

by any president of the MLA. Perhaps Whitman is suggesting that an election should be overturned if the candidate does not satisfy this criterion. Perhaps he is merely criticizing Said's supporters for failing to observe this criterion when casting their votes. The former is so arrantly antidemocratic and so obviously in violation of freedom of speech that it probably does not require refutation. But I fear that at least some members of the MLA will feel that the dignity mentioned by Whitman should influence their votes in the future, or even their membership renewal. Some might feel that Said is objectionable as president because at times he apparently lacked this "dignity."

There are two points to make in connection with this. The first is that the criterion proposed by Whitman is a matter solely of decorum, not of ethics—despite Whitman's assertion to the contrary. He is not suggesting that someone is made unfit for office by having, in practice, effectively supported the systematic degradation of individual human lives through the economic systems in which we live and work. He is not suggesting that a candidate becomes unfit for office by having—in national or professional or departmental politics—been complicit in the deprivation of individual human dignity based on race or sex or class or sexual preference or ability. He is not referring to the many and terrible varieties of practical dehumanization that make most of humanity suffer painful indignity every day. He is suggesting, rather, that impolite speech and impolite speech alone disqualifies one from office. Had Whitman adopted a moral criterion regarding human dignity rather than a criterion of mere etiquette, he may have been forced to conclude that Edward Said is one of the few people elected president of the MLA who in fact deserves the position.

The second point to make in this context is that even the criterion of decorum is never applied consistently. It is invoked almost entirely against dissident voices, as in Whitman's letter. As John Stuart Mill put it:

With regard to what is commonly meant by intemperate discussion, namely invective, sarcasm, personality, and the like, the denunciation of these weapons would deserve more sympathy if it were ever proposed to interdict them equally to both sides; but it is only desired to restrain the employment of them against the prevailing opinion: against the unprevailing they may not only be used without general disapproval, but will be likely to obtain for him who uses them the praise of honest zeal and righteous indignation.

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To the Editor:

Pardon my cognitive dissonance if I am unable to understand the recent attack on the qualifications of Edward Said, one of the most distinguished and well-known members of the academy in America or indeed in the world, to be president of the Modern Language Association. As someone who has known Said both through his written work, interviews, and media appearances and personally as my dissertation director, colleague in the Columbia English department, and friend, I can say that there probably are few people more fit to head the MLA.

The implication made is that because Said has attacked some scholars in a strong, engaged, and heated manner, he has somehow forfeited his right to be placed in a position of honor and service within the profession. First, it must be pointed out that the specific quotations were taken out of context and made into a tessellation secured with the misleading glue of ellipses. Second, even if we grant that some of the quotations were accurate, must we conclude that strong and even offensive language is inappropriate? We should all remember that Said is not arguing some abstruse theoretical position or some nicety of style. His work has been involved in the life-and-death politics of the Middle East and the ideological struggles associated with that conflict. Strong situations demand strong words, and the Supreme Court upholds the right of Americans to use strong and even offensive language. We should also remember that many of the authors we teach in literature classes—people like Thomas More, Jonathan Swift, or James Joyce—wrote things that make Said's comments seem like remarks at a Junior League tea.

Living as we do in a time of renewed puritanism, let us not stoop to the kind of impugning of character best left to scoundrel politicians. Integrity and commitment are characteristics too complex to be judged by a handful of selectively chosen "bad" words. By any standards, Said's accomplishments in literature and politics set an ideal for the rest of us. I believe that the majority of MLA members are deeply honored to have Said head the organization.

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To the Editor:

As a recent student of Edward Said's at Columbia, I write in a state of particularly outraged response to Jon Whitman's letter, in which he resigns from the MLA because of Said's accession to its presidency. Whitman's