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A Letter and a Dream: The Literary Friendship of Ellen Glasgow and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings

ASHLEY ANDREWS LEAR

In Ellen Glasgow's first published fiction, a story entitled "A Woman of To-Morrow" (1895), the heroine Patricia Yorke earns a law degree and must decide between the man she loves, who cannot leave his familial duties, and her ambition to succeed professionally as an attorney, but which requires her to move away from her home in rural Virginia. Patricia's dilemma is described in the story: "On one side all the womanhood within her quivered with desire; on the other, a man's ambitions struggled to survive. It was the new woman warring against the old—the twentieth century rebelling against the nineteenth" (Raper 9). Patricia Yorke chooses her ambition and earns a nomination as an associate justice of the Supreme Court, only to find herself looking longingly at a woman with a baby in her arms, wondering whether her choice was the correct one. The story ends in the way Glasgow's own life seems to end, with Patricia revisiting her former lover only to find his life, with a frail wife in a soiled gown clutching a child, to be as barren as the landscape that

becomes the subject of *Barren Ground* (1925). Ellen Glasgow also experienced romantic betrayal by Henry Anderson, but by the time of her death she felt a sense of strength and accomplishment in her career, a career that superseded her romantic desires. The last years of Glasgow's life were made even more meaningful by the friendships she developed with other women writers, such as Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, who showed the promise of a future that would allow women more choices and freedoms in their personal and professional lives. Rawlings, born the year after Glasgow published "A Woman of To-Morrow," not only succeeded in her ambitions as a writer, but also had the physical health and strength to discard the domestic life expected of a woman in her station and move to the wilderness of Florida, setting herself up as the owner and operator of an orange grove among the Florida Crackers, whose stories, ultimately, led to Rawlings's own literary success. While her first marriage failed as a result of this success, Rawlings was able to enter into an even more fulfilling second marriage to hotelier Norton Baskin. The evolution in women's professional opportunities from Glasgow's experiences as a writer to Rawlings's may be seen in their correspondence and in the literary tropes and characters developed by each writer in her major works, specifically the ways in which both women focus certain novels on rural settings with impoverished characters struggling with basic survival. This literary friendship simultaneously gives Rawlings a sense of the struggles faced by women writers before her time and Glasgow a vision of the future she had imagined women would one day have.

In her narratives, Glasgow repeatedly weaves together stories of women and men, who have been destroyed by the arbitrary expectations of social norms that require men, such as General Archbald from *The Sheltered Life* and Ralph McBride from *Vein of Iron*, to enter loveless marriages in order to preserve the reputations of the women who are accidentally alone with them and women, such as Dorinda Oakley from *Barren Ground*, to be subject to a Thomas Hardy-worthy ruination after finding herself pregnant and her fiancé married

to another woman. The destruction of these characters' lives and the disillusionment that comes with their plights mirror the social and professional ostracism faced by Glasgow as a southern woman, who desired a role in life other than becoming a wife and mother. Their experiences also allow Glasgow the opportunity to write about taboo sexual liaisons in a way that forces readers to suspend moral judgment. By contrasting the narratives, professional experiences, and personal life choices between Ellen Glasgow and Marjorie Rawlings, one can clearly understand why Glasgow sought to befriend Rawlings after reading *The Yearling* and why Rawlings agreed to write Glasgow's biography upon her death. These two women writers are representatives of a move towards independence and professionalism that, ironically, leaves one woman pining after her rural ancestors and another investing her fortune in an orange grove set deep within the wilderness that was central Florida in 1928.

