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## Errata

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## Errata

To the Editor:

Professor Phillip Brian Harper, Director of Graduate Studies in the Department of Social and Cultural Analysis at New York University, has pointed out to me in a recent email exchange that twice in my essay “Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* and the Difficult Gift of Human Exchange” (59:2, Winter 2010) I misnamed John Ames’ second wife (Lila) as Della. I did this once while supplying Ames’ wife’s name as a parenthetical reference within a quote (218) and once while describing Ames’ reference to his second wife and their unexpected falling in love as evidence that “transformations just that abrupt do occur in this life” (225).

But Della was the name of Jack Boughton’s African-American wife, or perhaps former wife, for whom he wonders if there would be room in Gilead. The Iowa town may not be as hospitable to a biracial couple in the 1950s as it would have been earlier in the century.

My mistaking Della’s name for Lila’s, Professor Harper writes, “seems worth noting because the slip could be read as a recapitulation of the very disavowal of personalized racial politics that Ames and old Boughton themselves enact, and of which Robinson is arguably offering a subtle but clear critique.” I see his point, however much I would prefer not to identify with—much less further—the racial politics which Robinson critiques. Later, Professor Harper writes that the mistaken attribution “might be seen as a comparable—albeit unintentional (though that unintentionality is part of my point)—disavowal of the real significance of racial difference in the very sites of daily personal experience and familial domesticity that are the focal points of the novel.” “Disavowal” might name what Robinson exposes in the novel and finds that critics haven’t given enough attention to. It would be good to hear Professor Harper develop this point further.

In unintentional and ironic ways, I reversed the direction of the following statement by Ames, once fear of Jack is replaced by recognition of shared flaw and fellow-feeling. “I felt,” Ames writes his son, “as if I’d have bequeathed him wife and child if I could to supply the loss of his own” (quoted on p. 230). It’s interesting to speculate whether Ames would have done any better with my misattribution than old Boughton would. I like to think he would have. Robinson seems pretty critical of Ames at the end, but she allows him a fair bit of self-criticism, too. More interesting is whether

we readers run hard enough against the flow of American racial politics as it influences us—this is Professor Harper’s concern—in our daily personal experience and familial domesticity. I hope my unintentional error points out the difficulty of that running rather than unwittingly strengthens the current. It’s no wonder that Augustine refers to human custom as a flood we can hardly withstand.

Maybe the last word should go to Lila. She’s mostly the listener as Jack, old Boughton, and John Ames discuss questions about predestination on the front porch (152-53). Glory has already gone inside, saying that she’s heard this argument a thousand times before, and hates it. Suddenly Lila interrupts the awkward discussion. Robinson presents the interruption this way: “‘What about being saved?’ She said, ‘If you can’t change, there don’t seem much purpose in it.’ She blushed. ‘That’s not what I meant.’”

But she does mean something like that. The conversation ends with her answering Jack, though still not looking at him, “A person can change. Everything can change.” With difficulty. For Jack, for Ames, for us.

Respectfully,

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