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Cheryl Walker

Persona Criticism and the Death of the Author

The difficulty with doing biographical criticism today is that the figure of the author has increasingly come under attack, almost as if the author's portrait, which at one time routinely accompanied critical works, were being atomized, dissolved in an acid bath of scorn and distrust.¹ Though "death of the author" critics have made a number of important points about the rigidity and naiveté of certain earlier forms of biographical criticism, I find that in my own practice I am loath to give up all vestiges of the author. The strategy I have chosen is what I call persona criticism, a form of analysis that focuses on patterns of ideation, voice, and sensibility linked together by a connection to the author. Yet persona criticism allows one to speak of authorship as multiple, involving culture, psyche, and intertextuality, as well as biographical data about the writer.

Persona criticism will not pass muster with those who, following Roland Barthes, believe that the critic's job should be recognized as that of "ceaselessly posit[ing] meaning [only] ceaselessly to evaporate it"² because this critical stance aspires to hold its place long enough to suggest connections between cultural, psychological, and literary history, connections that presume to rearrange our conception of the real. Persona criticism represents a compromise between those who will have no truck at all with authorship and those for whom the author is always and everywhere an ascertainable reference limiting what a text can and should mean. It is, as I have said, a strategy; but by calling it a strategy, I do not mean to suggest that its motivation is simple expedience.

Though biographical criticism was a respected genre forty years ago, contemporary attacks upon it force one to have recourse to some set of strategies in order to continue connecting authorial biography to textual meaning. Today the question of what role the author can claim to perform in writing a poem or a novel is deeply enmeshed in ontological uncertainties that first began to be registered a century ago, when anxieties about authorship also began to surface. Philosophically, this question has become entangled with concerns about the status of the will and intentionality. What do I do when I put my fingers on the computer keys? And who am "I" anyway?

In our frustration with the Romantic notion of the artist as supreme originator, towering above "his" time and igniting "his" text with primitive bolts of genius, we are now skeptical of both unified subjectivities and newness. Materialist critical theories remind us that historical circumstances in many ways determine the literary product. Critics of language insist that authors are always already inscribed in a linguistic situation drenched with the past and with ideology. Post-Freudians, too, are rightly skeptical about claims to conscious control over the "finished" product, control that has in the past often been seen as essential to the notion of the artist.³

Though all these are important considerations, as a feminist I find myself dissatisfied with the abstract indeterminacy of "textuality," which has, in many cases, come to replace authorship in critical discourse. It continues to seem to me important to identify the circumstances that govern relations between authors and texts, as between texts and readers, because without such material we are in danger of seeing gender disappear or become transformed into a feature of textuality that cannot be persuasively connected to real women.

Of course, it should be said that the main proponents of "death of the author" criticism—Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida—were never so extreme as to deny all attempts to discuss the author, and even the most rigorous opponents of biographical criticism may wish to make use of some form of what Foucault calls "the author function."⁴ Often, however, it is assumed that critics like Barthes and Foucault would disapprove of any extended usage of biographical material.

To correct this assumption, I have elsewhere noted that Barthes's real target in "The Death of the Author" was not so much biographical criticism per se as any practice that sought "to impose a limit on [the] text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing."⁵ "Death of the author" critics are united in rejecting the notion that behind the text stands a subject called the author to whom all questions

about the text should be referred and by whom (literally or figuratively) all confusions will be resolved.

I have no difficulty in accepting the notion that our understanding of “the author” must always be open to reconsideration, just as the text itself finds its meanings in readers who, because they are potentially infinite in number, might be said (à la Barthes) to be “without [any particular] history, biography, psychology” (DA, 148). But this is useful only when one is considering the *potential* of the text to assume significance in the multiple contexts of its reception.

Foucault is more specific about other contexts that might be interesting to explore. Though in his essay he says that “one has already called back into question the absolute character and founding role of the subject” as author, he goes on to say: “Still, perhaps one must return to this question, not in order to reestablish the theme of an originating subject, but to grasp the subject’s points of insertion, modes of functioning, and system of dependencies.”⁶ In other words, Foucault is quite ready to allow that exploring interconnections between what he calls, in other sections of the essay, the “scriptor” and the text might be both interesting and productive.

