

## “Whitman, Sex, and Gender”

“Welcome is every organ and attribute of me, and of any man hearty and clean,” wrote Whitman in his 1855 *Leaves of Grass*; “not an inch nor a particle of an inch is vile, and none shall be less familiar than the rest.” He embraced metaphorically all sorts and conditions of men and — some say less convincingly — women in his epochal poem. In the century since his death, critics, biographers, and general readers have puzzled over the elusive “real Me” projected in his poems and in the tantalizing snippets he let fall in conversation and correspondence with his contemporaries.

In spring 1988 a distinguished group of scholars met at the Camden campus of Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, to discuss the role played by sexuality in Whitman’s poetry. This special issue of *The Mickle Street Review* makes public the proceedings of the conference, which was entitled “Walt Whitman: Gender Issues and Sexuality.” The conference, organized by Rutgers professor David S. Reynolds, was co-sponsored by Rutgers University, The New Jersey Committee on the Humanities, and the Walt Whitman Association. Included in the current issue are seven conference papers by such noted Whitman scholars as David Reynolds, Jerome Loving, and William Schurr; feminist critics Vivian Pollak and Sandra Gilbert; Whitman biographer Justin Kaplan; and poet Louis Simpson. Together this panel examined every aspect of the problems of interpretation raised by Whitman’s sexual orientation — that of a homosexual in a severely repressive culture — and its implications for the modern reader.

From the insights at the conference, Whitman emerges as a multi-dimensional man and writer, at odds with his society, speaking in code to those who could hear him. He is also the poet who would seduce his reader in a bold collaborative venture of creation. He is the man who coyly hinted at heterosexuality and offspring, and carried a picture of an unknown woman with him, yet wrote with much more feeling about men. Although he was castigated for his frankness, he in fact aspired to get popular literature out of the mire of the penny dreadful. His ambivalence toward women provokes continuing debate: were they merely to be the bearers of a better breed for “these . . . States,” or were

they co-equals, and the feminine principle one facet through which the “real Me” would refract itself in the visionary new world? And what are we to make of the woman who watches the twenty-eight bathers: is she a comrade or a voyeur? The conference proceedings presented here under the title “Whitman, Sex, and Gender” should provide the final word on the subject of Whitman’s sexuality for a long time to come.

Also included in this issue is a selection of works by contemporary poets. Joseph T. Barbarese opens the issue with a dark meditation on America seen through the windows of Walt Whitman’s home in Camden, while Howard Nelson, Janice Guidotti, Donald Levering, Grace Bauer, and Elliot Richman celebrate the sexual and physical language of the body. Eight winners of the 1988 Walt Whitman Association High School Poetry Contest, which addressed the theme of “Peace,” are represented by their prizewinning poems. Two reviews of important new books in the field round out the issue.

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