentle swell of verse. In its soothing ebb and flow of enjambment and caesura, this passage hardly amounts to a rebuke—either to us, for participating in William’s pleasant anticipation, or to Lucy for ravaging the bower in which William is addressing her.

#### 4. “Cast-Off Weeds”: Dressing for Sex

Like young Wordsworth on his nutting expedition, “Nutting” often tricks itself out in the cast-off weeds of Spenser, as well as Shakespeare and Ariosto. This is not to say that Wordsworth’s poetry in general is not filled with their influences, but this poem puts on their colors more flamboyantly than any other major Wordsworthian lyric. No other poem actually quotes Shakespeare *with quotation marks*, for example, or dresses its protagonist in outdated clothes. This direct borrowing of Renaissance modes enables Wordsworth to address possibilities outside the bounds of a purely eighteenth-century poetic idiom: confusions of gender, violent bisexual fantasies, problematic relations between people and their genitals. It allows him, that is, to operate under the cover of “the literary.” In its explicit allusions to Shakespeare, Spenser, and Ariosto, “Nutting” reveals a poetic experience of gender and sexuality far less determinate than contemporary social convention could admit. By associating Lucy with a male character from

30. “Spenser and the Mingled Measure,” *ELR* 1 (1971): 238.

31. As Bill Jewett has pointed out to me, the “ghostly shapes” invoked at the end of “Yew-Trees” (1804)—Fear, Hope, Silence, Foresight, Death, and Time—also lie on a forest floor listening to murmuring waters associated with a cave: “. . . or in mute repose / To lie, and listen to the mountain flood / Murmuring from Glaramara’s inmost caves” (31–33). Part of the point of “Yew-Trees” is that they, unlike the hazel trees of “Nutting,” are “too magnificent / To be destroyed” (12–13). It is not clear, however, whether this means that they *cannot* be destroyed, or that they *should* not be, though alas the ghostly shapes will have their way with them too in the end. Probably it is the latter, confirming that the boy’s desires in “Nutting” are but superficial copies of the deeper urges which the world’s murmuring universally inspires.

a Shakespearean drama, for example, Wordsworth can suggest that her gender, and the idea of gender itself, is essentially performative, that she puts it on like a garment and acts it out as a role, just like the boy actors who played the female roles at the Globe. On the other hand, by associating "Nutting"'s hazel grove with Spenserian allegory, where the (sexual) body is identified with the earth, Wordsworth can suggest that the body's ambiguous or doubled gender is "natural" and therefore unimpeachable. He thus employs two central English Renaissance genres, drama and landscape-allegory, to suggest that both the social and the natural aspects of sex and gender are ambiguous and unstable. Critics have, however, consistently ignored these literary-historical clues. Lucy and the bower, for example, are usually identified as the poem's twin representatives of female virginity, even though Wordsworth gives each of them a Renaissance provenance which strongly destabilizes any simple assumptions about sexuality or gender.

(a) Shakespeare

When William encounters Lucy at the beginning of the longer versions of the poem, he immediately associates her with Shakespeare's Orlando (from *As You Like It*) by attaching to her two properly quoted tags from Orlando's flustered self-description in II.vii: "Thou, Lucy, art a maiden 'inland bred' / And thou hast 'known some nurture' . . ." ("Nutting," DC MS. 16: 6–7). In the scene where these phrases occur in *As You Like It*, Orlando has just burst in, sword drawn, on Duke Senior and Jaques in their nook in the Forest of Arden, demanding some of their food for his poor old servant Adam. Unflustered, the Duke inquires whether he is desperate or merely uncivil, and Orlando answers him thus:

You touch'd my vein at first. The thorny point  
Of bare distress hath tane from me the show  
Of smooth civility; yet I am inland bred  
And know some nurture. But forebear, I say.  
He dies that touches any of this fruit  
Till I and my affairs are answered.

The Duke and Jaques ignore these improprieties and respond with generosity and reason, prompting Orlando to explain himself further:

I thought that all things had been savage here,  
And therefore put I on the countenance  
Of stern commandment.

In a savage land, Orlando is prepared to be savagely, sexually male; in a gentle forest, he will of course be gentle. He cannot be quite sure *who* he is until he knows more or less *where* he is.

