

Forum

Journey of the MLA Job Candidates

A bunch of us new PhDs went together,
 And a cold coming we had of it,
 Just the worst time of the year—
 For a journey, and such a long journey:
 The roads hubcap-deep in slush,
 The airport jammed with holiday families,
 Little kids lying down on the concourse floor,
 Snot-nosed, screaming, refractory,
 Even the Hare Krishnas cursing and grumbling,
 The ticket agents hostile, the flight attendants unfriendly,
 The plane packed, cramped, and filthy,
 And two bucks for one drink!
 Who had two bucks? We were grad students, for Christ's sake!
 I could only sleep in snatches, too,
 Though it was the red-eye flight,
 Because I could still hear Dad
 Muttering as he loaned me the airfare,
 "You could've gone to B-school."

We touched down at dawn—I hate dawn—
 All of us smelling like last week's armpits,
 But at least no snow; instead it was raining.
 Raining? Pouring! The streets ran like rivers,
 So we pooled our pennies and split a cab
 To the three conference hotels downtown.
 It was packed six-deep at check-in and registration,
 And the information board was chaos,
 And if you asked anyone for directions
 They ran away—I just felt like kicking somebody—

PMLA invites members of the association to submit letters, printed and double-spaced, that comment on articles in previous issues or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. The editor reserves the right to reject or edit Forum contributions and offers the *PMLA* authors discussed in published letters an opportunity to reply. Submissions of more than one thousand words are not considered. The journal omits titles before persons' names and discourages endnotes and works-cited lists in the Forum. Letters should be addressed to *PMLA* Forum, Modern Language Association, 26 Broadway, 3rd floor, New York, NY 10004-1789.

But we finally found the bullpen just in time,
And since I'm here, I guess you could say it went OK.

You've got to remember, all this was a long time ago,
And I might do it again, but set down
This set down
This: Sorry, lost my train of thought
There: But think about
This: Do you want to go all that way
For one lousy interview?
They'll hire you certainly,
I know your CV and have no doubt.
But there are jobs, and there are Jobs.
I know being a part-time temp at your alma mater
Is hard and kind of embarrassing,
With all your old crowd gone off
And the new bunch seeming like aliens to you,
But for a position teaching five sections of comp?
Tenure-track or not, I'd rather die.

Marc D. Cyr

Georgia Southern University

Deciphering the Equiano Archives

TO THE EDITOR:

In his "The Other Interesting Narrative: Oludah Equiano's Public Book Tour" (121 [2006]: 1424–42), John Bugg welcomes my "company in studying the book tour" Equiano took throughout England, Ireland, and Scotland between 1789 and 1794 (1438n2). To my earlier narration of the tour in *Equiano, the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man* (U of Georgia P, 2005), Bugg has added several letters Equiano published in newspapers during those years, as well as indications of Equiano's posthumous reception history. Bugg has clearly done some rewarding and welcome archival digging. Readers of *PMLA* will decide for themselves the extent to which Bugg's account of Equiano's book tour and its implications overlap with my own.

Several comments and suggestions Bugg makes in the first section of his article, however, require a response. His assertion that I "claim that Equiano was born in South Carolina" misrepresents my position (1424). In my biography I say that if the baptismal and naval records are accurate, Equiano was born in South Carolina, and not Africa. I admit that "[r]easonable doubt raised by the recent biographical discoveries inclines me to believe that

the accounts of Africa and the Middle Passage in *The Interesting Narrative* were constructed—and carefully so—rather than actually experienced and that the author probably invented an African identity. But we must remember that reasonable doubt is not the same as conviction. We will probably never know the truth about the author's birth and upbringing" (xiv–xv). Similarly, citing an article I published in 2003 in which I mistakenly say that Equiano did not publicly claim an African nativity before the 1780s, Bugg ignores my more recent observation in the biography that Equiano may have first made such a claim in 1779 (197).

