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.

Figure Hunting

To the Editor:

Richard Levin in his recent article "On Fluellen's Figures, Christ Figures, and James Figures" (*PMLA*, 89, 1974, 302–11) has condemned in brief space an aspect of literary interpretation that is as persistent as it is ancient. "Figure hunting," he calls it contemptuously; and one must admit that among those moderns who engage in it are a fair number of misguided enthusiasts who sometimes give the appearance of playing at an irresponsible parlor game. Considering the prevailing attitudes of our time, it would not be altogether surprising to find someone among us willing, as Levin facetiously suggests, "to work up quite a respectable list comparing King Henry to an oyster shell" (p. 303). Nevertheless, the practice is not altogether reprehensible. Over the years many able critics and writers have acted on the assumption that at least some literary works exhibit the kind of correspondences that Levin finds it difficult to believe in; and a number of the critics have produced defenses of the practice that are perhaps more intellectually respectable than his brief quotations may suggest. For that matter, the kindly parody of correspondence hunting that Shakespeare gave to Fluellen in *Henry v* reflects discredit on the abuse of the practice, not on the practice itself.

In almost totally discrediting the latter, Levin has taken a post-Cartesian position that would have been far less congenial to Shakespeare and to most (though not all) of his contemporaries than it is to most of us. We, post-Cartesians all, willy-nilly share that position, at least to some extent: we are intimidated by "scientific method"; we regularly indulge in the uncritical use of such terms as "Dark Ages," "Middle Ages," "Renaissance," and "Enlightenment"; and we tend on principle to be suspicious of anything, literary or nonliterary, that does not submit readily to mathematical description or proof. Taking such a position in dealing with literature is clearly advantageous insofar as doing so causes us to appreciate properly aspects of a document that do indeed admit of mathematical or empirical proof, and discourages our human tendency to sloppiness in dealing with aspects that cannot be proved in this way; but to declare that such a positivistic position is the only one that an intelligent critic may take is to rule out more than sloppiness and abuses. It is to rule out poetry altogether—or at best to reduce poetry to impassioned propaganda and ornamented reportage.

Thomas Middleton's ingenious *A Game of Chess*, which Levin cites as exhibiting a legitimate form of figuring, can almost be classed with the first of these reductions. It is also a specimen of what William F. Lynch in his *Christ and Apollo* (New York: NAL, 1963) has called the univocal imagination; for in devising and maintaining consistently a set of terms and referents Middleton has achieved his end by eliminating differences rather than by incorporating them. Middleton, of course, wrote in full awareness of what he was doing; but the mental set that he resorted to in order to produce his tour de force is analogous to the one that Shakespeare parodies in Captain Fluellen, who might well have enjoyed Middleton's play but would probably have missed the point that it was satire. That set of mind, as I have already suggested, is respectable enough within its limitations; but however assumed, it is invariably reductive in its effect on literature. And this is true whether the possessor of it hunts for figures or declares such practice an act of superstition.

Shakespeare, like all our greatest writers, has a different set of mind altogether. Father Lynch, as well as other critics before him and after, have called his order of thinking analogical; for, as Lynch says, it "insists on keeping the same and the different, the idea and the detail, rigidly interlocked and in one imaginative act" (p. 136). That is, it proceeds from an assumption of the metaphysical unity of world and mind to the creation of a poetry in which the symbolic dimension is always rooted in literal images. Even though one may apprehend these literal images without being aware of the symbolic extension, that extension is always there, implicit in the readily apprehended details. There is, of course, nothing uniquely Christian about such writing or the attitude that produces it, but both are distinctively characteristic of Catholic Christianity; and irritating as the fact may be to Levin and to many post-Cartesian theologians of non-Catholic leanings, Shakespeare remains Christian in this sense, as some of his contemporaries and most of

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his successors do not. As products of a very different time and world we come at Shakespeare with our vision diminished and refocused. His generation was one of the last to see the world that St. Augustine described as "a fair field fresh with the odor of Christ's name." Before we dismiss that description out of hand as sentimental piety, we would do well to try to understand the circumstances that made it anything but pious (in our pejorative sense) for the Saint and made it the means whereby a genius like Shakespeare could write dramatic poetry that comes close to bringing into simultaneous focus the totality of human experience.