One can see the surface logic of William's comparison: perhaps Lucy's savagery derives from a mistaken notion, akin to Orlando's, that she is in a savage place. Like the Duke, William wants to assure her that the woods are, on the contrary, quite gentle (that is, both non-violent and aristocratic), an assurance which will allow her to *behave* gently. But the equation of Lucy with Orlando suggests more than this, since Orlando is not only male, but is at just this moment flaunting his violent and phallic maleness as clearly as possible. When Lucy is associated with Orlando at the beginning of "Nutting," the grove's gender has not yet been problematized, and therefore Wordsworth can count on his readers to identify the grove (i.e. "Nature") as conventionally female. The allusion thus suggests that Lucy, with her nutting-crook, is a *male* rapist.

By associating Lucy with Orlando, Wordsworth not only gives her a male persona and appendage, but also puts us in mind of the Shakespearean comic/romantic world in general, in which characters quite frequently disguise themselves as the opposite sex. Perhaps, then, in the spirit of this green world, the speaker of "Nutting" responds to the hazel grove's erectness partly because he is dressed in *Lucy's* "cast-off weeds," and has put on her sexual desires along with them. Michael Cooke and Mary Jacobus each add to this impression by emphasizing the pun on *quaint*, a likely one, given the poem's preoccupation with outmoded poetic figures and modes (Cooke 141; Jacobus 255). The pun associates William with female genitalia, as though this too can be put on and off like a garment. Thus this "figure quaint" (a quaint poetic figure borrowed from an early poetic idiom) is also a *figured cunt* in search of the erect grove—though the suggestion of homoerotic desire complicates this figuration. In spite of this gender trouble, William still hopes that he and Lucy can play the parts of pastoral heterosexual lovers:

Come rest on this light bed of purple heath,  
And let me see thee sink into a dream  
Of gentle thoughts, protracted till thine eye  
Be calm as water when the winds are gone  
And no one tell whither.<sup>32</sup>

(MS. 15: 15–19)

Lucy's figurative rape of the hazels thus leads to what looks like a pastoral invitation to literal sex.<sup>33</sup> In a reversal of conventional gender behavior, the

32. He later transferred these lines to the second "Ode to Lycoris," where they clearly address Dorothy, urging her to allow him to distract her from "the formal fellowship of petty things."

33. DC MS. 24 makes it clear that he wants them to lie down *together*: "Where shall we find so sweet a resting place?" DC MS. 15 already has his head upon her lap (44–45).

woman's display of violent sexual energy fills the man with awe and affection.

(b) Spenser

The sexual identity of the hazel grove at the center of "Nutting" is no less confusing than Lucy's is. The mutilated grove clearly derives from the Renaissance topo-somatic tradition, specifically its Spenserian mode, and conflates two major moments in the *Faerie Queene*: Acrasia's Bower of Bliss, which Guyon and his iron man destroy in II.xii, and Venus' bower in the Garden of Adonis in III.vi (the center of the poem—its generative region), which is suffered to remain unmolested, successfully "hid from the world." Both of these passages present the bowers as figures for the vagina. Guyon and the Palmer, for example, force their way "through many couert groues and thickets close" (II.xii.76.6) of pubic hair, "creeping" snakily to the place of bliss. Venus' bower even more clearly represents female loins, being itself on a mount, a *mons veneris*, "on whose round top / A gloomy grove of myrtle trees did rise" dripping with sweet gum and exuding dainty odors (III.vi.43.2–3). In the midst of all of this, "in the thickest couert of that shade" (44.1), protected by trees with wantonly entangled branches, lies the pleasant arbor. Each of these female bowers enfolds a heterosexual pair of lovers—Acrasia and Verdant in II.xii, Venus and Adonis in III.vi. This enclosure of both genders within one lap, as it were, seems to have suggested to Wordsworth a kind of combined genitalia, a region in which erectness mingles with fragrant lushness.<sup>34</sup>

The mutilation of Wordsworth's hazel grove repeats Guyon's destruction of Acrasia's bower: "But all those pleasant bowres and Pallace braue, / Guyon broke downe, with rigour pittillesse" (II.xii.83.1–2); Acrasia and Verdant are in the bower quite *literally* having sex when Guyon *figuratively* rapes the bower, turning their "blisse" to "balefulness."<sup>35</sup> If Verdant has been a prisoner of sex, he has certainly been a happy one; if he is being saved, it is "from himself" and not from his lover. But the "wanton Ladie" and her "louer lose" arouse Guyon to the only sort of desire he really knows, a desire to exact violent punishment. The dissociation between Guyon's *figurative rape* of the bower and Acrasia's *literal seduction* of Verdant within the bower reflects, in the context of poetics, the possibility for vastly incommensurable forms of erotic desire. Guyon's own arousal is all too visible in the form of Talus, the stiffly erect "yron man" accompanying

34. Perhaps Venus' myrtle trees added to this impression: on the one hand they are fragrant; have delicate, labial leaves; and are sacred to Venus; on the other hand they are trees, and hence phallic.

