

demand for deliverance from oppression, adapted the sermons of Fosdick and others to translate that demand into an idiom that white people would finally understand.

What role did Hegel, Walter Rauschenbusch, Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, and other “big-name sources” play in this process? These figures—whom I call the Great White Thinkers—mainly gave King something to resist. Although the mature King often replayed Fosdick’s and other preachers’ ideas as his own, he almost never borrowed from formal works of philosophy and theology. Whereas Rauschenbusch ignored racism and practically never mentioned the subject of race, King deplored racism almost every time he publicly opened his mouth. Whereas Niebuhr explicitly minimized the moral distinction between violence and nonviolence, King constantly maximized that difference. Whereas the Great White Thinkers assumed that time is linear, King followed slave religion by arguing that typological biblical events—such as the Exodus—recur continually in the spiral of history. Like thousands of other preachers—black and white—King also rejected Tillich’s view of divinity as the “Ground of Being” and the “God above God.” Instead of hailing such an amorphous, impersonal God, King always proclaimed an orthodox, fatherly, personal deity. He also advocated other thoughts at odds with prestigious Euro-American conceptions.

After escaping Boston University, King discarded the ivory-tower theological formalism that characterized many works his professors assigned him to read. And he quickly dropped the crabbed, stilted prose that they forced him to write. Their strange, artificial tongue had virtually nothing to do with his religion, his oratory, or the civil rights movement. Recently Clayborne Carson and others have revealed King’s plagiarism of substantial portions of his graduate papers and his dissertation. This disclosure provides additional, striking evidence that, instead of stimulating new ideas or even reinforcing earlier ones, most of King’s graduate work in philosophy and theology *did not seriously engage his mind*.

Clearly the reinforcement that King received came from black and white preachers. King’s central message—the traditional African American demand for deliverance from racial injustice—had no antecedents in the white philosophy, theology, or homiletics that he studied in graduate classes. Nor did the message require any such antecedent or reinforcement. In their folk pulpit and their music, blacks had generated, protected, and reinforced this theme for many generations. Like his father, his grandfather, and hundreds of other folk preachers, King needed no professor or Great

White Thinker to confirm the traditional yet radical black demand: “Let my people go!”

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### Further Debate about “Bardicide”

To the Editor:

In “The Poetics and Politics of Bardicide” (105 [1990]: 491–504), Richard Levin continues his ongoing criticism of a number of upstart recent critics of Shakespeare. Having previously dispatched feminists in a now infamous article (“Feminist Thematics and Shakespearean Tragedy,” *PMLA* 103 [1988]: 125–38), he here turns his sights on the Marxists and (post-)Freudians. Taking my cue from his method, I will list his fallacies.

*Levin is obviously right.* Levin assumes an overarching—indeed imperious—position, from which he seems to be able to correct all other positions. He makes his argument by taking a tone of condescension to these new approaches. For instance, he quips that “what takes over The Author Function in the practice of these critics . . . is the play itself or, *as they usually prefer to call it, the text*” (492; my italics). Who are “they”? Why are they separate from Levin? Isn’t it rather common in the idiom of our profession to use the word *text*? Here Levin is taking the assured, logical, always-right tone of the elder, about to spank the younger critics who should learn to speak more sensibly.

*Levin conflates positions.* Using bits of quotations from a number of very different scholars, Levin constructs one general position that he identifies as Marxist. However, someone like James Kavanagh has done notable work on Althusser (the entry “Ideology” in the recent *Critical Terms for Literary Study*), whereas Louis Montrose and Jean Howard are consciously affiliated with the new historicism. Levin does not seem to be particularly aware of these distinctions, and his view of Marxism is scandalously uninformed. His division of base and superstructure is reductively simplistic (498), and his definition of ideology owes more to James Baker’s than to that used by most other critics in the field. At the beginning of his essay he is at least careful enough to offer the disclaimer that his criticism applies to some, not all, Marxists (491), but by the end he says things like “in the Marxist version” or “the Marxists’ law,” which sound rather sweeping and inclusive to me.

