

recognize the autonomy of the literary experience.

Levin gets very close to noting this weakness when he points out how suspicious these critics are of pleasure. He cites one author who wants us to deny the “aesthetic satisfaction” in *King Lear* because if we allow ourselves to enjoy the play, we would be endorsing its “ideological position” (503n13)—and the play’s position is, of course, not in accord with the critic’s values. Levin is equally caustic of those who argue that there can be no resolution in *Othello* as long as the play does not resolve “the same impotent dialectic of [male] violence . . . that caused its rupture” or in *Macbeth* “so long as the . . . ideology of restoration prevails” (qtd. on 496). But when considering just why critics who certainly show evidence of a literary sensitivity far above that of the average reader nevertheless seem to derive little pleasure from the plays, Levin merely repeats the critics’ viewpoint: “[P]leasure is seen as a kind of bait offered by the text . . . to make us complicit in its ideological project” (496).

But to see the play as an “ideological project” has nothing to do with The Death of the Author but stems from the tendency of some critics, from Plato through Tolstoy to those of the present day, to see art only as an instrument for the inculcation of religious, political, or moral values and feelings. And to the extent that these neo-Marxist and feminist Freudian critics follow this tradition and so refuse to find at least some delight in literature that may “shock the virtuous Philosopher” (whether the virtue is Christian, feminist, revolutionary, or conservative), their writing will lead to the absurd conclusions cited by Levin. Until we realize that the problem is not the displacement of the author by the text but rather the idea of literature as instrumental rather than autonomous, we will not be able to go forward with the kind of criticism that deepens our understanding and enhances our enjoyment of Shakespeare’s plays.

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To the Editor:

The reappearance in *PMLA* of Richard Levin’s bashing of the new historicism will no doubt be the occasion for another round of outraged protest (see “Feminist Thematics and Shakespearean Tragedy,” 103 [1988]: 125–38; Forum, 103 [1988]: 817–19, 104 [1989]: 77–79). Before Levin’s defenders once more claim the moral high ground of the oppressed minority struggling for freedom of speech against a fantasized hegemony

of the left, let me try to clarify why the response to Levin’s essays is so much more heated than any response to Edward Pechter’s critique of the new historicism in these same pages (“The New Historicism and Its Discontents: Politicizing Renaissance Drama,” 102 [1987]: 292–303).

I will focus on one characteristic passage in Levin’s essay:

One does not ask how or why the text gave itself, or was given, this project—that is treated as a *donnée*. The project is always bad since it involves the reproduction or reaffirmation of some aspect of the oppressive and deceptive ideology (in the Marxist sense of “false consciousness”) that dominated the Renaissance world. . . . (492)

The first sentence implies that the assumption that the text is carrying out an ideological project is of some mysterious origin. The second sentence at least partly dispels the mystery; Marxist literary critics follow Marx’s critique of the social formation of consciousness, in which one’s beliefs reflect one’s place in a particular class and in which the dominant ideas of a society are a veiled representation of the interests of the ruling class. Marxist critics do in fact ask how and why texts carry out the work of ideological mystification, and there is a clear continuity from the theoretical formulations of Marx and Marxist theorists on this issue to the use of those ideas in Marxist literary criticism.

One might wish to question whether Marxist principles are sometimes applied to literary analysis in an overly positivistic fashion, and that critique could be carried out at both the theoretical and the practical levels. That is what Pechter does, but that is not what Levin does. Levin takes gratuitous potshots (“One does not ask . . .”) that he should know are wrong. The connection between the first and the second sentences from Levin that I have quoted is loose enough to allow two possible interpretations of Levin’s misrepresentation of the grounds of Marxist literary criticism. Either Levin, in order to launch some gratuitous sarcasm, suppresses his knowledge of a theoretical basis for assuming that a text is doing the work of ideology or else he simply did not do any reading into the theoretical backgrounds of Marxist criticism before he set out to prove its errors. If his reading in the subject is insufficient, I would suggest that he begin with *The German Ideology*.