Ellen Glasgow did not think highly of Rawlings's first novel, *South Moon Under*. In 1933, when the novel was published, she wrote to her close friend, literary executor, and editor of the *New York Herald Tribune*, Irita Van Doren, claiming that the characters and setting seem to be "made of wool" (Matthews 139). After reading *The Yearling* in 1939, Glasgow thought much differently of the younger writer, praising her in a letter to Rawlings: "I am watching your work with great interest *The Yearling* is a perfect thing of its kind. And this can be said of few modern works of fiction" (Matthews 188). She asked Rawlings to visit her if she were ever traveling north through Richmond and went so far as to write to Maxwell Perkins, Rawlings's editor: "Few books have ever moved me more deeply . . . It is a perfect thing of its kind . . . that tempts me to use the word 'genius.' And genius as a term in literary criticism does not appeal to me" (Ribblet 7). Glasgow extended her praise of Rawlings's work to her own literary circle, including her close friend and the principal reader of her own work, James Branch Cabell, who quotes Glasgow "as saying she admired only two women writers, Jane Austen and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings" in a biographical

sketch of Glasgow that he forwarded to Rawlings, signed by Ellen Glasgow, "with tremendous admiration" (Ribblet 7).

Rawlings did visit Glasgow in April of 1941, and the two writers established a strong friendship that resulted in a correspondence lasting until Glasgow died in 1945. The most notable letter in this exchange was sent by Rawlings to Glasgow in July of 1941 and includes a dream that symbolically portrays the complex nature of their friendship, which is both personally and professionally nurturing for both women. In Rawlings's dream, Glasgow comes to Florida to live with her:

I was away when you came, and on my return, to one of those strange mansions that are part of the substance of dreams, you were outside in the bitter cold, cutting away ice from the roadway and piling it in geometric pattern. I was alarmed, remembering your heart trouble, and led you inside the mansion and brought you a cup of hot coffee. You had on blue silk gloves, and I laid my hand over yours, and was amazed, for my own hand is small, to have yours fit inside mine, much smaller. You chose your room and suggested draperies to supplement a valance. The valance was red chintz and you showed me a sample of a heavy red brocade of the same shade. I told you that from now on I should take care of you, and you must not do strenuous things, such as cutting the ice in the roadway. James Cabell came into the room and asked what the two of us were up to. (As of course he would!). (Matthews 210)

The image of Glasgow's cutting ice from a roadway is indicative of the ways in which her career and the struggles she faced to achieve literary success helped to clear a path for later writers, such as Rawlings, who was able to publish from a young age, earn a university degree, and work as a journalist and writer without the same extent of prejudice faced by earlier women writers. (Glasgow published her first short story, "A Woman of Tomorrow," in 1895, the year before Rawlings was born, and her first novel, *The Descendant*, in 1897, the year after Rawlings was born). In the dream, Rawlings sees Glasgow doing more than simply cutting a path;

in fact, she is constructing from that cleared path an intricate geometric pattern. Rawlings may view Glasgow's work to be more than simply clearing the way. Her work establishes a legacy of narrative construction, which is complex and intelligent enough to compete with the canonical works of her contemporaries, whether they are well established male American writers or British women writers, such as Virginia Woolf, who may have broken the gender barrier in her professional career but clearly did not extend a sympathetic hand toward her American counterparts.

The remainder of the dream is even clearer, given the relationship between the older, accomplished Ellen Glasgow and the younger writer, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, who presumably had a long career ahead of her when she had this dream. Sadly, Rawlings died before she could finish Glasgow's biography and completed only one additional novel after she wrote this letter. In the dream, Glasgow's hand fits within Rawlings's hand. She leads Glasgow inside and takes care of her, bringing her coffee and advising her against strenuous activities. As she becomes Glasgow's caretaker, Glasgow becomes her advisor, even if it is only in the matter of interior decorating. This scene further indicates a symbolic shift between the two generations as Glasgow more naturally inhabits a domestic space in the dream and in her real life, while Rawlings has pioneered beyond those walls to live more easily along the icy path outside the walls of the mansion in the dream. They are interrupted by another writer, James Branch Cabell, another well known Richmond writer, friend, and literary advisor of Glasgow's with whom she had some altercations because of his refusal even to consider Glasgow as having romantic interests as a single woman in Richmond, claiming her love scenes come entirely from her imagination. Glasgow, likewise, criticizes Cabell's unrealistic and stereotypical portrayals of women. In spite of these occasional public criticisms of one another, Glasgow and Cabell remained lifelong friends. In this dream, Cabell is not privy to the conversation and interrupts out of curiosity to see what the two women writers can possibly be discussing

in the privacy of their rooms. The dream, thus, concludes with the assertion that such relationships between women are sacrosanct and beyond the understanding of certain male colleagues, but it also shows the intrusive nature of the masculine literary voice that interrupts the brief respite these women have to confide in one another.