In his view, of course, it is also possible to extend authorship to a variety of subjects who, for one reason or another, might appropriate the text. These subject-readers might also be considered authors, according to Foucault. Here again I concur as I do when Derrida, in “Signature Event Context,” says that “the sign possesses the characteristic of being readable even if the moment of its production is irrevocably lost and even if I do not know what its alleged author-scriptor consciously intended to say at the moment he wrote it, i.e. abandoned it to its essential drift.”⁷ Rather than examine the essential nature of what is readable, however, I prefer to appropriate Nancy K. Miller’s strategy of “changing the subject”⁸ in order to reflect on why it seems important to me to reconstitute the author in these contestatory times.

One of the useful insights of feminist criticism is that much totalizing theory is designed to obscure difference. In the past twenty years, women have been resisting the tendency of many masculinist theorists to assume that the male can speak for the species without finding out if what is claimed works equally well for both sexes. In fact, gender has been obscured as an important consideration in most modern critical practices in their formative stages. In psychoanalytic criticism, for instance, male experience has often been considered normative. In much historical criticism, history has been defined narrowly as the ideas and experiences of men. In myth criticism, male myths

(often of the hero) seemed at first more central than divergent or complementary female myths. These are merely three of many areas that have been targets of recent feminist revisions. It now seems absurd to act as if female experience is somehow deviant or exceptional and male experience is typical or normative.

Applying the techniques of feminist resistance to such old-fashioned assumptions, one might now ask if the following statement in Foucault's "What Is an Author?" is as universal as it claims to be. Foucault insists: "Using all the contrivances that he sets up between himself and what he writes, the writing subject cancels out the signs of his particular individuality. As a result, the mark of the writer is reduced to nothing more than the singularity of his absence; he must assume the role of the dead man in the game of writing" (WIA, 102-3). It is the word "must" that I puzzle over. In its claim to be true for all cases, I suspect it is hiding something and that what it is hiding may well be enormously significant.

Presumably, given the direction of other remarks, Foucault means that stylistic conventions and the iterability of language itself enforce a kind of impersonality (the translator Josué Harari calls it, significantly, *indifference*) that will always mock any pretense of particular identity in the writer.⁹ "He must assume the role of the dead man . . .," etc. But should we interpret this statement as meaning that the writer *must assume* that he must assume this role? In other words, does this seek to address the writer's understanding of the nature of "his" own performance?

Or is Foucault pointing to the way readers respond to a piece of writing—the fact, long recognized, that the writer cannot control the response of the reader, that the writer becomes *for the reader* a function of the way the text is structured rather than vice versa? The writer thus dies into art, and the text itself takes its promiscuous way indifferent to the feelings, the aims, the arrogance of its author. If the latter is what Foucault's text is suggesting, then one of the issues that is obscured with this word "must" is that the gender of the author, which—one would assume—would count as a particularizing aspect, has had and continues to have a great impact on the way readers actually encounter texts. Assertions about what a text means, especially if the writer is female, frequently depend for their logic upon widely shared assumptions about gender differences. Many women writers would gladly have accepted the role of "a dead man" in the game of writing only to find themselves treated by male critics as "a live woman" instead.

At the end of Foucault's essay, he asks the question: "What difference does it make who is speaking?" For Foucault, in 1969, subjects as historically limited individuals seem far less important than the in-

finite texts in which “writing unfolds like a game (jeu) that invariably goes beyond its own rules and transgresses its limits” (WIA, 102). Women have long been aware, however, that it makes a good deal of difference who is perceived as speaking. For example, research has shown that women are more frequently interrupted than men, most frequently *by* men.¹⁰ Indeed, women have only comparatively recently been allowed the privilege of speaking in public at all. Toril Moi coins an effective phrase to indicate the way men have thought themselves capable of speaking *for* women when she refers to “the ventriloquism of patriarchy.”¹¹

In the past, women have become writers partly to create substantive identities. Too often such women have found themselves ignored, drowned out, spoken for, or spoken against with the result that they have even lost contact with what they might be inclined to think, should they ever have the opportunity. At the level of her own understanding about her role as an author, therefore, it is fatal for such a woman to choose the role of self-sacrifice Foucault describes as characteristic of contemporary *écriture*. Self-sacrifice, as Nancy K. Miller suggests, may well be a phase in the development of authorial consciousness not appropriate to such female authors.¹² But, of course, all of this is only relevant at the level of the author’s positionality and intentions, concerns that are frequently ruled out of court by “death of the author” critics.

