Forum

PMLA invites members of the association to submit letters that comment 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 *PMLA* authors discussed in published letters an opportunity to reply. Submissions of more than one thousand words are not considered. The journal omits titles before persons' names and discourages endnotes and works-cited lists in the Forum. Letters should be e-mailed to pmlaforum@mla.org or be printed double-spaced and mailed to *PMLA* Forum, Modern Language Association, 26 Broadway, 3rd floor, New York, NY 10004-1789.

Philologia, *Beowulf*, *Commedia*

To the Editor:

In "Relating Philology, Practicing Humanism," the introduction to a recent cluster of essays on philology, Michelle R. Warren nudges the "philological hermeneutics" advocated and practiced by Erich Auerbach, Édouard Glissant, Edward Said, and especially Ernst Robert Curtius toward a philology of the "hidden" and "silent," while recommitting to their emphasis on "transhistorical intertextuality" (125.2 [2010]: 283–88). I support her rationale and suggest taking a further step in the same direction—by reaching back to the (intertextual) excursus on compositional designs like Dante's for the *Commedia* in Curtius's weighty book of 1948, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*. Almost thirty years later, in "Critical Calculations: Measure and Symmetry in Literature," R. G. Peterson surveyed the scholarship that followed Curtius's excursus (*PMLA* 91 [1976]: 367–75). My suggestion here builds on my exchange with Peterson in the subsequent *PMLA* Forum (92 [1977]: 126–29), which addressed some of the issues respecting philology raised by the essays Warren introduced.

My suggestion can be illustrated by briefly considering two examples from the cluster of essays on philology: one drawn from James W. Earl's analysis of *Beowulf* in "The Forbidden *Beowulf*: Haunted by Incest" (125.2 [2010]: 289–305) and one from Joseph Luzzi's reading of the *Commedia* in "'As a Leaf on a Branch . . .': Dante's Neologisms" (125.2 [2010]: 322–36). Using the data analyzed by Earl and Luzzi to compare *Beowulf* and the *Commedia* is recommended in this case by two properties the two texts share. Both present themselves in their manuscripts in a superstructure of sectional divisions and Roman numerals, and both superstructures are governed by the traditional principle of design that Dante (following Boethius) called *habitudo* 'proportionality.' These two

© 2011 by the modern language association of america

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2011.126.3.813 Published online by Cambridge University Press

properties may be understood as elaborations of two of the foundational metaphors literate medievals lived by: creation as book and its divine author as geometer (*Inf.* 11.105, *Par.* 33.133–36). They also recommend including among our philological tools working hypotheses in the following directions: Puzzled? Suspect reflexes of *those* metaphors. Still puzzled? Then check whether the passages at issue were designed and composed to embody *that* ancient principle.

The metaphor of tri-unity informing Luzzi's neologisms *disunarsi* 'to disone itself' and *intrearsi* 'to enthree itself' pervades Dante's triune architecture (323)—palpably, terza rima, three *cantiche*, 1 + 33 + 33 + 33 cantos, the *Cristo*-rhymes. Less palpable, though amply signaled, is Dante's use of *habitudo*—here geometrically triune—in arranging also the following three explicitly quantitative verbal, prosodic, and topical parallels: A) ". . . li tre ad uno ad uno" 'the three, one by one' (*Inf.* 33.71); B) ". . . quel uno e due e tre . . . / . . . in tre e 'n due e 'n uno" 'that [ever-living] One and Two and Three / [who reigns forever] in Three and Two and One' (*Par.* 14.28–29); and C) ". . . trino e uno" 'Threefold and One' (*Par.* 15.47).

Their relative ordinal placement? A is 4,494 verses from the *start*; B is 2,876 verses from the end; and C is 7,022 verses from A, the first and third of the three loci.

Habitudo? Yes: a proportion in three terms (7,022/4,494 = 4,494/2,876, factors to the nearest integer), "rhyming" all three loci and spanning the entire 14,233-line text. That is, 4,494 is the mean proportional "uniting" the extremes 7,022 and 2,876 (i.e., miming all right triangles, per Euclid [*Elements* 6.13]). Heuristics? Yes: when one adopts the triune *intrearsi* as a model, one soon finds many others comparable in principle, technique, and text-spanning "shape." Dante was serious about this.

But what then about *Beowulf*? I agree with Earl that its author was both a "master poet" and "literate" (291). So what if our working hypotheses above hold? What if this literate poet shared an understanding of *philologia* that was already traditional in Western thought some two centuries before the poem's earliest putative date of composition, the understanding embodied, say, in Martianus Capella's poetic portrait of *Philologia* (c. 500 CE) as embracing both qualitative and quantitative dimensions of *λογος* ("word" and "number," personified there as the verbal and mathematical *artes* of trivium and quadrivium)? It surprised Earl that the passages in which he suspected "dark matter," notably "repressed" details of incest, are hundreds or even "more than two thousand lines" apart (290). But is it "repression"? Or piecemeal (dis)integumentation? Perhaps something else "we can feel in the poem, even if we cannot see it" (298)? An underlying "Dantean" design?

