
Editor's Column

What's in a Name? Revisiting Author-Anonymous Reviewing

IN 1976, AS A MEMBER of the MLA Commission on the Status of Women in the Profession, I worked to promote the author-anonymous reviewing procedures that the Executive Council of the association approved in 1980 (see my "Name"). Since their adoption, *PMLA* has tried to ensure that for every submitted article "the author's name is not made known to consultant readers, to members of the Advisory Committee and the Editorial Board, or to the editor" until a final decision is reached.¹ The policy aims to make merit the only criterion of publication, by erasing signs of gender, ethnicity, institutional affiliation, and rank that might create bias for or against essays. It had vocal opponents before its institution and continues to have them to this day (e.g., Schaefer; Fish).

As editor of *PMLA*, I have been concerned about readers' attitudes toward anonymous reviewing. In my March 1996 column, I challenged the apparently widespread view that partly because of this policy "*PMLA* does not receive or publish essays by well-known senior professors."² Statistics reveal that there has not been a disproportionate decline in submissions from full professors; on the contrary, these members of the profession show the smallest decline among all professorial ranks, they have been the steadiest submitters since before the establishment of the policy, and they have fared relatively well in numbers of acceptances throughout this period.³ The related idea that this journal "favors young, untenured, little-known scholars at unprestigious institutions" was cited by Parker Prize winners who are "critical of certain trends in contemporary literary studies and by those who advocate, or consider themselves beneficiaries of, author-anonymous reviewing."

More surprising and troubling has been criticism from some scholars of color, who note that the special-topic issue on African and African American literature (Jan. 1990) did not contain a single essay by an

African or African American, except for the introduction by the coordinator, Henry Louis Gates, Jr.⁴ As one scholar of color put it, “Author-anonymous reviewing represents equal opportunity, but we need a process that embodies the principles of affirmative action.”⁵ Such an argument implies that authors from groups underrepresented in the pages of *PMLA* should be favored, perhaps that a certain number of slots should be reserved for these contributors each year. But how would the underrepresentation be determined? How would the claims of different constituencies—for example, Native Americans, medievalists, specialists in nineteenth-century Italy, and African Americans, all of whom could be said to be underrepresented in *PMLA*—be adjudicated? And most difficult of all, who has the right to say “we” in sentences like the one quoted? Who is authorized to speak (or write) as a member of a particular constituency, and how would the Editorial Board mediate conflicts within the profession over identity politics?

The seriousness of these issues, which instantiate the question of how knowledge is authorized and disseminated, has led me to revisit author-anonymous reviewing. Despite my belief in the continuing need for and value of the policy, I wanted to solicit the views of Editorial Board members and especially of the group most directly involved in its application—the thirty-two members of the Advisory Committee. In a letter to the committee members, I asked for general comments on the procedures and posed two questions: “What do you consider the strengths and weaknesses of the policy? Would you recommend any changes to the procedures as a general rule and/or for special-topic issues in particular?”

Of the seventeen committee members who responded, fourteen say they favor maintaining the policy.⁶ By and large, their arguments are similar to those that I and other members of the Commission on the Status of Women articulated in the late 1970s: that all articles should be judged by a single criterion—intellectual merit—not by the identities or reputations of the authors; that the policy promotes fairness, minimizes cronyism and elitism, and counters potential prejudice against women and those in minorities; that it is, in short, crucial to the integrity of the review process. Moreover, these committee members insist that the policy encourages submissions by younger scholars, allowing them, in Joseph Boone’s words, “to rise to the surface.”

In Boone’s view, the policy is the best one for all authors, from graduate students to senior scholars, and especially for reviewers: “I read, scrutinize, puzzle over each essay. I’m at once more frank, I suspect, than I would be if I were privy to the identity of the authors and more tactful, for the same reason in reverse—I might very well know the author.”⁷ And when senior scholars submit their work, Boone continues,

for once they can be judged for what they’ve actually said, not for all the preconceived notions that publicly circulate around them; [they] can count on receiving something closer to the “truth” about how their particular piece of writing strikes at least one reader without the more usual but less critical

“how brilliant” or “how original” comments their . . . friends and allies are more likely to venture.

