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Article abstract

Since its publication in 1884, Malcolm's Katie has received much and varied critical attention. Early critics read the poem as a narrative of nation building, a contribution to a patriotic program of Canadian settlement and expansion. The text received far different treatment in the hands of modernist critics, who reacted strongly against the poem's Victorian sensibility. Since the 1980s, Malcolm's Katie has been read through a variety of lenses- from the feminist to the ecological. These readings take important steps towards giving the poem the focused critical attention it deserves by acknowledging the nuances of Isabella Valancy Crawford's art. Throughout the poem different narratives compete for recognition: Katie's emphasis on truth against Alfred's duplicity; Max's naïve idealism against Alfred's nihilism; the pioneer history represented by Malcolm against the natural history suggested in Crawford's depiction of the natural world; and even the narrative itself against the interspersed lyrics that give voice to impulses and desires that do not fit in the narrative. Crawford's poem deserves and rewards continued academic study. It contributed significantly to the historical development of the Canadian long poem, and stands as a testament to Crawford's skill as a poet and the profundity of her thinking.

Exploring the Competing Narratives of Isabella Valancy Crawford's *Malcolm's Katie*

CEILIDH HART

IN THE INTRODUCTION TO the 1987 Canadian Poetry Press edition of Isabella Valancy Crawford's *Malcolm's Katie*, D.M.R. Bentley remarks on the often careless treatment the poem had received by scholars to that point, many of whom were even content to work from a copy of the poem that the poet herself described as being riddled with press errors. Since its first publication in 1884, *Malcolm's Katie* has received much and varied critical attention, careless or otherwise. Early critics read the poem as a narrative of nation building, a contribution to a patriotic program of Canadian settlement and expansion. When they weren't reading the poem as a celebration of the Canadian pioneer, these early critics focused on Crawford's biography, mistakenly romanticizing Crawford and her life in Toronto as a struggling artist (see Hale; Galvin). *Malcolm's Katie* received far different treatment in the hands of modernist critics, who reacted strongly against the Victorian sensibility of the poem. In *Creative Writing in Canada: A Short History of English-Canadian Literature*, Desmond Pacey finds the poem "tastelessly and clumsily florid" (70); Louis Dudek, also put off by its melodrama, describes Crawford's work as "hollow convention" (123). In *Literary History of Canada*, Roy Daniells does acknowledge that the poem has some complexity or sophistication, suggesting that it invites two readings, a "straightforward" one and an "esoteric" one (424). While this view might have opened the door for further exploration of the merits of Crawford's work, Daniells still relegates *Malcolm's Katie* to the rank of "nice pictures" in a "preposterously romantic love story" (424).

Since the 1980s, *Malcolm's Katie* has been read through a variety of lenses — from the feminist to the ecological. These readings take important steps towards giving the poem the kind of focused critical attention it deserves by

acknowledging the nuances of Crawford's art. For example, discussing Katie and the issue of gender in the poem, Cecily Devereux describes the conflict between Katie's feminine narrative and Max's masculine and exclusionary one. Devereux's insight into the gendered narratives of the poem allows us to see that gender is not the only subject Crawford treats with this kind of sophistication. In fact, throughout the poem we see different narratives or visions competing for recognition: Max's patriarchal vision of a new Eden against Katie's refusal to value the material and her rejection of an idealized image of Eden; Katie's emphasis on truth against Alfred's duplicity; Max's naïve idealism against Alfred's nihilism; the pioneer history represented by Malcolm against the natural history suggested in Crawford's depiction of the natural world; and even the narrative itself against the interspersed lyrics that give voice to impulses and desires that do not fit in the narrative. Taken together, these narratives comprise a poem that offers a multifaceted interrogation of several contentious issues. The drama and the dynamic of the poem occur in the conflict between different voices and the tension between different worlds. Settling on one side or the other, trying to resolve the discussion, and, in doing so, ignoring the complexities of *Malcolm's Katie* does an injustice to Crawford as an intellectual and as a writer whose work challenges us to hold the competing narratives simultaneously in our heads. The dialogue that emerges in the poem as we do so suggests that Crawford's work both exists within and pushes beyond the boundaries of convention — of the questing pioneer story or the melodramatic love story, for example. The poem serves as one example of the extent to which early women authors were engaging with the political and social issues of their day, even participating in national debates, through their writing; it therefore gives us ample reason to continue approaching early Canadian literature in critical ways. Using Devereux's discussion of gender in the poem as a starting point, and resisting the urge to decipher a single thematic thrust in the poem, this essay will explore Crawford's skilful handling of fraught issues with a view to a fuller appreciation of a remarkable poem. In doing so, it will revisit arguments taken up by many of the poem's scholars, particularly Bentley's seminal introduction to the 1987 edition. While Bentley addresses a number of significant and varied issues relating to the poem, this essay will suggest the ways in which they work together to create a broader structural coherence. It will also offer a closer reading of many aspects of the poem than has yet been offered.