On what evidence? For prehermeneutics, we provisionally stipulate our philological betters' best text. For heuristics, we hypothesize Dantean principles and techniques. For hermeneutics, we surmise comparable motivation (*Par.* 25.1–3). Then we look again at the locus in the Sigemund-Fitela song with Earl's "improbable" claim (302) and the sole parallel of the collocation involved: A) "No ic wiht fram þe . . . secgan hyrde" 'I [Beowulf] have not heard tell concerning you [Unferð]' (581–82) and B) ". . . welhwylc gecwæð . . . þæt he fram Sigemunde[s] secgan hyrde" 'he [equestrian scop] recounted everything he had heard tell concerning [from?] Sigemund['s]' (874–75). Their relative placement? A is 2,601 lines from the end, B is 875 lines from the start, and the interval from A to B totals 294 lines.

Habitudo? Yes: a proportion in three terms (2,601/875 = 875/294), linking both loci and spanning the entire 3,182-line text. Principle? The mean proportional "uniting" extremes 2,601 and 294 is (between 874 and) 875 (Euclid [*Elements* 6.13]). Technique, "shape"? Representative: compare, for instance, Earl's locus, lines 2,160–62, with 2,729–30 as 2,728/2,162 = 570/452, or lines 196–97 with 789–90 as 3,182/790 = 790/196. The *Beowulf* poet too was serious about this.

How does the "syntax" of these text-texturing designs—their "spiderwebbing connotations" (Earl 290), "*per verba*" (*Par.* 1.70; Luzzi 323)—matter for philology? Internally,

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2011.126.3.813 Published online by Cambridge University Press

as authorial warrant for textual integrity and for reading such sets as self-referential—that is, as designed to signify as a set. Externally, in the self-consciously literary tradition in which these two "foundational texts" stand: as additional warrant for the perspective of "trans-historical intertextuality" the cluster of essays advocates (Warren 286). Specifically, can Dante help with the many philological quandaries *Beowulf* continues to pose? The compositional strategies observable in these two examples suggest yes. Because for some matters of philology, to adapt Harold Bloom's dictum, "criticism is the art of knowing the hidden roads that go from poem to poem." Mutatis mutandis.

Thomas Elwood Hart
Syracuse University

"La Monstrua" on *PMLA*'s Cover

To the Editor:

In receiving my January 2011 issue of *PMLA*, I was initially pleased to see the cover illustration of the famous portrait of the fat Eugenia Martínez Vallejo, painted by Juan Carreño de Miranda for Charles II. One would expect the issue to contain a critical discussion of fatness (and the fat child), especially since categories like race, sex, and nationality are analyzed critically in it. Only fatness, it seems, must be a stable, modern category; thus, Eugenia is said to have been famous for her "obesity," itself a recent invention (126.1 [2011]: 8). "Modern observers," it is also noted, have diagnosed her as having Prader-Willi syndrome, a diagnosis that attempts to make us read the portrait with its indignant haughty look as only a representation of a modern disease (and, indeed, a modern diseased identity). Because this stable, singularly modern meaning is attached to Eugenia, other pertinent questions are not considered, including what her lived experiences were like as a fat person known as "La Monstrua"; how her fat body was seen as spectacular, even perhaps supernatural, as evidenced in the nude portrait of her in the guise of a Bacchus; and what some contemporary, alternative ways are in which her body can be understood by a humane (Spanish) audience, as evident in the bronze statue completed in 1997 by Amado Gonzáles Hevia in Avilés. Fat people are all too familiar with the way our bodies are used for a bit of sensationalism, but one would have expected more from *PMLA*, a journal that speaks for and to scholars who represent a range of languages, cultures, and histories.

Elena Levy-Navarro
University of Wisconsin, Whitewater

Spain's Marginality in Early Modern Studies

To the Editor:

In the Theories and Methodologies section of the January 2011 issue, Margaret R. Greer, in "Thine and Mine: The Spanish 'Golden Age' and Early Modern Studies," and Alison Weber, in "*Golden Age* or *Early Modern*: What's in a Name?," shed light on the challenges raised by Spain's place in early modern studies (126.1 [2011]: 217–24, 225–32). As Greer shows, classifying the early modern era in Spain—a time marked by the words *thine* and *mine*—as its "Golden Age" problematizes issues of imperialism, economic expansion, and religio-racial difference. The period is well known for the pursuit of wealth and territorial power. Thus, it is not surprising that the picaresque novel—in which an antihero of low social standing tries to make a living in a corrupt society—was born in Spain. It does not astonish either that early criticism of the cruel and violent treatment of indigenous subjects resulting from capitalist expansion—writings later known as the Black Legend—started by condemning the Spanish enterprise in the Americas. The racialized religious difference among Christians, Jews, and Muslims also contributed to the formation of a unique territory that confronted its otherness more directly than did the rest of Europe. Spain advertises its own difference, but, as Weber asks, at what cost?

