

## Editor's Column

THE editor's column in the March issue raised some questions about the recent decline in the number of essays submitted by men, about the merits of anonymous submissions and of our evaluation process, and about other matters. I invited members to share their thoughts on *PMLA* as a place to publish, and the responses are abundant, invigorating, dispiriting, quotable, predictable, and wonderfully informative. Since the scores of letters constitute a kind of informal survey, the first we have conducted for some time, I want to share some of the more telling observations, as well as the patterns that seem to emerge.

The first thing to say is that, not surprisingly, there is no consensus at all about *PMLA*. Our members extol the essays as "exemplary" and denounce them as "arcane," call them both "highly readable" and "unintelligible," describe them as "models of scholarship" and as "footnote heavy," judge them "stimulating" and "paralyzing." Even the editor's column receives mixed reviews (Is nothing sacred?), one reader praising its "genial tone," another condemning its "patronizing air of connoisseurship." This last reader, taking exception to the word "showcase" ("a journal such as ours," I had written, "really should be a showcase for the most important essays being written throughout the ranks of our membership"), asks, "Is *PMLA* then a museum or an elegant collection incomplete without its full array of specimens?" A colleague in British Columbia also takes gentle exception to the editor's diction: "I don't know whether I am 'nationally visible' (your phrase—implying, I suppose, that Canada is another American state), but I get enough commissions to keep me busy."

The question of commissions and of the relation between *PMLA* and "senior" scholars produced the most mail, with a number of correspondents saying that they do indeed, as I suspected, write only essays that are certain to be accepted. "It is difficult not to accept commissions, especially when they are in honor of an esteemed colleague," a well-known Hispanist writes. "When we do submit to *PMLA* we should be treated like ordinary mortals." From a student of American literature: "While I have served as a specialist reader on at least a half dozen occasions, I do not submit my own work because I do not have time to write articles beyond those I am invited to write." One reader, slightly misinterpreting one of my observations, says, "The suggestion that 'distinguished' senior scholars be given special privileges in *PMLA* fills me with shame. I want to see only the *best* articles, not those of my big-name colleagues, who may already be showing signs of senility and are afraid of the younger competition." From a former student of mine: "If the top shots don't want the indignity of a rejection slip, let them apply elsewhere. Up with the republic of letters!"

The subject of "top shots" produced a noteworthy response. "The great names are only great," one member comments, "because at some point someone encouraged them to take a first step." Another respondent, lauding the introduction of anonymous submissions, says that, by adhering to this policy for nine or ten years, "*PMLA* is in effect going to have *created* a new class of important scholars who will be the ultimate test for the policy and who may be expected to remain loyal to the journal and to submit their best articles to it." Another says that the process we now use is "the best insurance we can have that *PMLA* will publish the really major names, those of the year 2000 as well as of 1960." Again, "The 'blind' policy I find comforting—it assures me that rejection is objective, which makes it much easier to take." Finally, "My younger colleagues write better than my generation did. Do think twice before you change either the publication or your policies." Several correspondents point out that we do, regularly, publish the work of both well-known scholars and younger members, and they suggest that such balance is altogether desirable.

The reasons that members choose *not* to submit essays are sometimes based on misapprehensions. A graduate student, for example, says he was advised not to submit to *PMLA* because "it will take years to get a verdict." We try, in fact, to get responses to our authors within sixty days. Another potential contributor fears that "one anonymous reader could torpedo my article at the start," but since every essay receives at least two preliminary readings this fear is un-

founded. Other responses, however, are less easy to refute. Several members complain about evaluations that convinced them not to try again. One author "derives greater satisfaction from being published in a journal intended for specialists," and another admits, "I submit my work to the places most likely to accept it." "What I find objectionable," still another writes, "is that one must write in English regardless of one's language and the subject being explored," and one member complains that, while it makes sense to translate Chinese, Japanese, and other non-Western languages, "members of the MLA should certainly be familiar with Germanic and Romance languages. . . . If we do not maintain some standard of scholarship, who will?"

A modernist is convinced that the journal rules certain authors, such as Joyce Carol Oates and Joseph Heller, "off the roost" and that this policy makes *PMLA* "impossible to crack for some modernists." Another reader, suggesting that the discipline has become too varied for *PMLA* to encompass, thinks that the journal "still operates from the premise that scholars work in isolation, work primarily on high literary texts, and can make their careers (and reputations) from a few splendid articles, as leading figures of thirty or forty years ago indeed could. The premise yields a pleasant myth of the academic life; unfortunately, it hasn't been true for about twenty years."

Several members recommend the inclusion of short essays, of 2,500 to 4,000 words: "Good writing on any subject is almost always shorter than bad writing on the same subject." Others suggest commissioned essays, special issues, book reviews, and more illustrations. One reader suggests "an occasional foray into German *Rezeptionstheorie*. This would be welcome since the critical language of semiotics makes no sense, and the structuralists seem to be talking to one another."

While many letters laud recent issues and single out particular essays for praise, the more quotable comments lack sweetness and light. I share a representative few:

There are now so many scholarly journals that their inexorable arrival, quarter after quarter, is, to my certain knowledge, greeted with dread by practically everyone concerned except those authors whose articles are due to appear in them.

More people are publishing essays than reading them.

*PMLA* articles are not written to be read; they are written to be published.

A real conservative, I do not like "fashionable critical language," as you put it, which so often seems a substitute for real thought and which in any case dates work very rapidly.

I close with more harmonious notes. "I once wrote the MLA that if it would send me the whole *Bibliography*," a linguist writes, "it could keep the rest of *PMLA*. However, with such good articles as those in the last two issues, I may retract that offer." And a professor emeritus whose work many of us have long admired writes, "You are paid to be our conscience, but I urge you not to bleed over *PMLA*. Nowadays I read for pleasure and not out of any academic compulsion and I still read our journal as soon as it's in the house. The last number bats between .500 and .666, not bad in any league. I have, though, had a surfeit of greatness, and asking me to read much about Shakespeare or Chaucer is like asking a dog to watch television."

For the record, my dog *likes* television. I have a terrible time, though, getting him to read *PMLA*.

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