As *Malcolm's Katie* was taken up by critics interested in feminism and

issues of gender, there emerged a central question about Katie, and critics oriented their arguments around this question: does Katie have agency or not? Some critics have read Katie as another commodity in the fruitful Canadian landscape to be owned by the men in the poem. As Bentley writes, Katie is “a possession of the men in her life, a chattel whose value derives less from her merit as a person than from her various positions as dutiful daughter, adoring wife and fertile mother in a patriarchal system whose continuity and genealogy she assures” (Introduction xvii). Similarly, Mary Joy Macdonald finds evidence at the end of the poem of negative implications for Katie’s future relationship with Max, as Katie stands with her husband, father and son while Max twists her “hair/ About his naked arm” (VII, 16–17). Macdonald argues, “Katie must realize that she cannot move without occasioning her own pain” (44). In this reading, Katie’s own subjectivity sinks under the influence of men just as she disappears beneath Malcolm’s “wooden wealth” in the river in Part III. Diana Relke, on the other hand, posits a very different reading, suggesting that Katie is “both excessively feminine and exceedingly powerful” (59). Relke defends her thesis by describing the way Katie influences her father and Max even in her “maiden, speechless, gentle ways” (III, 89). In this reading, Katie successfully reconciles femininity and power, and assumes a position of moral authority over Max (Relke 61). Though equally compelling, both readings can be problematic. Seeing Katie as a passive figure, a victim of a patriarchal system that silences her subjectivity, ignores the moments where she does exert influence and articulate her desire; seeing Katie as a powerful figure of female agency ignores the clear constrictions placed around her by the gendered social structure of the poem.

In a more persuasive discussion of gender in *Malcolm's Katie*, Devereux describes a type of dialogue that occurs between a masculine narrative and a feminine one. Devereux identifies a male-centered myth, articulated by Max, and suggests that Katie works against this traditional male narrative by offering, and insisting upon, her own narrative. One critic regrets that Crawford “chose to waste her talents writing about men with axes, whom she did not understand” (Newton 12–13), but Devereux maintains that through Katie, Crawford challenges the idea that Canada is a male space, reserved exclusively for heroes with axes. Devereux traces the way Katie redirects Max’s narrative, inserts her own and then closes the poem with her own voice. Max’s story is a prevalent one in colonialist literatures. It is the story of overcoming the obstacles he faces in a hostile natural environment, establish-

ing a new Eden in the New World, and winning material wealth, and Katie, as a result (see Devereux 90). Katie's narrative, however, is different. It is a narrative that privileges love and fidelity and the intangible values Max does not recognize in his struggle to achieve the success he admires in Malcolm. We see their disparate visions in the first section of the poem when Katie refuses to let Max read her into his story in a particular way. He questions her constancy and speaks for her when he tells her, "That sixteen-summer'd heart of yours may say: / 'I was but budding, and I did not know / My core was crimson and my perfume sweet ...'" (I, 26–28). Here Katie interrupts him. She appropriates his metaphor of the rose and uses it not to show her inconstancy but to underscore her faithfulness:

If hearts are flow'rs, I know that flow'rs can root ...
 ... Tho' I be a bud,
 My roots strike deep, and torn from that dear soil
 Would shriek like mandrakes. (I, 37–46; see Bentley, Introduction xix)