Bugg and I disagree about likely interpretations of evidence found in Equiano's naval records. Since the grounds for his disagreement are anticipated and addressed at length in chapter 7 of my biography, I shall treat the issues only briefly here. Citing David Waldstreicher's "Reading the Runaways: Self-Fashioning, Print Culture, and Confidence in Slavery in the Eighteenth-Century Mid-Atlantic" (*William and Mary Quarterly* 56 [1999]: 243–72), Bugg suggests that "Equiano may have listed an American birthplace to deflect those pursuing runaway slaves" (1425). His suggestion, however, overlooks Waldstreicher's caveat that "[a]ny effort to appreciate the nature and impact of

unfree mobility . . . needs to be specific to region and to time” (245). Evidence on the 1773 muster lists alone undermines Bugg’s suggestion. Besides men from Europe and British America, the ninety-man complement of the *Racehorse* included at least two able seamen born in Africa: Madagascar-born Jonathan Syfax and Guinea-born Richard Yorke. Madagascar-born able seaman Joseph Brown served on the *Carcass*, the *Racehorse*’s companion ship on the expedition. Neither Syfax, Yorke, nor Brown saw any reason to conceal an African birth. Why would Equiano have done so when the records indicate that he could have claimed any birthplace he wished? Why would someone wanting to conceal an enslaved past choose South Carolina, the most fully developed slave society in North America? Besides, what is the likelihood that anyone hunting runaway slaves would target royal naval vessels sailing between England and the North Pole?

Bugg suggests that the misrecordings of “Vassa” as “Feston” and “Weston” on the 1773 muster lists of the *Racehorse* cast doubt on the age and South Carolina place of birth recorded for him on the same lists. As unlikely as those names may seem, they are no greater misunderstandings of “Gustavus Vassa” than the “Gusta Worcester” recorded by another purser sixteen years earlier on another vessel. Foreign names were frequently misrecorded. What are the odds that the purser of the *Racehorse* misheard Equiano’s place of birth and age so as to render them fortuitously consistent with his previous records? Bugg offers several other candidates as possible men miscalled Feston or Weston. But what are the chances that either the future soldier or criminal Bugg suggests was among the best seamen available in peacetime for a dangerous government-sponsored voyage, rather than the experienced and demonstrably multitalented Vassa-Equiano? If Feston-Weston was not Vassa-Equiano, who was? Or does Bugg mean to imply that Equiano fabricated his participation in the expedition?

Vincent Carretta

University of Maryland, College Park

Reply:

Anyone seeking to understand the trajectory of Equiano’s life is indebted to Vincent Carretta, who has laid much of the field’s groundwork, not

least in the meticulous research behind his Penguin editions of *The Interesting Narrative*. I am therefore glad that Carretta finds my archival work on Equiano to be of interest, and I am happy to join him, Paul Edwards, Nini Rodgers, and James Green in examining Equiano’s book tour and its significance. I visited archives at several of the cities on Equiano’s tour, and at each I found interesting, unpublished material. As Equiano’s itinerary included no less than two dozen stops, I am certain that further research will continue to develop our picture of his venture, the interest it generated, and its importance to abolition history, radical politics in 1790s Britain and Ireland, and the history of the book.

William Blake’s famous verdict that “[n]othing can be more contemptible than to suppose PUBLIC RECORDS to be True” is not the most helpful motto for scholars of literary history (*The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, rev. ed. [Berkeley: U of California P, 1982] 617), but those who work on Equiano do deal with a complex, elusive set of historical materials, and I welcome the chance to participate in a conversation about this archive and in particular about its uncertainties. (Readers might be interested in Paul E. Lovejoy’s recent contribution to this discussion, “Autobiography and Memory: Gustavus Vassa, alias Olaudah Equiano, the African,” *Slavery and Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-slave Studies* 27 [2006]: 317–47.) I appreciate Carretta’s candid revision of some of his earlier claims and his clarification of his present position. Even so, because Carretta’s original, attention-grabbing work on Equiano’s birthplace is still far better known than his subsequent refinements, I think it is necessary, for now anyway, to keep stressing the instability of the evidence.

This leaves the question of how to interpret “evidence found in Equiano’s naval records,” on which I respectfully disagree with Carretta. I do not accept that the “Weston” listed in the *Racehorse*’s log book is necessarily “Vassa,” rather than one of the many Westons involved in the maritime industry at the time (the few I list in my article are presented as symptoms of, not solutions to, the problem). And while it may be that Jonathan Syfax and Richard Yorke did not disguise their national identities, Equiano was more adept at identity politics than the average sailor. The question of sailors’ nationalities led the United States in 1798

to require “Seaman’s Protection Certificates” of all mariners, verifying national identities. And if we are to accept Carretta’s argument that “Weston” is a mistaken entry for “Vassa,” then is there any basis for believing that the entries for “Syfax” and “Yorke” are stable? I realize that I dissent from Carretta in regarding the muster lists as part of the evidentiary problem, not the court of appeal.