The dream becomes even more relevant when contrasting the professional setbacks of Glasgow and Rawlings. The progress in women's rights from the point at which Glasgow was attempting to publish and the point at which Rawlings was attempting to publish is tremendous. Glasgow traveled to New York to meet with a literary adviser after sending him the manuscript of her first novel, *Sharp Realities*, and fifty dollars given to her by her sister, Cary. The advisor's response illustrates just how dangerous it was for a woman attempting a professional life in the 1890s:

He was not interested in the manuscripts of young women. All he cared for, I discovered to my dismay, was their physical charm. After a vague and disconcerting prelude, he began to ask questions more personal than literary. Where was I staying? When would I come again? Would I come late in the afternoon, when he was usually alone in the building? All of this I was too startled or too stupid to understand. But I did understand when he said in his blunt Northern manner, "You are too pretty to be a novelist. Is your figure as lovely in the altogether as it is in your clothes?" ... Another minute, and his hands were upon me, who, even as a child, had hated to be pawed over—especially to be pawed over by elderly uncles. (WW 96–97)

Glasgow claims to have escaped before he made a full assault on her. She concludes this portion of her memoir by describing how she sent a messenger for the manuscript and burned it as soon as she returned to Virginia. When she was finally able to secure a publishing firm willing to help her publish *The Descendant*, her next novel, it is only with the understanding that the novel be published anonymously, presumably by a male author. As Susan Goodman points out

in her biography of Ellen Glasgow, "Once reviewers knew Glasgow's gender, those who had previously emphasized her uncompromisingly masculine vision began to stress her feminine intuition and sympathy" (60). Her clever entrance into the literary world secured Glasgow's position. She never again had difficulty publishing and, due to the fact that she began writing at such a young age, was able to publish 19 novels, a collection of short fiction, a collection of poetry, and a collection of prefaces to 13 of her major novels, not to mention her various book reviews and other editorials on topics ranging from feminism to Marxism.

Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings did not experience this degree of gender discrimination. In fact, she was able to earn a degree from the University of Wisconsin, as opposed to Glasgow, who came of university age before many universities, including the University of Virginia, were accepting women. After completing her education, Rawlings secured a variety of writing positions, including work for the YWCA of New York, the *Courier-Journal* of Louisville, Kentucky, and various newspapers in and around Rochester, New York. However successful she may have seemed professionally, Rawlings was not content with these publications. She wanted to be a novelist, but she had difficulty publishing her fiction. It was only after making the drastic decision to purchase an orange grove in central Florida and leave the comforts and trappings of society life in Rochester behind her that Rawlings was able to make a name for herself by writing nonfiction pieces about the Florida crackers among whom she lived. Her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Yearling*, is a fictionalized account of a family living off the land in the same area where she resided in Florida. Once she found her niche, Rawlings was able to enter the literary world without needing to provide a pseudonym or hide her identity as a woman.

Most notably, these writers' different experiences led to the development of narratives that mirror the ways in which each woman characterized crises of identity and their resolutions. While Glasgow's characters struggle against an unforgiving and irrational set of strict societal codes regarding gender and

sexuality, Rawlings's characters struggle with the land and basic survival. Most fascinating is the fact that both women attempt to break social norms by writing narratives involving characters from lower socio-economic positions living in rural landscapes. In this way, Glasgow and Rawlings are intentionally rejecting the confinement brought about by their own social classes and positions and expressing a desire for the different kinds of freedom that they imagine within an impoverished lifestyle in which survival diminishes the need for social performance. For both writers, such settings and characters allow them to write stories that bend and even break gender boundaries. However, one must note that neither writer can fully inhabit the landscapes she is exploring, having both been born into wealth and privilege beyond the experiences of the characters about whom they write.