Max then launches into his myth of nation building, a story that focuses on the material success of the male pioneer in founding a new Eden and that, by extension, excludes Katie. He tells her his narrative means "Outspreading circles of increasing gold ... A name in weight ... two arms indifferent strong ... (I, 111–15). Here again, Katie interrupts him to insert herself. To this list, she adds, "And Katie's heart" (I, 116). At the end of the poem, Katie separates herself from Max's myth of "prelapsarian recovery" (Devereux 90). She deflates Max's vision of a new Eden and turns the focus back on the story of which she is a part:

O Adam had not Max's soul ...
 And these wild woods and plains are fairer far
 Than Eden's self ...
 I would not change these wild and rocking woods ...
 For the smooth sward of selfish Eden bowers. (VII, 30–39)

Presenting Max's narrative and Katie's narrative in a struggle that is never completely resolved, Crawford refuses to let us rest easily on one side or the other of the gender issue. *Malcolm's Katie* is a story about Max and his nation building, but it is also a story about *Katie*, a story that has room for the feminine and for a kind of success that is intangible.

Katie's feminine narrative is challenged further by another man in the poem: Alfred, the smooth-talking Englishman. By deliberately pairing Katie and Alfred, Crawford exposes a struggle in the poem between truth and

deception and the relationship of language to both. Alfred's best weapon against Katie and, as we will see, against Max is his skill with words. But Katie more than adequately meets his challenge and uses them just as skilfully as Alfred does. Linked in this regard, they nevertheless differ significantly in the way they use language. For Katie, language is truth; for Alfred, language is deception. Alfred is introduced almost immediately as a man who loves Katie's wealth and not Katie herself, but his intentions to deceive are made explicit after he encounters Max in the forest and leaves him there to die. He says,

'And Katie shall believe [Max] false — not dead;
False, false! — and I? O, she shall find me true —
True as a fabl'd devil to the soul
He longs for with the heat of all hell's fires.' (IV, 230–33)

Acknowledging language's complicity in his deception, Alfred muses, "These myths serve well for simile I see" (IV, 234). Words wielded by Alfred have the power to destroy even those things sacred enough to seem beyond the influence of lies. At Alfred's suggestion that Katie is false, for example, Max's image of her is instantly wounded and he is riddled with doubt of her fidelity. With equal force, Katie counters Alfred's use of language, echoing him directly, and again self-reflexively, when she tells him, "(Max) is as true as I am ... / And did I seek for stronger simile, / I could not find such in the universe" (VI, 70–72). When Alfred tries to convince Katie and her father that Max has married another woman and started a family, Katie calls his story false, insisting, "He is true since I am faithful still" (V, 131). Katie can only conceive of the spoken vows she and Max exchange as truth, and therefore enduring. Because those vows molded "two hearts in one" (V, 130), and because Katie is constant, Max is *necessarily* faithful. On the surface, the struggle between Katie and Alfred resolves itself in favour of Katie, and yet, even the extent to which Crawford draws parallels between Katie and Alfred problematizes this easy resolution. In another significant moment of pairing through language, one that has posed problems for virtually all critics (see Bentley, Introduction xxv–xxvii; Macdonald 44), Katie's final words at the end of the poem are "if I knew my mind," hearkening back to Alfred who, in Part III, describes the motivation behind all of his scheming and lying by saying, "My pangs of love for gold must needs be fed, / And shall be, Katie, if I know my mind" (150–51). That Katie's final words echo Alfred at the moment he reveals his sinister intentions raises potential questions about Katie's own honesty and the integrity of her language.

Alfred is not presented just as a challenger to Katie in the poem, but also as a challenger *for* Katie. Bentley discusses the two-suitor convention in *Malcolm's Katie*, arguing that Crawford uses it as “a vehicle for the presentation of a rich dialectic between various forms of construction and destruction” (Introduction xxviii). In effect, what we see in Max and Alfred is not just two men battling for one woman (the right suitor and the wrong suitor), but also two world views battling for recognition, an idealistic one presented by Max and a cynical, even nihilistic, one presented by Alfred. Many critics have pointed out the simultaneous themes of nation building and love in the poem (see Woodcock; Devereux; Bentley, Introduction). The narrator is careful to remind us on several occasions that Max is both “the labourer and the lover” (III, 149); he is the ideal settler because he is also a lover, and both of these aspects of his character make him the *right* choice for Katie. As he labours to clear the land and build a farm, he is always “thinking much of Kate” (II, 241), and he talks of their future home so much that the other settlers can imagine “The snowy walls, deep porches, and the gleam / of Katie’s garments flitting through the rooms” (II, 250–51). Crawford celebrates Max as the settler-hero through the Herculean myth (see Bentley, *Mimic* 274). Although Max wields an axe and not a club, he experiences the same transformation Hercules undergoes, a transformation that is spiritual as well as physical. These changes can be seen in Max through the physical work he does on the land:

The labourer’s arms grow mightier day by day —
 More iron-welded as he slew the trees ...
 His young soul grew and shew’d a virile front,
 Full muscl’d and large statur’d like his flesh. (II, 168-73)

Katie herself recognizes the change in Max at the end of the poem, seeing “within his eyes a larger soul / Than that light spirit that before she knew” (VI, 132–33). This process of transformation is necessary to reinforce his position as the proper choice for Katie and to make him fit to be the founder of a new community through his pioneering activities. The physical work done by the settlers, Crawford seems to suggest, holds moral and spiritual value.

Alfred too is a lover, “not of Katie’s face, / But of her father’s riches” (III, 121–22), and while we immediately recognize him as the wrong suitor, he also problematizes an easy valorizing of Max when they are each given an opportunity to express their ideas of progress and nationhood in Part IV. Max articulates his project simply and directly, declaring, “We do immortal

tasks — / We build nations — this my axe and I!” (IV, 55–56). His is a teleological idea of progress that holds spiritual reward in the end. Alfred immediately undercuts Max’s “immortal task” with a nihilism with which Max cannot argue:

Nations are not immortal! Is there now
 One nation thron’d upon the sphere of earth,
 That walk’d with the first Gods, and saw
 The budding world unfold its slow-leav’d flow’r? (IV, 58–61)

Max argues that he *feels* eternity because he loves, but this is again undercut and rendered foolish by Alfred, who claims that love is not immortal and that women are as inconstant as nations (IV, 169–70). Throughout the poem, Alfred’s philosophy is one of hedonism and cynicism about anything intangible such as love, faith, or hope. He refuses to believe in an afterlife, or in spiritual reward of any kind, arguing instead, “With his face in dust, / Man loves his only Heav’n — six feet of earth!” (III, 147–48). While Alfred’s greed and nihilism are unpalatable, there is something in his eloquence that makes his argument compelling and Max seem a naïve idealist. Crawford provides ample opportunity for us to read Max this way, telling us, for example, that Max’s happiness is “boy-like” (III, 241). Orest Rudzik argues that Max is “the only character of the poem who does not feel the exquisite absurdity of his pastoralism, riding as it does happily with his need for progress” (55). Clinging to an ideal vision of love and of Katie that he cannot articulate, he tells Alfred, “You are too subtle for me; argument / Have I none to oppose yours with — but this, / Get you a Kate” (IV, 157–59). In the face of Alfred’s eloquent philosophizing, however, “Get you a Kate” does not seem like much of an argument, particularly when Max’s conviction is so easily destroyed by Alfred. At Alfred’s mere suggestion that Katie has been unfaithful to him, “All the blue heav’n was dead in Max’s eyes; / Doubt-wounded lay Kate’s image in his heart, / And could not rise to pluck the sharp spear out” (IV, 191–93). When Alfred calls Max “poor fond and simple” (IV, 262), we find it difficult to disagree. Alfred is so persuasive, as Bentley writes, that even in the final lines of the poem, “his self-centered nihilism remains to contest the poem’s concluding vision of a loving and accommodating community and, moreover, to lend to the poem — particularly for a twentieth-century reader — the quality of a dialogue on the meaning and purpose of life, a dialogue that has happily, but not ultimately, resolved” (Bentley, Introduction xxxiii–xxxiv). If we can see a happy resolu-

tion, it is only by wilfully ignoring a compelling, if unpleasant, voice that Crawford makes resonant in our ears.

