

A Predecessor on Nature and Art in the Renaissance

To the Editor:

Frances E. Dolan's "Taking the Pencil out of God's Hand: Art, Nature, and the Face-Painting Debate in Early Modern England" (108 [1993]: 224–39) merits praise as one of the better articles in the issue. So it is dispiriting to find that Dolan does not cite her most obvious—one would have thought unavoidable—predecessor. Her article begins, "Numerous scholars in the history of ideas have identified nature and art as the categories organizing many discussions of education, gardening, cosmetics, poetry, and rhetoric in Renaissance England." She uses the words (and the ideas) "nature and art" repeatedly, and the topic sentence of her conclusion begins, "The early modern debate over the relation between nature and art . . ." (236). Why, then, does she omit Edward W. Taylor's *Nature and Art in Renaissance Literature* (New York: Columbia UP, 1964) from the list of sixty-five works cited?

True, a reader can always suggest one more citation; no doubt sixty-five are more than enough. Still, the omission of so prominent and excellent a book as *Nature and Art* from this article about nature and art characterizes our time. Apart from its own merits, Taylor's book summarizes scholarship and literary history up to its moment. But the work is not now especially fashionable: it performs thematic rather than gender criticism, and—as Richard Levin argues in the most notorious article to appear in *PMLA* in recent years ("Feminist Thematics and Shakespearean Tragedy," 103 [1988]: 125–38)—it is not done nowadays to confess openly to any connection with the thematic.

Dolan need not agree with Taylor on any particular point. But she should cite him. And *PMLA*—that is, its readers, its editorial board, and its editor—should get back into the habit of seeing that elementary scholarly principles of coverage are observed.

No special criticism of Frances Dolan is intended. Her article is good, and her sin of omission—if sin it be—is merely symptomatic of present practices. But I would distinguish between open scholarly disagreement, which will always be with us, and postmodernist erasure of the past—throwing inconvenient works down the "memory hole"—a dangerous habit to get into.

ANTHONY LOW
New York University

Reply:

I agree that scholars must acknowledge their debts to their predecessors. But scholarly debts are various and extensive. Regrettable constraints on length compelled me to cut my list of works cited, and I eliminated reference to Taylor's book, among others, in order to include scholarship I engage more directly. I believe that my essay itself gives evidence of my willingness to confront "inconvenient" texts and of my commitment to scrutinizing and revising the past and our scholarly constructions of it rather than erasing either.

FRANCES E. DOLAN
Miami University, Oxford

Beowulf and the Intrusion of Literacy

To the Editor:

We were pleased to read Michael R. Near's essay "Anticipating Alienation: *Beowulf* and the Intrusion of Literacy" (108 [1993]: 320–32). Near brings us one step closer to the integration of contemporary criticism into Anglo-Saxon studies, a goal, as his essay demonstrates, that is still some distance away.

Near's assertions about the intrusion of the private into the public, "inexpressible psychological interiority," and the "privacy of individual mentation" presume a complex model of subjectivity that has not been constructed for Anglo-Saxon culture (329). There is, to be sure, considerable power in Near's bringing "the forces of submerged alienation" and "silence of the self" into juxtaposition with the "familiar" and communal context of Hrothgar's Heorot (328, 329). But these poetic and mysterious psychological claims remain largely unanalyzed; indeed, they render the poem inaccessible to criticism.

Near's essay seems to hark back to distinctly old-fashioned modes of *Beowulf*, those of "neoromanticism" and primitivism. He celebrates "[p]sychological states" as "integral aspects of a unified world of interactive relationships" (328), "the personal immediacy of verbal exchange" in the hall, and "the whispers of the vanquished" and their "unequivocal" stories. By posing the "technology of writing" against this entirely imaginary communal purity, he isolates the pagan and the oral from the Christianity that arrived with the new technology of the word (329). He never explicitly admits that his reading revives arguments about the "Christian coloring" of the poem that