Kathryn Hume concurs: “The bigger your name, the more difficult it is to get serious criticism. . . . If big names were not blinded by ego considerations, they would welcome the chance to get unbiased responses. . . . If they remove themselves from competition because they cannot do without the easy access given by their name, let them publish with friends.” Several Advisory Committee members share Jean Howard’s conclusion: author anonymity “is one of the best features of the *PMLA* review procedures.” The MLA should recommend it “as standard operating procedure for all scholarly publication,” adds Debora Shuger. In the debate over author-anonymous reviewing, Sandy Petrey insists, “the burden of proof is on those who oppose it.”

To be sure, those who favor author-anonymous procedures do not consider them ideal. As William Todd observes, they eliminate bias connected to name and affiliation, but prejudice involving topic, approach, or theoretical stance can remain.⁸ Moreover, author anonymity means that certain kinds of essays will not appear in *PMLA*, according to Charles Bernheimer, since the current policy “makes it extremely unlikely” that any article combining autobiographical reflection with textual analysis, “one of the most interesting current trends in criticism,” would be submitted to the journal. And although “senior scholars often advance their work by revising their own previous thinking . . . an essay that would be self-reflective in this manner and that might be written in the kind of essayistic tone that often comes with experience would probably be too author-centered to conform to the rules of anonymous submission. I see no way around these problems as long as anonymous submission remains the rule,” Bernheimer continues, “which I think it should.”

As the remarks by Bernheimer and Todd imply, those who favor the policy sometimes share views of those who oppose it. Judith Mayne, who supports the policy strongly, nonetheless believes that anonymity may encourage the submission of manuscripts that are not ready for publication: “[A]rticles are submitted when they are really drafts. . . . This year . . . I was particularly distressed to read an article that was a dissertation prospectus; the author hadn’t bothered to make even the most basic changes . . . to transform the text into an article.” Robert Caserio, who opposes the policy, agrees that “anonymity of submission provokes careless submission. . . . [T]he essayist throws anything whatsoever into the pool of submissions just to see what happens in the way of response.” Procedures determine minds, he argues: “our thoughts have become anonymous and mechanical.”⁹ Another member of the Advisory Committee is troubled by “the extraordinarily low level of so many of the essays I am asked to read for *PMLA*, far lower in quality than those I read for other journals.”¹⁰ Moreover, the procedure deprives this reviewer of “the only pleasure one gets in reading submitted manuscripts . . . to begin

or continue an intellectual dialogue with one's colleagues in the field.¹¹ I so dislike the policy," she concludes, "that I would never again agree to service in this capacity."

At times, those who want to see the policy eliminated present opposite points of view. Thus Caserio does not believe that he reads with prejudice, and he regards the notion of the necessarily biased reader as a fallacy of this era of suspicion:

I think I'd have the same responses to signed material as to unsigned. I don't think I'd be able to seize on my reviewer's job as if it were an axe with which to cut down the work of someone I don't like or bear a grudge against. Likewise, I think I can be critical of work by people I like or love and whose work I like or love. I like good work, even if it's by someone whose ideas I don't like and whom I don't like; even if it's by someone whose ideas I like or whom I like. Am I kidding myself when I say this? Supposedly I am, given the prevailing critical ideology, which assumes nefarious interest everywhere: it suggests everyone will act in the least generous spirit possible, so that an anonymous reviewing structure will have to do the self-critical work that the self-interested critic hasn't got the decency or the responsibility to do on his or her own. I don't like the implication given by anonymity . . . that one can't be an intelligent judge without a mask, that one can't be personal and fair-minded at once. A hermeneutics of suspicion demands anonymity of submission.

