

Forum

PMLA invites members of the association to submit letters, printed and double-spaced, 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 addressed to *PMLA* Forum, Modern Language Association, 26 Broadway, 3rd floor, New York, NY 10004-1789.

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Milton and Religious Violence

TO THE EDITOR:

Concluding his comments on Feisal G. Mohamed's "Confronting Religious Violence: Milton's *Samson Agonistes*" (120 [2005]: 327–40), Joseph Wittreich writes, "The ultimate question is whether Milton's tragedy, as a cherished artifact of Western literary tradition, shows, in Mohamed's words, 'evidence of the very brand of thought that the political dominant vilifies in the Other' or whether, breaking free of his own culture of violence, Milton here mounts a critique of it" (1642). Wittreich's useful summary does not require a bifurcated response by Mohamed, John Carey, or any other critical writer; Milton and other cherished authors can serve as artifacts of their times even as they break with their cultural moments to offer critiques, whether intended or unintended.

Those of us reading texts by canonical authors such as Milton will continue to expend ink on the extent to which they serve or break. Mohamed compellingly demonstrates why we should pursue a wide variety of views in these commentaries as a method of understanding our attachment to—and thus our temptation to avoid contradictions in—cherished traditions we perceive as our own.

Marco Katz
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Law and Literature in Dialogue

TO THE EDITOR:

I hope you will permit a longtime lawyer-member to join—somewhat tardily—the debate on law and literature inspired by Julie Stone Peters's essay ("Law, Literature, and the Vanishing Real" [120 (2005): 442–53]) and then continued by Peter Brooks's Forum letter (1645–46). Like Brooks, I ap-

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preciated Peters's account of the field; unlike him, however, I felt that her main point was misguided or at best overly schematic. To support her claim that the field is insufficiently interdisciplinary—each traditional area instead opportunistically invading the other while still maintaining its own self-definition—Peters constructs a three-phase history of law and literature: humanism, hermeneutics, and narrative. Since Peters references my work when she discusses humanism, I would take issue especially with the conclusion that I even implied that “[l]iterature could save law from itself by reminding it of its lost humanity” (445). *The Failure of the Word* (Yale UP, 1984), for example, threw down the gauntlet to both enterprises, finding their narrative strategies to be similar and at the same time deeply troubling. This phase of interdisciplinary study continues, because it is the most challenging not only to scholars but also to those nonacademic minions who count on our authoritative storytellers (be they judges, lawyers, critics, or politicians) to avoid resentment and to seek justice in the world. (On this point, see Laurence Buell's essay “In Pursuit of Ethics” [*PMLA* 114 (1999): 7–19], esp. 10.)

And this brings me to Brooks, who rightly seeks the Ciceronian identity of law and literature. That call, however, went out from some of the earliest scholarship cited in Peters's essay. Warts and all, these narrative enterprises were to be rejoined at the hip. Thus Jean-Pierre Barricelli and I, writing in “Literature and Law” (in Barricelli and Joseph Gibaldi, eds., *Interrelations of Literature* [MLA, 1982]), claimed, “Were it not for the uses to which we put the law, on the one hand, and literature, on the other, we would be struck immediately by their common epistemologies” (161). Ten years later, in *Poethics* (Columbia UP, 1992), I concluded that, “freed from unidisciplinary constraints,” narrative “continues its struggle to understand and to lead” (xiv).

For a quarter century, work in the field has sought the boundary crossings desired by Peters and Brooks. (A useful account and bibliography postdating their essays is that of the fine Dutch scholar Jeanne Gaakeer, “Law and Literature,” in the *IVR Encyclopedia of Jurisprudence, Legal Theory and Philosophy of Law* [www.ivr-enc.info/en/article.php?id=44].) There is little to Brooks's as-

sertion of the field's “real incoherence and failure of definition” besides its multiplicity of voices and absence of formalism during this first-stage renewal of the Ciceronian model. Scholars, lawyers, and writers have been challenged to see the identity of two disciplines that had drifted apart. Some of these voices, such as Richard Posner's, sought somewhat smugly to ensure that law would never reintegrate into the humanities, possibly because the judge was suppressing his own literary yearnings and more overtly because he feared that the recognition of sameness would reduce law professors' salaries. Others—and the explosion among literary scholars “doing” law and lit around the world is the best current example—have seized the moment and trespassed into a domain they are recognizing as their own.

Peters and Brooks encourage less the recasting than the continuation of what has been most provocative in the work already out there: the development of arguments that will liberate narrators of all stripes to participate fully and positively in the political world.

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PS. I have just read the further response of my former Cornell teacher, Burton Pike, who adds in the January Forum that there are pedagogical problems whenever one graduate department's “jargon” is aired in the same classroom with another's (121 [2006]: 295). Yes, but this “shock” to the systems of both graduate constituencies is part of what makes the law-and-literature class stimulating and productive. Speaking only of my own experience with law students and graduate literature students together over a semester, I can assure teachers that the shock and the jargon are gradually minimized. Both sets of students come to see that these two narrative enterprises work very well together.

Reply:

Richard Weisberg has spent much of his career as the principal defender of law and literature, generously supporting and encouraging those who write and teach in the discipline. His modest reference to himself as a “longtime lawyer-