Both articles show how the term *early modern* has recently come to replace, or be preferred over, the traditional *Golden Age*. The preference for *early modern* calls for a revised reading of

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2011.126.3.813 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the entire period. It also calls for an evaluation of how Spain's difference from the rest of Europe can be enclosed in a broader context. Whereas Greer delineates the evolution of the term *Golden Age* and explains how canonical writers came to occupy their places in the history of literature, Weber focuses on the implications of the term *early modern* in connection to other factors. Weber writes that *early modern* "favors other precipitating factors for demarcating a new age: political (the consolidation of monarchical power), social (urbanization and demographic growth), and technological (the introduction of the printing press)" (227). Indeed, the denomination *early modern* is an attempt to depict Spanish texts from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as closer to a contemporary audience, part of a nonending process more like José Antonio Maravall's *fieri*, unfinished and always developing, than his *factum*, closed and complete. Moreover, the term allows for a proliferation of studies in dialogue with other literatures through convergent theories and methodologies.

The inclusion of the three literary manifestos by the sixteenth-century Spanish poets Juan Boscán and Garcilaso de la Vega, which follow Greer's and Weber's articles in the same issue, is an assertive editorial decision (233–42). Boscán's and Garcilaso's declarations illustrate how artists' desire for novelty and fear of the criticism their inventions would attract produced an anxiety that cannot be apprehended by the canonical term *Golden Age*. These "little-known documents" draw a picture of how early modern writers approached translation and adaptation. In fact, the absorption of foreign sounds into the vernacular language, the incorporation of new ideas and values into Castilian culture, and the establishment of a dialogue with a European audience prove that Spain was experiencing a dynamic and complex modernization.

My objection to these articles is their omission of noncanonical authors. This exclusion perpetuates the practice that the field tries to overcome, keeping up the pressure on graduate students to write about renowned authors in order to find a niche in the demanding job market. It is justified, however, by the marginal place early modern Spanish literature occupies in Spanish studies. To engage a contemporary audience, then, it makes more sense to mention Cervantes than Francisco López de Úbeda or Francisco Tárraga.

Although the assertion that early modern Spain has been marginalized in literary studies has become a commonplace—one that cannot be explained only by our view of Spain but that also reflects the consolidation of theoretical approaches and the predilection for Latin American and Latino studies in the last decades—it is nonetheless true that early modern Spanish literary studies have experienced a degree of marginalization. For instance, the MLA's series Approaches to Teaching World Literature contains only four texts about early modern Spain and two about colonial Latin America. While these texts include extraordinary volumes on teaching topics such as the Spanish comedia and the picaresque tradition, there are half as many volumes dedicated to this field as to early modern English literature. Although I am not going to contrast the quantity or quality of texts produced by different nations during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe, it would be naive to think that England's literary production at that time surpassed the impressive and prolific literature of Spain.

I want to congratulate the contributors for such an enlightening group of essays and translations, and I hope that this initiative provokes a series of articles about early modern Spain in a forthcoming issue of *PMLA*.

Melissa Figueroa
Cornell University

Reply:

As the authors of "Thine and Mine: The Spanish 'Golden Age' and Early Modern Studies" and "*Golden Age* or *Early Modern*: What's in a Name?," we appreciate Melissa Figueroa's thoughtful response to and good summary of

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2011.126.3.813 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the points we attempted to make. We were invited to write our articles for the Theories and Methodologies section to address the question of how debates about the Spanish Golden Age challenge the configurations of early modern studies (and vice versa), as well as the question of how this "age of gold" travels across countries and continents. Doing so in under 3,500 words and attempting to engage with the broad readership of *PMLA* were not conducive to highlighting noncanonical authors, as Figueroa recognizes. That is a challenge for us to address collectively in the field of early modern Spanish studies. Part of that challenge, of course, is the extent of literary production in Spain in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, an outpouring too vast, rich, and diverse for any one critic's lifework, much less these brief articles, to fully encompass. Although we did not have space in our articles to discuss noncanonical authors, we recognize the importance of expanding the canon, and we celebrate the recent publication of many editions and studies of little-known dramatists, poets, and religious writers. It could be argued that Hispanists have been in the vanguard of the recovery of early modern women's writing.