For Caserio, the idea that bias may operate unconsciously is "an evasion of conscious responsibility."¹² At the same time, if there is unconscious bias, "no structure to block its workings will be effective," he concludes; "it's the nature of the unconscious to be inaccessible." Jack Zipes objects to the policy as well but cites opposite reasons: "Since I do not believe in neutrality or impartiality, I am not in favor of policies that suggest neutrality and impartiality are possible. In the end, the readers will generally act as they usually do with full conviction in their own methodology, whether they know the name of the author or not." But Zipes does not consider this a problem to be overcome through egalitarian procedures, even though there are disparities of power between the referee and the writer: "I believe it is more helpful if an author is confronted with a reader and his/her biases. . . . Obviously, there is a danger that a particular ideological perspective will prevail among readers. Given the open discourse in the MLA, however, I think this danger is not as grave as it was perhaps twenty or thirty years ago."

Whatever disagreements exist over the author-anonymous reviewing policy, there is an emerging view, which I endorse, that it should be modified for special-topic issues. During the Editorial Board's discussion of the policy, Cora Kaplan suggested that the coordinator(s) of each special topic be allowed to commission a maximum of two essays, which would be reviewed only by the board, while the regular submissions would proceed through the normal anonymous process. Bernheimer emphasizes the benefits of such a change in policy: "If we want the special-topic is-

sues to contain cutting-edge works by experts in particular fields—and this should be the purpose of these issues, in my view—those experts should be invited to submit essays in which they are free . . . to reflect on their methods and goals.” Although I share the concern of a board member who felt that this relaxation might constitute the first step in dismantling the policy, I tend to agree with another member that setting special rules for special topics does not violate the journal’s essential commitment to its standard rule of anonymous reviewing.¹³ The Editorial Board would need to be vigilant that the commissioned essays substantially enriched understanding of the topic and furthered the goals of affirmative action but that they did not promote the cronyism that the current procedures were designed to counteract. The opportunity to commission essays would also gratify the coordinators, who have sometimes expressed frustration over their lack of participation in the decision making about which essays are published in the issues they are called on to introduce.

Another Editorial Board member thought that it would be difficult to oversee a mixed format of commissioned and anonymously submitted essays. But in fact *PMLA* already has a mixed format: the guest columns, essays by honorary members and fellows, letters to the Forum, and recently instituted feature of roundtable discussions on the special topics do not involve anonymity.¹⁴ Neither do submissions of criticism in translation, which the editor or a board member can vet before a decision is reached on their publication. As Katherine Hayles observes, other journals, including *Modern Fiction Studies* and *Configurations: A Journal of Literature, Science, and Technology*, mix commissioned and unsolicited articles in their special issues.

On balance, then, I recommend that the rule of author anonymity be suspended for no more than two essays on each special topic, and I will urge the Executive Council, which sets editorial policy for *PMLA*, to institute that change. At the same time, I want to reaffirm my commitment to author-anonymous reviewing, not because the procedure is ideal but precisely because ours is less than the best of all possible worlds or professions. In that sense, I disagree with Joyce Carol Oates’s remark that “in an ideal world uncontaminated by ego and individual ‘identity,’ all works of art . . . might well be attributed to ‘Anonymous.’”¹⁵ Identity does not contaminate texts, in my view; on the contrary, it can inform and inflect their reading in complex and productive ways. And if the author’s identity remains suspended during evaluation for the purpose of approximating (however imperfectly) ideals of equal opportunity, it is because the MLA, like other professional communities, can be self-critical enough to recognize that egalitarianism in the outer and inner worlds of human subjects is not only unrealized but also constantly opposed and undermined. Of course, such communities also know that the critical task of reviewing is never completed, that it is renegotiated ever and anon.

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Notes

¹This wording appears in the journal's statement of editorial policy. *PMLA* is the only publication of the Modern Language Association to practice author-anonymous reviewing. Essays submitted to the journal are screened for any signs that would identify the authors, but referees can choose to be identified. The pages of *PMLA* contain certain other kinds of texts that are not subject to author-anonymous procedures.

²"Testing" 199. See also my "Parker Prize Winners Reflect on *PMLA*," esp. 985–86 and 990n1.

³Such statistics do not address the question of the visibility or prestige of the senior professors who submit work to the journal.

⁴The coordinator of a special topic serves to catalyze interest in the project, by bringing it to the attention of specialists and other colleagues, by writing a newsletter article about its importance, and so on. The coordinator also helps find readers for the submissions and may review proposals and first drafts but is not involved in publication decisions.

