

genetic code already evident in J. K.'s manias and Sir James's depressions. It is also possible that Jane passed on an inhibiting gene that precluded manic-depressive illness in Leslie but that was later switched off in Virginia by factors contributed by Julia. An individual's genetic makeup combines genes from both parents, neither of whom may express the full potential of what they pass on to their children. Genes are "switches" and may be turned on or off, abetted or inhibited, by the presence or absence of other switches. Such a mechanism for transmission obviously produces great variability—essential for evolutionary adaptation and survival—but it also complicates questions of inheritance, diagnosis, and the job of psychobiographers who need to know all that can be known about the lives of their subjects.

THOMAS C. CARAMAGNO  
*University of Hawaii, Honolulu*

### Feminist Criticism

To the Editor:

Richard Levin's "Feminist Thematics and Shakespearean Tragedy" (103 [1988]: 125–38) embodies precisely those flaws it falsely accuses feminist critics of: arbitrary selectivity, reductive thematizing, misplaced causality, unexamined and untenable assumptions about intentionality, irresponsible slippage from particulars to abstractions. His readings of feminist criticism of Shakespearean tragedy ignore its explicit premises, methods, and goals and fail to acknowledge the assumptions and anxieties that underlie his critique.

While Levin's target is clearly feminist criticism of Shakespeare in general, his selected focus is on early work on tragedy by American feminist critics. He treats this one strand of feminist criticism as if it represents the approach as a whole and ignores, mislabels, or marginalizes other strands, represented, for example, by the work of Janet Adelman, Linda Bamber, Catherine Belsey, Lynda Boose, Lisa Jardine, Kathleen McLuskie, and Linda Woodbridge. He fails to understand the serious concerns about inequality and injustice that have engendered feminist analyses of literature, and he constructs a pseudohistory of feminist criticism of Shakespeare that does not account for the complex development or great diversity of the approach. He privileges his favored genre, tragedy, without acknowledging that feminist critics have resisted this traditional hierarchization of genres.

Levin thematizes his selections along lines familiar from his 1979 book, *New Readings vs. Old Plays*, presenting snippets of decontextualized quotations to support conclusions presented as self-evident. But the charges fail to stick. Feminist critics do not often concern themselves with theme, and never in isolation from characters or

structure or culture. We do not claim that our interpretations account for everything in the play (as Levin notes in some puzzlement in the midst of accusing us of doing so [126]). We do not argue that the plays are "about the role of gender" or that gender or patriarchy is the sole "cause" of tragedy. It is Levin who is obsessed with *cause*, confusing it with *conditions* (127), and who imputes this claim to us. It is Levin who valorizes Shakespeare's intentions, concluding that "the tragedies are not criticizing their own gender assumptions but just assuming them" (134). It is Levin who construes "gender" and "patriarchy" as Platonic idea(l)s. We argue that gender difference is a historically specific cultural construct with diverse forms and representations and damaging consequences for characters in plays, subjects in the Renaissance, and for us—and Levin—today.

Accusing us of his own flaws, Levin paternally tries to preempt our strengths by recommending our project to us as if it were his idea. We have, of course, been analyzing "the actual nature of gender assumptions in these plays" (134) for over fifteen years; we examine the interactions between gender and dramatic genres and question conventional generic assumptions (132); we forthrightly acknowledge the partiality of our own interpretations; we "separate our activity from Shakespeare's," "criticize (his) assumptions" (134), and debate the question of his intentions in instances when we accept the concept of a unified author with discernible intentions. Levin applauds us for providing "many valuable new insights, from a new perspective, into [female characters'] personalities and especially their situations as women in male-dominated worlds" (131). But, absurdly, he wants us to provide these insights without revealing the strategies, structures, psychologies, and oppressiveness of the domination that particular male characters enact.

Levin does not recognize the profound challenges that feminist criticism poses to the crude Aristotelianism he has advocated since his introduction to his 1960 textbook, *Tragedy: Plays, Theory, and Criticism*: "There can be no dispute over the fact that the tragic form has, over long periods of history, seemed to authors, audiences, and critics alike well suited to the most exalted, significant, and beautiful of man's artistic creations" (iii). Tragedy, Levin assumes everyone assumes, is the highest genre, has a formal cause, a hero deserving sympathy, an experience of catharsis, a resolution that allows the hero self-knowledge and restores order. Our criticism has argued against each of these generalizations with detailed analyses of the specific actions of particular heroes (always a Levin desideratum). We can only reiterate here that the tragic heroes represent the values and contradictions of their societies, that abnormal behavior in crisis is always an intensification of tendencies present in "normal" behavior, that the tragedies repeatedly and poignantly ask what it is to "be a man," that the heroes often fantasize "a very serious provocation by a woman" (135) when

there is none, that self-knowledge, catharsis, and the restoration of order are vexed in many of Shakespeare's tragedies.

