

Special Topic on Science Fiction

TO THE EDITOR:

I want to thank you for the recent *PMLA* special topic on science fiction (119 [2004]: 429–546). Although its contents are a bit rough around the edges, the volume breathes new life into what has often struck me as a dull and tendentious journal. From the articles and correspondence gathered by coordinators Marleen S. Barr and Carl Freedman, one senses a vital, ongoing critical jousting about the issues that should matter most to us: about literary value and its determinants; about the ambiguous boundaries of genre; about the self-awareness of authors and the identity politics ascribed to them; and, most important, about literature's relevance to social and technological realities.

One of the blind spots in science fiction criticism emerges, however, in the contributors' insistence that literary reflection on and engagement with science did not exist before Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). Although science fiction critics portray themselves as angry outsiders waging a righteous battle against the bastion of elitist Value, these writers' own myopia on the historical development of literary engagement with technology represents another kind of parochialism. An entire world of literature exists in the shadows of *Frankenstein*, of "speculative" fiction reflecting on the consequences of recently invented technology and scientific discoveries. One need only think of the works of Thomas Love Peacock, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Jonathan Swift, Nicolas Edme Restif de la Bretonne, Benjamin Martin, the marquis de Sade, and Louis-Sébastien Mercier, to mention but a few eighteenth-century examples.

I propose that *PMLA* sustain this exciting field of literary reflection with a special topic on the interrelations between science and literature in the early modern period (the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries). Let's throw off the prejudice against the "premodern" and explore more fully the connections among literature, popular culture, and scientific development in the era predating canonical science fiction.

Julia Douthwaite
University of Notre Dame

TO THE EDITOR:

In "Introduction: Textism—An Emancipation Proclamation" (119 [2004]: 429–41), Marleen S.

Barr may want to turn her phaser down from kill to stun, or at least point it in the right direction. The genre wars are not taking place a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away so much as they are fought on the floors of chain bookstores. Authors such as Margaret Atwood will resist being called "science fiction writers" as long as the science fiction aisle continues to be home to whatever can be printed on cheap paper, bound with glue little better than spit, and expected to have a shelf life shorter than a can of beer. We can and should expect an author like Atwood to distance herself from any category so easily dismissed as "crap." We can also hope serious readers and scholars dip into the muck from time to time and bring to our attention neglected gems.

Barnes and Noble, Borders, Dalton's, and other book purveyors categorize texts as a matter of good commercial practice. The customer in search of Harry Potter, for example, is more likely to be lured into buying a nearby volume by Robert Cormier or Judy Blume than a work by Robert Heinlein, so J. K. Rowling's work is shelved as Young Adult. But effective product proximity placement is not the same as literary analysis. To allow commercial practices to determine rules of engagement in genre wars is to concede the high ground to clerks masquerading as corporate executives. If *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird* were forthcoming next week, these people would consign such books to the Young Adult aisle, not to Fiction or Literature (with or without a capital "L"). Look for *Pride and Prejudice*, the riotous, hysterically funny novel of sisters in search of husbands, to be stacked on the odiously named Chick Lit table. So why not a science fiction classification scheme free of commercial considerations?

Naturalism. In this baseline genre, Newtonian physics is respected; our ordinary sense of cause and effect in the physical world is unquestioned and requires no explanation. Ethan Frome's sled doesn't take flight and carry him to a happier, alternative universe. (I'd welcome suggestions for a more helpful label than "naturalism" to distinguish this genre from what some scholars will insist applies exclusively to such writers as Theodore Dreiser.)

Fabulation. In fabulations, a single element of the work abandons Newtonian physics, after which the work proceeds as naturalism. We suspend our

disbelief and accept that angels fall from heaven and crash into chicken coops. Of course people turn into rhinoceroses. Sure, Billy Pilgrim slides forward and backward through time. The fabulous element is presented as a matter of fact, with no explanation. In this genre, we do not read how a radioactive bug nipped Gregor Samsa to create Roach Man.

Speculative fiction. While respecting Newtonian physics, authors writing speculative fiction extend scientific or social trends to extremes. Antiutopian novels by Atwood and George Orwell are obvious examples. Postapocalyptic visions such as the Mad Max films or Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* belong on this shelf, beside William Gibson's *Neuromancer*. It's breathtaking to read a work in which an imagined element becomes reality—Jules Verne's submarine or Arthur C. Clarke's system of communication satellites in stationary orbits. Criticism abounds with attempts to define a genre that asks, "What if . . . ?" This is it.

Science fiction. Like speculative fiction, this genre seeks to comment on contemporary mores and trends, but it presents a world explicable only with non-Newtonian physics. Typically—and too often clumsily—the author takes time to explain or at least suggest the cause-effect science that makes possible a future to be realized just the day after tomorrow. We'll all enjoy holodecks; we'll venture to other galaxies through wormholes where non-carbon-based life-forms will befriend or harass us; we'll travel through time on superstrings or through black holes; we'll escape the solar system as soon as we harness not-yet-discovered dilithium crystals, the stuff of *Star Trek's* warp drives. Writers in this genre explore social issues in worlds that might be, but are not necessarily, extensions of ours. Stories about shifting gender identity are plentiful enough to be considered a subgenre. The rebel defying monolithic galactic states is another subgenre, venerable space opera. Humanity warring with BEMs (bug-eyed monsters) is a third, whether the BEMs come from another planet or, like Godzilla, rise from the sea. Are such works metaphors about identity politics, politics systems, or the consequences of nuclear devastation? You betcha, but the essence is a metaphor of reality, not a speculation about what will happen if current conditions continue.

Fantasy. While unexplained science may look like magic to a barbarian, imaginative worlds allowing events irrespective of any kind of physics are

fantasy realms. In Middle Earth, Narnia, Oz, and at Hogwarts, incantations and spells are based on faith. Cars fly, swords glow blue in the presence of evil, and beasts that lack vocal chords nevertheless talk.

The source of textism is that newly minted sword-and-sorcery epics, science fiction, and speculative fiction compete for space on the same bookstore shelves. Some of the writing is beastly and some wonderful. Is it literature? The same conversation is ongoing in the mystery aisle, but as readers we ought to be aware that as a rule, after such literary niceties as characterization and prose style, we judge genre writers by how consistently or inventively they observe the tropes of a form. For critics, at issue should be whether work is accomplished, not its genre.

Genre is more complicated than the bookstores can tolerate, and since complexity is usually a good thing, along with Marleen S. Barr when it comes to critical conversation, I say, "Make it so."

Perry Glasser
Salem State College

Reply:

To Julia Douthwaite's call to "throw off the prejudice against the 'premodern,'" I reiterate what I said in "Introduction: Textism—An Emancipation Proclamation": "make it so." Who can argue against throwing off prejudice? I, for example, would like to throw off Douthwaite's phrase "science fiction critics portray *themselves* as angry outsiders" (*italics mine*). Are "themselves" science fiction critics and "ourselves" realistic literature critics? Us and them? Some of my best friends are science fiction critics.

Perry Glasser asks, "So why not a science fiction classification scheme free of commercial considerations?" His call for even more generic categories does not address the reality of publishing fiction: publishers' and agents' obsession with profit supersedes literary value. Or: if Faulkner were alive today, he would be advised to move to a southern Mississippi Gulf resort and clone *The South Beach Diet*. In a publishing climate that values money above all else, all fiction that agents and publishers view as unprofitable—regardless of its literary merit—is branded with the pervasive word many elitist, textist critics use to dismiss all science fiction: *crap*.