Crawford not only complicates Max as a hero, but also interrogates the nation-building project in which he participates. On this issue critics are again often polarized. Robin Mathews, for example, finds nothing negative in the poem's depiction of settlement and the idea of progress Max espouses. He argues that the poem is whole heartedly "optimistic" in its attitude towards nation building (60). Robert Burns, on the other hand, suggests that in her poetry, particularly in her later work of which *Malcolm's Katie* is a part, Crawford takes issue with the "rapacious and soulless commercialism that accompanied nineteenth-century industrialism" (Burns, "Poet" 31). Again, Crawford's poem cannot be easily categorized as either/or; rather, the attitude *Malcolm's Katie* expresses towards the pioneering project is an ambivalent one, even a both/and proposition. We clearly see a positive side to pioneering in Canada in the depiction of immigrants who finally settle here, the "quick rush of panting, human waves / Upheav'd by throbs of angry poverty, / And driven by keen blasts of hunger" (II, 201–03). It is an image of peace and resolution as the "troubl'd groaning waves, / Throb down to peace in kindly, valley beds" (II, 205–06). We also see a potentially sinister side to progress, however, which suggests that Crawford is not wholly enthusiastic about the way the country is developing. One notable instance where Crawford explores the shadow of progress occurs in Part II:

Then came smooth-coated men, with eager eyes,
And talk'd of steamers on the cliff-bound lakes;
And iron tracks across the prairie lands;
And mills to crush the quartz of wealthy hills;
And mills to saw the great, wide-arm'd trees;
And mills to grind the singing stream of grain. (230–35)

Although Mathews argues this passage is ambiguous for modern readers only, it is difficult to ignore its effect (57). The speed created by the repetition of 'And' at the beginning of the lines in this passage gives the impression that the narrator has lost control, that something else has taken over the narrator's power to order and dictate the landscape of the poem. The passage is violent in its assault on our ears with the repeated battery of "And," as well as words such as "crush" (233), "saw" (234), and "grind" (235). Interesting, and just as difficult to ignore, is Crawford's implication of Max's axe in this din, as the narrator tells us, "With such busy clamour mingled still / the throbbing music of the bold, bright Axe" (236–37). The sound of this pas-

sage comes not uniquely from the tools of progress; we also hear the “wail / Of falling forests — voices of the Past” (238–39). The reference to something past may suggest implicitly something lost. In mingling the music of the axe with this violent “clamour,” Crawford manages to celebrate the axe — and by extension the pioneering project — *and* to express foreboding for what is coming as well as that which is being lost.

Crawford's ambivalence towards progress and the pioneering project extends to broader understandings of history itself. What we see most clearly in the poem is a pioneer history concerned with ownership of the land. This is the history embodied by Malcolm, the once young pioneer turned successful farmer. His story is a human story of humble beginnings and hard work that is eventually rewarded. It is a noble battle of physical strength that Max describes when he tells Katie how Malcolm and his brother ploughed their first field: “Yok'd . . . side by side to the new plough,” they “drew the ripping beak through the knotted sod, / Thro' tortuous lanes of blacken'd, smoking stumps” (I, 72–78). This arduous reshaping of the land becomes in itself a right of ownership, as Max makes very clear: “they OWN'D the rugged soil” (I, 86). In Malcolm's history, only human ambition and human labour affect the land and the world in which he lives. Even the description of Malcolm as his own creator, “self-hewn from rock, remaining rock through all” (I, 57), erases any transcendent force of influence. Max's description of the way he foresees Malcolm opposing his match with Katie presents a Malcolm who has godlike control over his land:

“Why, he will rage
And fume and anger, striding o'er his fields,
Until the last-bought king of herds lets down
His lordly front, and rumbling thunder from
His polish'd chest, returns his chiding tones.” (I, 127–31)

As Max describes it, the whole world responds to Malcolm's will. And Malcolm does indeed seem a god in Part III as he sits in his farmhouse on the hill, a house with so many windows that “no distant meadow might lie hid, / Nor cornfield hide its gold — nor lowing herd / Browse in far pastures, out of Malcolm's ken” (4–6). Malcolm's will and authority are absolute.