A document that I am inclined to credit, which Carretta does not address, is Equiano’s 1785 letter to the Quakers that I mention in my essay. Equiano changed his self-identification as “African” in the 1785 letter to “negro” for the version that he included in *The Interesting Narrative* four years later, an alteration that complicates the claim that Equiano was invested in fabricating a specifically African identity. It is clear that Equiano’s vibrant historical presence and ensuing importance have magnetized a field of discussion, fact-checking, and ongoing investigation and debate, of no less concern to us than to his contemporaries, and I am pleased to have Carretta as a colleague in this endeavor.

John Bugg
Princeton University

The Origin of Donne’s Soul

TO THE EDITOR:

Although Ramie Targoff convincingly argues in “Traducing the Soul: Donne’s *Second Anniversarie*” (121 [2006]: 1493–508) that the poem is unexpectedly heterodox regarding the origin of the soul and that its “violation of normative Christian belief . . . has until now escaped our critical eye” (1494), her emphasis on the uniqueness of the soul’s generation in the *Second Anniversarie* as compared with the *First Anniversarie* is mistaken. Indeed, while I agree that such lines as “Thinke further on thy selfe, my soule, and thinke / How thou at first was made but in a sinke” have been overlooked as suggesting simultaneous generation of soul and body (*Second Anniversarie*, lines 157–58), I must point out that the same suggestion, albeit less bluntly, lies in “the soule of man / Be got when man is made” (*First Anniversarie*, lines 451–52). Both poems portray the soul not as a separate divine creation but as a result of the same sex act that produces the body.

James H. Sims
University of Southern Mississippi

Human Rights Conference

TO THE EDITOR:

In “Relative Humanity: Identity, Rights, and Ethics—Israel as a Case Study” (121 [2006]: 1536–43), Omar Barghouti, using primarily Israeli sources, documents callous and violent Israeli acts against Palestinians. Barghouti neglects to mention the homicide bombings, fatal kidnappings, stabbings, and stonings inflicted by Palestinians upon Israelis. Barghouti suggests that the roots of alleged “Israeli public justification” of Israeli injustice can be found in, “among other sources, [fundamentalist] interpretations of the tenets of Jewish law, or Halakhah” and the Torah (1540). On the Torah, Barghouti quotes from a statement attributed in a controversial work by the late Israeli chemistry professor Israel Shahak to a fundamentalist rabbi, Yitzhak Ginsburgh, who asserts that “[t]he Torah would probably permit” taking a “liver of an innocent non-Jew to save” the life of a Jew who needs one [because] “[t]here is something more holy . . . about Jewish life than about non-Jewish life” (qtd. in Barghouti 1540).

Some twenty-five hundred years of diverse rabbinic opinions encompassing ethics as well as law compose the Halakhah, which means literally a way of “going” or “walking,” of being in the world. Having been nourished for decades by Halakhah grounded in such midrashim as one in which God rebukes “the angels” for singing when the sea closes over the newly liberated Israel’s pursuing oppressors, whom the midrash recognizes as equally God’s creatures, I am horrified by Ginsburgh’s wild-eyed if qualified interpretation (*Midrash Rabbah*, Exodus 23.7). But also horrifying is Barghouti’s use of Ginsburgh’s atypical words to impugn the character of the Torah, the Halakhah, and the ethos that prevails in today’s Jewish-Israeli society. The dehumanized, stereotyped image of the Jew as vampire that Barghouti invokes hovers over the remainder of his piece to justify its cynical closing call for an end to the Jewish-Israeli state (1542).

Born of the Torah and the books of the Hebrew prophets, the ideal that attends the two-thousand-year-old Jewish dream of return to the land—no matter how grim the current reality—is a peacefully united world. In published and forthcoming work, I have shown that when the biblical promise of peace fails to materialize, the Torah

has the literary capacity to fulfill it by facilitating a “conceptual process of de-dichotomization” such as Barghouti contends is “a necessary condition for a just reconciliation” (1541). This process requires neither a Hegelian sacrifice of difference such as Barghouti rightly condemns nor a sacrifice of the life-sustaining narrative of a people and their state such as he recommends. It requires only openness to the difference of the narrative of the Torah, the “teaching” that can recall the timeless, prelinguistic, bodily recorded experience of interconnection with all the life of the earth through the mother. It requires willingness to take responsibility for the choices one makes when determining meaning, naming self and other.

