

Guest Column

Note. With this issue *PMLA* offers its readers two features that I hope will reappear periodically in its pages. As a refreshing alternative to the Editor's Column, which has graced the front section of *PMLA* since William Schaefer had his say there in the January 1975 number, you will find a Guest Column. The authors are Myra Jehlen of Rutgers University and Maureen Quilligan of the University of Pennsylvania. As the two recently retired members of the *PMLA* editorial board, they can jointly tender their private but expert perceptions of the workings of the journal. This issue also brings the first of what I anticipate will be occasional contributions by honorary fellows and honorary members of the MLA. I am deeply grateful to Carlos Fuentes for generously releasing to *PMLA* a piece that he calls "a story on the stories of Borges." It is appropriate that one of our fellows should be honoring another of our fellows in the (in)imitable styles of both and in the process should evoke yet another fellow whom the MLA would surely have honored had he not predated the association by some four hundred years.*

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WHAT'S in a name? All that Juliet sought to suppress. Since 1980, the editorial board of *PMLA* has been pursuing a policy of anonymous submissions, assessing the value of submitted work solely on the basis of what's on the page, attempting to understand this work in relation to the larger culture of literary studies, without reference to the elemental fact of the writer's identity. As we complete our terms on the board, we thought it might be useful to consider the paradoxical results of our attempt to read an article without the context of an author's name—and all that is in a name, not the least of which is the mark of gender.

Anonymity conceals more than gender, of course. As a policy, it intends equally to mask institutional affiliation and rank, and it tends as well to obscure ethnic origin, possibly race, and theoretically class. These concealments are certainly as significant as the masking of sex, but they are not as dramatic, gender being so immediate and so final an assignment of context in our society. Through its exclusion of crucial grammatical information, the suppression of gender required us to develop positive alternative linguistic strategies in order to form coherent sentences about what we had read. In our group discussion, we had to invent another way of speaking about writers, to take the stage if not a stand.

We rehearsed several grammatical strategies. "He or she" was the simplest but soon grew unwieldy. The compound "s/he," so convenient in the readers' reports appended to each article, had, when imitated in speech, the unfortunate spasmodic quality of requiring either a sneezelike stutter or a jerk of the hand to signal the slash. Alternating "he" or "she" is more graceful at each turn, but everyone tended to lose count. We found no perfect solution. More radically, we discovered that our formulas, whatever they were, could not repress the undeniable fact that board members had often already privately assigned definite genders (and ranks as well as geographical locations) to individual authors. ("Oh, so you assume it's a he?" "How can you be so certain the author's from Canada?")

At first thought, one might expect that a policy of anonymous submissions would remove difficulties by abstracting the intellectual from the social and political, by separating the work from the person. On the contrary, in editorial discussions the personality of an unnamed author became not less tangible and particular but often more so. The unnamed persona that we imagined to match the authority we perceived in the written text both unconsciously and consciously formed our own rhetorical strategies of persuasion. Had the author's identity been revealed—as full professor or graduate student, as a faculty member at a two-year community college or an Ivy League university, as male or female, as culturally congruent with the text under discussion or not—that name would have helped to explain and decode the writing for us. The process through which person and work tend to collapse into one another in the authority of a single name is as old as the medieval formula for an *auctor*, "As Tully saith. . . ." Unexplained and unidentified, the inevitable traces left in articles by their passage through the world emerged the more vividly. (A was a radical feminist female; B had clearly trained at Yale; C was obviously an Australian.) By serving as generalizing labels, names abstract from the reality they name. In the absence of names, the editorial analysis remained immersed in the reality of the pages' particulars. To say that we also struggled hard to provide a context for judgment, assigning more or less authority

*Both the Fuentes essay and this note were written before the death of Jorge Luis Borges on 14 June 1986. In an ironic twist of fate that the master himself might have invented, *PMLA* pays tribute to a writer who accomplished the impossible feat of remaining unique while leaving his indelible stamp on modern literature.

to the names that remained—of the two and sometimes three readers who had written reports, of the texts under the anonymous author's scrutiny—is to say that we continued to function as all readers do: we filled in the gaps. And so, in finding the identification of authors a problem in our discussions, we did not avoid but engaged the problems of social and political identification inside the editorial process.

Each time, once the decision whether to publish had been made, the revelation of the author's name came as a sort of reward. For finally, we were curious, and having diligently analyzed what and how, we very much wanted now to be told who. Knowing "who" provided a certain resolution: the reward was the satisfaction not merely of our curiosity but of our own assessment of authority, the correct or incorrect guesses we had made about the missing contexts. ("I never would have thought that piece was by a graduate student." "See, the author *was* an Australian.") There were times when the impression we had formed over the course of the discussion proved wildly wrong, and misimpressions seemed widest of the mark, of course, when we had mistaken an author's gender. At one point, when an author whom most of us had assumed to be female was revealed to be male, one member muttered, "We've been had." Had by whom? By any reader's need to supply an identity to the "voice" heard and to put the authority of the writing in a context for evaluation. In those moments of wrong guessing, the sense of resolution granted by our learning the name was the sharper, and the issues of our own assumptions about the authority of scholarly status and of gender more visible.

None of us seemed much interested in recognizing particular names. Indeed, specific familiarity with disclosed names was rare—though when authors were personally known by members of the board, one could gauge the usefulness of anonymity with real force; the regret or the delight that an honored friend or colleague had been rejected or accepted measured the pressure one might have felt to vote and argue other than one had. In the even rarer instances in which an individual board member knew for certain (rather than simply guessed) an author's identity and had to remain silent during discussion, the deliberation was awkwardly infected by the knowledge that at least one person knew how accurately the reconstruction of the author's identity was proceeding. Such specific identifications, either before or after the discussion, felt like strange accidents, for it was not individual names we lacked in the language of our deliberations but the names of social and cultural categories. Individual names would have had to be generalized and categorized to serve the group's purpose.

When this categorical language was restored to us through the final naming, its terms were not what they would have been had we had their use all along. If that final naming provided a resolution, this resolution was newly ambiguous in conveying a henceforth dubious knowledge. Had we not ourselves just demonstrated how dubious such knowledge is by having sometimes guessed so wildly wrong? Had we not experienced precisely how contingent and complicitous our sense of authority is, how it constitutes a body of questions rather than of answers? In short, the innocence of names had been lost in the experience of anonymity. This loss of innocence was a ritual drama we played out in all our discussions: it is difficult to imagine any drama more appropriate to the editorial board of a journal devoted to understanding the experience of reading.

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