

Editor's Column

Policies and Procedures of *PMLA*

THE first editor of *PMLA* wrote no editor's column; indeed he is not named anywhere in volume 1 (1884) of what was then called *Transactions of the Modern Language Association*. In this case, anonymous was not a woman but rather A. Marshall Elliott, professor of Romance languages at Johns Hopkins University, founder and first secretary of the association. He was identified on the title page of volume 5 but remained silent about his functions, and it was not until 1948, when William Riley Parker began a column called "For Members Only," that the editor regularly included comments in the journal. The first "FMO" consisted of two pages of short news items, but it soon expanded to include not only much longer news items but also vignettes and comments. As time passed and the profession changed, the volume of news overwhelmed the editorial content. The *Newsletter* was launched in March 1969, following the tumultuous 1968 convention, to provide a better forum for expressions of opinion by members as well as by the editor; a year later, in January 1970, the "For Members Only" column became "Professional Notes and Comment." The professional news notes grew more and more numerous, however, while the comment dwindled away.

In 1973, *PMLA* adopted a new editorial policy, intended to orient its contents more toward articles with a broad interest and less toward specialized scholarly studies. Articles accepted under the new policy appeared in January 1975, and William Schaefer wrote the first "Editor's Column" to announce the policy to readers. In his second column he explained the procedures followed in considering essays submitted for publication. Every issue of *PMLA* reprints the basic "Statement of Editorial Policy" on the page following the table of contents. Since 1975, under Joel Conarroe's editorship, the policy has been modified in two important ways: the original hope that each article would interest every member of the MLA has been replaced by the goal that every article should be of broad interest and excellent of its kind; and the policy of author-anonymous submission, or blind reading, has been applied since 1980. Otherwise, the procedures remain much as they have been for a decade, and most of the members seem well satisfied with them. As I assume the responsibilities of editor, I think it would be useful to review these procedures and to reflect briefly on the editor's function. I must emphasize that the rates of acceptance I cite are the results of experience, and not in any sense quotas; at every stage of the review, the readers or the board may accept or reject as many submissions as they see fit.

1. *The Specialist Reader*. Every year, about six hundred essays are submitted to *PMLA*. When an article is submitted, it goes first to the office of the managing editor, Judy Goulding, where the staff check it to be sure that the author has not inadvertently revealed his or her identity, give it a code number, and send it to a specialist reader. Since 1980, we have called on more than a thousand MLA members to serve as specialist readers. Virtually all of them are chosen because they have published in a field closely related to the subject of the essay. Most were initially recommended by a member of the Editorial Board or the Advisory Committee, by other committee members, or by the staff; we keep a record of each report and avoid readers who are very slow or whose reports seem hasty, biased, or harsh. Obviously, each essay must be assigned on an ad hoc basis; we make an effort not to send it to a reader who would be unsympathetic to the approach, or who is a close colleague of the author, or who is already reading or has recently read an essay for us. To try to speed the process as much as possible, we send out these requests unannounced, and the hard work of writing a conscientious criticism goes without public acknowledgment most of the time. Nevertheless, we estimate that ninety percent of the people to whom we send essays agree to read them.

2. *The Advisory Committee*. Whatever the judgment of the first reader, the essay is next forwarded to a member of the Advisory Committee, a group of twenty-eight well-known scholars, chosen to reflect expertise in the major literatures and appointed by the MLA Executive Council for four-year terms. The number of essays sent to an Advisory Committee member depends on how populous and how popular the field is, but simple arithmetic shows that advisory editors must read on average more than twenty essays per year. They disagree with the first readers' recommendations in about one case in four, although this figure fluctuates too erratically to have much meaning. When the first two readers do not concur, the essay is sent to a third reader. At this level, roughly five of every six submissions are turned down and returned to their authors with the readers' reports. Most readers see themselves in part as editors and recommend ways to improve the article, whether it is considered acceptable or far below *PMLA* standards. For many scholars, this is an invaluable ser-

