

(Jeffrey Sammons has repeatedly diagnosed *that* malaise!) Nonetheless I stay convinced that *PMLA* ought to attract a greater number of nonmembers at a time when solidarity within the profession offers the best bulwark against indifference or hostility in governmental circles and elsewhere.

As you note in your editorial, many opinions held about *PMLA* are based on misapprehensions. But as we, scholars of linguistics and literature, will be the first to acknowledge, myths and perceptions, however erroneous, can matter as much as reality. To many in the foreign language area, at least to those I have consulted, *PMLA* appears rigidified in style and tendentious, even trendy, in methodology, enlightened solely by what passes as current.

As to style, it is now far less often beset by the hyper-correctness that Theodore M. Bernstein once characterized as “Miss Thistlebottom’s hobgoblins.” To wax autobiographical by way of illustration, I once submitted an article, subsequently accepted, that annoyed the reader no end because the phrase “Mr. X, interviewed at his home [instead of *house*]” reflected “realtor English.” Those days are gone. But what remains is a type of stylized writing, analogous to a certain hard-to-define uniformness, found, for example, in the *New Yorker*. I suspect that stylistic nonconformists will shun—or will be rejected by—*PMLA*, its staff, and evaluators. Our journal should allow for greater flexibility of style in its pages; the race should not always go to the “traditionalists,” on whom Claire Kehrwald Cook, the author of our (largely admirable) stylistic bible, *Line by Line*, admittedly relies (xi).

As far as methodological bias is concerned, it is certainly true, as you state, that articles, regardless of method, may enter the kingdom of heaven through the pages of *PMLA*. (I was delighted, for example, with Paula Backscheider’s recent positivistic Defoe article!) But it is my impression—no more—that a method, whether foreign or homegrown, arrives in and departs from *PMLA* in direct conformance with its degree of welcome among a small group of tastemakers. And it appears to me and others that this bias is reflected in the preponderance of articles bearing their stamp of approval.

But, you will ask by way of rebuttal, how can that be, if our readers represent all shades of the methodological spectrum? Simple: the canon or ethos of a journal—or of a society—tends to perpetuate itself. As a past and present member of several editorial boards, I have recommended—*mea culpa*—for or against the publication of an article in deference to the journal’s or yearbook’s established profile. In fact I have even suggested to disappointed authors that their articles would have a better chance at other publications. Your readers may be similarly preconditioned. If that is so, the remedy could be painless: a periodic editor-readers workshop at the annual meeting, in which the referees are told that their own

views, not the perceived editorial canon of *PMLA*, should prevail.

Let me make one final suggestion on ways and means of converting the unconverted among our colleagues and reenchanting the disenchanting—beyond the very positive steps you have already undertaken. It is a practice common among new journals, but that need not preclude its adoption by a renewed *PMLA*. Ask your colleagues in the foreign languages about seminal articles and new insights in their fields and invite the scholars who have been identified to submit their next substantive articles for consideration by *PMLA*. (I am *not* advocating any change in the evaluation process.) Such a solicitation, I submit, will serve as a medal of recognition, as a garland of welcome, or—to borrow from your realm of metaphors—as an invitation to the multiethnic feast.

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Shakespeare and Feminist Readings

To the Editor:

One hopes that Richard Levin intended his article “Feminist Thematics and Shakespearean Tragedy” (103 [1988]: 125–38) to be provocative. If so, he has succeeded, at least for me. The provocation, however, depends on assumptions he makes about reading that I cannot begin to agree with. His major objection to feminist thematics (the big to-do he makes over the discovery that feminists have a thematic approach to texts is downright funny if one considers that the *ist* of *feminist* already grants the point) is that feminists are partial readers, in both senses of the word. Two implications arise from the objection: first, that Levin himself is not partial; second, and more generally, that im-partial readings are possible.

Consider the first implication in regard to Levin’s article. A partial feminist reading of the tragedies, he says, depends on seeing the “extraordinary calamities” (127) that the plays enact as if they were commonplace results of the social structures of patriarchy. So, he says, none of the characters in *Othello* views Desdemona’s death “as one of your everyday patriarchal events; instead, they consider it a horrifying violation of the norms of their world” (127). An im-partial reading of a play, Levin suggests, would repose in the uniqueness of the characters (126) and of the circumstances that lead to the tragedy, which becomes so extraordinary, one begins to suppose, that it points to nothing beyond itself, is not typical or representational or, God forbid, metaphoric (in Levin’s eyes, the besetting sin of Madelon Gohlke’s approach to the plays).

But surely the death of Desdemona is remarkable because of its physicality, not because of its uniqueness. Emilia, one might say, suffers a multitude of deaths, moral rather than physical, before she too dies physically.