Jody Baxter, the protagonist of *The Yearling*, serves as a conduit for Rawlings to explore those aspects of survival that supersede the sexual complications experienced by characters, such as Dorinda Oakley from Glasgow's *Barren Ground*. While many readers consider this *bildungsroman* to be most suited for young adults, the young age and gender of Jody Baxter further permits Rawlings to explore a conflict other than those being explored by women writers in this period. Rawlings achieves a kind of independence at Cross Creek that a writer, such as Glasgow, can only imagine. Granted, Glasgow's health issues would have prevented her from succeeding in such an endeavor.

In *The Yearling*, Jody Baxter is an impoverished child who lives with his parents on a self-supporting tract of land in the wilderness far away from even their nearest neighbors. On the farm, his parents perform fairly stereotypical gender roles. His mother cooks, cleans, makes their clothes and launders them, while his father plants and harvests the crops, hunts, and takes care of the livestock. However, these roles are equally demanding physically and seem devised more from a necessary division of labor in trying circumstances than on an arbitrary social system based on women's and men's work.

Jody, as the child, has roles that shift from helping his father take care of the crops to helping his mother milk the cows. Rawlings seems to highlight the fact that Jody is unaware of his family's poverty, being that it is all he has ever known. His father, Penny, wants Jody to experience the freedoms that come with childhood, in spite of the work required to live on their farm. When Penny is recovering from the rattlesnake bite that results in Jody's adopting his pet yearling, Flag, his mother explains to the doctor: "Jody's a'right, but he ain't a thing but boy. Got his mind on nothin' but prowlin' and playin' His Pa encourages him" (160). The yearling he adopts becomes the means by which Jody matures into a caretaker, but the creature also becomes a lesson concerning the severity of life and responsibility to family. Once the deer is fully grown, there is no means by which he can be kept out of the crops on which the Baxters depend for their very livelihood. His father's illness and his mother's poor shooting abilities mean that Jody must take the life of the pet he has loved and raised. His mother attempts the first shot and only injures Flag in the leg. After that, Jody is able to make the fatal shot before collapsing, vomiting, and finally sinking "into a blackness as into a dark pool" (410). This act becomes his final rite of passage into manhood: "He did not believe he should ever again love anything, man or woman or his own child, as he had loved the yearling. He would be lonely all his life. But a man took it for his share and went on" (428). Rawlings narrates this passage into manhood as one necessitated by the harsh reality of survival, which always overcomes even the most beautiful and innocent forms of love between boy and animal.

Ellen Glasgow's *Barren Ground* includes a similar scene of disillusionment, but this earlier novel, published in 1925, tells the story of a female protagonist, Dorinda Oakley, who is betrayed by her fiancé, Jason, after she has become pregnant with his child. Just as Rawlings finds her authorial voice in the primitive lifestyles of farm-dwelling Floridians, so does Ellen Glasgow seek out the rural landscape of her ancestors, who dwelt in the farmland beyond the Shenandoah. Glasgow

points out that the farmers in *Barren Ground*, "though 'land poor,' as they say, owned, and had always owned, every foot of the impoverished soil which they tilled, or left untilled, on their farms" (CM 156). Glasgow intends her story to be about the "weakened progeny" of the original frontier families, who lost their physical prowess and their moral integrity when faced with the new generation of inhabitants. Just as Jody Baxter must kill Flag to mature fully into the isolation of adulthood, Dorinda Oakley also initially considers destroying Jason, her betrayer—but, he does not represent the same innocence found in Flag, the deer. After firing her gun at him and missing, she drops it: "Every nerve in her body, every drop of her blood, hated him; yet because of this nameless force within the chaos of her being, she could not compel her muscles to stoop and pick up the gun at her feet . . . 'Why am I here? What is the meaning of it all?' she asked wildly of the emptiness within her soul" (167). Dorinda's plight, as opposed to Jody's, is due to the betrayal of another person and weakness of moral character, not out of any kind of necessity. What's worse is that her own naivety and desires have resulted in a pregnancy, with which she must deal alone, now that Jason has married another woman. In the same way that Jody realizes that his flutter-mill is nothing more than palmetto strips, at the end of *The Yearling*, Dorinda realizes her perception of a romantic ideal is flawed and even destructive: "Dreams, that was the danger. Like her mother she had tried to find a door in the wall, an escape from the tyranny of things as they are; and like her mother, she had floundered among visions. Even though she was miserable now, her misery was solid ground; her feet were firmly planted among the ancient rocks of experience" (187).

