

Forum

Forum Policy: Members of the Association are invited to submit letters commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of scholarly and critical interest generally. Decision to publish will be made at the Editor's discretion and authors of articles commented on will be invited to reply. Letters should be fewer than 1,000 words of text; footnotes are discouraged.

The "Fluellenian" Method

Mr. Levin replies:

To answer Professors Bryant, Milward, and Siegel I must begin with the distinction (assumed in my article) between analogies to an extradramatic person that are stated in the play and those supplied by the critic. The comparisons of Henry V to Alexander, Caesar, and Essex cited by Milward (and of Kennedy to Lincoln in Siegel's hypothesized drama) are part of the work and so do not depend on the "Fluellenian" method. They would be interpreted by the same method as any other dramatic statement, taking into account the speaker and the occasion.

This applies to the explicit comparisons of Richard II to Christ noted by Siegel. Since all three (III.ii.132; IV.i.170–71, 237–42) are made by Richard, they show that he thinks of himself as a Christ figure at these times, but it need not follow that Shakespeare does, for he has shown in Richard a marked tendency toward self-glorification and self-pity. We surely are not meant to ignore the fact that Richard is completely wrong in the first comparison (the men he calls "Judases" did not betray him), and partly wrong in the other two, which deny his own guilt. Therefore, I cannot see that these speeches make him a Christ figure, any more than his comparisons of himself to a lion (I.i.174) or the sun (III.ii.36–52) make him a lion or sun figure.

Nor does Carlisle's reference to Richard as "the figure of God's majesty" imply Christ figurehood; it simply states his idea of kingship (an idea also expressed by the Duchess of York when she calls Henry "a god on earth"). And while his prophecy that crowning Henry will turn England into "the field of Golgotha" sets up an analogy to the Crucifixion, it does not point to any Christlike qualities in Richard but to the consequences of deposing him; and it cannot be identified with Shakespeare's view, because it is balanced by opposing attitudes. Finally, I do not understand how York's description of the crowd throwing dust on Richard suggests a comparison to Christ, except in the general sense that anyone showing patience in adversity may be considered Christlike. There is no specific analogy here, for in the procession to Calvary—presumably the nearest biblical equivalent—the

behavior of Jesus and the onlookers is entirely different (Luke xxiii.27–31). Moreover, in his final moments Richard rejects this patience for a very un-Christlike fury. So much then for the Christ figurehood of Richard, the only character in Shakespeare who is explicitly compared to Jesus.

The problem of "Fluellenism," however, arises when we do not have these explicit comparisons—when critics assert a parallel to extraliterary persons that is not stated in the work. How do we determine whether these alleged "figures" are invented by the critic (a possibility acknowledged by both Bryant and Siegel) or intended by the author? None of my respondents faces this problem, but perhaps it is only fair that I, as the challenger, should venture first.

It seems clear that, if we are limited to internal evidence, we must adopt Bacon's criterion: the character should show "a conformity and connexion with the thing signified, so close and so evident, that one cannot help believing such a signification to have been designed."¹ Obviously, no Shakespearean Christ figure comes close to satisfying this criterion, nor do most other alleged figures in literature. We must therefore rely to some extent on external evidence—on whatever we can learn about the author, his audience, the genre, etc., which might help us determine the likelihood that the figure was intended. Thus I explained in my article that the censorship proved that political allusions were a real possibility in Elizabethan drama; and the fact that reviewers saw an analogy to McCarthyism in *The Crucible*, as Siegel notes, strongly supports such a reading of Miller's drama. But where is the equivalent evidence for Shakespeare's Christ figures? After some forty years of searching, the critics of this school have not found anything to suggest that any character in his plays, or those of his contemporaries, was ever regarded as a figure of Christ, or of any other biblical personage, by anyone in his time. And this surely is the sort of thing one would expect to be recorded somewhere—for instance, in the defenses of the stage, where it would be especially relevant. Hence the absence of this evidence is itself very telling evidence against these critics.

