
Editor's Note

ISSUES OF *PMLA* cluster articles. Unlike fruits, flowers, or cells, the texts are grouped not according to any natural principle but by a process of selection from the manuscript pool and of combination in particular sequences. To the editorial I, this operation unfailingly reveals surprising connections, which in another age might have elicited a Baudelairean awe over correspondences. And yet issues of *PMLA* have sometimes been viewed as arbitrary, inchoate bunchings and lumpings of pieces, thought to result “unfortunately” from the journal’s democratic procedures. This perception, accurate or inaccurate, frequently or rarely expressed, prompted the Editorial Board to institute two valuable features: special topics and, more pertinent to this number of the journal, “clusters” of articles formed from the available stock.

In the October 1990 Editor’s Column, which prefaced the first such cluster, John Kronik explained that the board had observed “some happy coincidences: correspondences, both logical and unexpected, connecting groups of essays through chronology, geography, theme, or methodology” and had thus decided to “take advantage of potentially fruitful dialogues among studies that had been submitted independently. . . .” Although the naturalist notion, implicit in the term “fruitful,” that “the clusters are self-generated groupings” could be questioned, the desire to make textual (inter)connections has produced copious sections devoted to Victorian, Hispanic, modern fiction, reader-response, Russian, and Chaucerian studies, introduced by members of the Editorial Board or of the Advisory Committee. In this issue, a cluster of four texts on gender is prefaced by the resonant dialogic remarks of Coppélia Kahn and Sandy Petrey, to whom I extend the board’s gratitude.

Figuring Gender reflects the conspicuous trend in many disciplines to denaturalize the concept of sexual differences and to investigate the cultural construction of men and women. Beginning in the mid-seventies and complementing the earlier, more exclusive emphasis on women in feminist studies, the focus on gender as a category of analysis has underscored that definitions of femininity and masculinity are relational, part of a system of binary oppositions. The articles making up this

cluster, by Frances E. Dolan, Ellen G. Friedman, Bette London, and Gregory W. Bredbeck, figure—and seek to figure out—those relational constructions in particular contexts. In contrast to theorists of patriarchy, whose efforts to make gender a (or the) principal factor in all sociocultural organizations—or in “the symbolic system”—often resulted in universal, immutable, essentialist notions, these authors highlight and span the historical specificity of gender ideologies from early modern to postmodern times.¹ Moreover, the idea that “it is only possible to be in one [gendered] position . . . and never in both at once,” which Judith Butler calls the “gendered law of noncontradiction” (332), is undermined both by London’s study of Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and by Bredbeck’s discussion of homosexual poetics.

In probing the gender implications of various texts, images, aesthetic schools, and trends, the authors of these essays figure the act of reading as a gendered (and for Bredbeck also an erotic) undertaking. This deuniversalization and denaturalization of the reader has made a monumental difference—possibly on the order of a paradigm shift—in literary studies. Accordingly, Sandy Petrey reads the four essays from his own gendered and sexual positions, whose problematic implications do not seem readily resolvable at this juncture. And Coppélia Kahn gives a reading of both Petrey and the cluster that exposes the difficulties—and the blind spots—of all forms of gender identity. The connections and disconnections among all these texts make for a particularly “fruitful” cluster.

Although the unclustered essays in this issue of *PMLA* may seem paratactic, they manifest links to the first four and to one another, most notably through their ways of figuring reading. Robert Lecker interprets Northrop Frye’s conclusion to the *Literary History of Canada* as an androcentric romance of fall and redemption that casts Frye, and by extension the prototypical critic, in the role of a mythic “reader-hero.” Echoing Lecker’s emphasis on “allegories of reading,” Jeanne P. Brownlow shows how Galdós’s late-nineteenth-century novel *Torque-mada* brings Dante’s Christian allegory into intratextual negotiation with a positivist episteme—and episteme, in its Foucauldian usage, is an allegorical construct in its own right. In a close reading of passages from Montaigne, the emblematic reader-as-writer, George Hoffmann argues that the constant emendation and republication of the *Essais* were a means of maintaining ownership of the text, which would have fallen into the public domain had it remained unchanged. Extending the investigation of writing and reading back several centuries, Michael R. Near analyzes *Beowulf* as an allegory of the conflicts between oral transmission or interaction, the declining tradition for which the epic longs, and literacy, whose alienating, isolating effects on human beings and thus on social organization the epic opposes.

Clustered and unclustered, then, the articles in this issue constitute “a bundle of relations,” to borrow Emerson’s description of “man,” associations that can counteract textual isolation even in postliterate

times. For making relations or fabricating connections is part and parcel of what it means to be *vir* or *femina faber*.

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Note

¹On the importance of historicizing gender, see Joan Scott's influential "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," first published in 1986.

Works Cited

- Butler, Judith. "Gender Trouble, Feminist Theory, and Psychoanalytic Discourse." *Feminism and Postmodernism*. Ed. Linda Nicholson. New York: Routledge, 1990. 324–40.
- Scott, Joan. "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis." *American Historical Review* 9 (1986): 1053–75.