

A dialogue concerning Tompkins' paradox

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Abstract. This paper presents a dialogue between Tompkins and a character whom I refer to as N. Tompkins asks, "How do we get into the big leagues?" N's response is to emphasize quantity. This suggests a solution to the paradox.

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Tompkins' paradox is not going away!

Tompkins' paradox is here to stay!

Do you know Tompkins' paradox (Edward 2022: fn. 1)? Jane Tompkins writes: Women... are, understandably afraid. Afraid of being confused with the weaker sex, the sex that goes around whining and talking about itself in an unseemly way, that can't or won't do what the big boys do ('tough it out') and so won't ever be allowed to play in the big boys' games. I am sympathetic with this position. Not long ago, as organizer of an MLA session entitled 'Professional politics: women and the institution', I urged a large roomful of women to 'get theory' because I thought that doing theory would admit us to the big leagues...

But she writes all this in the prestigious journal *New Literary History*. There is an argument then that Tompkins is already in the big leagues.

I have imagined a dialogue between Tompkins and a character whom I call N, and it suggests a solution to this seemingly paradoxical situation.

Tompkins: How do we get into the big leagues?

N: So you are looking for a plan, a rational plan?

Tompkins: Yes.

N: But if there is a rational plan then lots of people will use it and if you let lots of people in, it will not be the big leagues any more.

Tompkins: No.

N: So either you get into the big leagues without planning to or the difference is quantity. You produce more than the others who use the plan and that allows you into the big leagues and not them.

End of dialogue. Given *N*'s perspective, one publication in such a prestigious journal as *New Literary History* is probably not enough, which explains why one can rationally ask Tompkins' question there.

References

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