

my work finding a home in *PMLA*, if acceptance is determined by the entirely impenetrable “standards” that appear in the description of the forthcoming topic *Imagining History*.

Once the association and *PMLA* recognize and accept that many of us are in British and western European studies, that we work on canonical authors, although not necessarily always from a traditional perspective, that this is what we teach, that we are not engaged in cultural meandering of the vaguest sort, that our work is scholarship on literary texts that have interested generations of readers and critics—and, we believe, still do—that we are not engaged in political hype as perhaps are some of the trendier nonscholarly publications, then submissions, whose lack reflects intense noninterest in the journal, will increase. It is altogether obvious that *PMLA*’s prolonged transformation away from the core interests and values of the membership has resulted in a devastating failure. The entire organization, if these practices do not change, will soon follow.

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TO THE EDITOR:

I have read with interest your column “Lost Moorings—*PMLA* and Its Audience,” which seems a sincere expression of concern about a problem that I agree is real. Here, for what they’re worth, are a few thoughts on the subject.

I’ve been a continuous member of the MLA since finishing graduate school over thirty years ago. Shortly after taking my first job, I submitted an article on John Milton to *PMLA*, but it was rejected on grounds that it was “not of interest to a broad cross-section of the Association.” It may be that the reviewer who wrote that critique thought the article lacking in quality and simply wished to spare my feelings (although I don’t see why that consideration should have arisen in an environment of anonymity), but I found the response sufficiently chilling that I never tried again. And though I’m older and maybe wiser now, I can’t see myself submitting anything in the future because despite the openness claimed in the Statement of Editorial Policy (to “a variety of topics” and to “all scholarly methods and theoretical perspectives”), I—like myriad others—don’t believe that the statement means what it says.

To get specific, last month I attended the sixteenth annual meeting of the John Donne Society of America. The society has a continuing membership of about 125 scholars, of whom between 60 and 70 attend the annual convention in any given year; and these aren’t the only people reading or teaching Donne in the studies and classrooms of the world. At this conference—to mention only a couple of examples—I heard presentations on the introduction of Donne to the English curriculum at Harvard in the late nineteenth century and on sacramental womanhood in Donne’s *The First Anniversary* that I think anyone would rate among “the best of [their] kind,” yet the idea that either of these authors would submit their work to you brings a smile because these essays belong to categories of work that—whatever the Statement of Editorial Policy says—*PMLA* would not welcome.

Or take textual criticism, the particular vineyard I’ve been laboring in for the past twenty years. Though you wouldn’t know it to look at *PMLA*, there’s a vigorous scholarly subculture devoted to this area: many of its members congregate in New York every other spring at the meeting of the Society for Textual Scholarship, contend for federal funds through the NEH’s Research Division, submit their work for approval to the MLA’s Committee on Scholarly Editions, and even compete biennially for the MLA Prize for a Distinguished Scholarly Edition. And the fruits of their labors are essential to most of our other professional activities. Yet the only *PMLA* article in recent memory that even remotely touches on textual scholarship is David Greetham’s piece in the special issue *The Status of Evidence* a few years ago (“Textual Forensics,” 111 [1996]: 32–51). Textual scholars are expected to subsidize with their dues and be interested in—to take the top items from the two “Forthcoming” lists on pages 6 and 7 of the January 2001 issue—“Gender Trouble and Genoese Gold in Cervantes’s ‘The Two Damsels’” and “The Making of a Gay Literary Tradition in David Leavitt’s ‘The Term Paper Artist’”; yet their own work is never eligible for publication in *PMLA*.

To come at this another way: even though MLA membership automatically entails a subscription to *PMLA*, it’s a mistake to imagine that the parent organization’s membership and *PMLA*’s actual audience are coextensive. And if we offered an option for

membership without the journal subscription, the truth of this would be immediately apparent. An MLA survey ten years ago indicated that at least eighty-five percent of those among the professoriat who teach language and literature continue to teach and think about our subject in fairly traditional ways (“Highlights of the MLA’s 1990 Survey of Upper-Division Literature Courses,” *ADE Bulletin* 101 [1992]: 34). These are the people who join the organization out of a sense of professional duty or because they need to attend the annual convention or because they want to purchase the bibliography or—especially among junior faculty members—because they want their own copy of the *Job Information List*. But they’re also the ones whose interests are largely not addressed by *PMLA* and who would drop that part of their membership in a heartbeat if they had the option. Some of them no doubt are not publishing anywhere, but many are. They just know *PMLA* won’t be interested in their work, so they don’t submit it.

In sum, if you and the *PMLA* Editorial Board are really interested in attracting more submissions, you might try actually following a big-tent policy rather than merely announcing one in the Statement of Editorial Policy. And this would have the added advantage of making the journal reflect the full range of interests represented among the MLA’s membership.

Gary A. Stringer
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TO THE EDITOR:

In response to Carlos J. Alonso’s informative report on declining submissions, I thought that, as a life member of the MLA and a constant reader, or skimmer, of *PMLA* over several decades, I would explain, for what it is worth, why I would not submit my work to it, though I did once, unsuccessfully, in the past.

1. Over the years I have grown rather weary of *PMLA*’s relentless self-praise in varying formulations, its incomparable rigor and selectivity, its restriction to “the best of its kind.” It is the University of Chicago of periodicals; the stance is not only ungracious and unmannerly, it is intimidating. Perhaps it is useful in driving off persons of my limitations, but I think it likely that not many capable scholars, especially younger ones, are supremely confident that they can meet such peerless standards.

2. Alonso seems to set less value on my time than I do. Why in the world would I spend it on a composition for a journal that boasts of a ninety-five percent rejection rate? Many of us have all we can do to meet solicited obligations for conference papers, thematic journal volumes and books, *Festschriften*, and the like. To attempt an essay for *PMLA* would be a foolish use of resources.

3. I remain fairly unimpressed by the advantages to the supplicant Alonso ascribes to the evaluation process. I neither want nor need the advice of referees, with which my overall experiences have been dispiriting. My clearest memory of the commentary to *PMLA*’s rejection of my paper is that it was cranky and petty; to be sure, that was a long time ago.

4. As to the journal’s content, I was once invited to a panel on that topic, where I ventured the suggestion that, instead of pursuing the most esoteric and rarified top of the line and leaving the expert general discourse on literature to the *New York Review of Books* and the *Times Literary Supplement*, *PMLA* might better serve the diverse membership with fundamentally informative and instructive essays on literatures and theories not our own. This talk was not well received; it was supposed to appear in an MLA publication but was “lost” in the office. Still, no one I know likes *PMLA* as it is very much; at the end of the academic year, when people are on the move, the Dumpsters fill up with it. Since it occasionally prints letters from admirers, I have concluded that it is a coterie publication.

5. Finally, I will not submit, so to speak, to anonymous submissions; on this point I agree entirely with Stanley Fish. For the same reason I decline to evaluate such submissions. To translate Lincoln into a more trivial register: as I would not be treated as an anonymous by my own professional organizations, so I will not treat others that way. If I had one piece of advice, it would be to abandon that policy, but I expect it would be futile.

Jeffrey L. Sammons
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TO THE EDITOR:

You may remember that last fall I wrote the MLA offices in protest over yet another unreadable issue of *PMLA*. You kindly responded and pointed to your statement of policy to appear in the January