Levin's last sentence calls on feminist critics to support "a scientific study of the complex factors in human development, which would investigate the similarities as well as the differences between women and men, based on evidence that compelled the assent of all rational people, regardless of their gender or ideology." Levin seems unaware that what passes for "rationality" in a particular historical moment is likely to look irrational from the perspective of another, that affirmations of shared attributes often mask oppression based on unexplored assumptions of hierarchical difference, that many dreadful thoughts and brutal deeds have compelled the assent of people fully convinced of their own rationality and the irrationality of a cultural other. The view that "science" and "rationality" can comprehend "complex factors in human development" without the messy intrusion of "gender and ideology" is an Enlightenment dream, long since turned to nightmare.

We are puzzled and disturbed that Richard Levin has made a successful academic career by using the reductive techniques of this essay to bring the same predictable charges indiscriminately against all varieties of contemporary criticism. We wish to know why, in view of the energetic, cogent, sophisticated theoretical debate that is currently taking place within and among schools of Renaissance criticism, *PMLA* has chosen to print a tired, muddled, unsophisticated essay that is blind at once to the assumptions of feminist criticism of Shakespeare and to its own.

<sup>1</sup> JANET ADELMAN, *University of California, Berkeley*  
<sup>2</sup> MARGARET J. ARNOLD, *University of Kansas*<sup>3</sup> LINDA BAMBER, *Tufts University* CATHERINE BELSEY, *University College, Cardiff*<sup>5</sup> HARRY BERGER, *University of California, Santa Cruz*<sup>4</sup> LYNDA BOOSE, *Dartmouth College*<sup>1</sup> PETER ERICKSON, *Clark Art Institute*<sup>8</sup> SHIRLEY NELSON GARNER, *University of Minnesota, Minneapolis*<sup>9</sup> GAYLE GREENE, *Scripps College*<sup>6</sup> DIANNE M. HUNTER, *Trinity College* LISA JARDINE, *Cambridge University*<sup>7</sup> COPPÉLIA KAHN, *Brown University* CAROL LEVENTEN, *Adrian College* KATHLEEN McLUSKIE, *University of Kent*<sup>5</sup> CAROL THOMAS NEELY, *Illinois State University*<sup>4</sup> MARIANNE NOVY, *University of Pittsburgh*<sup>1</sup> REBECCA SMITH, *University of Arkansas, Little Rock*<sup>8</sup> EDWARD A. SNOW, *Rice University*<sup>1</sup> MADELON (GOHLKE) SPRENGNETHER, *University of Minnesota, Minneapolis*<sup>20</sup> CAROLYN RUTH SWIFT (LENZ), *Rhode Island College*<sup>2</sup> ANN THOMPSON, *University of Liverpool*<sup>24</sup> VALERIE WAYNE, *University of Hawaii, Manoa*<sup>23</sup> RICHARD P. WHEELER, *University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign*<sup>24</sup> LINDA WOODBRIDGE, *University of Alberta*

Reply:

This letter must set a Forum record for the number of signers and the number of charges levied against one article. Although these signers seem to take a dim view of "intentionality," they begin by constructing an intention for me—and one I explicitly disavow. They charge that my "target is clearly feminist criticism of Shakespeare in general" and that I treat one strand "as if it represents the approach as a whole"; yet my second paragraph clearly states that I am dealing not with this entire approach but with only one strand. I say it in so many ways that the copy editor objected to my redundancy, but I retained the wording to ensure that no one would make the mistake they have made. Moreover, in notes 3, 14, and 20 I name feminist Shakespeareans who are not in this strand, so I cannot be claiming it "represents the approach as a whole." Four of those named there are in the list of seven whom, according to the next charge, my article "ignores, mislabels, or marginalizes." Thus they are not ignored; nor are they marginalized—I say they "have given us significant studies that may be riding the wave of the future" (125). And the only labels I apply to them are "not thematic" and, for one group, "cultural materialist" (137n20). If that is mislabeling, the letter should explain why. I also do not understand the charge that I construct a "pseudohistory" of feminist Shakespeare criticism, since my few remarks about this history are based on an essay (cited in note 1) by a signer of the letter.

