Forum

Members of the Association are invited to submit letters, typed and double-spaced, commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. Footnotes are discouraged, and letters of more than one thousand words will not be considered. Decision to publish and the right to edit are reserved to the Editor, and the authors of articles discussed will be invited to reply.

The Lonely Pistil

To the Editor:

John B. Humma's exploration of the contribution of Lawrence's nature imagery to the meaning of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* ("The Interpenetrating Metaphor: Nature and Myth in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*," *PMLA* 98[1983]:77–86) I found sensitively pursued and (in view of Ellsworth Barnard's letter, 87) gracefully expressed.

I was arrested by the simile Humma quotes in his first paragraph, in which the gamekeeper Mellors is compared to a "lonely pistil in an invisible flower." Both the simile and Humma's treatment of it raise fascinating questions. Certainly the comparison holds a sexual dimension—flowers traditionally hold such a meaning as a primary possibility to be evoked, their pistils even more so; and Lawrence's sexual interest, both overt and suffusive, transforms likelihood into certainty. As the pistil is an erect tubular projection extending upward or outward from the center of the flower, often emphasized by color as the center of a sunburst of petals, it is understandable that it should be described as "phallic." In fact, too, like the penis, the pistil is an external sexual organ—but (greatly complicating and enriching our study) a *female* one. The pistil receives at its tip the pollen, which is formed by a separate male organ, the stamen; the gametes are carried through the stem (style) of the pistil to further organs of fructification in its base, where they unite with the ova gametes to quicken the embryo seed. The enclosing organs commence to swell into a fruit or other protecting seed case. Since Rudolf Camerarius' experiments in 1694, the sexual functions of the stamen and pistil have been known scientifically (and of course those of many economic plants were known to horticulturalists from classical times). Linnaeus' system of plant classification was almost entirely limited to scrutiny of the stamens and pistils; in his terminology they are personified, in imagery very like the reciprocal of Lawrence's simile. The flower Lawrence imagines would be categorized by Linnaeus as *monogynia* 'one woman' ('one feminality,' in Erasmus Darwin's translation). Most flowers are, in fact, what Linnaeus, his contemporaries, and their predecessors called "hermaphrodites"; that is, they contain both pistils and stamens in combinations of numbers up to *polyandria polygynia*. On some plants, however, the male and female organs occur in separate flowers—on holly, ginkgo, and squash, to mention examples that may be widely familiar to readers, and on that favorite for eighteenth-century (botanical) experimentation, the cannabis. Lawrence's image of a "lonely pistil" is therefore botanically perfectly possible.

But what does the image *mean*? Of what is it evidence? If we take Lawrence to be deliberate here in likening Mellors to a pistil, then we begin to discern an amazing countercurrent expressed by some of the imagery "interpenetrating" the current Humma so well describes. In this the flow of vitality passes not only out from Mellors but into him, therein to quicken, so that the world he represents is also renewed and enriched. I have not been able to study the novel or much of Lawrence's other work, but looking over the material from the novel that Humma presents, I see frequent association of Mellors with eggs, buds, flowers, and fruit and of Connie with trees (which are not only potentially phallic symbols but also, in appropriate contexts, symbols of "natural" paternalism, long-enduring, sheltering, and "right"). In English fiction since the rise of the oligarchy, with its concomitant landscape-garden style—that is, since the eighteenth century—the tree has been used (often in explicit contrast to the machine) to symbolize the claims of the (male) aristocracy. Within this context, Lord Chatterley's figure in his wheelchair may be seen to pick up that of Sir Leicester Dedlock at the end of *Bleak House*, living out his diminished existence, "invalided, bent, and almost blind," among "the stately oaks, rooted for ages in the green ground which has never known plowshare," after he has been "felled" (by a "stroke," we would say) at the disclosure of his wife's dishonor (chs. 66, 16, 56). At this critical moment, as that exceptional teacher Richard Hinman (now of North Carolina State University)

pointed out to me, the narrative also discloses metaphorically that it is Lady Dedlock who constitutes the vital part of his existence—she is to him "a main fibre of the root," "the core," the "stock of living tenderness" (ch. 54). Perhaps in Lawrence's novel the force of the aristocratic tree symbol can be seen as transferring from Clifford to Connie. The phallic potential of the tree symbol would then combine with the image of her female form—and with the pun concealed in her name—to create a powerful androgynous resonance complementary to that of Mellors' "thin, white body" placed in the simile with which we began.