35. The terms "literal" and "figurative" must be understood relatively here: the acts of both Guyon and Acrasia emanate numerous waves of figurative content, but her seduction of Verdant is more literal as a *sexual act* than is Guyon's "rape" of the bower.

him everywhere and carrying out Guyon's violent desires—a walking metal penis (he carries his own detachable phallic weapon as well, suggesting an infinite phallic regression).<sup>36</sup> The difference between Guyon's desires and Acrasia's is the difference between the repressive and the expressive. While Guyon represses his sexual desires and commits violence, Acrasia expresses her sexual desires openly. At the same time, Acrasia represses her violent desires and sexually dominates Verdant, whereas Guyon expresses his violence openly. Guyon's act and Acrasia's are exactly incommensurate. They are mirrored or negative images of each other, just as the desires that provoke them are psychologically, emotionally, and morally incommensurate. The point is not to determine which (sex or violence) is the "real" tenor or vehicle, but to recognize that Guyon and Acrasia's desires must always fall on opposite sides of the metaphor, and more generally to acknowledge that sex and gender are *figurative*.

It is this non-directional kind of figuration which Wordsworth finds so useful, for it allows him to resist the *fixed* directionality of the sexual figuration which rape culture establishes. According to this model, rape—whether the act, the fantasy, the fear, or the representation—is always the tenor of every relation between men ("rapists") and women ("victims"). Everything that men and women do *as* men and women represents or means "rape," since it is the figure of rape which determines them as men and women to begin with. Rape never *has* a meaning, because rape always *is* the meaning. But in Spenser's model, the figurative *difference* is the only thing that matters, like the difference between the "south" and "north" ends of a magnet, in which it makes no difference at all to switch the names, as long as the same difference remains. Wordsworth takes this formulation even further, suggesting that it is equally unimportant to distinguish between "male" and "female" in sexuality.

There is, however, an asymmetry in Spenserian sexuality, which Wordsworth carries over into "Nutting": William seems to grant Lucy (as I have argued) a sex-drive stronger than his own, so that to this extent at least she plays Acrasia's part, threatening her male lover with sheer excess of desire. When William invites her to rest with him on a "light bed of purple heath" (15), he may remember the "bed of Roses" on which Acrasia and Verdant drowse and the "pleasant arbour" where Venus and Adonis lie "Lapped in flowres and pretious spycery" (II.xii.77; III.vi.44, 46). Even after William's and Lucy's genders have been exposed as figures and performances, there still remains, apparently, a balance of aggressive desire

36. I do not say that this is Talus' only figurative identity; only that he takes it on in this scene.

on her part which must be concealed within a pastoral and entirely conventional structure of gentle—even genteel—sexual repose.

(c) Ariosto

The mutilation of the bower in "Nutting" derives as much from the mad Orlando's destruction of a grove in the twenty-third book of *Orlando Furioso* (which itself echoes Ajax's mad slaughter of the cattle in Sophocles' *Ajax*) as from Guyon's similar (though differently motivated) act in Book Two of the *Faerie Queene*. Critics have often noted the allusion, but without recognizing its function in "Nutting"'s intertextual economy.<sup>37</sup>

The story of Orlando's insane destruction of a grove shares two other details with "Nutting": a cave where lovers meet, and a period of hesitation. In the twenty-third book of *Orlando Furioso*, Orlando wanders into a grove which his beloved, Angelica, and her lover Medore, have made a trysting spot.<sup>38</sup> The lovers' names are carved into "divers trees" (23.78) in order to make their shame (or lack of it) public. Orlando tries to tell himself that this must be some other Angelica, though he recognizes her hand. He next happens upon "a shadie cave and pleasant spring" where Angelica and Medore "[s]pent time in sports that may not be exprest" (23.81–82)—a "shadie cave," we learn earlier in the poem, "Like to that cave where (shunning stormie wether) / The Trojan Duke and *Dido* met together" (19.27). Inscribed on the wall of the cave is a story which leaves no doubt that Orlando has been betrayed. Even upon reading this story, however, he resists the urge to respond violently, until, having wandered out of the cave in sadness, he "hap[s] again to light upon the cave" and see the inscription once again, at which point he goes berserk:

To see the stones againe his woes display  
And her ill name and his ill hap deprave  
Did on the sudden all his sence enrage  
With hate, with furie, with revenge and rage.