On the issue of the text itself, there are still other problems to contend with. What about the ethical considerations of reading a woman’s writing as writing written by a woman, for instance? Would it not be better to avoid the kind of derogatory, patronizing, or cooptive commentary women writers have been subjected to (even by women) by simply treating all texts without reference to the historical particularities of their authors? Though sometimes recommended by critics who think of themselves as sympathetic to the claims of feminism, this mode mimics, it seems to me, the universalizing tendencies of patriarchal criticism by claiming to be able to transcend culture and gender entirely, at least at the level of authorship. This approach has always resulted in the masking of oppression of various kinds. As long as gender, class, race, sexual orientation, and other forms of difference are constituted hierarchically by power politics, they will remain important features of both writing and reading. The choice to ignore such issues, in the end, serves the status quo.

From my point of view, it seems far better to bring to the fore those ways in which readers and writers differ than to dwell at length upon the essentialist properties of textuality. If what legibility means is that a semantic sequence must be able to be made sense of

irrespective of particularities among readers or writers, this tells us nothing about what actually happens in textual relations connecting author and text, reader and text, author and reader. Though I am not “against theory”¹³ that focuses on the nature of language and textuality (indeed I find such theory fascinating), I find other investigations interesting as well. Readings that make clear what is at stake for the reader seem to me especially valuable because they clarify their own limits and thus help us to orient ourselves as readers.¹⁴

Rather than erasing the author in favor of an abstract textuality, I prefer a critical practice that both expands and limits the role of the author, in my case by finding in the text an author-persona but relating this functionary to psychological, historical, and literary intersections quite beyond the scope of any scriptor’s intentions, either conscious or unconscious.¹⁵ The persona functions more like a form of sensibility in the text than a directional marker pointing back toward some monolithic authorial presence.

The strategy of persona criticism is aimed at reconceiving the author function. The persona is a mask that may be related simultaneously to the biographical data available about the author and to other cultural and literary voices. It is particularly relevant to lyric poets in the modern period in whose work it *appears* that we have access to something approximating the author’s voice. However, many novelists, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, George Eliot, and William Faulkner (not to mention more contemporary writers like Margaret Drabble and Milan Kundera), project a similar illusion of definition and accessibility in their fictions and could be addressed productively by means of this form of analysis. Hawthorne’s narrators, Ishmael in *Moby-Dick*, Eliot’s authorial intrusions, and Gavin Stevens in Faulkner all offer versions or masks of their authors for consideration. The mask may well be at odds with some information we have about the author. However, the significance of the persona goes beyond its congruence with or divergence from typical authorial moods and meditations.

Rather than locating the grounds for deciding between interpretations in the historical subjectivity of the writer, persona criticism alerts us to the diversity of possible investments in the text. First, it is necessary to identify the characteristics of an author-mask in a range of related texts in order to establish the significance of this construct. One searches for a pattern, a constellation of effects.

The second phase of persona analysis explores the way these effects (this voice or character) come out of a particular time and place at the intersection of psychological and cultural history. Often (though not always) the mask functions as an organizing feature of the text.

Thus the mask of the skeptic is not only a subject in *The Education of Henry Adams* but also a structuring device. Similarly, in Emily Dickinson's poetry, the cheshire cat persona—prone to ironic dissolve—often makes voice into poetic pattern. Of course, fissures in the mask become significant as well. One should always pay attention to contrary evidence or slippage.

