

nist scholarship, the signatories claim that Levin “ignores, mislabels, or marginalizes” the work of these feminist critics. All seven individuals are among the twenty-four signatories. Thus, what is presumably the objective “they” really becomes the subjective “we.”

5. *Stacking the Cards*. “Accusing us of his own flaws, Levin paternally [as opposed to *maternally*?] tries to preempt our strengths by recommending our project to us as if it were his idea” (paragraph 4). The writers go on to itemize the particulars of the work they have been providing for over fifteen years. They then end the paragraph as follows: “But, absurdly, he wants us to provide these insights without revealing the strategies, structures, psychologies, and oppressiveness of the domination that particular male characters enact.” While not quite an epiphany, *that* is quite a revelation!

6. *Bandwagon*. Just imagine, twenty-four signatories from places as diverse as Canada and England and a cross-section of American universities from Hawaii to Massachusetts—all attacking one sole professor.

7. *Transfer*. Just to make sure that the female feminist critics are not accused of ignoring male feminists, there are also four male signatories to “transfer” the implied approval of the opposite (opposing?) sex to what might otherwise be considered a sectarian (“sectarian”?) issue.

Incidentally, I thought that Richard Levin’s reply was on target. Upon further reflection, since his cognomen means “lightning” the feminist letter and his response might be designated as “*Donner und Blitz*.”

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Reading Kenneth Burke

To the Editor:

Robert McMahon’s essay “Kenneth Burke’s Divine Comedy: The Literary Form of *The Rhetoric of Religion*” (104 [1989]: 53–63) presents itself as a temporally new and textually current reading of Burke, even as it leans on Plato, Augustine, and Dante. I too value “the spirit, as well as the light, of Burke’s achievement” but question the acceptability of McMahon’s claim that his “essay examines the widening gyres of *The Rhetoric of Religion*.” McMahon theoretically links what he calls a forward reading with backward movement in the generic form of divine as well as Platonist comedy: the dialectic union of “solemn comedy” with “tragic sacrifice,” comedy’s high seriousness as a low form of art. He makes this special claim for Burke: “He teaches us that politics and religion have long been and still are more deeply interconnected than our conventional categories lead us to think” (61). Having made similar, and earlier, claims for Burke, I would certainly have to agree.

Working at the intersection between religious conceptions and literary works, I have addressed some of the very same problems McMahon perceives, in antiquity as well as in the last four decades. For example, in *All Things Vain: Religious Satirists and Their Art*, published four years ago, I make five indexed references to Plato, twelve to Augustine, seven each to Dante and Burke. On beyond these ancients and moderns, no doubt much remains to be said concerning McMahon’s large and important topics, which are still largely terra incognita. My concern in this letter is that the maps we have already in hand not get lost, or even smudged.

One of McMahon’s first oxymoronic statements concerns Burke’s religious secularity, what McMahon refers to as Burke’s comical criticism of “the dogmatic willingness to anathematize an opposition as heretical” (53). I have myself made the theologically documented argument—with references to Leon Christiani’s *Heresy and Heretics*, volume 36 in *The Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, and to W. F. Cobb’s “Abuse, Abusive Language” in the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*—that the intention of reforming ridicule is complicated by the orthodox Christian viewpoint that not everything about heresy is false. More than seventy years ago, long before Burke, F. M. Cornford demonstrated that comedy and tragedy have origins and sources that “lay . . . close together,” however much they have drifted apart in the fullness of time. For Cornford, Comedy and Tragedy (his caps) are “two species of dramatic art,” and he argues for “the supposition of a conscious rescue of Tragedy from its ‘satyric’ phase—a deliberate expulsion of those elements which distinguish the satyric drama from the tragic plays to which it was so closely linked” (“Comedy and Tragedy,” *The Origin of Attic Comedy*, ed. Theodor H. Gaster, Garden City: Anchor-Doubleday, 1961, 165–91). I twice acknowledge Cornford and credit him for both “empirical though vast objectivity and subjective yet focused style.” Remarking on what he calls “the comic program of *The Rhetoric of Religion*” (56), McMahon quotes Burke on the relation of satyr play to tragedy. Without a mention of Cornford, McMahon makes literary claims for Burke that look oblique, not to say derivative, on the subject.

McMahon claims that Burke imitates “the trinitarian structures of *The Confessions*” and that Burke has a “logological duel” with Augustine (56). Thirty years ago, in *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art*, Robert C. Elliott’s arguments, like his subtitle, were explicitly “trinitarian,” and his two longest quotations from *The Philosophy of Literary Form* identified Burke’s subtlety on tragedy and satire. Elliott’s exposition seems to me clearer than McMahon’s, which puts the case that “in Burke’s sense satire is not properly comic” and that “Burke summons the spirit of solemn comedy to confront the spirit of tragic sacrifice” (57, 58). Here, what seem to be elusive are McMahon’s discrete but connected mean-

ings of sense in Burke and spirit in Burke's literary forms, in the genres of satire, comedy, and tragedy.

