

## A Predecessor on Nature and Art in the Renaissance

To the Editor:

Frances E. Dolan's "Taking the Pencil out of God's Hand: Art, Nature, and the Face-Painting Debate in Early Modern England" (108 [1993]: 224–39) merits praise as one of the better articles in the issue. So it is dispiriting to find that Dolan does not cite her most obvious—one would have thought unavoidable—predecessor. Her article begins, "Numerous scholars in the history of ideas have identified nature and art as the categories organizing many discussions of education, gardening, cosmetics, poetry, and rhetoric in Renaissance England." She uses the words (and the ideas) "nature and art" repeatedly, and the topic sentence of her conclusion begins, "The early modern debate over the relation between nature and art . . ." (236). Why, then, does she omit Edward W. Taylor's *Nature and Art in Renaissance Literature* (New York: Columbia UP, 1964) from the list of sixty-five works cited?

True, a reader can always suggest one more citation; no doubt sixty-five are more than enough. Still, the omission of so prominent and excellent a book as *Nature and Art* from this article about nature and art characterizes our time. Apart from its own merits, Taylor's book summarizes scholarship and literary history up to its moment. But the work is not now especially fashionable: it performs thematic rather than gender criticism, and—as Richard Levin argues in the most notorious article to appear in *PMLA* in recent years ("Feminist Thematics and Shakespearean Tragedy," 103 [1988]: 125–38)—it is not done nowadays to confess openly to any connection with the thematic.

Dolan need not agree with Taylor on any particular point. But she should cite him. And *PMLA*—that is, its readers, its editorial board, and its editor—should get back into the habit of seeing that elementary scholarly principles of coverage are observed.

No special criticism of Frances Dolan is intended. Her article is good, and her sin of omission—if sin it be—is merely symptomatic of present practices. But I would distinguish between open scholarly disagreement, which will always be with us, and postmodernist erasure of the past—throwing inconvenient works down the "memory hole"—a dangerous habit to get into.

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## Reply:

I agree that scholars must acknowledge their debts to their predecessors. But scholarly debts are various and extensive. Regrettable constraints on length compelled me to cut my list of works cited, and I eliminated reference to Taylor's book, among others, in order to include scholarship I engage more directly. I believe that my essay itself gives evidence of my willingness to confront "inconvenient" texts and of my commitment to scrutinizing and revising the past and our scholarly constructions of it rather than erasing either.

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## *Beowulf* and the Intrusion of Literacy

To the Editor:

We were pleased to read Michael R. Near's essay "Anticipating Alienation: *Beowulf* and the Intrusion of Literacy" (108 [1993]: 320–32). Near brings us one step closer to the integration of contemporary criticism into Anglo-Saxon studies, a goal, as his essay demonstrates, that is still some distance away.

Near's assertions about the intrusion of the private into the public, "inexpressible psychological interiority," and the "privacy of individual mentation" presume a complex model of subjectivity that has not been constructed for Anglo-Saxon culture (329). There is, to be sure, considerable power in Near's bringing "the forces of submerged alienation" and "silence of the self" into juxtaposition with the "familiar" and communal context of Hrothgar's Heorot (328, 329). But these poetic and mysterious psychological claims remain largely unanalyzed; indeed, they render the poem inaccessible to criticism.

Near's essay seems to hark back to distinctly old-fashioned modes of *Beowulf*, those of "neoromanticism" and primitivism. He celebrates "[p]sychological states" as "integral aspects of a unified world of interactive relationships" (328), "the personal immediacy of verbal exchange" in the hall, and "the whispers of the vanquished" and their "unequivocal" stories. By posing the "technology of writing" against this entirely imaginary communal purity, he isolates the pagan and the oral from the Christianity that arrived with the new technology of the word (329). He never explicitly admits that his reading revives arguments about the "Christian coloring" of the poem that

were, until recently, the familiar currency of Anglo-Saxon literary criticism, but how his model departs from this old-fashioned dichotomy he does not say.