(23.103)

He attacks the cave and its surroundings with his sword (23.104) (a "foolish franticke feat") and then lies down on the ground for three days and "doth not sleepe nor drink nor eat." On the fourth day he rises in a rage, tears

37. By 1798 Wordsworth was quite familiar with Ariosto's epic romance. In 1796 he was already helping Dorothy read it in Italian (Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth: A Life* [Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992] 107).

38. I quote from Sir John Harington's English translation of 1591, ed. Robert McNulty (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972). Citations are by book and stanza.

off his clothes, “and runs about starke naked” (23.105), and finally commences his real assault:

He roots up trees as one would root a weed,  
And ev'n as birders laying nets with skill  
Pare slender thornes away with easie strokes,  
So did he play with ashes, elmes and okes.

(23.107)

Like the speaker in “Nutting,” Orlando visits a lovers’ cave, then lies down in a grove, and then gets up and destroys the grove. As a context for Wordsworth’s poem, however, Ariosto’s scene complicates the situation instead of explaining it. William and Lucy in the cave remind us of Medore and Angelica in their cave, and Lucy’s lusty gusto at the beginning of “Nutting” recalls Angelica’s aggressive courting and sexual enjoyment of Medore, “Forgetting so all maidenly sobrietie / That she of him could never have satietie” (19.26.7–8).

By offering both Guyon’s *and* Orlando’s acts of destruction as antecedents for those of Lucy and William, Wordsworth makes it difficult for us to assign any single motivation to the acts in “Nutting,” and thereby complicates its conceptions of “desire” and “sexuality.” Further, by adding Ariosto’s “Orlando” to the Shakespearean “Orlando” directly quoted early in the poem, he complicates identity itself, implying that even a name does not help. Lucy is “Orlando,” but William is also “Orlando,” and the two Orlandos come from different literatures, languages, genres, and cultures. The surplus of Orlandos in “Nutting” is a joke at the expense of rationalists who would deny the (literary) history compacted into any act of desire. Gender and sexuality may be “constructed,” Wordsworth implies, but not in any simple way, and this construction cannot evade the difficulties of, among other things, literary history. William’s destruction of the grove links him to Ariosto’s Orlando, and Lucy’s “rude intercourse” in the bower echoes Angelica’s rudely insatiable intercourse with Medore. Thus the allusion to *Orlando Furioso* casts William and Lucy in two different but intertwined relations: Lucy remains the adulterous and oversexed woman, but William resembles both her illicit lover *and* the insanely jealous boyfriend who discovers her adultery. Likewise, the destruction of the grove in “Nutting” both repeats Orlando’s act of jealous rage *and* represents aggressive, female-initiated sexual intercourse. The point of the allusion is, in part, that the “rude intercourse” and “merciless ravage” of “Nutting” are not reducible to an expression of simple power or oppression.

In the longer versions of the poem, this irreducibility is centrally expressed by the two acts of mutilation—Lucy’s and William’s—which refuse

to collapse quite into one. *His* rape of the grove was a childhood habit, long since suppressed by the seemingly natural "sense of pain" it caused him, whereas *she* commits "rape" as an adult, or at least as a sexually mature adolescent (a "maid"), and apparently feels no guilty pain at all. The poem attempts to reconcile these complementary but dissimilar experiences through the figure of the "intruding sky" at the end of the poem.

#### 5. Intrusion and Seclusion

In the longer version of "Nutting," no aspect of the poem remains single or unambiguous: female violence is doubled by male violence, and nutting as pastoral activity is answered by nutting as metaphor for rape. Two closing figures are therefore required to bring the poem to an end: the *intruding sky*, which ends the speaker's story and returns him to Lucy's presence, and the *spirit in the woods*, to which he entrusts both Lucy's sexuality and his own.