*Levin denies irony.* Extending his earlier corrective argument on the double plot, Levin denies irony (501). However, irony precludes not necessarily a double au-

dience but a double *moment*, a change in temporal standing (a well-known locus of this is of course de Man's "Rhetoric of Temporality"). Apparent or ostensible meanings can indeed be proved wrong in reading—most obviously, for example, in the structure of a detective story.

*Levin scorns a rhetorical effect of texts.* Levin mocks the "ventriloquized" moves of these younger critics, particularly that a text might have a "project" or "function." But don't texts have rhetorical ends, even if only for entertainment? or for education or acculturation? As a case in point, the common genre of the family sitcom offers amusement and, beyond that, presents a distinct cultural model that is anything but innocent or neutral. Sitcoms advertise the values of the nuclear family, of bourgeois consumption (in the clothes, houses, and concerns of the characters, as well as the incessant train of commercials), and of traditional gender and sexual roles (the women are still usually misty-eyed about babies, and male roommates are always "buddies," not lovers). For that matter, what is the function of teaching a Shakespeare play, say, to students in the middle-class suburbs of Long Island, as Levin does? Not simply to teach reading but to give them what Bourdieu calls "cultural capital," at the least.

*Levin proves intentionalism by default.* Levin says, rather acerbically, that it is a "curious thing" that Shakespeare has disappeared (491). Why? This observation begs the argument and implicitly states Levin's intentionalist faith. The ghost behind Levin's stance is E. D. Hirsch, whom Levin cites explicitly in his *New Readings vs. Old Plays* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1979) and who posits a single ascertainable authorial intention. Levin seems scandalized that the new "critics maintain . . . that there is no 'unmediated' access to the text 'in itself' and that all interpretations of it are 'appropriations' determined by the interpreter's political position . . ." (492). Since Levin finds this to be a fallacy, does he indeed have unmediated access to Shakespeare's texts? If he does, he should surely tell us. And does he deny that one's position determines one's interpretation? or that one's position entails some sort of politics? His stand here is as the plain-talking literalist sheriff, keeping Shakespeare safe for humanity. And that position does entail consequences, which affect, if not national politics directly, certainly professional politics, departmental politics, the curriculum, book publishing, students, and so forth.

All this is not to say that Levin's analysis is without value. His highlighting of the figures of this criticism—the personification of the text, the use of military terms like *strategy* and *tactics*, and the trope of the text performing mechanistically—are surely worth further ex-

amination. And his analysis of the institutional placement or predicament of these historicist readings—that they enact a kind of (textual) class warfare that their critical arguments are fixed to win and that offers a fantasy resolution (500)—is intriguing and bears on current discussion of the profession of theory.

Nevertheless, finally, the thrust of his argument—that criticism has no political effect—is disturbing and disempowering. The university is not an immune zone of culture but a significant site of ideological (re)production and struggle (indeed, for Althusser, schools are the dominant ideological apparatus). I would hope that one can have an effect, however humble, through various tasks and interventions there.

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To the Editor:

I found Richard Levin's "Poetics and Politics of Bardicide" amusing in its wit, but the article also left me puzzled in some respects and dismayed in others. Perhaps I should define my position: I am a Blakean and, in my reading of Blake, I cannot be a feminist or a sexist, but I lean toward the androgynous; I am also a Humanist (a good Blakean term) and, therefore, interested in all human activities and knowledge, including feminism.

My initial problem with Levin's article is taxonomic. I find his classifications puzzling: "most of the first type [of readings] that I found come from the Marxist cultural materialists and the feminists associated with them, and most of the second from critics employing a feminist revision of Freud that I call neo-Freudian" (491). Feminism is mentioned in both categories, but I cannot place these groupings into what I know of that movement. As an interested outsider reading about the history of the second wave of feminism, I have found that a traditional division is into French, English, and American schools. They possess different emphases and approaches, although they overlap somewhat. The French variety is interested in Lacanian French Freud, deconstruction, and so forth; the English school is often associated with Marxism. But Levin obviously does not use "neo-Freudian" to mean French feminists, and his "Marxist" does not refer to English critics—thus I remain puzzled. Perhaps part of the problem is that feminism is a political issue with a platform in the real world and with a critical stance in academe that is marked by great diversity and no one inflexible set of principles (outside of the political ones) that all practitioners ad-