What makes the mask preferable to the author as a focus of analysis is the fact that the mask is unlike a human being. It is limited, identifiable, constructed, and without intentions. Indeed, in my understanding, the persona is almost precisely opposite to the historical subject-author in that it functions like an outline, a potentiality, rather than a fullness which is always already depleted as it renders itself in discourse. One might even call the persona a *thin description*, in the sense that it acts simply as a structuring mechanism, a predisposition that takes on substance as it becomes embedded in particular contexts. The persona may well appear various in these contexts, but these variations cannot be said to be the result of persona intentions. Furthermore, the mask is not a limit on what the text can mean. It is simply a feature of the text like a node from which meaning can be seen to radiate in many directions.

To use an example from my own research, my reading of Elinor Wylie's work focuses on the persona of the woman warrior.¹⁶ This figure is often the speaker or the subject of Wylie's poetry. Furthermore, its lethal combination of aggression against others and abjection of self is particularly seductive for females, I believe, and can be connected to both culture and psyche in the historical situation of early twentieth-century American women writers.

Elinor Wylie (1885–1928) was a highly respected poet in her day whose work often prompted critics to indulge in a simpler form of biographical criticism. Her poems were read straightforwardly as autobiographical statements. One reason for this is that Wylie wrote so many self-portrait poems in which she speculated, often ironically, about the strengths and weaknesses of her own character. A second reason has to do with the highly colored nature of her life. The scandal of Wylie's desertion of her first husband, her three much-publicized marriages, the many suicides in her family—all served to inspire speculation about the relation between the pain so palpable in her poetry and her own experiences.

On the other hand, Wylie was not primarily interested in confession, and some found her work overly cold and artificial. As the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* puts it: "She appears to have assessed her talent coolly, and she continued to write the elegant, formally conservative, decorative poems that she preferred,"¹⁷ despite

the pressures of modernism. The challenge of interpreting her work is posed by the tension between its violence and its control, the dry ice of its language.

I have found the persona of the woman warrior a productive way of contextualizing that dry ice with reference to Wylie's time and gender. Focusing upon this mask appears to me preferable to undertaking the kind of biographical analysis characteristic of her critics in the twenties and thirties. Is Elinor Wylie's particular personal experience relevant to the creation of the woman warrior persona? Absolutely. Yet from the perspective of persona criticism, all such experience can be seen in contexts broader than the personal. Even the exceptional fact of Wylie's upper-class status and scandal-ridden life, even these particularities, though not normative, are representative. In her case, they connect her with the "band of outsiders" also deeply significant to the poet H. D., with whom she shares a great deal, both culturally and psychologically.

At this point I suspect some of my readers will want to ask: What about the *uniqueness* of Wylie's work? If everything is seen as representative, does this not undermine the special value of the poet and her poetry? Though the process of persona analysis tends to relate the poetry to contexts outside itself, the way a given text is representative is always peculiar to that text. Presumably one chooses to work on a writer whom one respects and whose work one feels to be enriched by the kinds of readings the critic can bring to bear.

However, it is true that notions of individual genius and exceptionalism are weakened by this process. Unlike some critics on the left with whom I share other assumptions, I do not think it is necessary to set aside the notion of genius entirely, as long as it is not being used to do the kind of ideological work that has resulted in oppression (particularly of women) in the past. The genius (one thinks of Milton) may be an unusually powerful writer, but the genius is not always a reliable source of ideas about politics and gender. It is dangerous to make authors into cultural icons.

Furthermore, though I am still willing to say Emily Dickinson was a genius, I am not willing to leave it at that. The fact that she had special talents and peculiarities does not mean that she should be read in isolation, even from the other American women poets of her day who were not as talented.

By the same token, I am interested in Elinor Wylie as a separate entity, but I am also interested in the way her literary persona takes shape in a particular cultural gestalt that binds her to others of her time and gender. I prefer this mode of appreciation to one that would elevate her to the status of an eagle isolated on its mountaintop. The

very fact that she was so envious of the eagle, for example in her poem "The Eagle and the Mole,"¹⁸ leads us back to the assault upon female subjectivity experienced by the woman warrior. Indeed, by shifting primary attention from author to persona, one is participating in the contemporary move away from genius and toward culture, away from presence and toward representation.