For example, the Torah’s first reported instance of human speech is an act of naming that does violence to self and other when the namer, *adam*, a human being formed of the dust of the *adamah*, the earthen ground or soil, both breaks its nominal connection with the ground by changing its name to *iysh*, “man,” and arrogates to man the generative capacity of woman’s body (Gen. 2.23). However, the occasion for the naming speech arises only after the *adam* has been set into a “deep sleep” from which the biblical narrative does not state that the *adam* awakens, licensing a dream reading, a linguistic return to the (m)other within (Gen. 2.21). In *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Robert Alter observes that the naming speech is “[w]ritten in a double chiasmic structure,” a double structure of mirror inversion ([New York: Basic, 1981] 31).

In the mirrors of this speech it is possible to see a corrective exposure of mankind’s tendency to the dehumanized and dehumanizing state of disconnection that Julia Kristeva has taught us temporarily to call abjection. But, unlike the words of Ginsburgh and Barghouti, the words of the biblical naming speech are written in the language of self-questioning and renewal, a mode of linguistic relation that calls for improved relations among diverse human beings, new Halakhah. As I write this letter, an already anguished Lebanon is once again in turmoil. It is not only still rebuilding after the recent bombings that were Israel’s response to the kidnapping of its soldiers by Hezbollah, the self-styled “party of God,” whose warriors live among the civilian population and whose tunnels near the Israeli border contained

tens of thousands of the rockets that destroyed the lives of hundreds of Israelis. But Lebanon is also in shock after the assassination of yet another of its cabinet ministers by, it is commonly supposed, that same Syrian-backed party of God.

That Barghouti draws primarily on Israeli sources to document Israeli abuses attests to the spirit of autocritique and free speech that pervades Israeli cultural life. Syria, as of this writing, refuses to participate in a United Nations tribunal intended to investigate the murder of the Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri. In Beirut, Hezbollah insists on the right to veto all government decisions, including whether Lebanon will participate in the same UN tribunal. Hezbollah is expected soon to try to bring down the Lebanese government. In nearby Iran, meanwhile, President Ahmadinejad with the enthusiastic support of Islamic fundamentalist leaders calls regularly for the obliteration of the Jewish state, and he is building Iran’s nuclear capabilities. What chance of survival would Barghouti’s proposed secular state stand in a region so increasingly in thrall to the homogenizing fanaticism of the violently religious? What chance would its moderate Muslim citizens stand, let alone its Jewish and Christian citizens? What would become of the Torah, the “teaching” that can begin to fulfill its promise of peace only when readers are willing to see within themselves the source of images of self and other, including the image of God?

Charlotte Berkowitz

University of Houston, University Park (retired)

TO THE EDITOR:

My enjoyment of *PMLA*’s October issue was greatly marred by the inclusion of an anti-Israel conference paper whose one-sided rhetoric is hardly what one would expect from an academic publication constrained by the bounds of proof and context. The fact that Omar Barghouti, author of the paper in question, is a graduate student at an Israeli university already belies his claim about the systematic dehumanization of Palestinians in Israel. Thousands of Palestinians like him are welcomed into Israeli institutions, including the Israeli Parliament. At the peril of death, on the other hand, Israelis cannot set foot in most Arab countries.

A review of any Israeli publication will demonstrate widespread concern with human rights, including the treatment of minorities. Any poll will likewise demonstrate that a majority of Israeli citizens (not a small minority, as Barghouti claims) continue to favor the establishment a Palestinian state alongside Israel, despite constant terror attacks and shelling of Israel proper by Islamic militants, who repeatedly declare that their goal is to destroy Israel, politically, militarily, and demographically (hence the attempt by Palestinians to give birth within Israel, which is itself an abuse of Palestinian children by their own parents).

The cost of pointing at the world's favorite scapegoat and implying that if only Israel behaved a hundred percent correctly the whole world would be full of love and order is that, in the meantime, more alarming abuses of human rights are overlooked. Millions of children languish in brothels, are raped in Africa, are infected with AIDS, die of treatable diseases, and are sent to blow themselves up, but the world convenes to congratulate itself on exposing Israel's failings, both real and trumped up.

If *PMLA* has decided to publish material unrelated to the study of language and literature, one would hope that at least it would subject this material to a refereeing process as rigorous as that through which its standard articles are passed.

