

and with no diminution, as far as I can see, of its purposes as a scholarly and critical periodical. The tensions within the MLA are those of the academic profession as a whole, and how we look at literature is intimately connected with how we perceive ourselves. I should be very disappointed if *PMLA* ceased to reflect what may indeed be regarded as some rather uncomfortable professional realities, and to offer a variety of points of view upon them.

LAWRENCE POSTON, III  
University of Nebraska

### Circular Rhymes in *Lycidas*?

To the Editor:

In a recent article in *PMLA*, Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr., argues that *Lycidas* is tied together by a unitary rhyme scheme, which gives the poem a circular movement and suggests progress from disorder to order.<sup>1</sup> “*Lycidas*, I shall argue, possesses a formal, circular pattern carefully articulated by the poem’s rhyme scheme—a rhyme scheme that is more regular than most when most irregular it seems . . .” (p. 61). “Despite the clearly-marked divisions between stanzas or verse paragraphs, the poet, interested in the binding effects of rhyme, worked out a single, continuous rhyme scheme. Thus instead of beginning a new rhyme scheme with each new stanza, the poet treated those stanzas, or verse paragraphs, as if they did not exist at all” (p. 62). Taking distant lines and rhyming them with each other, Wittreich claims that there are only three unrhymed lines in the poem—one for each crisis (p. 63). Because rhyme words used near the beginning appear also at the end, the poem’s whole movement is said to be circular (p. 65), a form that emphasizes the poem’s “perfection, and eternity” (p. 67).

Of all these assertions, only one can reasonably be supported—that the rhymes toward the end of *Lycidas* move in the direction of order. But this has nothing to do with Wittreich’s claims for inter-stanzaic connections—and it has been pointed out before.

An examination of the rhyme scheme of *Lycidas*, as printed in an appendix to Wittreich’s article, reveals that the “rhymes” he is talking about are too far apart to have any meaning. Thus, although he speaks repeatedly of a breakdown in the stanza pattern, and of the use of rhyme to bind the verse paragraphs together, Milton seems to have gone out of his way to avoid this very effect. There are only five instances in the whole of *Lycidas* in which adjacent verse paragraphs can be said to contain the same rhyme: “rude” (l. 4) and “shroud” (l. 22)—a poor rhyme, as Wittreich admits; “horn” (l. 28) and “morn” (l. 41);

“swain” (l. 92) and “twain” (l. 110); “said” (l. 129), “head” (l. 147), and “dead” (l. 166). None of these rhymes is especially unusual. If stanzas are to be woven together by the “band”<sup>2</sup> of rhyme in any perceptible way, much tighter connections must be made.

If anything, it appears that Milton has deliberately avoided tying the verse paragraphs together. He has avoided inter-stanzaic rhymes closer to each other than thirteen lines, while within the stanzas the rhymes are never farther than five lines apart, and with rare exceptions, no more than three lines apart. At a distance of thirteen lines, it can safely be assumed that the first rhyme will have stopped sounding in the reader’s ear. But this is exceptionally close for the rhymes Wittreich cites: one pair is sixteen lines apart, another seventeen, and the rest are eighteen or more. A record is set by “blue” in line 192, which is 182 lines from its predecessor “knew” (l. 10). What possible significance can such a rhyme have?

Presumably, this is a purely intellectual rather than a poetic pattern. Aside from the fact that Milton normally writes poetry that is “simple, sensuous, and passionate,” however, any such intellectual scheme must appear more nearly regular than random if it is to be accepted. This Wittreich’s scheme plainly fails to do. Far from shadowing forth a circle, the “rhymes” more nearly resemble a spider’s web, with no rationale for the connections perceptible. If this is true when the lines are laid out and schematized for the reader in an appendix, where he can see them most easily, how much more must it be true for a reader without Wittreich’s aids, and with only the poem to go by? The distances between the inter-stanzaic rhymes are as follows: 18, 16, 17, 33, 57, 47, 24, 58, 29, 18, 69, 66, 58, 41, 18, 73, 41, 34, 19, 117, 134, 138, 95, 23, 28, 97, 182.<sup>3</sup> The distribution of these pairs also appears to escape any pattern, although Wittreich apparently believes that the final stanza is particularly closely tied to the first. He may possibly be right, but the distinction is not especially pronounced.

In fact, rhyme in a long poem is bound to repeat itself, since there are only so many convenient rhyme sounds in English. Although a poet could avoid repetition, he would have to make a special effort to do so, nor would the result be worth the trouble. Probably, then, the extra-stanzaic rhymes in *Lycidas* are instances of random repetition, with Milton concerned only with avoiding repetitions that fall too closely together. To take another poem at random for comparison, the first Canto of Pope’s *Rape of the Lock*, with a total of 148 lines, contains six pairs of couplets that rhyme, two groups of three couplets, three groups of four, and one group of six.<sup>4</sup> Pope is a careful poet, and so few of these identical sounds are close to each

other—with the exception of “air,” which he may have wished to emphasize. It is noticeable, however (after some rather troublesome calculations that no normal reader would make), that of the last thirty couplets, fifteen look back to earlier couplets: not, presumably, because Pope wished to give Canto 1 a circular form, but because he had gotten sufficiently far from the earlier rhymes to use them again.