All Things Vain identifies the "perennial and immemorial ambivalences" that are built into religious satire; primarily because of the nature of its subject matter, it posits a dualistic literary perspective. In considerable detail throughout my book, I present a synopsis of binary and binomial oppositions within as well as outside literary theory, identifying numerous perspectives I call "bifocal" and "Janus-like." Most probably some of them are what McMahon refers to as "conventional categories." I think they include the kind that McMahon describes as an amalgam of forward-backward and upward-downward "dialectical strategies" (59): in my introduction I say that "satire attacks metaphysical esoterica, often being high-minded even as it takes the low road," and that "high art forms, even when they soar, are not devoid of their terrestrial, or low, subject matter." Clearly, McMahon and I have had similarly horizontal and vertical thoughts.

McMahon says that Burke's "double mode of comedy and true irony" is most apparent in *The Rhetoric of Religion's* epilogue, that it is serious without being theological (58). Also focusing on it in chapter 4, I quote Burke specifically on his intentions in *The Rhetoric of Religion*, saying that "politics and literature contain humanistic and rhetorical genres as techniques," that "Burke's concluding 'Epilogue: Prologue in Heaven' is a satiric 'Parable of Purpose,'" that it is "a demonstration of the very resources of language that solve some problems in 'the talking animals' way of life in a civilization," and that "in an explicitly and insistently generic way, Burke maintains his sense of both politics and literature." McMahon's concluding dual celebrations—of the literary utility of Burke's dialectic irony insofar as it "responds in several ways to the sociopolitical context of America at the time it was written" and of Burke's "patiently working through texts that are central to the Western tradition and through principles that are, according to Burke, common to all human beings as symbol-using animals" (62)—seem to me unassailable. With McMahon, I value what he calls Burke's élan and incisiveness; I also think that McMahon might imitate more closely the vast scope and attention to contemporary issues in what he calls Burke's "symbolic action of comic criticism" (62). In what ways, in what particulars, I wonder, do McMahon's viewpoints differ from mine? Is his interest in "Platonist comedy" with an Augustinian bent similar to that expressed in the title of my third chapter, "'Tragisatire': Legitimacy for an Unchristened Genre"?

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Tuition, Theory, Feminism, and the Canon

To the Editor:

Large segments of the American public, including parents who pay heavy tuition tabs, appear disenchanted with the American literary academy. They ill understand strident defenses of literary theories that may prove ephemeral, insistence on a "feminist" agenda, and "canon revision," which they fear will downgrade Shakespeare and Hawthorne to make room for writers whose voices may bolster social and political priorities dear to some academicians. "Is such," some parents in effect are asking, "the 'education' for which we are spending \$10,000 or \$15,000 a year?"

As an MLA member living abroad and following the fray from afar (perhaps thus able to see the forest, if not all the trees?), I wish to venture the following questions, observations, and suggestions:

Who in the academy is concerned enough about the public perception to institute some dialogue—especially with tuition-paying parents?

How can we afford to wax dogmatic about the theories of living critics? It seems characteristic of our American cultural impatience *not* to allow these theoreticians the same test of time that critics from previous generations have had to undergo. Debate, yes; dogmatism, no—it's much too early. And should we be surprised if the public sees such dogmatism, bordering at times on petulant intolerance of others' views, as the very opposite of what a liberal education is meant to engender?

Feminism—and feminist women admitted this to me during a recent MLA convention forum—is no longer the best word to delineate what progressive men and women espouse today. Its continued use will prove constricting, maybe even intellectually embarrassing. If *feminism* is to continue to be taken as a positive term, we need a companion term—*masculinism* (likewise with positive connotations)—to delineate a whole complementary field of study. The absence of research into "masculinism" leaves our endeavors badly unbalanced. (I am taking issue not with the range of "feminist" priorities, many of which I endorse, just with the use of so one-sided a term and with the concomitant slighting of "masculine" notions.) Let us go on promoting the rights and sensitivities of whatever groups, or individuals, may suffer from injustice—women, men, ethnic minorities, and so on—but let us do so under a more inclusive banner.

"Canon revision"? From where I sit it looks more like canon explosion—scattershots of proposed new "must be read" authors from every interest group in the world literary marketplace. Within ten years we shall have not merely "revised" the canon but quintupled it, particularly if another cherished—and worthwhile—goal is achieved: the opening up of the MLA to constituencies in Europe, Africa, Latin America, and Asia. The use of the word