Yael Halevi-Wise
McGill University

Reply:

In her response to the paper I presented in 2005 at The Humanities in Human Rights, a conference cosponsored by the MLA and the Graduate Center, City University of New York, Charlotte Berkowitz defends Judaism and Jews as if they were the object of my attack. By doing so, she not only misses the point—Israel's view of Palestinians as relative humans—but adopts the classic canard of equating criticism of Israel and of Zionism with anti-Semitism, the chief objective of which is to stifle debate on Israel's racist and colonial policies. Instead of recognizing that fundamentalist interpretations of the Halakha constitute one of the main factors nourishing Israel's racial discrimination against the indigenous population

of Palestine, Berkowitz tries to portray such interpretations as "atypical." Her claim is readily refuted by the fact that fanatic interpretations of Jewish law are propagated by influential rabbis and internalized by a wide proportion of Israeli society, secular and religious sectors alike.

Even before the creation of Israel, a core concept in this fundamentalist worldview was publicly espoused by religious Jewish leaders of immense influence, like Rabbi Abraham Yitzhak Kook, the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Palestine, who said, "The difference between a Jewish soul and the souls of non-Jews . . . is greater and deeper than the difference between a human soul and the souls of cattle (qtd. in Israel Shahak and Norton Mezvinsky, *Jewish Fundamentalism in Israel* [London: Pluto, 1999] ix).

My contribution to the conference, however, did not revolve around the above point. My main contention was that Western-dominated approaches to human rights often leave out people in contexts of colonialism, military occupation, and other forms of national oppression, where "material and institutional foreclosures . . . make it impossible for certain historical subjects to lay claim to the discourse of rights itself," as the philosopher Judith Butler argues ("Israel/Palestine and the Paradoxes of Academic Freedom," *Radical Philosophy* 135 [2006]: 16). Israel and Zionism, the political ideology on which the state was created, have always perceived—and consequently treated—the native Palestinian Arabs as inferior and not fully human, shedding doubt on their equal entitlement to basic human rights.

This is precisely why Israel is so frequently compared to apartheid South Africa nowadays, even by key political figures, like Jimmy Carter in his recent book, *Palestine: Peace, Not Apartheid*. Years earlier, Desmond Tutu, in his article "Apartheid in the Holy Land" (*Guardian* 29 Apr. 2002, 21 Mar. 2007 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/israel/comment/0,10551,706911,00.html>>) wrote:

I've been very deeply distressed in my visit to the Holy Land; it reminded me so much of what happened to us black people in South Africa. . . . Have our Jewish sisters and brothers forgotten their humiliation? Have they forgotten the collective punishment, the home demolitions, in their own history so soon?

Many Jews have not forgotten—even in Israel. Roman Bronfman, an influential member of the Israeli Knesset, criticized what he termed “an apartheid regime in the occupied territories,” adding, “The policy of apartheid has also infiltrated sovereign Israel, and discriminates daily against Israeli Arabs and other minorities” (“The Hong Kong of the Middle East,” *Ha’aretz* 20 May 2005, 21 Mar. 2007 <<http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/ShArt.jhtml?itemNo=578338>>). Esther Levitan, a famous Jewish grandmother once condemned to indefinite solitary confinement without trial in South Africa for her activism in the African National Congress, admitted that she considered Israel appallingly racist, adding, “Israelis have this loathsome hatred of Arabs that makes me sick. . . . They will create a worse apartheid here” (qtd. in Thomas O’Dwyer, “Parts and Apartheid,” *Ha’aretz* 24 May 2002). The former Israeli education minister Shulamit Aloni once stated that Israel commits war crimes, utilizes “terror,” and is “no different than racist South Africa” (qtd. in Roe Nahmias, “Israeli Terror Is Worse,” *Yedioth Ahronoth* 29 July 2005, 21 Mar. 2007 <<http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3119885,00.html>>).

As early as 1967, the famous Jewish American writer I. F. Stone summed up the dilemma of Zionism thus: “. . . Israel is creating a kind of moral schizophrenia in world Jewry. In the outside world the welfare of Jewry depends on the maintenance of secular, non-racial, pluralistic societies. In Israel, Jewry finds itself defending a society in which mixed marriages cannot be legalized, in which non-Jews have a lesser status than Jews, and in which the ideal is racial and exclusionist” (“Holy War,” *New York Review of Books* 3 Aug. 1967, 21 Mar. 2007 <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/12009>>).