When the boy's voluptuous pre-rape hesitation comes to an end, the ravaging of the bower passes by practically unnoticed in a single sweeping movement:

Then up I rose,  
 And dragg'd to earth both branch and bough, with crush  
 And merciless ravage, and the shady nook  
 Of hazels, and the green and mossy bower,  
 Deform'd and sullied, patiently gave up  
 Their quiet spirit; and unless I now  
 Confound my present spirit with the past,  
 Even then, when from the bower I turn'd away,  
 Exulting, rich beyond the wealth of kings—  
 I felt a sense of pain when I beheld  
 The silent trees and the intruding sky.

(MS. 15: 83–93)

Wordsworth seems unwilling to dwell on the act itself. The poem moves from rape to guilt—and from boyhood to manhood—in the middle of line 88, and the momentum carries us across the gap before we quite know what has happened. The concluding address to Lucy ("Then, dearest maiden . . .") immediately follows, suggesting that the memory of the intruding sky has returned him to his present time and place—with Lucy, in a mutilated hazel bower into which the sky is, presumably, also intruding. Thus at this point, the two acts of mutilation, separated by a number of years, and separated in the poem until now, are finally collapsed into one "spot."

This condensation occurs around the strange figure of the “intruding sky,” which binds the two ravagers, the two bowers, and the two moments. This image is the poem’s creation, the key to its conception of erotic memory. It is a catachresis, shaping something expansive and intangible into a phallic instrument of violation. It dissolves and dematerializes the models of agency and violence that “Nutting” originally employs. In fact, we know that it is William who has intruded: by tearing away branches, he has broken into the area belonging to the sky—that is, the entire space beyond the branches. By figuring the sky as intrusive, the speaker transfers the agentive status from himself to the sky, so that it is now responsible for the mutilating of the grove, which would be intact if the sky had not jabbed itself through the branches.

Let us imagine that as William *recalls* the intruding sky, he instinctively looks up and actually *sees* the sky “intruding”—for he and Lucy are standing, after all, in a grove where she has been indulging in “rude intercourse” (an activity into which *he* has intruded, first physically and then verbally, forcing a sexual interpretation onto what may be an innocent pastime). His reverie is now broken. When he looks down he sees Lucy, who is responsible for this particular mutilation, though we are given no indication that she feels any “sense of pain.” Despite William’s warning to her at the beginning of the poem, she gives no sign of remorse. Apparently she feels no guilt; the intruding sky does not mean to Lucy what it does to William. For him it acts, as Brisman has pointed out, as a strange, weakened kind of superego which is subservient to a female force. For Lucy, though, it seems to *affirm* her desires and actions. It causes him pain, but merely flushes her cheeks. Lucy herself, I suggest, or her aggressive sexual desires, *are* the feminized superego impinging on William, at least from his point of view. When he begs her to “touch gently,” it is precisely because he recognizes her prerogative to touch any way she pleases. Here we can see the point of the catachresis “intruding sky”: the idea of “intrusion”—penetration, violation, rape—is exposed as a figurative construction. Something as unintrusive as “the sky” (overarching, maternal, serene) can take a phallic, intrusive form if it is imagined that way. Or to put it bluntly: sexual aggressiveness, even sexual *intrusiveness*, is not dependent on possession of the bodily penis. A woman’s sexuality can be violent and violational just as the sky can “intrude” into the grove.<sup>39</sup> The intruding sky is the pivot around which female “rude intercourse” replaces male “ravage.”

39. This may be precisely the speaker’s lesson to Lucy, and it may be a performative one: perhaps Lucy *has* no violent desires until he makes it clear to her, through this figure, that they are possible.

Once the intruding sky has brought the speaker around full circle, back to Lucy with her flushed cheeks and "look half cruel in its eagerness," he is reminded of his opening admonition, which he now repeats verbatim, with the identical enjambment: "with gentle hand / Touch." The repeated emphasis on "touch" advises us to consider the resonance which "touching" has acquired in the poem. But Wordsworth goes one step further as well, now adding an amplification and an explanation to the admonition or plea:

. . . Move, sweet maid, along these shades  
 In gentleness of heart.—With gentle hand  
 Touch, for there is a spirit in the woods:

(MS. 15)

We can now give the spirit a name; let us call it "the spirit of good desires," or of unofficial sexuality. Every element here is a paradox: the "gentle hand" is non-harmful, but also well-bred in the sense that it understands that desire and gender can be created, or at least revised, through literary memory, and that these revisions are necessary antidotes to the dead, unimaginative structures of official gender and sexuality. The female hand is "gentle" in this latter sense because it remembers the possibility of independent, even violent sexual desires. "Gentleness of heart" contains a similar irony: in the telling of his own nutting story, the speaker has defined the heart as a reservoir of mischievous, even transgressive desires. The maid is urged to make *her* heart gentle in the double sense of hedonistically refining her desires (specifically with respect to their poetic past) and of making them *appear* to the world to be within the bounds of civility.

