

# PMLA

*Volume 100*  
*Number 2*

*Publications of the  
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March 1985

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*Michael Goldman*

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**Abstract.** The biblical book of Ruth is a succinct, intricate love story powered by five intense dialogues. It is a story about language and literature as well as about love. The characters find all three as generously available as the grains of barley on which Boaz and Ruth pledge their troth. Boaz, Ruth, and Naomi draw on a rich common store of literary allusions and laws derived from Hebrew literary tradition to create a happy ending for the sterile stories of their individual pasts. The liberties they take with known biblical and Hebraic law have long puzzled scholars trying to place the story in its precise historical or cultural context. But I argue that the book was never intended to represent a time and place, that it celebrates the creative improvisations religious rules are meant to inspire in any time or place. (JW)

The Figure of the Reader in Petrarch's <i>Secretum</i> . VICTORIA KAHN . . . . .	154
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**Abstract.** Critics of Renaissance literature have recently claimed that the active role of the reader in the production of meaning is only recognized in the sixteenth century. While numerous counterexamples can be found in classical and medieval literature, this essay focuses on the active role of the fictional reader in Petrarch's *Secretum* in order to demonstrate the limited applicability of such a claim to the early Renaissance. While critics have interpreted the exchange between Augustinus and Franciscus as the dramatic representation of Petrarch's divided will, they have failed to note that this dividedness is conveyed as well by the intertextuality of the work. In his willful misreading of Augustine's *Confessions*, in his allusions to his own earlier letter on the ascent of Mont Ventoux, as well as in his use and abuse of citations and moral exempla, Petrarch dramatizes his conception of the will itself as a faculty of interpretation. (VK)

Sexual and Social Mobility in <i>The Duchess of Malfi</i> . FRANK WHIGHAM . . . . .	167
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**Abstract.** For some time Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* has been interpreted by reference to brother-sister incest, but that explanation has not been well integrated with other concerns in the play, nor has its sheer presence been questioned. Anthropological kinship theory, however, which conceives incest as a social act, reveals relations among the brother-sister plot, the play's major thematic element of social mobility, and the Jacobean setting from which the theme arose. Seen in this anthropological light, social-structural relations come into view among Ferdinand's incestuous inclination, his sister's cross-class marriage, and Antonio's and Bosola's upward social mobility. These relations in turn show how the play is grounded in its particular historical setting, at a time of substantial changes in notions of social role, changes that helped make visible the social determination of personal identity. (FW)

The Father’s Word/Satan’s Wrath. MARY NYQUIST . . . . . 187

**Abstract.** Milton’s two epic beginnings are interrelated by a network of structural parallels and verbal echoes and by the articulation of the Father’s Word with Satan’s wrath. An important if unacknowledged intertext for Satan’s temptations against the Word, which occur in both epics, is the Reformed reading of the Genesis exchange between the serpent and Eve. Granting it status as an intertext permits a fresh exploration of the intertextual relations of *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. Under a poststructuralist and Lacanian analysis, the distinctive logocentric structures and operations at work in these two epics reveal the authority and self-presence of the Father’s Word systematically yet progressively being caught up in or displaced by Satan’s plotting, by history, and by writing. (MN)

Dialogic Midwifery in Kleist’s *Marquise von O* and the Hermeneutics of Telling the Untold in Kant and Plato.  
JOHN H. SMITH . . . . . 203

**Abstract.** We often speak of a text “pregnant” with meaning. But how does it give birth? Certainly not through the intervention of monologic doctoring but, rather, with the aid of “dialogic midwifery.” In Kleist’s *Marquise von O*, the tale of an unexplained conception and pregnancy, the art of ironic dialogism, though never directly giving expression to the peculiar state of affairs, helps give birth to interpretation and to the genre of the realistic novella. The circuitous narrative technique of telling and untelling, which supplements consciousness as a midwife assists a woman in childbirth, links Kleist’s text to a hermeneutic tradition stretching from Plato through Kant (and well beyond). (JHS)

“That Which Is Always Beginning”: Stevens’s Poetry of Affirmation.  
STEVEN SHAVIRO . . . . . 220

**Abstract.** Wallace Stevens’s later poetry traces the multiple investments of desire that impel a world in perpetual metamorphosis. The works from “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” onward constitute an unlimited and ceaselessly repeated affirmation of difference, heterogeneity, and change. The evanescent movements of this poetry can never be reduced to sameness or self-identity, but they produce partial and temporary fixities of subjectivity and signification as local effects. Stevens’s radical perspectivism and his rejection of concepts of identity and substance work to subvert traditional dualisms of subject and object, language and world, and assertion and denial. But this work of displacement is never merely negative and destructive. Stevens’s later poetry celebrates what Nietzsche calls “the eternal joy of becoming,” and in so doing it exceeds the limits of Western humanist thought. (SS)

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