Most recently, John Dugard, the United Nations’s special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967, issued a definitive condemnation of this racism:

Discrimination against Palestinians occurs in many fields. Moreover, the 1973 International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid appears to be violated by many [Israeli] practices, particularly those denying freedom of movement to Palestinians. . . . The international commu-

nity has identified three regimes as inimical to human rights—colonialism, apartheid and foreign occupation. Israel is clearly in military occupation of the OPT. At the same time elements of the occupation constitute forms of colonialism and of apartheid, which are contrary to international law.

(“Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Palestinian Territories Occupied since 1967,” *Human Rights Council, Fourth Session, 29 Jan. 2007, 7 Mar. 2007* <<http://www.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/4session/A.HRC.4.17.pdf>>)

I have always endorsed a moral approach to decolonization, recognizing the great difference between justice and revenge. In the context of national liberation struggles against settler-colonialism, absolute justice, which implies a comprehensive reversal of historical wrongs committed against the indigenous people, is practically and morally unattainable. Even if it were achievable, pursuing absolute justice may lead to the commission of fresh injustices against the settler community, which would call into question the ethicality of the process. The more ethical approach is therefore to seek relative justice, which entails redressing the fundamental rights of the indigenous people while avoiding the infliction of any unnecessary or unjust suffering on the settler community. In Algeria, that meant the wholesale flight of the settler-colonist community to its country of origin, France; in South Africa, relative justice was achieved through ending racial privileges in the laws and practices of the state and giving all the citizens an equal right to vote and to run for office, among other economic and social measures.

In the Palestinian-Israeli case, the path to justice and peace must take into account the particularities of the conflict, its origins, and its international context. At its core, Israel’s perception of Palestinians as relative humans is expressed in its three-tiered system of oppression: denial of Palestinian refugee rights, including their right to return to their homes; military occupation of Gaza and the West Bank (including East Jerusalem); and racial discrimination against Palestinian citizens of Israel. A just peace would have to ethically and practically address all three components as a minimal requirement of relative justice. A prerequisite

for all that is Israel's recognition of Palestinians as equal humans entitled to equal rights.

Omar Barghouti
Jerusalem

Once and Future Feminism

TO THE EDITOR:

The October 2006 *PMLA* Theories and Methodologies section focusing on feminism(s) testifies to the importance of the topic and the vitality of our professional journal (121 [2006]: 1678–741). All the essays it contains demand an attentive reading.

There is no doubt that feminism—like all historical phenomena—has undergone great changes through the years. Any social and political movement must change. However, I find very problematic the dismissive tone of some of the quoted statements about the so-called second wave of feminism. To simplify, downplay, or disparage past efforts is a disservice to truth, our understanding of our past, and the interests of all human beings who are working toward a changed world.

The ones among us who were alive and active forty years ago know that even then we sensed that we were embarking on a long and complex journey. Nothing was simple, there were no paths already open. History books had erased our past as well as that of many other people. We had to reinvent feminism and ourselves. The relationship between what has become customary to view as an undifferentiated middle class of “white women”—in itself a fallacious abstraction—and women of color and other until-then-ignored female human beings was even then much more nuanced than the metaphors of first, second, and third wave suggest.

As to the new perspectives in feminist theory, I fear that scholars have become too nervous about focusing on the universe of femaleness. Its exploration must be somehow justified by being subsumed under more general and worthier topics of research, even though that universe cannot but intersect with all forms of otherness. Naming women continues to carry the stigma of limiting oneself to the study of something exclusive, “secondary,” less important, and to be somewhat disguised.

More problematic still is the tendency of intellectual discourse to adopt new abstractions.

Race, class, ethnicity, yes; but those categories, whose listing has become almost an obligatory mantra, have meaning only if refracted by the diversity of individual human beings. Each of those elements of identity, like gender, is lived differently by different people.

On the other hand, to deny the existence of people's common experiences is absurd and damaging to those who are now living them. The almost universal coercion to which women and girls are subjected in matters of sexuality is indeed a common experience, no matter how mild or horrendous a form that coercion may take. Even the rape of men is predicated on their being “lowered” to the level of women, as Abu Ghraib and many other of the world's hellholes have taught us. Women's long exclusion from the universe of learning is yet another common experience, which today's scholars would do well to remember. Although we do not belong to the so-called underdeveloped world, our full participation in public life is a recent acquisition and by no means eternally assured.