3. *The Editorial Board.* The six members of the Editorial Board are distinguished scholars identified most closely with specified fields but also regarded as broadly knowledgeable about literary scholarship and criticism. They too are named by the Executive Council, for two-year terms. Every year, they read approximately one hundred essays, individually prepare detailed criticisms of each essay, meet three times for two days each time, and discuss every essay at length. As editor, I meet with this board and chair the meetings, but my participation is otherwise exactly the same as that of the other members. As each essay comes up, we go around the room, reading or summarizing our criticisms; Judy Goulding or one of her staff makes notes on the discussion, to be sent to the author. At this final level, about one essay in three or four is accepted for publication.

Editorial Board meetings are among the most rewarding events in my academic experience. Reading a hundred essays each year is hard work, especially since many are in fields remote from one's own interests; the titles sometimes remind me of that ironic phrase penned by Kingsley Amis' Lucky Jim, "this strangely neglected subject," but I usually finish the essay feeling enlightened and intrigued by the discovery of yet another field I wish I knew more about. In any case, once the board assembles all the labor is repaid. The board's discussions are a kind of ideal seminar, where seven intelligent and well-prepared scholars take up a series of important critical problems. Moreover, there is drama and suspense; each board member has to put his or her judgment on the line and see whether it is confirmed or contradicted by the others. Unanimity is in fact quite rare, and members soon come to accept spirited disagreement as a higher form of collegiality. In some cases, a single articulate advocate can win acceptance for an unusual essay. Once a decision has been reached, the name of the author is finally revealed; after a particularly intense debate, we are as impatient to open the envelope as hopeful Oscar candidates.

A procedure such as this is appropriate for the journal of an association, which ought to reflect the diversity of the membership rather than any single school or method. It follows, however, that the editor of *PMLA* plays a limited part in determining the content. I am bound to abide by majority decisions of the Editorial Board, which is in turn guided by the readers, and all of us must select from what is submitted to *PMLA*. Unless the members mandate a change through the Executive Council or our submissions change significantly, *PMLA* will continue very much as it has been in recent years. The Delegate Assembly and Executive Council have recently voted to continue the policy of anonymous submissions that had been adopted provisionally in 1980; a great majority of those who have worked under the policy approve of it. In keeping with my view of the editor's role, I plan to devote this page to analyzing and commenting on important aspects of *PMLA*; rather than call it "Editor's Column," which implies more influence and control than I really possess, I will give each one a title according to its subject. I intend also to continue the practice, begun by Joel Conarroe, of including some notes on the contributors; as a reader of *PMLA* I found this a welcome innovation, and the general response has been favorable.

ENGLISH SHOWALTER

Notes on Contributors

MARSHALL BROWN majored in German at Harvard, earned a Ph.D. at Yale in comparative literature, and now teaches eighteenth-century English at the University of Colorado. His publications have been equally varied, including a book entitled *The Shape of German Romanticism* (Cornell Univ. Press, 1979) and an article in *PMLA*, "The Logic of Realism" (March 1981), which received honorable mention in the William Riley Parker Prize competition. The present article combines his interests in shapes and fiction. He is currently working on a book on preromanticism.

MARY WILSON CARPENTER has a 1983 Ph.D. from Brown and is a lecturer at Harvard this year. Her article grew out of her dissertation on George Eliot and the apocalyptic structure of history. While at Brown, she worked on the *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals* and participated in the Pembroke Women's Seminar. She has previously published an article on Milton and prophecy in *Milton Studies*. Her next project will be a book on women's visionary narrative in nineteenth-century England.

IBRAHIM DAWOOD received the Ph.D. in comparative literature from Indiana University in 1983. His dissertation topic was "The *Panchatantra*, *Kalilah wa Dimnah*, and the *Morall Philosophie* of Doni: A Comparative Study." He recently returned to Jordan, his native country.