The men in *Malcolm's Katie* certainly are powerful, yet aspects of the poem challenge the supremacy of human will and human history. The most beautiful passages of the whole poem occur in sections in which Crawford describes a natural history and, importantly, a history in which humans play no part. Almost immediately after Katie's prayer at the end of Part I, “God

speed the axe,” the natural world inserts itself aggressively into the poem in Part II as the South Wind breaks his calumet and throws his spear towards the sun (1–5). Crawford’s depiction of the seasons battling in Part II is full of colour, action, and movement: the South Wind “crept on moccasins of flame” (38), the “scouts of Winter ran” (50) and the West Wind “danc’d” (36). This history is a powerfully dynamic and continuous one that is in no way owned or controlled by the men who live on the land. The battle that rages on such a giant scale in the natural world makes the pioneers seem very small. It is a much-diminished Max we see in Part II after witnessing the passion and violence of nature. Introducing Max into this section of the poem, the narrator tells us, “The mighty morn strode laughing up the land, / And Max, the Labourer and the lover, stood / Within the forest’s edge” (148–50). It seems the sun mocks Max and his claim to be a King in this world as much as it mocks the Moon of Falling Leaves for thinking Summer is dead. The sun’s insistence that Summer will return, “Always shot, and evermore returning” (143), also speaks to Max’s claim that he performs an “immortal task” (III, 155) and forces us to question exactly what in the poem is immortal.

Crawford’s decision to personify elements of the natural world as Native chiefs and warriors and to use Native imagery is an interesting one that also complicates implicitly the idea of history and ownership as it is represented by Malcolm and Max. The juxtaposition of these images with the world of the settlers demands an acknowledgement of another human history that was here before the settlers. The passage beginning Part II is *about* the seasons and nature, yet it invokes a human community, the Natives living in North America, whose history is often ignored or belittled in much early Canadian writing. Mathews discusses the theme of nation building as the central focus of the poem. The long sections depicting the natural world in terms of Native imagery, he suggests, act as a beautiful backdrop to that project. In his reading, Max and Malcolm and the other pioneers are always at the fore. The poem, however, deliberately acknowledges that there is a history in Canada that extends beyond and before the white settlers. The long passages devoted to a Native landscape do much more than act as backdrop. Through Crawford’s use of anthropomorphism, Aboriginal voices are given forum to speak and space to be seen. These passages carry heavy implications for readers with a postcolonial orientation, but they also underscore Crawford’s determination to let many, if not all, voices speak. This is not to suggest that Crawford the writer was postcolonial in her ideologies, but that her emphasis on *another* story of Canada is no accident. The deliberate

craftsmanship Crawford displays in writing these parts of the poem indicates that they are more than casual, and they are too beautifully vibrant to be ignored or dismissed. While it is true that the Native world remains, for the most part, relegated to the natural landscape of the poem and does not come in overt conflict with the pioneering project, it nevertheless haunts the other sections of the poem, just as the almost ghost-like apparition of the hunter in the bark canoe in Part II haunts that scene, drawing attention to the ghosts of a real history on the land in Canada.

Like the sections of the poem that use Native imagery and voices, the interspersed lyrics in *Malcolm's Katie* are an aspect of the poem often overlooked by critics, who focus attention on the main narrative. Whatever the reason for this oversight, these interventions in the narrative do warrant attention. Kenneth J. Hughes and Birk Sproxtton give a cursory treatment of the songs in *Malcolm's Katie*, acknowledging their importance to the structure of the poem as a whole. They see these lyrical pieces, however, as recapitulations of the action occurring in the main narrative (62). In their reading, the lyrics are synonymous with the words spoken by the cast of characters in the main narrative. When the lyrics are read closely, they sometimes speak to, but they also often speak against the narrative in important ways, creating relationships or tensions that further complicate the characters, actions, and issues set out within the story. Not just essential to the structure of the poem because of the balance they establish with the action of the main narrative, as Hughes and Sproxtton suggest, they are also vital to the dynamic of the poem. Katie's "Forget-Me-Not" song can be heard as a self-reflexive, even a metafictional, marker. She sings, "ev'ry blossom hath a tale / with silent grace to tell" (V, 52–53), and this can be read as a textual clue directing us to these small parts of the poem as expressions of tales that go silent in the narrative.

The tension between the pioneer history and narratives that challenge that history is further complicated in Part IV by one of these small lyrics. It is only a brief moment in the poem, yet it offers a powerful alternative to Malcolm's history of human success, to Max's idea of building immortal nations, and even to the natural history of the seasons:

High grew the snow beneath the low-hung sky,
 And all was silent in the Wilderness;
 In trance of stillness Nature heard her God
 Rebuilding her spent fires, and veil'd her face
 While the Great Worker brooded o'er His work. (34–38)

By acknowledging a Great Worker, this interpolated lyric undercuts or challenges the celebration of human work and human achievement we find in the poem, and wrests ultimate visionary control away from the pioneer. The natural world itself is subordinated to this omnipotent Creator, whose powers are so transcendental that Nature “veil’d her face” in submission (37).