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To the Editor:

A fundamental question raised by Richard Levin's article, which he himself fails to raise, is surely: Was Shakespeare himself a Fluellenist? "Anyone familiar with modern criticism of Shakespeare," says Levin, "need not be told how popular the pursuit of Christ figures has become" (pp. 304–05). Yes, but why has it become so popular? Isn't it conceivably because Shakespeare has himself provided ample material for this pursuit? And if he has provided ample material, mayn't he have done so—at least, to some extent—consciously and willingly?

The only substantial reason Levin has to offer in answer to these questions is implied in his own rhetorical question: "How can we believe that Shakespeare would write such a devastating parody of the selfsame method of 'figure' hunting that he expected, according to these critics, of his own audience" (p. 309). But to his question we may well answer (in Celtic fashion) with yet another question: How can we be sure that Fluellen's speech is a devastating parody of this method? Isn't Levin doing with the words of Fluellen just what he criticizes another critic for doing with the words of the Duke in *Measure for Measure*: that is, taking them out of their dramatic context, and applying them to a quite different situation? Isn't he, like his figure of Fluellen, finding "figures in all things" in that, whenever he finds a Shakespearean critic discerning a hidden similarity between a character in a play and a person in real life, or between a phrase used in a play and a phrase used in the Bible or in some book of the time, he straightway dubs it "Fluellenism."

When we turn to Fluellen's speech in the context ignored by Levin, namely Act iv, Scene vii of *Henry v*, we soon find reason for doubting that it is really a parody—or at least, a devastating parody—of "figure" hunting. Certainly, there is something amusing in the way Fluellen explains the parallel he has noticed between King Henry and Alexander the Great. The logical steps he takes to prove his point are, of course, absurdly inadequate. Yet strangely enough he does succeed in getting his point across both to his hearers and to the audience. Scholars like Levin may labor the obvious: that Henry is not Alexander. I suppose Fluellen would himself be the first to agree with them, though not without the protest: "It is not well done, mark you now, to take the tales out of my mouth, ere it is made and finished." Yet through his words, and even through the inadequacy of their logic, Shakespeare impresses on the mind of his audience an unforgettable association between these two historical names.

What then, we may ask, was the dramatist's purpose in making this association between Henry and Alexander within the terms and context of this play? Surely not the irrelevant purpose of gibing at theologizers! Wasn't there something else o'er which his melancholy sat on brood? A possible purpose, in view of the patriotic element in the play, was to present Henry in the light of the great Macedonian conqueror. At the same time, in view of the complementary satirical element in the play, this light, as projected by Fluellen, is more of a mock-heroic than of a heroic nature. In its further details, moreover, as given by Fluellen after Gower's rude interruption, the light is not unaccompanied by darkness: inasmuch as the comparison points to a certain ruthlessness in Henry, who is ready, not only to reject his old friend Falstaff when the occasion calls for it, but also to command the slaughter of all the French prisoners (which is chiefly emphasized in this scene).

There is a sense, indeed, in which Levin may well ask how Shakespeare could write such a devastating parody of this method, as he imagines it to be. Only the correct answer to his question is not precisely the answer he evidently expects. After all, don't we find Shakespeare himself offering us an example of this very method in the words, not of a character, but of the Chorus, which draws an open parallel between Henry returning from France and "the general of our gracious empress . . . from Ireland coming"? Was ever inconsistency more glaring, if we accept Levin's interpretation of Fluellen's words? And yet, as if to compound his inconsistency, the dramatist goes on in the same Chorus to call Henry a "conquering Caesar," as if his former comparison with Alexander were not enough. We may, of course, object that Alexander was a Greek, and Caesar a Roman, whereas Henry was an Englishman (or a Welshman). But then we are objecting, not to any Shakespearean critics, but to Shakespeare himself. And, in any case, what does the objection make against the point of the comparison? A comparison is a comparison. No one, not even the

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