Along what "shades," then, is Lucy "moving"? He means "shadows" or "shady places," of course, but the use is a little strained, suggesting that "these shades" are also the literary ghosts so strongly conjured up by the poem: the shades of Virgil, Ariosto, Spenser, and Shakespeare, especially. This is Wordsworth's most serious "instruction" to Lucy and to his readers: we are to recognize that the literary past has a large part in determining the present social boundaries of gender, sexuality, and desire. Those who know that past well and intimately, even erotically, have it in their power to change the present and future through strong interpretations of past depictions of women and men, their desires and their intercourse. The spirit in the *woods* is partly, and crucially, a spirit in the *words* as well.

The ending of MS. 15 makes it particularly clear that the speaker means to *instruct* Lucy and not merely admonish her:

Then, dearest maiden, if I have not now  
 The skill to be thy teacher, think of him,  
 The ragged boy, and let his parting look  
 Instruct.

(DC MS. 15: 94–97)

But what kind of instruction is he really offering? The overt and relatively weak lesson is that Lucy must conform to the gentle conventions of female sexuality, but the lush description of the violent rape and its attendant pleasures—confirmed by the “intruding sky” or female phallus—suggests more powerfully that she continue her current habits, only perhaps with a more sophisticated decadence. The upshot of this double lesson is that she must learn to conceal her violent and unstable sexuality within the gentle confines of socially constructed “gender” and “sex.” In DC MS. 16 William makes this goal a little clearer. He points to two toppled saplings and proclaims:

. . .—Well! blessed be the Powers  
 That teach philosophy and good desires  
 In this their still Lyceum, hand of mine  
 Wrought not this ruin.

(DC MS. 16: 24–27)

William has not given up the “strong desire, resistless” that drove him to wreak ruin in his youth, but rather has learned to convert it into “good desires.” These are transgressive desires, grounded in the urge to violate fixed boundaries, but expressed in a way which leaves those boundaries superficially intact. Wordsworth’s poetic desire to offer this instruction to Lucy and his readers is hampered by the boundaries of accepted social idiom, but also, more crippling, through his own *personal* fear of Dorothy’s erotic independence. In order to evade the social constrictions, he takes a detour through an older set of *literary* idioms, urging Lucy to convert her (newly discovered or created) desire for “rude intercourse” into “good desires” by refining her transgressive urges and actions through the medium of strong literary memory.<sup>40</sup>

40. The phrase “rude intercourse” occurs in only one other place in Wordsworth’s poetry, in *The Excursion*, written sixteen years after “Nutting.” Here it has no apparent sexual overtones, but it does beg for refinement. In this episode, the Solitary extols, for the Wanderer’s benefit, the advantages of wandering. In the various people that a wanderer encounters, the Solitary suggests, he finds

Examples efficacious to refine  
 Rude intercourse; apt agents to expel,  
 By importation of unlooked-for arts,

## Conclusion

I suggest that the two basic versions of "Nutting"—longer and shorter—constitute a demand that the poem be read in two different ways: first as a visionary manifesto and then as a personal plea. Both elements are present in the poem's ending, which as I have noted, is the same in both the longer and the shorter versions. As a visionary statement, the final plea for Lucy to "touch gently" is primarily a demonstration to us, the readers, that Lucy is strong enough, both personally and erotically, to *require* such a plea—a demonstration that female sexuality need not be determined by anything less than the imagination. It suggests that the literary imagination, if accompanied by a strong memory of the literary past, can be used to destabilize our present social ideas—our weak, used up metaphors of female sexuality, for example.<sup>41</sup> As a personal plea, however, the poem is not addressed to women in general but to Dorothy Wordsworth, on whom William's mental and emotional stability very much depended during that winter in Goslar. He recognizes that she has it in her to live a completely independent life, erotically and otherwise, and he no doubt wants this for her in one sense. But he simply cannot bear the thought of losing their tightly bound relationship—their co-dependency, I suppose we would call it now.