Along with the historical, Crawford also complicates the issues of gender and femininity outside of the narrative. Some critics have pointed out her careful treatment of sexuality in the poem and her consciousness of the Victorian audience to whom it is directed. Katie’s quiet morality does not go far to challenge Victorian codes of behaviour, but there is in *Malcolm’s Katie* a sensual awareness of life and expressions of desire that are masked in the narrative. These expressions are particularly linked with the natural and the Native worlds. Crawford’s descriptions of the natural world are influenced by Longfellow’s *Song of Hiawatha*, but Bentley points out that, in a significant departure from Longfellow, “Crawford’s blank verse is richer in adjectives and adverbs than Longfellow’s trochaic tetrameter can be and, correspondingly, more languorously sensual, indeed, sexual” (*Mimic Fires* 276). In Part II, for example, the image of the hunter in the canoe is highly eroticized:

His form as stirless as the brooding air,
His dusky eyes, too, fix’d, unwinking, fires;
His bow-string tighten’d till it subtly sang
To the long throbs, and leaping pulse that roll’d
And beat within his knotted breast. (91–95)

As the hunter pauses, watching the stag and poised to shoot, the narrator pauses also, taking the opportunity to linger on the hunter’s body. The sexually charged atmosphere intensifies as the hunter’s pulse quickens with anticipation. We see another expression of sensuality in the description of Summer in the same section of the poem:

She will linger, kissing all the branches;
She will linger, touching all the places,
Bare and naked, with her golden fingers,
Saying, ‘Sleep, and dream of me, my children’. (122–25)

While in the previous passage the narrator expresses desire but remains passively the observer, here Summer is an active figure who behaves sexually, kissing and touching and speaking. Uniquely feminine, she is figured as both sexual and maternal, opening all kinds of doors for different types of femininity that do not find expression in the narrative.

Although one would never expect to hear Katie make such expressions of sexuality herself, Crawford invites us to link the sexuality we do see in the poem with Katie. Although the poem is titled *Malcolm's Katie*, Katie herself gets lost somehow in the narrative of the men in the poem. We can find Katie in moments outside of the narrative, such as in the Lily Song in Part III. The lily is linked with Katie not only because she is described with flower imagery throughout the poem, and because we are told Max crafts the song about the lily "always meaning Kate" (III, 174), as Bentley points out in his introduction to the poem, but also because the language of the song itself echoes Katie's own words at the beginning of Part I. Just as the lily's roots in the song are "Deep as some ocean-hidden cave" (III, 185), Katie has told Max, "Tho' I be a bud, / My roots strike deep, and torn from that dear soil / Would shriek like mandrakes" (I, 44–46). The Lily Song becomes a vehicle for Katie's self-expression, her expression of sexual desire for Max, which she could not otherwise articulate.

Crawford's lyrics do not provide Katie only with an opportunity for self-expression. Other characters speak in this way as well, revealing tensions or insights that often run against what we find in the narrative. The "Song of the Axe" in Part IV is one such example. Clearly the "Song of the Axe" is associated with Max; it is his axe that sings while he clears the land, and yet, what the axe expresses seems almost incongruous with what we know of Max from the text. Max speaks relatively little in the poem, and when he does describe his dreams and aspirations, he speaks about his home and about Katie. These are the pioneer's modest aspirations to live a comfortable, domestic life. Because Max cannot articulate his vision as Alfred can, for example, his actions, and his axe, speak for him. The promises the axe makes, however, are not humble or domestic. It promises "all joyous things, / That furnish forth the lives of kings!" (41–42), "Cities and palaces" (42–43), and "a nation strong" (48). Far from rejecting these things, Max urges the axe on, commanding, "Bite deep and wide, O Axe, the tree; / Bright seer, help on thy prophecy" (52–53). This song complicates how we see Max and his objectives as a pioneer and settler. The suggestion may be that Max, like Alfred, is more interested in the potential for material wealth he sees around him than he is in Katie.

