Introduction

This issue of *New Views on Gender* identifies and creates connections between the written word and gender. These essays dissect literature, symbol, and icon for the purpose of taking a new look at the role of literature in the creation, maintenance, and/or evolution of concepts of gender.

Texts represent a concrete manifestation of a less visible cycle. So, as we begin to think about writing, we should be mindful of the other stages in such a cycle. Texts must have an origin, an author. The act of writing attempts to fix an experience, a thought. While the very nature of experience is subjective, writing changes its subject even further so that it only resembles the original experience. It is a snap-shot through an imperfect lens, a carnival-mirror image of life, created by human minds.

A text must also have a reader. The reader brings her subjective experience to the text as she interprets, deciphering squiggles on the page and drawing meaning from them. Neither the author nor the reader has ultimate control of meaning. The "actual" meaning of a text, some authoritative interpretation, is therefore not available. Why then, is the *written word* a good place (even a credible place) to look for a *new view on gender*?

Words act as "other" to experience. While writing consists of concentrations, dilutions, and other variations of the "stuff" of experience, it is different by virtue of the very fact that it is written down. It is more available for inspection. It stands still (in a way) long enough to be cut open, examined.

To some extent, writing represents a social agreement, an agreement of importance. One may write something down in order to remember it, so that someone else may not forget it; because one feels it should not be lost, it is of value. The stories told must be literally remarkable to their authors and, in

order to survive, their readers must agree. Writing must not only resemble life, it must resonate. In this way, writing is an ideal other; we demand that it be literally perfect, the whole that contains perfection and imperfection; life, but not life; us, but not us.

The relationship is reciprocal: culture influences literature and literature, in turn, influences culture. When we look at a text we are looking at a representation of societal values in a form that is available to scrutiny.

The study of writing then, is an opportunity to look at society in an anesthetized state. The point of such study is not, however, prescription but description. We are not surgically removing the offending limb from the body of literature and leaving our patient for dead. Nor are we out to recover some quintessential golden nugget of truth, a philosopher's kidney stone.

We are instead, operating for the sake of understanding and with the hope of fleshing out interpretations and meanings that may have been overlooked. And our patient, the text itself, is immune to actual harm: while it is possible to pose new interpretations, it is impossible to rob a text of some other meaning.

Gender and the impact of its constructions may be more visible in literature because of the distortion. Just as Frankenstein's monster illuminates the distinction between humanity and monstrosity and implores us to reconsider that which we take for granted, so too literature may illuminate specimens of gender.

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