Was Wordsworth's decision not to publish the longer version of "Nutting" an act of suppression? If this is in any sense true, then the object of that suppression is Lucy's "rude intercourse," an expression of female desires in violation of society's fixed boundaries of gender and sexuality. These chaotic desires seem to precede controlled forms of sexuality. In its texts and its textual history, "Nutting" suggests that Wordsworth *discovers* Lucy's violent and aggressive sexuality and then tries to convince her simultaneously to accept it and refine it. But this reading begs a central

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Raising, through just gradation, savage life  
To rustic, and the rustic to urbane.

(*The Excursion* 8.66–70)

Wordsworth generally endorses Rousseau's disapproval of the development of "savage man" into more urbane forms, but here and in "Nutting" I think that "refinement" and urbanity are not advocated in jest. Wordsworth understood that his conception of the rustic was as much a myth as Rousseau's savage, and he was able, at least on occasion, to acknowledge and even recommend the literary refinement that made him (and, as I think the poem suggests, to some extent Dorothy) an intellectual rather than a rustic.

41. Rachel Crawford's Lacanian map of the poem helps to illuminate my conviction that the poem charts the conversion of *definite* relationships into a highly *indefinite* relationship with a figure combining the sororal, the sexual, and the natural. See note 17 above.

question: why does the poem's speaker insist, in the first place, on interpreting both his and Lucy's acts of nut-gathering as violent sexual transgressions? Perhaps there was nothing at all sexual in Lucy's actions, or the little boy's actions, before the poem's speaker used them as a figurative, intertextual pretext from which to create *both* the transgressive desire ("rude intercourse") *and* the strategy for containing or refining it ("with gentle hand / Touch"). Catherine MacKinnon and other neo-structuralist theorists of rape might agree: since the sexuality of a young woman of late-eighteenth-century England would have been formed by the official paradigms of "rape-culture," she could hardly have developed—much less satisfied—violent, ambiguous, or transgressive desires.

I want to suggest instead—as I think the poem suggests—that "rude intercourse" and its desires are a myth like Rousseau's "natural man," a myth of priority invented *at the same time* that the speaker begs Lucy to "gentle" these desires. In creating this myth of uncontrolled desire and its suppression, Wordsworth mimics the construction of "official" sexuality, which creates "legitimate" sexual desires out of a prohibition of homosexuality and incest—desires which are also, as Judith Butler hypothesizes in her recent *Gender Trouble*, invented alongside of their "prohibition":

The object of repression is not *the desire* it takes to be its ostensible object, but the multiple configurations of power itself. . . . In other words, desire and its repression are an occasion for the consolidation of juridical structures; desire is manufactured and forbidden as a ritual symbolic gesture whereby the juridical model exercises and consolidates its power. (Butler 75–76)

There was, in other words, no chaotic, unfettered sexuality "before the law." Official sexuality and the desires it represses (including any independent female desire) are created simultaneously in order to eliminate any possible plurality of sexualities or gender-constructions.

In order to create the myth of "gentle touching"—a controlled form of active female sexuality—Wordsworth must simultaneously create the myth of "rude intercourse." The "gentle touching" urged by Wordsworth at the beginning and end of the complete "Nutting" is not a response to a pre-existing uncontrolled desire for "rude intercourse." Instead, this refined-yet-violent form of desire is produced by responding to various traditional (which in 1798 meant "Renaissance") poetic moments *as if* they indicated that such female desires already existed. He is thus able to offer "rude intercourse" as an alternative to the current male-dominant social paradigms of sex and gender—an alternative so strongly present that the speaker of "Nutting" has to beg Lucy to keep it under control. The myth

of an underlying chaotic sexual force is invented simultaneously with the instructions for its refinement.

It is true that both the myth of "rude intercourse" and the answering concept of "good" or refined desire are products of a male, heterosexual poet, and that they are established in a scene of instruction where the pupil is female. But it is also true that the instruction turns into a plea by the end of the poem, implying that the poet's ruse has partly worked—that Lucy now *does* have, from the male speaker's perspective, an alternative, non-submissive form of desire which he must now beg her to control. Structuralists from Levi-Strauss to Foucault and MacKinnon agree that the power to instruct falls only to those occupying a culturally defined position of authority. Accordingly, only a white, straight, male poet working in the accepted literary tradition would be in a position to offer a textual alternative to definitions of gender and desire current in turn-of-the-nineteenth-century England. Can such a poet, using the tools and history of his craft, begin to *give away* that exclusive authority by reinterpreting the literary depictions which collectively help define the structures of gender, sexuality, and desire? By insisting on publishing and republishing the poem, but in a fragmentary form which both censors Lucy's "rude intercourse" and retains a reminder of it, Wordsworth gives this question a decidedly uncertain answer. Dorothy's life after 1798, however—permanently attached to William, sexually (and romantically) abstinent, bedridden and demented during her last twenty years (Gill 375)—offers little support for this hope.