She is marginalized, objectified, literally utilized by her husband, in whose hands she is molded into a thing who can keep quiet despite her mistress's anguish at the loss of the handkerchief or who can swallow the insult of Iago's "It is a common thing" (3.3.302) and still perform as a wife. Levin might say that I am reading Emilia partially, ignoring her feisty response to Iago or her courage at the end of the play. I respond that I am doing no such thing, that in fact Emilia's feistiness becomes coyness and that her speech at the end of the play is a reflex of the power that her husband has had over her speech in the middle of the play. It is Levin's reading, which seeks not to see its own partiality, that is partial, incomplete.

Partial in a different sense is his reading of the ends of comedies. "[I]f patriarchy is held responsible for the unhappy endings of the tragedies," he says rhetorically, "then it must be equally responsible for the happy endings of the comedies and romances" (128). Equally rhetorically, I will ask, happy for whom? Claudio and Benedick at the end of *Much Ado* may well rejoice in the possession of two good women, but what do the two good women have to say for themselves? Hero, notoriously silent through almost the whole play, says nothing. Beatrice, one of the active women of the comedies who "reinsert themselves into the patriarchal structure" (128), has a rather ambiguous final speech, addressed to Benedick some thirty long lines before the end of the play: ". . . I yield upon great persuasion, and partly to save your life, for I was told you were in a consumption" (5.4.95–97), whereupon Benedick literally "stops" her mouth (98). Part of the good humor of the play, the happiness fostered by the patriarchy? Only if one happens to be a male member of the social order, I suspect. For the women it bodes ill that at the end of the play they are silent while the men return to the cuckold jokes that originally structured the social world of the play.

Who is partial, then, and in what sense, those who say that comedies are unproblematically happy or those who suggest that there are profound problems for all the characters, male and female, at the ends of comedies? Both readings are partial, incomplete, as well as partial in the sense of taking a position on one side of the gender divide. Levin reassures us that the partiality of the feminists he criticizes is not intentional but, he therefore suggests, perhaps a bit naive, perhaps ignorant. Might not the same observation apply to the second part of Levin's article, in which he glides over the "very impressive achievement" of feminists in clarifying the position of women in society because, he says, "it seems so obvious" (131)? If it is so obvious, then how can Levin *still* say that comedies end "happily" or that Leontes's jealousy in *The Winter's Tale*, because it is shared by no other male in the play, says nothing at all about male attitudes toward women?

I do not think that men need feel defensive at the conclusion to which feminist readers of Shakespeare come, that masculinity is a malady. It is the gender, not the sex,

that is the problem. Strategies to take and keep power—whether based on gender, race, economic status, or some other classification that is deemed significant—will be problematic. Levin is right to say that "since gender relations are only one of the components of each [dramatic] 'world,' we have no reason to single them out as the basic cause of events" (127). However, every reading must have some angle of incidence: there is no omniscient point of view to account for all possible readings. I wonder, therefore, how one is to take Levin's project for "a scientific study of the complex factors in human development" (136) that will yield an unsubjective, absolute set of criteria with which to unlock the heart of the mystery of texts. And, finally, I wonder how such a magic key to texts is to remain free of "ideology"—a consummation devoutly to be wished, no doubt!

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Reply:

Alberto Cacicedo is obviously angry, and it is not easy to answer anger, especially when one cannot be sure just where it is directed. Some of it seems to be directed at Iago's treatment of Emilia; but I agree with him on this and can only wonder why he thinks I would not. I believe that Iago is presented as a misogynist, the only one in the play, and that he has subjugated Emilia, although Gayle Greene claims that she is supposed to represent an "autonomous" woman who provides an "alternative" to Desdemona's acceptance of male authority (a position that Cacicedo seems to give to me in the little exchange between us that he invents). But I do not believe their relationship is presented as a typical patriarchal marriage, which is Irene Dash's view (and apparently Cacicedo's), because the marriage of Desdemona and Othello, before Iago gets at him, is very different. It may not meet modern standards for an egalitarian marriage, and we can certainly register this judgment, but we should not attribute such a view to the play.

His second point, on the endings of the comedies, simply confirms my contention that when these critics confront them they "either argue that the ending is ironic or else give up the intentionalist position" (133). He seems to be doing both, although it is hard to tell. But if one adopts the intentionalist position (as did all the critics I was discussing, when they dealt with the tragedies), then the question, again, is not whether a modern woman—or man—would regard the endings as happy but whether the dramatist meant them to be regarded in that way. I think he did, and I would be glad to argue the question on those grounds. Of course it is possible to find what Cacicedo calls "profound problems" at the ends of the comedies, if one defines the real issue of these plays in terms of the theme of gender conflict. That is just what