Instead of ending the narrative with Dorinda, floundering in misery or possibly losing her life like Tess in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Glasgow writes an alternate ending to this "fallen woman" narrative. Dorinda travels to New York with the money she earned in the local store, suffers a miscarriage in an incident with a carriage, becomes a nanny for the family of the physician, who saved her life after

the carriage incident, and, through a family friend, begins attending agricultural lectures that help her to develop the most profitable dairy farm in the state of Virginia after she inherits her father's land. Dorinda eventually marries later in life, but it is a marriage of friendship to join her property with that of a kind, older farmer, whom she respects; it's not a marriage involving any romantic attachments. She never fully gets over Jason's betrayal. Just as Jody knows he will never love again the way he loved Flag, Dorinda chooses to be done with love, in order to prevent such a betrayal from happening to her again. While Glasgow presents an unrealistic narrative in some respects by having Dorinda succeed in being rescued and educated to the point of becoming a very successful farmer, she does so, seemingly, as a response against the traditional tragic ending that befalls "ruined milkmaids" in Victorian literature. In *Barren Ground*, as in *The Yearling*, the focus of the narrative on an impoverished class allows Glasgow the freedom to explore her protagonist's strengths in overcoming adversity, without the need to justify decisions that can be potentially considered immoral when made by characters, whose lives do not hinge on basic survival. While both Glasgow and Rawlings turn to rural life for narratives that allows them to explore non-traditional stories, Glasgow maintains her focus on the young woman, who must find strength in the face of betrayal. Rawlings steps beyond that narrative and, instead, finds Jody's rite of passage in the destruction of his innocence in the midst of his family's struggle for survival. The only betrayal that Jody faces comes from his mother, whose actions throughout the novel—though harsh and easy to criticize—seem somewhat justifiable given the living conditions of the Baxter family.

Rawlings's next book, *Cross Creek*, abounds with stories of her own survival that mirror Jody's narrative in *The Yearling*, even though Rawlings is living at the Creek by choice, rather than necessity, and is maintaining a higher standard of living than her workers and many of her neighbors. At Cross Creek, Rawlings learns to hunt, catches rattlesnakes with a young Florida herpetologist, protects her grove from winter freezes,

goes on a river trip with her close friend, Dessie, and perfects the art of cooking, publishing *Cross Creek Cookery*, a vivid collection of her best recipes, many of which require milk from a Jersey cow. The evolution of women's roles in this setting is most apparent in "Hyacinth Drift," when Rawlings describes the reactions of men to her and Dessie's decision to take a river trip on the St. John's River by themselves: "'Two women alone? The river runs through some of the wildest country in Florida. You'll be lost in the false channels. No one ever goes as far as the head of the river.' Then, passionately, betraying themselves, 'It will be splendid. What if you do get lost? Don't let any one talk you out of it'" (343). Throughout *Cross Creek*, Rawlings challenges traditional women's roles with her own hearty attitude towards life on the creek. She never backs down on opportunities to face her own fears and limitations, by accepting every offer to participate in what even the Baxters in *The Yearling* would have designated as men's work.