I am then charged with "presenting snippets of decontextualized quotations to support conclusions presented as self-evident." I do rely on such "snippets" since I know of no better method of discussing many essays, and I see the letter uses "snippets" from my article. There is nothing wrong with this practice unless the passages are excerpted in a way that distorts them, which I presume is implied by "decontextualized." But every "snippet" I quote is identified, so it should be easy to detect distortions of the author's meaning, especially for the ten signers who are authors of essays I "snippet" from. Yet they do not cite any instances of it, which suggests that this charge too is without substance. And I cannot be presenting my conclusions "as self-evident" if I present "quotations to support" them, so the charge contradicts itself.

The signers' tactics then shift from these unsubstantiated charges to a series of general pronouncements about what "we" do or do not do that are supposed to refute my article. But I try to show that each essay I discuss (with two exceptions cited in note 17) does what they claim "we" do not do, and does not do what they claim "we" do; and if I am wrong they should be able to name at least one essay that does not argue that the play is about gender or does not valorize Shakespeare's intentions or does criticize his assumptions, and so on. They never at-

tempt it because they are talking not about these essays (which are not even mentioned) but about an abstraction called “feminist criticism” that “we” practice and that seems to have no faults. Thus this tactic allows them to dispose of all my criticisms of these essays without confronting any of them. And it places those signers who wrote the essays in the position of making assertions about “we” that do not apply to their own work.

The charges in the fifth paragraph are easily answered: I do not “assume” any of the generalizations about “tragedy” listed there, although a few are conclusions I have reached about Shakespeare’s tragedies; and I cannot assume that “everyone assumes” them, since I quote critics who do not. That 1960 textbook, by the way, presents five other theories of tragedy in addition to Aristotle’s, without “advocating” any of them. But I wonder why those signers who do not “accept the concept of a unified author” would want to unify me with the person who wrote that book thirty years ago.

The letter’s last two paragraphs introduce more general issues. My appeal to evidence acceptable to all rational people is rejected because brutal deeds have been committed by people “convinced of their own rationality.” (Of course brutal deeds have also been committed by people convinced they were promoting equality and justice, yet that does not prevent the signers from invoking those values.) But if we cannot appeal to such evidence, on what basis are we to prefer one theory of human development over another? If we judge them by their conformity to the right ideology, we are on the road to Lysenkoism, and while the cultural materialists among the signers might welcome this, I do not think the rest would.

I will not descend to answer their charge about how I “made a successful academic career,” which is unworthy of them, and I leave it to anyone familiar with that career to judge the accuracy of the charge. But their objection to the publication of my article raises a more

important question. In my reply in the last Forum, written before I saw this letter, I reported that many of my correspondents felt *PMLA* is now controlled by the feminist and other new approaches. This letter’s signers apparently would like to strengthen that impression: the fact that it is publishing a steady stream of feminist articles is not enough, in their view; they also want it to deny publication to any criticism of them that they disapprove of. But if *PMLA* is to remain an open journal, it cannot be subjected to the veto of any group, and all of us must be prepared to find articles in it we oppose.

I am under no illusion that my reply will convince the signers or others who share their feelings. For them, critiques of feminist criticism are permissible from within the fold (in note 2 I name six signers who engage in it, which further vexes their use of “we”), but not from “a cultural other.” Then objections to one strand of this criticism become an attack on “the approach as a whole,” and that becomes an attack on feminism itself, which is implied in the charge that I fail “to understand the serious concerns about inequality and injustice that have engendered feminist analyses of literature” —something they could not possibly know from my article. I think I understand those concerns as well as a man can, and I strongly support efforts to rectify the inequality and injustice, which is why I joined NOW; but that does not affect my view of the essays, since a just cause cannot justify interpretive faults. And my criticism of these faults cannot be explained by charging me with “anxieties,” the way Freudians treat objections as “resistance.” I have faith, however, that rational argument will eventually prevail, or I would not have written the article or this reply, and I even hope that one day some of the signers and I can enter into a real discussion of the issues I tried to raise.

RICHARD LEVIN

*State University of New York, Stony Brook*