In another era (our own, perhaps), it is unlikely that Wylie would have chosen the woman warrior for her preferred mask. In the United States today, it is mostly women of color and lesbians who seem attracted to the warrior persona, a fact that itself might be productively analyzed.¹⁹ By tracing the forms of Wylie's self-representation, one must also take into account the grammar of her cultural context in which her choices were embedded. The "author" as she appears in her novels and poems is as much the world of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century social change as it is any particular subjectivity named Elinor Wylie. The woman warrior was a favorite with white, comparatively privileged, and ambitious women around the turn of the century who saw themselves fighting for new modes of self-expression.²⁰

But what about Wylie's intentions? Surely she did not see herself as representing such hypostases as the New Woman, the Victorian aesthete, or Julia Kristeva's suicidal "object."²¹ To this one must respond by saying that in persona criticism Wylie's intentions are relevant, but they are in no way definitive. Indeed, Wylie was herself suspicious of intentionality, claiming that authors adopt deceptive strategies to avoid both "the bitterness of being understood" and "the bitterness of [self-] understanding."²² If I feel that my conception of what Wylie's work is up to is enriched by investigating the hostility and self-hatred that puts it at the crossroads of culture and psyche, gender and genre, I need not believe that Wylie herself would have thought so.

Strangely, however, the very fact that Wylie *could not have* understood her poems the way I understand them makes the kind of readings I advocate unpalatable to some. For others, the attempt to get at the circumstances governing textual production is liable to be condemned as historical rather than critical, as though it were important to keep history outside of criticism. In contemplating my own insistence on uniting the two, I have also come to a further conclusion regarding my own type of analysis, and this is what I mean when I say that I have not adopted the strategy of persona criticism for the sake of mere expedience.

Serious criticism, it seems to me, always emerges from deep and complex sources in both the culture and the critic. When I consider what a subject is, when I consider what I am and how the self-that-I-

can-use-in-writing²³ connects to my texts, I am convinced that the best exploration of my role as author would take into account my psychological development, gender, race and class affiliations, cultural experience, reading habits, and intellectual and political concerns. It seems particularly relevant to the shaping of my own critical practice, for instance, that I grew up poor, in a female-headed household, profoundly isolated in the fifties and sixties in Midwest suburbia. I thus failed to realize until my college years that I had *any* relation to history whatever. Like many of the women I study, the wider world of social, economic, and political life seemed to have nothing to do with me. Therefore, it later became extremely important to begin to connect psyche with culture, gender with literary history, even to see my mother's 1920s love poetry as the signature of a certain form of nascent female consciousness in that era. Making these connections gave me a way into the historical conversation, made it possible for me to write. I can now see that I am/not my mother, and, whereas she stopped writing, I can (must?) continue.

But I also feel confident in saying that a text itself is an encoding of history in which one may find traces of both culture and psyche without the prior context of biography. Part of the project of cultural criticism, to which persona criticism essentially belongs, is the uncovering of such lost mediations in the text. Alan Trachtenberg provides the following illumination of this project where he says:

“Culture” distances the reader from the “text” pure and simple—and calls attention to what is absent, the missing mediation of the text's history, or as we might put it, the texture of transactions by and through which we know it as a cultural artifact. Thus does culture replace the familiar literary object with an unfamiliar reading, . . . the aim of such a distanced reading being not to understand the presumed text in its presumed autonomy, but the network of relations into which the cultural text subsumes and reconstitutes the literary text.²⁴

Persona criticism is an attempt to connect what is peculiar in a writer's work to what is shared with others. That I am motivated because of my special life experiences to value such connections is neither irrelevant to my work nor the whole truth about it. Instead of saying this aspect of the writer's work is important *because and only because* it relates to something the writer experienced or something we know he or she thought about, the persona critic must reflect on the way the forms of authorial representation available in the text open it to other kinds of texts from the same time period or to other texts produced under similar circumstances.

