

sponse to it, I fear that his disappointment with it derives from reading it as an example of “historical and ‘contextual’” criticism rather than as an attempt to explore the complex representations of a subcultural gender experience within a dominant culture that not only marginalized but criminalized it. Clearly, Kahn is right to point to my sins of omission, for they are many; however, to endeavor to “involve *all* relevant facts” seems to me a rather hubristic undertaking that obscures both the epistemological and the political implications of any choice of frameworks and materials. Since my purpose was not to write the final word on Wilde but rather to introduce a set of questions that has been heretofore excluded from the commentary on his work, I am grateful for Kahn’s suggestions and would welcome his own attempts to elucidate the significance of the materials he finds lacking in my work. (Though regarding his comments on Wilde’s use of Nordau, I would find it more fruitful to consider both the ironic and the strategic importance of such a popular reference—after all, Wilde was trying not to define the “truth” of his experience but to convince the prison authorities to release him.)

As for my sins of commission, I would like to take exception with Kahn on two points:

1. In his assertion that “perhaps the term *homosexual* was coined in 1869, but the realities behind it were as old as the hills,” Kahn fails to appreciate the complex interaction between experience and understanding that makes such “realities” problematic. Reading some of the recent writings by gay and feminist historians and literary critics might help him work out the theoretical *and* political implications of addressing the shifting cultural constructions of social and gender identities, but I will not be so pedantic as to provide him with a bibliography here. Instead, I will simply suggest that the “reality” of the “sodomite” whose crime was not directly mapped onto his “character” and yet merited his execution could not be the same “reality” as that of the “homosexual” whose “identity” was constituted by a juridical-medical discourse that mapped the significance of a particular sexual-object choice onto a disparate range of social relations. (A more extensive elaboration of this point is forthcoming in my essay “Legislating the Norm from Sodomy to Gross Indecency,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* [Winter 1989]). Thus, while I was not attempting to argue for the absolute “novelty” of Wilde’s complex representational practices, I do believe that the context within which they took place was qualitatively different from any that preceded it.

2. As to Kahn’s suggestion that my interpretation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* “might have puzzled Wilde himself, who probably thought he was basically writing an allegory of ‘good and evil,’” I would probably concur with the first clause and disagree with the second. Perhaps (?), Wilde would have been able to make little sense of my post-Freudian, post-Marxist, postmodern idiom, yet to reduce the complexity of his own understanding to

that of a moral fable seems to me to be unjustifiably patronizing and to underestimate the subtlety of Wilde’s engagement with—indeed his conscious deconstruction of—the moral problematics of the late Victorian bourgeoisie. That Wilde situated himself both experientially and authorially at the margins of such contemporary ideologies was evident even to his contemporaries (i.e., to those who lived the “facts and spirit of the period depicted,” whatever these were), so that they spent much of the 1880s and 1890s making fun of him for precisely this reason. Yet, more important, to appreciate the power that Wilde’s irony had to call into question the moral certainties of his era, it is necessary to avoid any form of interpretive reductionism that seeks to fix his play on or of meanings to that of “allegory.”

I realize that in replying to Kahn I am probably guilty of the same form of reductionism about his text that I chide him for applying to Wilde’s. However, with the final recognition that I often perceive those flaws that are most like my own, I will conclude by thanking Kahn for providing me with the opportunity for clarifying—for myself if not for him—the implications of my essay.

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Widening *PMLA*’s Appeal

To the Editor:

Your closely reasoned editorial—or position paper—in the March 1988 issue (107–08) encourages further debate on an issue vital to the well-being of our profession and the MLA. I had argued, during an MLA committee meeting, that foreign language instructors are underrepresented within our general membership and that *PMLA* may contribute to their disaffection.

Let me concede from the start that your counterargument is both cogent and valid: the evaluation procedure for articles, from anonymous submission to reexamination of rejected papers on appeal, is sensible and fair-minded; the panel of readers and the members of the Advisory Committee and the Editorial Board, many of them personally known to me, stand indeed for the highest scholarly standards and almost always render fastidious judgments. Also they obviously represent many specialties and a wide range of critical approaches. I will even concede that reasonable people, Ulrich Weisstein and you, for example, can come to opposite conclusions on the advisability of routinely including articles in *PMLA* in a language other than English.

Nor do I want to exculpate colleagues in the foreign languages who absent themselves from our ranks because they are French (or German, Italian, Spanish, Slavic, or other) provincials or, worse still, because they perceive their areas as foreign enclaves on American campuses.

(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.