Ellen Glasgow never had the physical capability to explore this type of lifestyle, having inherited her mother's weak disposition, which kept her out of school as a child due to her anxieties and frequent headaches. Glasgow's hearing, which was a physical disability that she attempted to hide, deteriorated over the course of her life, as well. While Rawlings was struggling with the elements at Cross Creek, Glasgow relied on her friend and caretaker, Anne Virginia Bennett, to help care for her dogs and home in Richmond. In her fictional narratives, Glasgow's characters are able to overcome their physical limitations by means of dispositions, which she did not possess and in situations she researched rather than experienced. Her novel, *Vein of Iron*, follows such a character, Ada Fincastle, whose work to help her family evolves from assisting with the small garden and tasks in their rural community before World War I to her taking on the role of breadwinner for the family by working in a department store once they relocate to Queenborough, a fictionalized version of Richmond, during the war. Whereas Dorinda runs away to hide the shame of her pregnancy,

Ada Fincastle proudly bears her bastard son, born from an intentional liaison with Ralph McBride, after her father and the parents of another local girl pressure him into marrying Janet Rowan because of an accusation that he has ruined her reputation. Ada, who knows the characters of both Janet and Ralph, finds this marriage to be unjust and, thereby, justifies her own decision to spend a weekend with Ralph in a remote cabin before he leaves for the war. Eventually, Ralph divorces his wife and, after he returns from the war, he marries Ada. Ada loves Ralph, even after she recognizes his struggles with alcoholism and fidelity in their relationship. She is, throughout the novel, the “vein of iron” that holds the family together and helps them survive. Ralph characterizes Ada best at the end of the novel when they return to the Valley to bury her father: “You’re a dreamer, Ada. It’s queer that a dreamer should be a rock to lean on” (395). Ada’s life in the last portion of the novel includes taking care of Ralph after a car wreck, dealing with his drunkenness, supporting their child and her ailing father through her work, helping her Aunt Meggie with the housework, and attempting, through it all, to meet the emotional needs of her family members. Glasgow fashions the character of Ada Fincastle after her own ancestors, her “father’s forebears” who possessed those “primary elements that composed the Presbyterian spirit and the Presbyterian theology . . . the chief of these elements . . . was the substance of fortitude” (CM 169). Glasgow returns to these pioneers in the same way that Rawlings turns to the Creek. In rediscovering the past, the two women are able to shuck off the expectations of their present lives. For Rawlings, Cross Creek is a way to escape her in-laws in Rochester and a husband, who resents her literary success in light of his own failures. Glasgow finds in literature a way to reclaim the pioneering spirit of her forebears and to experience vicariously the physical manifestation of the inner fortitude she possesses, which she cannot physically manifest in the same ways Rawlings can.

According to Susan Goodman, Glasgow’s biographer, in her account of Rawlings’s and Glasgow’s first meeting:

"Rawlings, the anointed biographer, told Glasgow her own life story. Rawlings, who had a troubled first marriage, sensed that Glasgow had experienced similar emotional entanglements. Her new marriage, she admitted, was 'something of a gamble'" (238–39). Goodman goes on to describe how friendships with women writers, including the one she shared with Rawlings, "gave Glasgow, who craved the company of like minds, a feeling of 'intellectual integrity, of a certain rightness of mind and heart . . . [of] breadth, depth, and elevation.' They gave her a sense of immanence" (239). This sense of immanence was clearly shared by Rawlings, as evidenced in her dream. From Alice Walker's obsessive search for the story of Zora Neale Hurston to Virginia Woolf's declaration that there would be no women's literature without Aphra Behn, women writers have depended upon the connections they find with those few, brave pioneers, who cleared the icy paths leading to rooms in which they work. Ellen Glasgow suffered through a career with setbacks, a series of lovers who jilted her, and the physical limitations of failing health, but she continued writing, in part, so that women, such as Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, could achieve a fuller sense of independence, both personally and professionally. Glasgow once wrote of femininity that its "apparent passivity is not inherent, but acquired, and is obliged, therefore, to disappear in the higher development of the race" (Raper 35). Clearly, Rawlings developed beyond many of the limitations experienced by Glasgow. To bear witness to and share in Rawlings's success was indeed one of the highlights of Ellen Glasgow's life.

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