Choosing to concentrate on a composite persona removes the difficulty of having to decide who the writer “really” was and what she “really” meant, an irritating tendency of some psychological criticism. The persona is a mask, necessarily artificial and therefore unlike human subjectivity, which, with all its artificiality, also produces the genuine as one of its descriptive binaries. Limited and identifiable, the persona inevitably represents history, for the mask is embedded in ritual and culture. Like the masks used in dramatic tribal rituals, the persona always invokes the past as well as its particular moment.

Of course, it must be said that persona criticism cannot legitimate the introduction of biographical material in critical practice for those who would prefer not to think of texts as having authors at all. It can, however, be an appealing strategy for those who are committed to talking about the author but do not wish to fall into the trap of limiting the text to the author’s experience. For me, persona criticism has provided a way to go on talking about the combination of forces that impinge on the text without sacrificing my sense of psychological complexity, my notions of intertextuality, or my commitment to cultural history. Rather than functioning as a way to “close the writing,” persona criticism multiplies the critical horizons, suggesting not limits of possible significance but avenues of potentiality and new worlds to explore.

Notes

1. As one example of a piece of recent critical theory that takes a hard line concerning authors, see Toril Moi’s *Sexual/Textual Politics*, in which she exclaims: “For the patriarchal critic, the author is the source, origin and meaning of the text. If we are to undo this patriarchal practice of *authority*, we must take one further step and proclaim with Roland Barthes the death of the author” (62–63). She therefore disdains the attempt of Jane Marcus to take into consideration Virginia Woolf’s state of mind as she was composing her texts. See Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (New York: Methuen, 1985).

2. See Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 147.

3. For a typical example of the way the artist role has been associated with control over the text, see Sylvano Arieti, *Creativity: The Magic Synthesis* (New York: Basic Books, 1976). Arieti compares schizophrenics who “appear to be” creative with those he feels are truly creative because, unlike mental patients, they can make conscious decisions about their art.

4. In “What Is an Author?” Michel Foucault uses the term “author function” to signify the way a “mode of being of discourse” is characterized,

often through the use of the author's name: "the name seems always to be present, marking off the edges of the text, revealing, or at least characterizing, its mode of being." See Foucault, "What Is an Author?" trans. Josué Harari, in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon), 107.

5. Barthes, 147. Further references to Barthes will appear in the text as DA, page reference following. My essay "Feminist Literary Criticism and the Author" appears in *Critical Inquiry* 16 (Spring 1990): 551-71.

6. Foucault, 118. References to this text will henceforth appear in the text as WIA, page reference following quotation.

7. Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context" first printed in *Glyph I* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 182. This essay also appears in Derrida's *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 307-30.

8. See Nancy K. Miller, "Changing the Subject: Authorship, Writing, and the Reader" in *Feminist Studies, Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 102-20.

9. On the issue of iterability see Derrida, "Signature Event Context" and *Limited Inc* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

10. Widely known in psychological circles, studies confirming these tendencies are discussed in Wendy Wood, "Meta-Analytic Review of Sex Differences in Group Performance," *Psychological Bulletin* 12 (1987): 53-71. Also see Nancy Henley, *Body Politics: Power, Sex and Non-Verbal Communication* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1977).

11. See Moi, 68.

12. See Miller, 105.

13. The allusion here is to two essays by Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels: "Against Theory," in *Against Theory: Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 11-30 and "Against Theory 2: Hermeneutics and Deconstruction," *Critical Inquiry* 14 (Autumn 1987): 49-68. Knapp and Michaels argue that since the text must be construed as meaning something in order to function as a text, its meaning must also be limited and ascertainable; that limit, they feel, is furnished by the author.

14. For a good example of a critic who tells us what is at stake for her in her readings, see Cora Kaplan, *Sea Changes: Essays on Culture and Feminism* (London: Verso, 1986).

15. Though similar in some ways to Paul Jay's work, *Being in the Text: Self-Representation from Wordsworth to Roland Barthes* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), my work does not concentrate on prose autobiography, and my sense of persona is expanded to include more than psychological and epistemological issues.

16. My most extended discussion of Elinor Wylie's work occurs in *Masks Outrageous and Austere: Culture, Psyche and Persona in Modern Women Poets* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), chapter 4.

17. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, ed. Nina Baym et al. (New York: Norton, 1989), 2:1197.