If readers of Wordsworth doubt that even at his most liberal (or radical) he would have poetically conspired toward this kind of redefinition and liberation of female desire, they might ask themselves whether he might have done so—ambivalently, marginally—on behalf of his sister Dorothy, to whom "Nutting" is personally directed. He took away her chance for an independent life by accepting her love for him as brother and poet, and in some sense lover. It is not hard to imagine him mythologizing her "repression" (explaining her lack of any apparent sexuality) by writing the story of "Lucy's rude intercourse," which he, of necessity, begged her to curtail for *his* sake ("think of him, the ragged boy," he implores in the expanded versions of the poem's ending). Only if we understand some such enormous personal investment in "Nutting" can we make sense of Wordsworth's insistence on publishing a fragment addressed to his sister which is far more sexually preoccupied than the rest of his work, and which ends with a warning or plea made ludicrously irrelevant by the poem's mutilation.

"Nutting" not only depicts rape provocatively, but also instructs the

reader how to enjoy the *anticipation* of rape. But its particular myth of rape as “rude intercourse”—the satisfaction of a desire imagined as inherently female—seeks to loosen the structural equation of dominant male and submissive female. The figure of “gentle touching” which it offers as a refined form of “rude intercourse” suggests that the power latent in sexuality can belong as much to women as to men, perhaps to women even more. The most serious claim that “Nutting” makes as a *political* poem is that the poetic reimagining of traditional literary depictions of gender and desire can actually affect the future practice of sexuality. As a *personal* record, though, the poem severely limits this hope. It is doubtless extreme to accept Dorothy’s life after the composition of “Nutting” as a judgment of the poem’s potential, and yet there is no way to avoid it. In the experience of *this* Lucy, the poem’s personal instruction to be “gentle”—though seemingly weaker than its literary and aesthetic instruction to indulge in “good desires”—succeeds so completely that her strong urges, whether actual or merely potential, disappear like the opening of “Nutting,” leaving even less of a trace.

However much political hope the poem may offer, the most crucial strand of its reception-history thus suggests that a conventional bond—between brother and sister, or perhaps simply man and woman in their conventionality—is far stronger, *in a given personal life*, than any subversive textual refiguration of identity. This is not to say that simply because “Nutting” was no help to Dorothy, it has nothing to offer other women or men, over whom Wordsworth obviously has no personal power. We are free to inherit whichever aspect of the poem we *can* (and it is a question of interpretive and therefore moral strength), just as he was free to inherit the visions of gender and sexuality that he wrestled from Virgil, Shakespeare, Spenser, and Ariosto. Such an imaginative victory, however, though it will be no small one, still leaves the question of *experience*. There is not much to be gained, as Emerson was fond of pointing out, by “manipular attempts to realize the world of thought.” A poet can imagine a new sexuality for his sister, but the emotional limits of their relationship will prevent this fantasy from taking shape in her actual life. The voice of Wordsworth’s poetry could never be the voice of solitude for Dorothy—the solitude without which it is impossible even to contemplate resistance to social conventions of identity—since William himself was always there sharing her solitude. For us, though, at this cultural and temporal remove, “Nutting” can *only* speak in this voice, a voice which may yet rouse us to practical results, or encourage us to have faith in results already achieved:

Never mind the ridicule, never mind the defeat: up again, old heart!—  
it seems to say,—there is victory yet for all justice; and the true

romance which the world exists to realize, will be the transformation of genius into practical power.<sup>42</sup>

The genius of "Nutting" is a "dear maiden" named Lucy with flushed cheeks and a look half cruel in its eagerness. I do not know precisely how she is to be "transformed" into a creature of practical power, or even how she can be given a voice of her own, but perhaps we should begin by restoring her "rude intercourse" to this powerful poem, as its occasion and its promise.

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42. "Experience" (1844), *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures* (NY: Library of America, 1983) 492. This is the essay's final sentence.