⁵203n1. Author anonymity cannot address a criticism made by diverse members—that the *PMLA* Advisory Committee and Editorial Board traffic in the dominant theoretical and literary discourse of the day to the exclusion of more traditional or unconventional types of criticism. Since those two bodies are appointed by the Executive Council, suggestions of additions to the fields that are represented on them or of specific MLA members who should serve on them can be directed to the association's executive director.

⁶This number even includes a respondent who admitted that a manuscript she submitted anonymously to *PMLA* was turned down.

⁷Like Boone, William Todd finds reading anonymous essays "more of an intellectual adventure. I believe that I have read them more carefully for not knowing the names of the authors." Jean Howard, who has been on the editorial boards of several journals, feels that "many acceptance decisions (my own included) are subtly influenced by the . . . author's name on a manuscript."

⁸As editor, I review the reports that precede each decision to decline a submission. If I sense bias against the author's approach, topic, or conclusions, I commission another reading, while recognizing my fallibility in such detection, as well as that of the *PMLA* editorial staff. Moreover, if the author of a declined article can make a convincing case that the decision was biased, I ask the author for the names of five colleagues to whom the essay could be sent for evaluation and get still another reading. It has been my experience that this further reading does not generally change the final outcome.

⁹Casario adds that the quality of the work published in the March and May 1996 issues of *PMLA* (the latest issues before his reply) "is very different from the quality of submissions."

¹⁰In the interest of making *PMLA* more competitive with other journals, whose editors can accept conference papers for publication immediately after hearing them, Shuger proposes that members of the Editorial Board be allowed to bypass normal procedures with outstanding conference papers and to take the manuscripts, after revision, directly to the board for review; she would limit this exception to "no more than one article per issue." I have indeed urged board members to serve as scouts at conferences and to encourage the authors of excellent papers to send them to *PMLA*, but such texts go through the normal procedure, except that if they reach the Editorial Board, the sponsoring members disqualify themselves from the discussion and the final decision.

¹¹Referees can sustain this kind of dialogue under the present system of review by choosing to make their identities known to authors in their reports and encouraging further contact. The same committee member, who wishes to remain anonymous, believes that the review process "on all sides is full of leaks" and thus that the pretense of anonymity should be given up. There is no way to determine whether or how often leakage occurs. Todd, who works in the "relatively small field" of Russian studies, has not recognized "a single author behind the text" of the dozen essays he has evaluated. During my tenure, a small number of *PMLA* reviewers have disqualified themselves because they thought they knew an author's identity.

¹²Unlike Boone, Caserio believes that because of anonymity "we can be lax or over-enthusiastic with no cost to our personal reputations."

¹³I agree with Jean Howard on the importance of having "over half of the essays in a special-topic issue . . . chosen in the usual way" and of making acceptance of the solicited essays contingent on the board's approval.

¹⁴The roundtable discussion was first proposed by Heather Dubrow for the special topic The Status of Evidence (Jan. 1996). The guest columns and the Forum are sites for the kind of autobiographical and self-reflexive writing that Bernheimer feels might seem unwelcome in *PMLA*. The guest columns and the criticism-in-translation series can counteract a potential problem Katherine Hayles cites: "The only argument that I have heard against an author-anonymous policy is that the work of a few very well established scholars might be important as milestones or turning points. . . . I am thinking here of writers of the stature of Jacques Derrida. . . . In my view this argument is not sufficiently compelling to alter the refereeing of general submissions." For the record, a translation of a talk by Derrida appeared with the essays on the special topic Literature and the Idea of Europe (Jan. 1993).

¹⁵To be sure, Oates does not have the same aims in her op-ed piece as I do in this column: she reviews why "Anon." wrote so many texts in the past, distinguishes anonymous from pseudonymous, and defends the use of anonymity by the author of the roman à clef *Primary Colors*: "there is nothing in the slightest dishonest, insincere, deceptive or in any way unethical in publishing a book . . . under the author-identity 'Anonymous.'"

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