Instead of such evidence, they usually fall back upon general traits of the Elizabethan mentality which sup-

posedly produced theatrical Christ figures. But when we ask for facts to support this, we are given something else—biblical typology, or allegorical masques, or sermons, and now multiple plots and a division of mankind into analogical pre-Cartesians and mathematical post-Cartesians. Yet none of this speaks to the point, which is whether any Elizabethan was likely to create or discern a Christ figure on the stage (indeed one wonders why, if these figures depended on the pre-Cartesian spirit of that age, they have only been discovered in our post-Cartesian century). Nor does it speak to the problem of “Fluellenism,” since it offers no help in distinguishing the author’s figures from the critic’s. Nor does it speak to any of the specific objections I raised to the Christ figures found in Shakespeare. So it seems fair now to turn and ask my respondents to explain which of these figures they accept, and which they reject, and on what grounds.

Bryant also presents another defense of Christ figures, based not on whether they are provable but on whether they improve the play. According to him, anyone who denies that in *The Winter’s Tale* Hermione is a figure of Christ, Paulina of St. Paul, and Perdita of the Church (I use his reading) is “reducing” the play, presumably to “impassioned propaganda and ornamented reportage.” I think anyone who affirms these figures is “reducing” the play to allegory. This is a question of different minds valuing different things in literature, and about such matters we cannot argue fruitfully. But we can argue about the probability that such figures were intended. And I think the answer is obvious.

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Note

¹ “Of the Wisdom of the Ancients,” *The Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. James Spedding et al., vi (London: Longmans, 1870), 696.

Spenser’s Poetic Strategy

Mr. Tonkin replies:

James Neil Brown takes me to task for failing to consider the work of John Erskine Hankins in my article “Spenser’s Garden of Adonis and Britomart’s Quest” (*PMLA*, 88, 1973, 408–17). Hankins’ important book *Source and Meaning in Spenser’s Allegory* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971) did not in fact appear until 1972, two years after my article was submitted and shortly after I had completed my revisions.

Had Hankins’ study been in my hands in time, my disagreement with him would have been largely over Spenser’s poetic strategy. Hankins establishes, at least to my satisfaction, the likelihood that Spenser was

better acquainted with Ficino (either first- or second-hand) than Ellrodt implies in his study *Neoplatonism in the Poetry of Spenser* (Geneva: Droz, 1960). What his elaborate discussion does not do, however, is demonstrate the central importance of the Garden of Adonis to the development of Spenser’s argument in Books III, IV, and V (indeed, that is not part of his purpose). My own reading set out to show how the Garden, with Venus and Adonis in its center, is linked to the quest, at once dynastic and sexual, of Britomart for Artegall. In so doing, it suggested a thematic link, the theme of the union of form and matter, between Venus and Adonis on the one hand and Marinell and Florimell on the other, and then between Florimell and Marinell and Artegall and Britomart. In Britomart’s pursuit of Artegall the normal role of the sexes is reversed, and this reversal of roles extends ultimately to Venus and Adonis, itself a myth of such reversal.

In making this suggestion, I was not intending to imply an exclusive and total reversal. Just as Britomart, as a kind of Venus Armata, contains within herself the attributes of Mars as well as those more usually associated with her, so the Venus of the Garden of Adonis is not merely the female principle. At the same time Brown’s flat assertion that “Spenser’s Venus is androgynous” cannot hold. There is no such thing as Spenser’s Venus; there are only Spenser’s Venuses. She is different in her different manifestations, and the hermaphroditic Venus of Book IV is not the Venus of Acidale or the Venus of the Garden. The Venus of the Garden needs, indeed, seeks out, Adonis.

It is this seeking out that is the most interesting aspect of her character. As patroness of generation (and Brown is right to see a parallel here with the Aphrodite Pandemos), she plays a dominant role that may be mythologically acceptable but is certainly not what we traditionally associate with the role of the female. As such it parallels, and throws light on, Britomart’s quest for her future husband. There is nothing especially unusual in Spenser’s playing with our expectations in this fashion. He does the same, for example, with the dream in Isis Church (Bk. V), the interpretation of which seems oddly inadequate, or with the Dance of the Graces (Bk. VI) where the implications of the episode are much broader than Colin’s rather prosaic explanation.

Brown’s caution that an emphatic identification of Venus as form or Adonis as matter fails to take into account the complexity of their relationship makes excellent sense, but I am not sure that that of necessity should lead us to accept Hankins’ Neoplatonic argument in all its complexity. We simply do not need Ficino to understand the “comely rew” of creatures in the Garden, or the cycle of generation represented by the babes. And the function of Adonis as species is self-evident, without appeal to Alanus de Insulis