

for all that is Israel's recognition of Palestinians as equal humans entitled to equal rights.

*Omar Barghouti*  
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## Once and Future Feminism

TO THE EDITOR:

The October 2006 *PMLA* Theories and Methodologies section focusing on feminism(s) testifies to the importance of the topic and the vitality of our professional journal (121 [2006]: 1678–741). All the essays it contains demand an attentive reading.

There is no doubt that feminism—like all historical phenomena—has undergone great changes through the years. Any social and political movement must change. However, I find very problematic the dismissive tone of some of the quoted statements about the so-called second wave of feminism. To simplify, downplay, or disparage past efforts is a disservice to truth, our understanding of our past, and the interests of all human beings who are working toward a changed world.

The ones among us who were alive and active forty years ago know that even then we sensed that we were embarking on a long and complex journey. Nothing was simple, there were no paths already open. History books had erased our past as well as that of many other people. We had to reinvent feminism and ourselves. The relationship between what has become customary to view as an undifferentiated middle class of “white women”—in itself a fallacious abstraction—and women of color and other until-then-ignored female human beings was even then much more nuanced than the metaphors of first, second, and third wave suggest.

As to the new perspectives in feminist theory, I fear that scholars have become too nervous about focusing on the universe of femaleness. Its exploration must be somehow justified by being subsumed under more general and worthier topics of research, even though that universe cannot but intersect with all forms of otherness. Naming women continues to carry the stigma of limiting oneself to the study of something exclusive, “secondary,” less important, and to be somewhat disguised.

More problematic still is the tendency of intellectual discourse to adopt new abstractions.

Race, class, ethnicity, yes; but those categories, whose listing has become almost an obligatory mantra, have meaning only if refracted by the diversity of individual human beings. Each of those elements of identity, like gender, is lived differently by different people.

On the other hand, to deny the existence of people's common experiences is absurd and damaging to those who are now living them. The almost universal coercion to which women and girls are subjected in matters of sexuality is indeed a common experience, no matter how mild or horrendous a form that coercion may take. Even the rape of men is predicated on their being “lowered” to the level of women, as Abu Ghraib and many other of the world's hellholes have taught us. Women's long exclusion from the universe of learning is yet another common experience, which today's scholars would do well to remember. Although we do not belong to the so-called underdeveloped world, our full participation in public life is a recent acquisition and by no means eternally assured.

As Toril Moi so aptly says, “If feminism is to have a future, feminist theory—feminist thought, feminist writing—must be able to show that feminism has wise and useful things to say to women who struggle to cope with everyday problems” (1739).

*Angela M. Jeannet*  
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## Shakespeare at Oxford?

TO THE EDITOR:

The point of Robert F. Fleissner's recent Forum letter (121 [2006]: 1743–44) is that Shakespeare may have spent some time at Oxford, and the principal argument is that “[t]he dramatist's works were too learned not to have been inspired by such academic influence.” It is a familiar argument that is usually employed by the anti-Stratfordians, who insist that the “Shake-speare” plays were too learned to be written by a mere commoner and so must come from an aristocrat, the most popular claimant now being Edward de Vere, the seventeenth earl of Oxford. His partisans might be called the old Oxfordians (although Oxford himself was educated at Cambridge), while Fleissner, as a new Oxfordian, claims not that the playwright was Oxford but merely that he studied there.

I think most people in Shakespeare's day, and for at least two centuries afterward, would have been surprised by the notion that his plays were "learned," which would have meant that they displayed considerable classical erudition (and even imitated classical models). In this sense, the most learned plays of his time were closet dramas, and the most learned writer for the public stage was usually considered to be Ben Jonson, who studied under Camden at Westminster School. In fact, Jonson's "learned" art was sometimes contrasted with Shakespeare's "natural" art, as in Milton's "L'Allegro":

Then to the well-trod stage anon,  
If *Jonsons* learned sock be on,  
Or sweetest *Shakespear* fancies childe,  
Warble his native Wood-notes wilde.

That distinction may no longer be relevant today, but what is relevant is the failure of the Oxfordians, both old and new, to produce any positive evidence for their argument, which would consist of examples of "learning" in the plays that Shakespeare could not have acquired from his Stratford schooling or his reading or his experiences in London and therefore must be credited to Oxford the earl or the university. No such evidence exists. What is even more significant, I believe, is that these Oxfordians ignore the negative evidence, which really does exist and which consists of examples in the plays showing that their author was not so learned after all. I am not speaking here about the many minor anachronisms in dress (ancient Greeks or Romans wearing hats, gloves, scarves, doublets, etc.) that a number of commentators have pointed out, and that may have been the result of simple carelessness, but about a much more serious ignorance of geography and chronology. Thus the author of *The Winter's Tale* believed that Bohemia has a seacoast, and the author of *Hamlet* believed that the way to lead an army from Norway to Poland is by marching through Denmark. Moreover, in the first part of *The Winter's Tale* Leontes consults the Delphic oracle, which was closed down in AD 390, while in the second part, which follows by sixteen years, a courtier refers to Julio Romano, an artist of the Italian Renaissance. And in *Troilus and Cressida* Hector cites Aristotle, who was born many centuries after the end of the

Trojan War. Is this the kind of learning that could only be acquired at a university?

*Richard Levin*  
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#### TO THE EDITOR:

The Forum section of the October *PMLA* includes a letter from Robert F. Fleissner with the following reference to me: "A London Shakespearean, Gil Elliot, in her letter in the *Times Literary Supplement* (25 July 2003), also defended the view that Shakespeare went 'to university,' citing Peter Alexander, the well-known Shakespearean authority from Scotland, to this effect." I would like to point out that I am not a Shakespearean or a scholar of any kind, nor did my letter defend the view that Shakespeare went to university, nor, to complete this review of errors, am I female.

I am male and a writer, and my letter to the *Times Literary Supplement* was meant to suggest that academics like my old professor Peter Alexander, in common with many others through the ages, tend to configure Shakespeare in their own image. I happen to believe that Shakespeare's education at Stratford Grammar—along with the voracious reading to be expected of such a protean mind—was perfectly adequate to feed his genius.

*Gil Elliot*  
London

#### Reply:

I am aware of the anti-Stratfordian approach endorsing Edward de Vere as Shakespeare, but that connection did not appear germane. I certainly agree that the so-called Oxfordians have no real positive evidence favoring de Vere as the playwright.

The existence of errata in Shakespeare's plays might be explained by Shakespeare's having possibly been only an auditor of some sort at Oxford (although I have been reading again of his father's having been a local "high bailiff" or chief magistrate—in certain towns a son of such a person was supposed to receive free tuition at Oxford). The playwright simply may not have registered all the facts he heard.

*Robert F. Fleissner*  
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