

Class, Gender, Pleasure, and Criticism

To the Editor:

Richard Levin's "The Poetics and Politics of Bardicide" (105 [1990]: 491–504) makes wicked fun of what this reader-response critic terms the text-active position. Levin points out the absurdities of critics' claims to the "real meaning" of a text. He shows the pretentiousness of the pretense to an absolute, god's-eye view of what a text does or is. He punctures the claim that we can step out of the mortal psychological processes of perception and interpretation that necessarily produce any critic's reading. Levin targets those who premise *The Death of the Author* and substitute an active, projecting, strategizing, revealing, concealing text for the lost bard. I think he makes it clear, however, that the same anomalies and pretensions appear when more traditional critics claim "objective knowledge of the real meaning of a text" (499).

Levin's critique thus calls down—I hesitate to say it—a Shakespearean plague on both houses. He leaves us with the ever-daunting question, Where do we go from here?

I suggest that the beginning of wisdom is frankly to acknowledge a different "project of the text." The real purpose of all these readings, formalist-humanist or anti-formalist-humanist, is that their authors may publish and not perish. (From this point of view, Levin might note, the authors he cites are very much in existence, indeed somewhat frantically so.) We can begin by granting that the primary aim of literary criticism as we know it today is publication and all the rewards that publication brings.

If so, then what might we publish if we were to give up our claims to superhuman objectivity? We would, of course, have to acknowledge our own activity in our criticism, but greater critics than we have done so. Indeed it was customary until recent decades. We might, for example, express opinions. We might point to things to admire or condemn. We might conduct a dialogue with a text. We might parody, we might contest the text, or we might engage the author in a conversation as some historians today engage their subjects. In short, we might try for a little more imagination in our publishing than either the old or the new New Critics show. Levin's witty exposé points, if not the only way, one way.

NORMAN N. HOLLAND
University of Florida

To the Editor:

By using their own words, for the most part, Richard Levin clearly shows us how neo-Marxist and feminist Freudian critics have reduced Shakespeare's plays to parables of the consequences of domination by a class or a gender. For these critics, every one of Shakespeare's plays, no matter how diverse the surface action, conceals the same economic or social conflict. They contend that "no matter how 'silent' the text may be about elements of this conflict, it must really contain them" (499). Nor is the conclusion in any play a real resolution of these conflicts; it is merely an attempt to rationalize the patriarchal or upper-class values: "[N]o matter how satisfactory the resolution may appear, it must really be 'imaginary' because the contradictions it seems to resolve are by definition unresolvable . . ." (499).

But as successful as he is in pointing out the absurd lengths to which neo-Marxist and neo-Freudian critics go to reach their conclusions, Levin is less successful, it seems to me, when he explains just what causes these critics to arrive at such absurd conclusions. For Levin, the cause is *The Death of the Author*. Bypassing the author allows critics to find in every play their own ideas rather than Shakespeare's and to judge the success of a play by how clearly it demonstrates their own values. To avoid such solipsistic criticism, we should, Levin concludes, repudiate not only the particular biases of these neo-Marxists and feminist Freudians but also the concepts of the intentional fallacy and irony associated with the New Critics of a previous generation, and we should adopt in their place the kind of interpretation that would be limited to the author's intentions.

Levin's mistake is the obvious one of not questioning the assumptions that the meaning of a literary work is the reflection of the author's intentions, that we can discover these intentions, and that no matter how much an interpretation might increase our understanding and enjoyment of a work (and even if it came from the pen of a brilliant critic such as Coleridge, Bradley, Knight, or Frye) the interpretation can only be justified by evidence that Shakespeare wanted us to see it. But what is more important in this context, although not as obvious, is that Levin's focus on the intention of the author, as well as his distrust of ironic meanings, prevents him from recognizing the real source of the absurd conclusions of the neo-Marxist and feminist interpretations—namely, their failure to distinguish what happens on the stage from the real event. The *fons et origo malorum*, what allows criticism to see failure (particularly in the conclusions) in plays that most readers find to be among the greatest works ever written, is that politicized (or moralized) criticism does not