Another short lyric in *Malcolm's Katie* in Part IV, "Doth true love lonely grow?," can be attributed to Alfred, as uncomfortable as that association might seem at first. Immediately before this lyric, Alfred speaks a long pas-

sage and, as a result, his voice naturally carries over into this lyric that expresses the unhappiness associated with love:

But with Love's rose doth blow,
 Ah, woe! ah, woe!
 Truth with its leaves of snow,
 And Pain and Pity grow
 With Love's sweet roses on its sapful tree! (V, 176–80)

If we associate this lyric with Alfred, it gives voice both to his growing sense of conscience and the painful realization that he is falling in love with Katie. He does admit directly before this lyric that he feels “a pulse / Stir” when he looks at Katie (V, 142–43) and asks, “O Katie . . . / Wilt thou be Nemesis . . . / To rend my breast?” (V, 140–42). He then moves quickly to oppose these feelings vehemently by insisting on annihilating love in a vision of a perverse marriage between Death and the Dead, whose union yields “A million children, born of mould'ring flesh” (V, 156). That he has spoken this admission at all, however, allows us to connect him with this lyric. Just as the “Song of the Axe” complicates our reading of Max as the *good* character, “Doth true love lonely grow” even further complicates an already complex Alfred, whose slipperiness as a character is heightened as we see his potential for love and regret. Bentley argues that the passage that follows this one, another short lyric, “glosses over the sufferings of both Max and Katie” (*Mimic* 279), but perhaps we can add that it also acknowledges Alfred's internal struggle.

Despite the structural coherence of *Malcolm's Katie*, the poem is marked by struggle and conflict. Rather than being the result of my own location as a reader, however, the dissonance that characterizes much of the poem results from Crawford's deliberate attempt to engage with the social and political issues of her Canadian surroundings. Whether she tried to maintain her intellectual independence while still catering to a conservative Victorian audience, as Mary Joy Macdonald contends, or whether she keenly felt the tensions of her day in personal ways, the conflicts in the poem are important and compelling. Although Bakhtin famously withholds his discussion of dialogism from poetry, it is possible to see some of the polyphony he attributes to the novel here, in Crawford's poem. Indeed, the success of *Malcolm's Katie* lies in Crawford's ability to appropriate a panoply of voices and represent disparate visions in a poetic forum. This forum successfully resists the privileging of any narrative over another, and refrains from resolving any of the tensions that result from their confrontation. Most important to *Malcolm's Katie* are the voices we hear — the voices of the men and the

women, but also of the axe, the forest, and the Northwind. We are given one story, and another, and another. Crawford's provocative representation of competing stories verifies Burns's description of Crawford as being "very much caught up in the social and political currents of her time" ("Poet" 51). Published in 1884, not yet twenty years after Confederation, *Malcolm's Katie* comes at a time in Canadian history when ideas of nationhood, gender, and the representation of history are crucially relevant and contentiously irresolvable.

Like much early Canadian writing, *Malcolm's Katie* has often received critical attention that does not do it or its author full justice. Even critics who celebrate the poem for its merits have often treated it reductively as part of an immature stage in the development of Canadian literature that relies too heavily on British precedent. As scholarly work on Canadian long poems progresses, however, we can see this attitude begin to shift. Some critics stress the importance of taking the time to be careful with poems like *Malcolm's Katie*. Robert Alan Burns, for example, celebrates what the poem holds for "the serious reader," and D.M.R. Bentley's introduction to the 1987 edition of the poem opens the door for new understanding with keen critical insight (Burns, "Crawford" 7). Burns and Bentley, and more recent critics such as Cecily Devereux and Wanda Campbell, leave us with questions and possibilities for the poem and a request that we as readers and critics continue to be "more serious." There is much left to explore in *Malcolm's Katie*. We can go deeper, for example, in exploring Crawford's use of the Native imagery that comprises such a prominent part of the poem, and we can spend more time on the interspersed lyrics that have been studied in isolation as much as they have been addressed as vital elements of the poem as a whole. If we do this, we can see that Crawford deserves and rewards continued academic study, not merely because of her position as a woman writer in early Canada, or because she contributes to the historical development of the Canadian long poem, but also because of her skill as a poet and her engagement as a thinker.

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