Milton was not averse to using numerological or other esoteric patterns—although several recent studies have exaggerated his practice. But if it is the pleasure of a hieroglyphic poet to hide these devices, it is the critic’s duty, once he has found them, to demonstrate them clearly. Otherwise, he adds nothing to our understanding of the poem.

ANTHONY LOW

*New York University*

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Milton’s ‘Destin’d Urn’: The Art of *Lycidas*,” *PMLA*, 84 (1969), 60–70.

<sup>2</sup> Puttenham’s word for rhymes used to link stanzas or other verse units together, cited by Catherine Ing, *Elizabethan Lyrics* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1951), p. 47.

<sup>3</sup> These are the distances between the *nearest* rhymes, in each case looking backward toward an earlier rhyme. Therefore, the increasing frequency of long gaps toward the end of the sequence is somewhat misleading. Each of these long-distance rhymes has a counterpart somewhere nearer the beginning, which looks ahead.

<sup>4</sup> Signifying each couplet by its second line, for convenience, the rhymes are distributed as follows: =*owers*, 34, 124; =*ame*, 60, 106; =*ace*, 80, 142; =*ide*, 82, 128; =*ear*, 86, 130; =*all*, 96, 104; =*ue*, 4, 94, 118; =*ed*, 22, 52, 120; =*ive*, 40, 56, 102; =*ow*, 24, 36, 78, 90; =*ay*, 14, 26, 62, 92; =*air*, 46, 50, 66, 108, 112, 146.

#### *Mr. Wittreich replies:*

Presenting objections in behalf of the “normal reader” who is disinclined to make “troublesome calculations” involving rhyme (and much else that is technical in poetry), Professor Low suggests that poetic practice (i.e., Pope) and critical tradition (i.e. Puttenham)—not to mention my analysis of rhyme in *Lycidas*—support his conclusions rather than my own. Where I find a difficult order, Low sees only calculated disorder. Rather than perceiving circles inscribed by Milton’s rhyme, Low draws lines through circles to make “a spider’s web”—so many lines that he obliterates the circular pattern his own metaphor suggests. I argue that Milton uses rhyme rhetorically, structurally, and thematically (see esp. pp. 63–65 of “Milton’s ‘Destin’d Urn’”), but Low contends that there is “no rationale” for the distant rhymes that Milton employs in *Lycidas*: “What possible signifi-

cance” can they have, he asks. Clearly there are fundamental differences in our assumptions about poetry and in our critical understanding of Milton’s poetry: Low’s Milton is not Wittreich’s Milton.

My essay continues to speak for itself, but Low’s rejoinder to it creates certain confusions that I should like to dispel. One source of confusion is the opacity of Low’s statement. For instance, when he writes, “this is a purely intellectual rather than a poetic pattern,” he creates a false dichotomy: poetry, at least the sort that Milton writes, involves “intellectual” patterning, which is a type of “poetic pattern” and not, as Low contends, its opposite. Moreover, to say in this context that “Milton normally writes poetry that is ‘simple, sensuous, and passionate’” is to falsify what Milton actually says about poetry. In *Of Education* Milton writes that poetry, *when compared to rhetoric*, is “less subtle and fine, but *more* simple, sensuous, and passionate” (my italics). Low is no more precise when, in the same paragraph, he writes that “. . . Wittreich apparently believes that the final stanza is particularly closely tied to the first. He may possibly be right, but the distinction is not especially pronounced.” *The distinction?* I do not argue for distinction; I attempt to show resemblance, marked incidentally by rhyme and conspicuously by “corresponding images . . . a kind of non-aural rhyme.”<sup>1</sup>

More often, however, confusion derives from our differences of opinion regarding what Milton was attempting to accomplish and what he expected *intellectually* from his audience, from our different understanding of Milton’s art and of the traditions that give shape to it. Indisputably, Milton’s rhymes are distanced from one another. This point I have demonstrated, not denied. But distance is not always to be equated with “random repetition”; nor should we arbitrarily set a distance after which rhymes cannot be heard and therefore can have no meaning. Low establishes such limits when he says, “At a distance of 13 lines, it can safely be assumed that the first rhyme will have stopped sounding in the reader’s ear.” My own experience with *Lycidas* does not bear out Low’s contention. The *-ore* rhyme is a case in point. The line beginning, “Weep no more, woeful Shepherds” (l. 165) reverberates the first line of Milton’s poem: “Yet once more, O ye Laurels, and once more.” This rhyme, distant though it may be, has also been heard by many of my students who, I am confident, did not work out a rhyme scheme for *Lycidas* and who did not, I am even more confident, read my essay on the poem. But then this is an exceptional example. An ordinary reader can hear the rhyme at a considerable distance because the rhyme sound is supported by metrical and verbal repetition. Many rhymes closer in proximity are more difficult to hear; in most instances they are