The greater part of what I suggest would obtain even if Lawrence's simile was an unconscious error. Indeed, in this case, we gain the added interest of being able to consider what the error might be said to reveal. Dr. Freud is never far away from Lawrence—on the subject of those birds Humma discusses (and on the flowers, too) see, for example, Ernest Jones's essay "The Madonna's Conception through the Ear" (*Essays in Applied Psychoanalysis* [London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1951], vol. 2).

How far does the range of unconscious—but significant—error extend? "All students of twentieth-century literature will appreciate the implications of [Mellors'] gun" (Humma, correctly, no doubt, observes [82]), as will those others of us who remember Shakespeare's Ancient Pistol. Perhaps the homophone in the name of the floral organ tricked Lawrence into a psychopathological pun. Or have we before us a wondrous instance of unconscious chauvinism, of expropriation of the organ, of (what shall I say?)—pistil envy? Humma's article becomes far more interesting than even at first it seems, as offering not only a good critical reading in itself but also stimulating matter for discourse among psychoanalytical critics, feminist critics, reader-response critics, and other investigators of strategy and of subtext, not to say the harmless drudges and their kin. As the simile is quoted twice (once prominently as the first quotation in the article), I sense that its meaning may have escaped comment (that is, its misprision may have been affirmed) by a wide community, including Humma himself, the students in his seminar mentioned on page 3, the specialist readers of his article, the *PMLA* editorial board, the editorial staff, and yourself, Joel Conarroe, all forming petals of the "invisible flower" surrounding Mellors' lonely form.

YVONNE NOBLE
Canterbury, England

Reply:

Yvonne Noble offers some ingenious possibilities, which I confess I did not see in quite the same way, or at all, as I was writing the article—but, in the instance of some of them, wish I had. We are guessing, of course, but it seems likely that Lawrence was conscious of associating Mellors with the feminine in nature (the "lonely pistil"). That Mellors, like other Lawrence figures, combines a good deal of the "feminine" in his nature along with the "masculine" makes the connection perfectly apt. Moreover, since Lawrence was promoting the idea of tenderness in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, his association of Mellors with the delicate pistil is once again strategically appropriate. In another scene Connie is fascinated by the "frailty" of Mellors' penis. Finally, *pistil* and *pistol* are not really homophones, or they are so only partially. And *pistil*, because of its last syllable—*ul* or *il*?—is a word we are more than usually conscious of as we pronounce it. Lawrence probably, therefore, would have been aware of the punning possibilities and so could not have been "tricked . . . into a psychopathological pun" or guilty of an unconscious "pistil envy" (a lovely phrase, by the way).

The point that Noble makes about *Bleak House* in relation to *Lady Chatterley* appears quite plausible. When Lawrence rests Connie against the tree, his interest obviously is in showing her response to its blatantly masculine properties. But that there may be an unconscious androgyny is an interesting possibility. Although the last sentence of Noble's letter is not clear to me, I am taken by her notion of a community of scholar-petals. I hope that her recognitions do not exclude her from a place within the happy circle.

JOHN B. HUMMA
Georgia Southern College

The Footnote

To the Editor:

"At the Margin of Discourse: Footnotes in the Fictional Text" (*PMLA* 98[1983]:204–25) is without doubt a valuable essay. Some readers will quarrel with a few of Shari Benstock's particular observations; but even they must admit that her remarks are suggestive—and suggestive in part because she (self-admittedly) leaves room for more to be said about the general significance of footnotes in works of fiction as distinguished from scholarly texts and also about the specific meaning of that device in the three instances she chooses to concentrate on. Yet