

or promise publication in respected scholarly locations rather than to the anonymity and uncertainty of refereed publication in journals with a five to six percent acceptance rate; in this regard, “refereeing” has a wide applicability, including the refereeing that takes place when a guest editor and a journal or house editor review and edit a solicited manuscript. And many senior scholars will tell you that they almost never bother submitting an essay for publication in the current circumstances: their dance cards are full years in advance for solicited publications. Finally, editors want their journals to be read and noticed in an increasingly competitive situation; thus, solicited or special issues in which recognizable names appear have become increasingly the norm, particularly for journals that wish to significantly enhance their visibility or are reinventing themselves.

In sum, I don’t think *PMLA* is alone in this situation, or that there is something specific about the journal or its policies and review processes that has caused the significant downturn in submissions: I think it is a fact of life in an environment where the norms are changing rapidly as print gives way to electronic publication and where, for many, there is little room or incentive for pursuing traditional scholarly publication.

Patrick O'Donnell
Michigan State University

TO THE EDITOR:

I read with great interest your thoughtful editorial on the declining number of submissions to *PMLA*; a day later, with the column still in mind, I received your letter urging me to “seriously consider sending [my] next article to *PMLA*.” Having published in many kinds of academic journals, including those that aspire to reach a broad, nonspecialist audience, I find myself compelled to reevaluate why ever since graduate school I have consistently ruled out *PMLA* as a potential forum for my work.

As somebody who reads more articles published in *PMLA* than most, I am in sympathy with your desire to reform the journal. I appreciate your cogent analysis of the problem of declining submissions, and I admire your determination to redress it. But while your pitch is persuasive, it is not persuasive enough. Your official discourse about the journal’s review process conflicts with the profession’s

unofficial discourse: word on the street is that *PMLA*’s review of manuscripts is arbitrary, capricious, and often unfair.

As a result, I have never submitted an article to *PMLA*—though I know many, many colleagues and students who have. While some acquaintances have published in *PMLA*, many more have been rejected (as one would expect, given the journal’s low acceptance rate). However, the fact remains that I have heard only horror stories about the review process, even from colleagues whose articles were accepted. I have read many excellent manuscripts that were rejected by *PMLA*, and I have read a number of them in conjunction with the readers’ reports supplied by the journal. In every instance, the readers’ reports tended toward the capricious. Several *PMLA* reports I’ve read conveyed a strong impression that the reader had done little more than skim the submission. As a result, readers’ reports often evidence a failure to grasp the author’s argument; they recommend that the author consider scholarship already cited in the article; they suggest an “alternative” line of argument that happens to be the very argument the article’s author pursues.

I have every reason to believe that Seth Lerer was a meticulous and responsible reader of the large number of submissions he reviewed during his time on the Advisory Committee; indeed, by helping rejected manuscripts find good homes elsewhere and by raising the issues you address in your column, he reveals his dedication and sense of professional commitment. But his letter, quoted in your column, also makes evident why so many submissions seem not to garner a fair reading, no matter how distinguished the readers assigned to evaluate them. By his own account, over a four-year period Lerer was sent a manuscript by *PMLA* for evaluation every couple of weeks. With such a relentless workload, no wonder some of our profession’s busiest members skim manuscripts and end up composing ill-considered evaluations. It is the disproportion between the care with which one produces one’s best work and the care with which it seems to be reviewed that convinces me submission to *PMLA* would be folly. And it remains totally unclear how increasing the overall number of submissions would do anything to alleviate that problem.

Having said that, I should add that I would be happy to read for the journal *occasionally* and to

provide the kind of reports on manuscripts that I believe association members would not be indignant to receive. I hope your column and letter campaign elicit a happier response than mine, or that the printing of letters such as this one might spark some credible stories of judicious and timely manuscript review; printing those might help dispel what I take to be a long-standing and widespread impression concerning *PMLA*'s review process.

Tim Dean

University of Illinois, Urbana

TO THE EDITOR:

You didn't request my musings, and they may be worth about what most free advice comes to—every penny it costs. In any event, I offer them.

Biographically, I send them as a reasonably well published contributor to the literary field (some twenty books written or edited, with reviews I'm not ashamed of; fifty years plus as editor of the *West Virginia University Philological Papers*—it's not *PMLA*, but it does its duty; over a couple of hundred articles on literature, travel, education, and philately, which at least pleased your correspondent; I've even had two or three small items in *MLA* publications, and I did three years before the mast of your *International Bibliography* vessel; oh yes, and you granted my requests to chair several of my own sessions at Christmas meetings). I've also spent a term on the *MLA*'s Delegate Assembly. In short, I have served my time and still do at age eighty-six.

But I have never submitted and do not intend to submit an article to *PMLA*, much as I would feel honored to appear in its pages. Your eight-week average review time is a blessing (*WVUPP* more or less equals it, with occasional stumbles). The journal's reputation is what you claim for it. The problem is that "five percent." A chance of something like one out of twenty for professors up against recognition, advancement in rank, even retention just isn't a good bet. Multiple submissions are rightfully frowned on, so most of us try for a publication where we have better odds. There is even the suspicion that the old-boy network favors certain submitters. In all honesty I have never found this to be true, and since accusatory evidence is anecdotal, it doesn't come to much. Still, I know scholars say it and doubtless feel it, a fact that may hurt submission figures. Some of us may also feel slighted that

so many of your pages result from commissions, not unsolicited submissions. Finally, your articles are rather more lengthy than what can result from the twenty minutes granted to presenters at literary conferences. The ambitious may feel that if they have to undertake such a major effort, why not go for a whole book, a necessary success for most promotions.

All this, however true, does not detract from the high reputation deservedly enjoyed by *PMLA*, but neither does it make for easy solutions. Doubtless you really don't expect any.

Armand E. Singer

West Virginia University, Morgantown

TO THE EDITOR:

It was with considerable interest that I read the column "Lost Moorings" in the January 2001 *PMLA*. I find quite ironic the "angst" and sense of bewilderment that you bring to this column, while nonetheless I welcome your well-intentioned efforts to remedy the critical lack of submissions to *PMLA*.

I will respond by making two points. First, it is not just a question of submissions. The entire *MLA* appears to have lost its moorings. In fact, that is a common topic and has been for some time among professors of French literature. Recently, while working to assemble panels for upcoming conferences, I had to comb the Internet to learn the locations of a variety of scholars in French literature, since so many of my colleagues have apparently dropped out of the organization. I refer to senior colleagues; many of the junior ones have never bothered to join. I was unable to locate addresses in the *PMLA* Directory, which once was a close-to-perfect mirror of the profession. Having for so long turned away from what most of us consider Romance studies, *PMLA* now wonders what has happened to submissions?

Second, I would suggest you take a good look at the silliness and pretense that mark the descriptions for forthcoming *PMLA* special topics, on pages 6–7 of the January volume. I work in the intersections of literature and history, and I have recently been analyzing the historical codes that are embedded in the seventeenth-century novels of Lafayette but are often invisible to the contemporary reader. Most of the members, or disappeared members, of the association work as I do: on specific writers, on specific texts, as you well know. I cannot imagine