

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Signature Books Defended

I'd like to echo the sentiments expressed by John Sillito ("Navigating the Difficult Terrain of the Mormon Experience," 36, no. 3 [Fall 2003]: 266-70) regarding Ronald W. Walker's, David W. Whittaker's, and James B. Allen's brief discussion of Signature Books in their book *Mormon History*.

Never once during my fifteen years as Signature's director of publishing did anyone ever attempt directly or indirectly to dictate a decision to accept or reject a manuscript for publication. The assertion that Signature favors any one person's ideology is simply wrong. I know from attending countless meetings of Signature's editorial board and board of directors that decisions regarding what to accept are governed exclusively by the quality of writing, responsible use of sources, cogency in presentation and organization, contribution to the general intellectual environment, and marketability. To suggest otherwise is to perpetrate a lie.

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Hamblin Ad Hominem?

"Reagan's economic policies are absurd; but what should we expect from an actor?" While this impromptu quotation may have been

inspired by the recent death of the former president, it is a very good example of a rhetorical method called the *ad hominem*.

The *ad hominem* has today become one of the most frequently used rhetorical arguments employed in discrediting the claims of others. It is my thought that ignorance, as well as its ubiquity, has dulled many to the point that the device has become unrecognizable for what it is: a method used in discrediting the claims of another in which the person rather than his or her argument becomes a point of argumentation. The *ad hominem* is a poor substitute for logical and scholarly argument and criticism.

Having to do with the irrelevancy of the appeal made rather than its falsity is where the *ad hominem* lurks. Reagan was indeed an actor, not an economist, but is that what makes his economic policy absurd? In the above quotation, my imaginary interlocutor's appeal simply criticizes Reagan's occupation, rather than logically and systematically explaining why the economic policy is absurd. While here we have a criticism of one's occupation, other forms of criticism might include one's character, associations, hobbies, motives, preferences, or beliefs.

I mentioned how frequently

this rhetorical device is used, but why? Perhaps the appeal of the *ad hominem* is that it is so very simple to do. It requires little if any effort to compose. One need simply find a point one's audience will consider unfavorable. The simple introduction of such a point goes a long way toward essentially "charming" one's audience to disregard the entire argument or position of one's opponent. Many it seems are seduced and swayed by its power without ever realizing it. It is a tool of the demagogue. Its power lies in its ability to convince the reader or listener that such bad ideas (i.e., those you disagree with) naturally come out of the mouths of bad people.

So what can be the purpose of this lesson in rhetoric? In a recent issue of *Dialogue*, an article featured an irrelevant argument in the form of an *ad hominem*. That article was William J. Hamblin, "There Really Is a God, and He Dwells in the Parietal Lobe of Joseph Smith's Brain," 36, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 79-87. Hamblin's article was composed in response to a previous *Dialogue* article by Robert M. Price, "Prophecy and Palimpsest," 35, no. 3 (Fall 2002): 67-82. Both articles deal with the origin of the Book of Mormon and whether it was a composition from the imagination of Joseph Smith himself.

Price's argument essentially cul-

minated in the theory that the Book of Mormon was inspired fiction written by Joseph Smith, a conclusion against which Hamblin's article quite convincingly and systematically argues. But where Hamblin missteps is in his conclusion, in which his scholarly and logical argument lapses, to be replaced by the *ad hominem*. Hamblin here simply and facilely attacks Price's beliefs rather than continuing to present additional relevant points. Price is an atheist, a point Hamblin makes expressly clear.

My question is: Why, after such good scholarship in responding to Price, would William Hamblin resort to such irrelevant tactics? True, Price is a self-proclaimed atheist, but what is the point of bringing up his religious beliefs? Hamblin holds that there is a relevant purpose for highlighting Hamblin's atheism—that in essence an atheist is incapable of commenting on or understanding the "ways of God" and is thus ill qualified to comment on the "divine" origin of the Book of Mormon.

As much as Hamblin denies that he is making it sound like Price is a "bad person" because of his atheism, what effect does this observation have upon his predominantly believing Christian