As Toril Moi so aptly says, “If feminism is to have a future, feminist theory—feminist thought, feminist writing—must be able to show that feminism has wise and useful things to say to women who struggle to cope with everyday problems” (1739).

Angela M. Jeannet
Franklin and Marshall College

Shakespeare at Oxford?

TO THE EDITOR:

The point of Robert F. Fleissner's recent Forum letter (121 [2006]: 1743–44) is that Shakespeare may have spent some time at Oxford, and the principal argument is that “[t]he dramatist's works were too learned not to have been inspired by such academic influence.” It is a familiar argument that is usually employed by the anti-Stratfordians, who insist that the “Shake-speare” plays were too learned to be written by a mere commoner and so must come from an aristocrat, the most popular claimant now being Edward de Vere, the seventeenth earl of Oxford. His partisans might be called the old Oxfordians (although Oxford himself was educated at Cambridge), while Fleissner, as a new Oxfordian, claims not that the playwright was Oxford but merely that he studied there.

I think most people in Shakespeare's day, and for at least two centuries afterward, would have been surprised by the notion that his plays were "learned," which would have meant that they displayed considerable classical erudition (and even imitated classical models). In this sense, the most learned plays of his time were closet dramas, and the most learned writer for the public stage was usually considered to be Ben Jonson, who studied under Camden at Westminster School. In fact, Jonson's "learned" art was sometimes contrasted with Shakespeare's "natural" art, as in Milton's "L'Allegro":

Then to the well-trod stage anon,
If *Jonsons* learned sock be on,
Or sweetest *Shakespear* fancies childe,
Warble his native Wood-notes wilde.

That distinction may no longer be relevant today, but what is relevant is the failure of the Oxfordians, both old and new, to produce any positive evidence for their argument, which would consist of examples of "learning" in the plays that Shakespeare could not have acquired from his Stratford schooling or his reading or his experiences in London and therefore must be credited to Oxford the earl or the university. No such evidence exists. What is even more significant, I believe, is that these Oxfordians ignore the negative evidence, which really does exist and which consists of examples in the plays showing that their author was not so learned after all. I am not speaking here about the many minor anachronisms in dress (ancient Greeks or Romans wearing hats, gloves, scarves, doublets, etc.) that a number of commentators have pointed out, and that may have been the result of simple carelessness, but about a much more serious ignorance of geography and chronology. Thus the author of *The Winter's Tale* believed that Bohemia has a seacoast, and the author of *Hamlet* believed that the way to lead an army from Norway to Poland is by marching through Denmark. Moreover, in the first part of *The Winter's Tale* Leontes consults the Delphic oracle, which was closed down in AD 390, while in the second part, which follows by sixteen years, a courtier refers to Julio Romano, an artist of the Italian Renaissance. And in *Troilus and Cressida* Hector cites Aristotle, who was born many centuries after the end of the

Trojan War. Is this the kind of learning that could only be acquired at a university?

Richard Levin
Stony Brook University

TO THE EDITOR:

The Forum section of the October *PMLA* includes a letter from Robert F. Fleissner with the following reference to me: "A London Shakespearean, Gil Elliot, in her letter in the *Times Literary Supplement* (25 July 2003), also defended the view that Shakespeare went 'to university,' citing Peter Alexander, the well-known Shakespearean authority from Scotland, to this effect." I would like to point out that I am not a Shakespearean or a scholar of any kind, nor did my letter defend the view that Shakespeare went to university, nor, to complete this review of errors, am I female.

I am male and a writer, and my letter to the *Times Literary Supplement* was meant to suggest that academics like my old professor Peter Alexander, in common with many others through the ages, tend to configure Shakespeare in their own image. I happen to believe that Shakespeare's education at Stratford Grammar—along with the voracious reading to be expected of such a protean mind—was perfectly adequate to feed his genius.

Gil Elliot
London

Reply:

I am aware of the anti-Stratfordian approach endorsing Edward de Vere as Shakespeare, but that connection did not appear germane. I certainly agree that the so-called Oxfordians have no real positive evidence favoring de Vere as the playwright.

The existence of errata in Shakespeare's plays might be explained by Shakespeare's having possibly been only an auditor of some sort at Oxford (although I have been reading again of his father's having been a local "high bailiff" or chief magistrate—in certain towns a son of such a person was supposed to receive free tuition at Oxford). The playwright simply may not have registered all the facts he heard.

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