

Editor's Column

What's in *PMLA*

IN the last Editor's Column, I discussed the distribution of *PMLA* articles and submissions into categories of national literatures and historical periods. Alas, many people tell me unashamedly that they (and—they allege—everybody else) read only the (rare) articles in their own fields, as defined by nationality and period. The exceptions are often those just as rigidly committed to some other category and interested only in theory, a genre, a critical approach, comparative studies, or the like.

These specialists are missing something; after a year of reading all the articles in *PMLA*, I can assert categorically that any student of literature with a reasonably open mind should find something worthwhile in every one of them. Obviously, not all are equally interesting to every reader, and I will not try to persuade everyone to read everything. In fact, however, *PMLA*'s unusually stringent editorial policy ensures that every article published receives acceptance first from two specialists in the field and then from a majority of the Editorial Board's seven members, who normally represent seven different fields. To be published, an article must therefore win approval from at least three board members from other fields. More than any other single factor, that policy differentiates *PMLA* from most similar journals and preserves its function as the journal of the association.

Some people object to the way we define fields, but our categories are not the worst problem; rather, it is our lazy way of allowing our fields to define us. Classifying scholars and their works is useful and often necessary for department heads and institutional administrators of all sorts, including us here at MLA headquarters. A system of classification has to cover everything, create comparable units, avoid duplication, and correspond to some reasonable view of reality. The field structure of our profession meets these criteria, probably better than any other system could. It works well for submissions to *PMLA*, too, largely because the articles are written by scholars accustomed to thinking in those terms. Nonetheless, the articles do not always fit neatly into the pigeonholes where we put them, and what made any article interesting in the first place, especially to scholars from other fields, was often what extended beyond the boundaries of the primary field.

The field definitions can exert a stifling influence on the profession if we take them for anything more than a convenience. When good scholars and teachers cannot find a departmental home, when innovative courses cannot be offered, when interesting convention papers fit into no session, or when provocative articles suit no journal's editorial policy, then the structure has become a prison and is obstructing original thought and work. The same thing has happened when readers refuse to look at articles outside their own fields.

As the journal of an association, *PMLA* recognizes an obligation to evaluate submissions equitably, applying clearly stated and widely accepted criteria. The criteria are spelled out in the editorial policy statement, which was adopted by the duly elected and broadly representative Executive Council. Equity of application is maintained by the rotating appointment of representative scholars to the Editorial Board and the Advisory Committee. In the moment of decision, however, all the editorial readers must rely on a personal interpretation of the criteria, and there is no question that editors are fallible.

A recent story in the *New York Times Magazine* reports that William Kennedy's fine 1983 novel *Ironweed*, which won a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Critics' Circle Award, had been rejected by thirteen editors. Such stories, which abound in the annals of literary history, should hearten authors and humble editors. As a novice, still soft-boiled and soft-bitten, I take some consolation from the knowledge that even the most experienced editors have not always recognized excellent work when it crossed their desks. Of course, my personal say at *PMLA* is not greater than that of the other members of the Editorial Board; but I think each of us proceeds as if we were individually responsible for the whole journal. The system virtually ensures that everything published in *PMLA* is excellent, but no system can ensure that everything excellent will be published.

On the whole, despite the differences in our own fields and approaches, we seem to agree most of the time on our conception of excellence in scholarly or critical articles. We nonetheless often disagree on specific cases and do not necessarily detect the same qualities in a given article. The policy no longer requires, as it once did, that each article be "of significant interest to the entire membership of the Association," and this noble but utopian ideal has been replaced by the idea that each article should "exemplify the best of its kind, whatever the kind." Board members and consultant readers still tend to feel that the structure of the review process implies, even if it does not explicitly state, that the high quality should be evident to nonspecialist readers.

The first article in this issue raised the question of broad interest in dramatic form. No member of the Editorial Board claimed expertise in runic scholarship, and the number of runic specialists

in the MLA is surely small. Yet a majority of us found this essay intriguing and rewarding. It is a virtually perfect demonstration of a certain kind of scholarly work, which resembles puzzle solving or code breaking, venerable narrative forms. In laying out the evidence and weighing the clues, the author gives a small course in runology, with insights into the social history of the medieval Norse people, into their visual arts, and into their language.

In my opinion, at least, "The Järsta Stone" is a model *PMLA* article on a limited and esoteric subject. I can speak only for myself, but in such articles I look consistently for these things: a clear explanation of what the problem is and why it matters, a succinct but thorough analysis of previous work on the topic, a persuasive argument for an original and useful solution, evidence that a breadth of knowledge has been brought to bear on the subject, a feeling that I have learned something of value. I regard the existence of a tradition of scholarship or interpretation surrounding the work as an indication of the work's importance; in that sense, an older work has an advantage over a recent one. At the same time, originality is harder to achieve; a mere reviewing of previous work, however judicious, does not constitute the sort of new contribution I think *PMLA* requires. As "The Järsta Stone" should prove, the importance of the work itself has only an indirect bearing on the matter. "Major" authors and works, in the terms of the old *PMLA* policy, presumably have received more thorough study and perhaps lend themselves more readily to interesting analysis than "minor" works do; but the scholar or critic makes the crucial difference.

Some subjects obviously have a natural appeal to a general journal like *PMLA*. Articles on themes or critical theory or synthetic approaches to a period clearly fit *PMLA*'s editorial purposes and audience; recent examples include such essays as Terry Castle's "The Carnivalization of Eighteenth-Century English Narrative" (Oct. 1984), Elizabeth Gitter's "The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination" (Oct. 1984), Marshall Brown's "'Errours Endlesse Traine': On Turning Points and the Dialectical Imagination" (Jan. 1984), and David Foster's "Latin American Documentary Narrative" (Jan. 1984). But such subjects also require extensive research and a creative ability to reach conclusions; there is no easy way to get an article into *PMLA*.

In fact, such broadly based articles represent a small fraction of those submitted to us. Most of the articles we publish, including all six in this issue, make a single work or author the focus or pretext for a study that engages larger questions. An author who is considering submitting an essay to *PMLA* should of course think about the appropriateness of the subject; but the manner of presentation is equally important. The article must make its case to an audience of expert readers but nonexperts in the subject. That rhetorical condition is both an invitation and a challenge, and the source of *PMLA*'s excellence.

ENGLISH SHOWALTER

Notes on Contributors

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