Decreasing the relative marginalization of Spanish studies in the early modern field—or ensuring that attention is paid to the Spanish Golden Age in Renaissance studies, if one prefers those terms—is necessarily a bidirectional effort. *PMLA*'s publication of our articles is but one indication of a gradually increasing interest in Spain on the part of other European cultural scholars over recent years. To encourage the continued growth of this interest and engage effectively with other traditions, we should produce more translations of Spanish texts—works by noncanonical authors as well as the less read works of canonical authors—to make them accessible to general readers and useful in comparative courses. (Unfortunately, the academic tenure and promotion policies in the United States do not encourage this effort, so translations, like good scholarly editions, are done more for the love of the art than for career advancement.) At the same time, we need to become familiar enough with other traditions and their critical and theoretical debates to engage with those debates in the articles and books we write or encourage our students to write.

Margaret R. Greer
Duke University

Alison Weber
University of Virginia

Reply:

We would like to thank Melissa Figueroa for her thoughtful response to our Little-Known Documents entry "Three Literary Manifestos of Early Modern Spain." She perceptively points out that the poetic manifestos we translated reveal the anxieties of a newly formed *mentalité* that corresponds to the historiographical designation *early modern*. Yet because the conventional term *Golden Age* is intended to describe not the social conditions of early modern Spain but the aesthetic qualities of its literary production over two centuries, it seems to us still taxonomically useful in that it asserts the literature's classical European roots while proclaiming its distinction. The literature's worth is all the more significant given its authors' diverse social, religious, and cultural origins and, no less, the many obstacles that most authors encountered when attempting to write. If, as Saint Teresa rightly bemoaned, those were exceedingly rough times, they also left us a legacy we cannot afford to devalue. In our own *tiempos recios*, Figueroa's regard for the field is heartening.

Anne J. Cruz
University of Miami

Elias L. Rivers
Stony Brook University
State University of New York

Talking about Lebanon and Gaza

To the Editor:

In replying to Basem L. Ra'ad's recent Forum letter on the exclusion of Lebanon and

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2011.126.3.813 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Gaza from *PMLA*'s October 2009 issue on war (126.1 [2010]: 243–45), Srinivas Aravamudan, coeditor of that issue, concedes Ra'ad's criticism but goes on to muddle the topic with talk of heroic monumentalization (126.1 [2010]: 245–46). Ra'ad's point is simple: we should talk about Palestine, Lebanon, and Gaza. And the end of such conversation would be, well, the opposite of not having such a conversation and being silent about Palestine, Lebanon, and Gaza. Whatever else Troy and Guernica might be brought to signify, their representations in art are first acknowledgments that certain events took place.

Petar Ramadanovic
University of New Hampshire, Durham

Reply:

I thank Petar Ramadanovic for his letter. In response to his concern that I conceded Ra'ad's criticism but am muddling the issue with talk of heroic monumentalization, I can only remind him of the complex nature of literature as both imaginative and referential.

Literature is neither history nor politics, even though literature and literary criticism are much the poorer if not in constant conversation with both. But this conversation cannot be obligatory: it has to be voluntary, which means some might choose to enter it, and others might take a pass. Ra'ad's simple point—as Ramadanovic puts it, "*we should* talk about Palestine, Lebanon, and Gaza" (emphasis mine)—is not so simple. Who is "we"? Antiwar activists? Certainly. Literary critics? Not necessarily. The moral imperative carried by "should" is coercive. Should everyone? Why? And while some may, others might not. Why should everyone agree to discuss one particular (even world-historical) conflict to the implicit exclusion of others, given that time and space are always limited?

Does focusing on one conflict universalize priorities for everyone, and what would "we" say if someone else counters that "we should" instead, at this very moment, be talking about the Arab Spring or the much greater human toll of the civil wars in Libya, the Sudan, and the Congo, or break the deafening silence about the recent genocide of the Tamils in Sri Lanka? Of course, we can't talk about everything at once: the Jakobsonian principle of the axis of selection teaches us that. An infinite conversation may include everything, but everyday attention spans are brutally finite.

Naming something or talking about something does not necessarily acknowledge that "certain events took place"—witness the way the Nazis manipulated the Reichstag fire. Conversely, world history and even current events are littered with many genocides and wars that are hardly ever brought up for moral contestation in our imperfect forums—but that does not mean they did not occur. I would insist (maybe this is *my* moral imperative) that we *also* imagine damages and losses beyond our capacity to render justice by positively acknowledging specific wars, which are legion.

Srinivas Aravamudan
Duke University

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2011.126.3.813 Published online by Cambridge University Press