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Measuring Ideas, Managing Readings? On the Criteria for Determining Quality in Research in Literary Studies

Literary studies is a scholarly discipline that is characterized in theory and practice by a diversity of diverging approaches, methods, intended aims, and definitions of its object of study, and it is, in one of its main sectors, concerned with the analysis of meanings that are not fixed but have still to be worked out in the first place. This article considers the question of how it can be possible for such a discipline to reach agreement regarding shared criteria for distinguishing between high and less high quality in its products – publications and research plans. By way of introduction, it reviews the awkward status of literary studies as a scholarly discipline (*Wissenschaft*), and the specific conditions in which meanings are determined and assigned

in literary texts or in literary communication processes. They tend to make the identification of objective quality criteria in this field seem improbable or inappropriate. The article then confronts the epistemological reflections of the subject-specific discussion with the fact that the latter is taking place in an academic and political context that brings with it the obligation to justify decisions and provide evidence of achievement, and to this extent does not give us the choice of whether we want to define and recognize quality standards. Instead, we need to ask ourselves what quality criteria are most suitable for literary studies and what the appropriate ways to determine and use them are. With this in mind, the article presents a report from the shop floor of how evaluation takes place in the DFG (*Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*, Germany's largest research funding organization), discussing the theme of quality criteria in the context of defined principles of assessment and some remarks on the interpretation of these principles. In the process, it becomes apparent that the tried and tested quality criteria in the field of literary studies are largely congruent with those that apply to other academic fields, with the special features of work in literary studies being taken into consideration when these general criteria are applied to individual cases. In order to make the points of reference comparable, voting and debate in group discussions among subject-specific representatives chosen by their scholarly communities or inspection groups invited by the DFG are necessary. In general, it is the case that, even in such discussion-based processes of arriving at assessments, there still remains a 'non-objective element' that should not be overlooked – premature conclusions about the topic when forming judgements or one-sidedness in assessors' positions. This feature does not immediately indicate a limitation of or failing in quality assessment; it corresponds to the openness and creativity of literary communication processes, and to this extent reflects more a surplus than a deficit. Putting the corresponding quality criteria into practice places a high demand on the assessors involved. It demands a considerable readiness to debate, consistency and clarity of argumentation, and integrity, as well as a willingness to approach the application of the quality criteria in such a way that it becomes, for all concerned, a transparent part of a process of scholarly discussion.

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