Nor does Near acknowledge the extent to which many of his sources discuss the issues of reading and writing his essay explores. Near never considers the detailed arguments of Lerer (1991) or O'Brien O'Keeffe (1990), even though he refers to their work. He makes no mention of Overing's book, *Language, Sign, and Gender in Beowulf* (1990), although he cites two of her articles; Frantzen's essay on reading and writing in the poem, published the year after the book to which Near refers (1990), is also not cited. James W. Earl's psychoanalytic commentaries on Anglo-Saxon culture, and on *Beowulf* in particular (1982, 1983, 1986, 1991), also go unmentioned, although they bear directly on Near's thesis. And more traditional criticism is also ignored, including Fred Robinson's *Beowulf and the Appositive Style* (1985), a seminal work that argues persuasively against the primitivism Near advocates and that demonstrates the degree to which *Beowulf* is indebted to Christian perspectives wholly at odds with the public, pagan orality that Near emphasizes.

Happy though we are to find this essay in *PMLA*, we are disappointed that Near's work engages little of the new thinking that has revived Anglo-Saxon studies. *PMLA*'s reviewers owed the journal a more thorough critique of Near's essay. We are also disappointed that *PMLA*, which goes to great length to accommodate the typographical requirements of foreign languages, did not reproduce the Old English "ash" (æ) and thus produced a hybrid of Old and Modern English whenever Near quotes Anglo-Saxon texts.

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### Reply:

With Allen J. Frantzen and Gillian R. Overing I too regret that my more detailed engagement with their arguments and with those of Lerer, O'Brien O'Keeffe, and others needed abbreviation. In my editorial choices, however, I intended no slight to anyone. Having been afforded the critical generosity and constructive insight of reviewers scrupulously attentive to the substance and progress of my discussion, an attention, I believe, much more common to *PMLA*

than is its absence, I attempted to present some ideas about *Beowulf* that might be of use—useful not because they are self-consciously new but because they are interesting to me and could perhaps be of interest to others. A survey of critical works that may or may not pertain to my topic was simply not a part of my project, nor in this regard would I pretend to rival the work that Frantzen has already made available to us recording the progress of scholarship on matters concerning Old English literature.

Underlying my argument are a few critical assumptions that may be "old-fashioned" or newfangled or at times a bit of both. I am, in fact, deeply indebted to the insights of several generations of readers of Old English poetry, but I must admit that I have been somewhat negligent in discerning which of these insights has participated in either the demise or the revival of Anglo-Saxon studies. Critical inquiry describes a process of ideological transformations that contribute to a kind of dynamic continuity. I am not sure, therefore, if it is old or new thinking to suggest, as I do in my argument, that great literature is often a response to ideological tensions and conflicts occurring within a culture, that literature often gives expression to these conflicts as aspects of its own thematic concerns, that the use of language carries with it a complex set of epistemological demands that influence the texture of culture as a construct, that conflicting epistemologies give rise to conflicting cultural practices, and that literature, as language and as a practice of culture, affirms the epistemology most compatible with its capacity to signify, an affirmation that often reveals the ideological tensions that have prompted the response of the text itself.

I discuss differing modes of comprehension in terms that identify them as equally complex and ultimately practical—that is, structured by practice rather than by belief. I must confess, therefore, that I am not entirely clear what a primitive or pagan epistemology might be. If my discussion might be seen to hark back to, to celebrate, or even to advocate such a construct, then I am justly chastised. The cultural speculations of Clemons and Godden and the psycholinguistic speculations of Ong, Goody, and Stock, however, have suggested to me ways in which we might reevaluate *Beowulf* as a product of culture that have little to do with romancing the past. They have to do with language, the use of language, and the practical implications of this use for the thematic concerns of *Beowulf*. If I posit that within the poem we might witness an intersection of conflicting cultural practices and that the dominant practice seems to conform to the constructs of a principally oral culture while the