The opposition to Levin’s appearance (and reappearance) in *PMLA* does not proceed from an intolerance for contrary viewpoints. It arises from the sense that his essays are critical gossip and not serious scholarship. It is difficult to believe that anyone’s intellectual

horizon is expanded by them. Those who agree with Levin simply have their prejudices confirmed, and they are set free to follow their leader in deploring new directions in criticism without going through the bother of learning anything about them. Those who are angered by Levin's reappearance in *PMLA* might wish to put the whole matter in historical perspective by recalling Virginia Woolf's caricature of Professor Von X in *A Room of One's Own*:

His expression suggested that he was labouring under some emotion that made him jab his pen on the paper as if he were killing some noxious insect as he wrote, but even when he had killed it that did not satisfy him; he must go on killing it; and even so, some cause for anger and irritation remained. . . .

I knew that he was angry by this token. When I read what he wrote about women [feminism, Marxism] I thought, not of what he was saying, but of himself. When an arguer argues dispassionately he thinks only of the argument; and the reader cannot help thinking of the argument too. If he had written dispassionately about women [feminism, Marxism], had used indisputable proofs to establish his argument and had shown no trace of wishing the result should be one thing rather than another, one would not have been angry either. One would have accepted the fact, as one accepts the fact that a pea is green or a canary yellow. So be it, I should have said. But I had been angry because he had been angry.

I couldn't have put it nearly so well myself.

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To the Editor:

Seldom can one see more clearly how the battle lines of contemporary criticism have been drawn than in the juxtaposition in the May 1990 issue of two articles: Richard Levin's "The Poetics and Politics of Bardicide" and Susan Winnett's "Coming Unstrung: Women, Men, Narrative, and Principles of Pleasure" (105 [1990]: 505–18). Each critic represents what the other despises: Winnett is a "neo-Freudian," a revisionist reader of masculine paradigms both in primary texts and in criticism, while Levin is an "androcentric" reader who, like Peter Brooks, would see Winnett's effort as little more than a new version of thematics. Yet each, I believe, could learn something from the other.

Winnett polarizes the issue of the pleasures of reading, saying that there are masculine and feminine ways of reading. But her discussion of feminine pleasure offers (for me, at least) new ways of reading male as well as female texts. I take as my example a poem widely

regarded as "masculine": Yeats's "Among School Children." The speaker, conscious of aging and mortality, wonders what adoring mother, if she could see her infant son become "that shape / With sixty or more winters on its head," would consider that image "A compensation for the pang of his birth / Or certainty of his setting forth?" (37–40). Yeats's question anticipates Winnett's revisionist perspective of narratological pleasure. As she puts it, "[B]oth childbirth and breast feeding force us to think forward rather than backward" (509). Unlike Winnett, however, Yeats seems to have realized that such looking ahead will not necessarily produce pleasure. Also, Yeats's poem contradicts Winnett's broad generalization that in "the erotics of oedipal transmission, the woman is *always* a stage (in both senses of the word) for or in the working out of a problem of paternal interdiction, toward the moment of 'significant discharge' when the son frees himself from the nets of paternal restriction and forges a self-creation—however ironized this process may be" (512; my italics). In "Among School Children" woman does *not* appear to be a stage, in either sense of the word. Rather, Yeats uses woman as a symbol to free himself from the "restriction" of masculine philosophy: neither Plato nor Aristotle nor Pythagoras offers Yeats a satisfactory answer to his questions about origins and mortality in the poem. The images of woman offer Yeats a new way to conceive of experience—a way that circumnavigates the masculine tendency (so evident in Freud's "masterplot" of the death drive) to view life as linear, an unbroken progression from birth to death. Yeats, instead, adopts the more feminine (and for many readers more satisfying) image of "labour" that is "blossoming or dancing / Where body is not bruised to pleasure soul" (57–58). The cyclic pattern suggested by this image is more consistent with the pattern of motherhood than with the linear vision of life that predominates in so much of the masculine, meditative verse written by Donne, Wordsworth, and others. Yet one feels that for Yeats (and, ostensibly, for many readers) this image also adheres to the "pattern of tension and resolution ('tumescence and detumescence,' 'arousal and significant discharge')" that Winnett rejects (508). We need not insist on a choice of masculine or feminine pleasures. This text, like many others, might satisfy the various forms of desire as defined by Brooks, Scholes, and Winnett.

Levin's argument raises other problems. Both his recent *PMLA* articles use remarkable subtlety in analyzing contemporary approaches to Shakespeare. Levin correctly sees how Marxist and feminist-psychoanalytic views have politicized Shakespeare studies, yet I am not convinced that he represents those approaches fairly.