
Forum

PMLA invites members of the association to submit letters, typed and double-spaced, commenting 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 authors discussed an opportunity to reply to the letters published. Occasionally the Forum contains letters on topics of broad interest written and submitted at the editor's request. The journal omits titles before persons' names, discourages footnotes, and regrets that it cannot consider any letter of more than one thousand words. Letters should be addressed to PMLA Forum, Modern Language Association, 10 Astor Place, New York, NY 10003-6981.

The Framing of Evidence

To the Editor:

The special topic *The Status of Evidence* (111 [1996]: 7–127) continues to make me think about the ways in which framing mechanisms shape how evidence is received and perceived. Enlisting the trial metaphor introduced at the beginning of the roundtable, I note that each of the seven essays on the topic is preceded by a statement of the author's qualifications to bear witness or offer opinions on the matter at hand. As is commonly done in civil and criminal trials, information is provided about the witness's occupation, professional affiliations, and accomplishments that might increase readers' willingness to believe the testimony. The witness's current scholarly endeavors are also usually described, further reassurances that the deposition comes from an up-to-date, working professional.

Thus, the journal reports Heather Dubrow's special title (John Bascom Professor) and the fact that she is "a senior member" of her employing institution. Furthermore, she is coeditor of an essay collection and "author of four books," the most recent of which is named and identified by publisher and date of release so that readers will be duly impressed by the press and by the work's currency (7). According to similar introductions, D. C. Greetham "founded the interdisciplinary Society for Textual Scholarship" and "is at work on a monograph" (32); Julie Bates Dock is "an independent scholar in Los Angeles" and "is completing a documentary casebook" (52); T. Hugh Crawford is a "director" of an administrative entity and an "author" and "is working on a book" (66); James Wilkinson is also a "director" and "author" and "is completing a book-length study" (80); Susan M. Griffin is "professor . . . editor . . . author . . . and coeditor," and her testimony is "part of a study" (93); Robert Brinkley and Steven Youra (testifying in tandem) have each produced publications on a list of writers and topics (108).

Although placed in an italicized sidebar as a paratextual entry, the professional biography has the potential to influence the way readers receive the evidence. While the roundtable discussion and the case studies in the articles do a fine job of opening up an examination of how and what evidence gets into the record, it seems to me that *PMLA* readers would also benefit from more discussion of the evidentiary effects of institutional practices, such as the contributor-identification rituals I've been commenting on.

My mother had a cliché for dismissing the opinions or gossip of community members she held in low regard. "Just consider the source," she'd say with finality. That is exactly what the paratextual paragraphs direct the reader to do, except

they are meant to privilege the source, to explain why the witness deserves respectful attention. At least *PMLA* and other journals in literature and language studies have not yet gone the route of certain journals in mathematics and psychology that include photographs of the authors. The cues of race, gender, age, ethnicity, and body type that photographs reveal probably influence the reception of evidence by even the most conscientious observers.

The eleven participants in the roundtable are identified only by institutional affiliation, as are most of those whose letters are included in the Forum section. It seems that in such contexts one's ideas are expected to fend for themselves, while the evidence presented by article authors is given a salutary send-off.

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Attributing *A Funeral Elegy*

To the Editor:

In rereading Donald W. Foster's "A *Funeral Elegy*: W[ilham] S[hakespeare]'s 'Best-Speaking Witnesses'" (111 [1996]: 1080–1105), I checked his calculations of the percentages of rare words used by Egeon in *The Comedy of Errors* in proportion to the total number of *Errors* rare words found in *Henry VIII*, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, and the elegy whose authorship is in question (1090). (Egeon was supposedly played by Shakespeare, and the character's words are consequently assumed to have lodged disproportionately in the playwright's creative imagination.) I've uncovered consistent discrepancies. They're small, but they're important to Foster's case because the numbers of rare words measured by the percentages are small in proportion to the total number of rare words in each of these works. The discrepancies are important to future users of Shaxicon also, because the errors seem to rest on a mistake in using this important tool.

I'm working with Shaxicon 2.0, generously provided by Foster some years ago. He now works with a new, presumably much improved version, but the number of words removed or added since version 2.0 is no doubt small, because in this respect the early version was accurate. Foster promises to license his new version for access on the World Wide Web, but professional responsibilities and the flood of correspondence about his other accomplishments (particularly his identification of the author of the roman à clef *Primary Colors*) may have delayed this eagerly awaited project.

What I believe prompted Foster's errors (and what led me into several initial wrong results) was confusion be-

tween the two halves of a divided screen that appears when one combines word lists in *WordCruncher*, the database program used by Shaxicon. Start in the wrong half of the screen, and if you are looking for, say, the number of occurrences of rare words, including repetitions, in *A Funeral Elegy* that appear as well in *The Comedy of Errors* through their basic inflectional forms, you get instead the number of relevant words and their repetitions in *The Comedy of Errors*, not in *A Funeral Elegy*.

Calculating in this mistaken way with Shaxicon 2.0, I come up with percentages that are practically identical with those given by Foster and derived from the new version of the database. But calculating in the correct way, I arrive at 36.4%, not 39.0%, for *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (12 Egeon rare words out of a total of 33 *Errors* rare words in Shakespeare's supposed part of the entire work); 31.3%, not 22.0%, for *Henry VIII* (15 Egeon words out of 48 *Errors* words in Shakespeare's supposed part of *Henry VIII*); 35.7%, not 40.5%, for *A Funeral Elegy* (10 Egeon words out of 28 *Errors* words in that work).

A simple demonstration shows the correct way to calculate in Shaxicon 2.0. Follow the directions Foster supplied with that version to find the number of Egeon's rare words, including repetitions, that appear in "R2" (the basic text of *Richard II*). You will arrive at 12. A further step shows you a list of the words. Going down the list you will see two cases of "hopeless." But it is not R2 that contains two such cases; it's Egeon's speeches in *Errors*. You can check this by consulting Shaxicon's Output List or by looking up "hopeless" in Marvin Spevack's *Harvard Concordance to Shakespeare*, the chief source for Shaxicon: there are two occurrences in *Errors* and one in *Richard II*. Foster did not change his method in his revised version or in his *PMLA* article: his results can be approximated by wrongly reversing the lists on the screen.

Foster's case stands: the elegy still has a surprising proportion of Egeon words—higher than *Henry VIII*, although lower than *The Two Noble Kinsmen*—but the inaccuracy does not inspire confidence and may affect his results when he tries to show, to considerably smaller tolerances, the disproportionate return in the playwright's works of words Shakespeare recited earlier as an actor and consequently to illustrate the curve of Shakespeare's acting career.

Above all, however, I am struck by a corollary: the number of Egeon rare words in any of these works (not the percentage) seems to me statistically trivial in relation to the total number of rare words in the work (10 Egeon rare words in the mass of 435 rare words in *A Funeral Elegy*, for instance, or only 12 in the 963 rare words in Shakespeare's supposed part of *The Two Noble Kinsmen*).