

**Reply:**

Helene Solheim's anecdote delights me profoundly, not only because it enables me to appear once more in *PMLA* but because it allows me to share a similar anecdote in my turn. In fact, my own particular interest in Jonson's epigram 101 derives from an event very like the one Solheim describes: a dinner party that took place in 1982, while I was still a graduate student. I will not dwell on the details of the evening, which was pleasant; it is noteworthy, however, that the practice of using Jonson's poem as a dinner invitation is widespread among American academics. I might venture to suggest that this practice is a kind of minor social convention, comparable in its way to our undergraduates' amusing habit of donning togas for their evening entertainments. I am confident that this insight could generate a dissertation or two on the semiotics of the American theme party.

I am not so confident, however, that such matters have any bearing on my exchange with Schmidgall. Having enjoyed Solheim's letter thoroughly, I don't want to belabor this point; but the fact that a literary text is assimilable to one social situation does not preclude it from being equally assimilable to other—even contradictory—situations. Scripture has "worked" as well for Jacob Sprenger as for Mother Teresa, Shakespeare has worked as well for John Wilkes Booth as for Abraham Lincoln, and so forth. Epigram 101 has worked for dinner parties in the past; yet that doesn't mean it will work for every dinner party (some of my toga-clad undergraduates, for instance, might find the poem more self-absorbed and mystifying than charming and adroit—a view with which I can't help partly sympathizing); and the success of the epigram as a dinner-party invitation does not prevent it from working as, say, a poem.

Every party having its pooper, I must raise a further small objection. Although I do not doubt that Solheim is an ideal party host, I wonder whether her letter describes an ideally nonabsolutist social situation. Perhaps what bothers me is the assurance with which she speaks for everyone at the party when announcing that a good time was had by all; perhaps what worries me more is her eagerness to improve my rhetorical manners (and Schmidgall's); then again, perhaps I am simply miffed over my perception that neither Schmidgall nor I would make her A list of prospective supper guests. But in any case, I cannot avoid detecting just the tiniest bit of coerciveness in her prose—although it is doubtless there for the best reasons.

Finally, I want to correct the impression that I regard Gary Schmidgall as humorless. I have never called him

humorless. On the contrary, I have publicly described his work as witty and amusing. If Solheim and other readers do not believe that those adjectives were seriously intended, I must take issue. I did and I do mean them.

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**Beyond the Stockpiling of Citations**

To the Editor:

I don't think I would have had such a charged reaction to the March Editor's Column addressing the pressing issue of "[w]ho's who in *PMLA*" (106 [1991]: 200–04) if these comments hadn't followed an unprecedented barrage of critical sorties against our profession (and its collective conscience) in the public press. Frankly, I am appalled that John Kronik could devote a column to such an inane exercise at a time when we are routinely, perhaps deservedly, vilified—both from within our own ranks and from outside academe—as being obsessed with "accreditation lists" and self-promotion and self-validation and other vapid manifestations of cynicism, opportunism, and status anxiety. About the best we can manage, it seems, is to shrug off such criticism as "anti-intellectualism" (or, worse still, as "journalism") and get on with our portfolio building and our networking.

Maybe our critics are right: maybe we have lost our soul after all. Maybe we *have* raffled off our collective mandate to—what, reinvigorate public life with humanistic inquiry?—for the tenuous reward, as Kronik puts it vacuously, of "[h]onorable mention in a *PMLA* note" (204). Sounds like so much "blonde ambition," doesn't it? "No academic heart swells so fully," he fibrillates, "as when its owner becomes a citation." The argument is clinched touchingly: "My own debut as a footnote occurred many years ago in this very journal and endures in my memory as the acme of my career" (200).

Bruce Wilshire's recent indictment of "academic professionalism, specialism, and careerism" as "an intergenerational and cultural failure" (*The Moral Collapse of the University*, State U of New York P, 1991) differs little from the denunciation composed by modern culture's earliest critic. "To consider them behind," he wrote, "is *glory*. / To consider them before, is *humility*. / . . . Continually to be out-done, is *misery*. / Continually to out-go the next before, is *felicity*." In the same spirit, we now read, "Top billing on my ac-

creditation list goes to [two] . . . French thinkers . . . tied at 58 entries each"; a Duke star comes in at a not unrespectable ninth, with 23 entries (no stolen bases), while a University of California, Irvine, free agent lags at the eight pole with 19.

Unless I have completely missed the irony, this exercise in group narcissism offends deeply precisely because it *isn't* superficial. Stripped, apparently, of any capacity for self-criticism, Kronik is, it would seem, *completely serious* about tracking literary stars around the rat race, implying, as Hobbes said, that "to forsake the course is to *die*." Absent here is much, if any, sense that something's absent. Beyond the stockpiling of citations, "there is," as Gertrude Stein said of Oakland, "no there there."

I realize that this entrepreneurial angle on academic professionalism follows from the prevailing epistemological and theoretical precepts of the poststructuralist critique. We have learned to ask old questions in new ways. In the critical enterprise, for example, what if there *is* nothing but power or contingencies of authority? What will prevail? Ego and will? Do I struggle to establish myself as close as possible to the center in a universe of competing contingencies? If so, credentials are essential. Horsepower *is* vital. Advertising a "gallery of names and titles" is much more than, as I take it, primping before the mirror of one's colleagues.

But what are the ontological and ethical consequences of a case for the supply-side view of professional accomplishment and honor, indeed of personal "immortality"? *How do I carry myself into the world?* In the words of one of our spectacularly successful colleagues, do "I walk into any first-rate faculty anywhere and dominate it, shape it to my own will" by booting up my *PMLA* citations? ("I am," he goes on to say, "fascinated by my own will.") Is merit a calculus based on institutional status and not a quality independent of "the notes of articles" and "the onomastic indexes of books"? Have we become obsessed with results, with getting attention, with "billing," "balance sheets," and "rising stock values"? If so—if, that is, position precedes

merit in the same general (non)ethical way that "all preferences are principled"—then we ought to claim outright our allegiance, as Walter Kendrick put it recently in a slightly different context, with supply-side economics, "Star Wars" technology, Ronald Reagan, and Ivan Boesky. And we ought to freely admit that such things as identity, self-discovery, generativity, and personal integrity have little to do with the kind of meritocracy that John Kronik painstakingly erects in his Editor's Column. He is to be congratulated for admitting that himself. It doesn't really "matter," he says, "that my name had been misspelled" in "[m]y own debut as a footnote." Identity and being—as embodied in one's very name—are radically dissociated from one's "laurels," from the "acme of [a] career," and from "the reduced fonts where . . . immortality reposes." Doing precedes being. "No matter," I repeat, "that my name had been misspelled; I could rest on my laurels" (200). Are others astonished by that moral non sequitur, as I am? Does it really matter?

John Hollander's recent indictment of "being an academic professional" bears quoting ("Reading as Was Never Read," *ADE Bulletin* 98 [1991]: 7–13):

[T]he *gauchisme* of many younger scholars reads like the deeply unpolitical cant of an exceedingly careerist generation. Many of the scholars wielding disproportionate power in the professionalized study and teaching of literature in universities today have the same character as CEOs who look only for the quarterly bottom line, as lawyers who have been contriving to give that profession an even—did it seem possible?—worse name. (11)

The answer to "Who's who in *PMLA*?" celebrates a roster of stars, those "arbiters of power" who know *how* to score. One still wonders whether they *know* the score.

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