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## Editor's Column

# The Publishability of *PMLA* Submissions: Policy and Practice

**I**N MY FIRST Editor's Column (108 [1993]: 9–13), I wrote that it was not imperative to change yet again the description of the “ideal *PMLA* essay” set forth in the statement of editorial policy, which has been in effect since 1981. “[O]f interest to those concerned with the study of language and literature,” such an essay, according to the statement, “exemplifies the best of its kind, whatever the kind; addresses a significant problem; draws out clearly the implications of its findings; and engages the attention of its audience through a concise, readable presentation.” As I argued, “what is judged to be ‘of interest,’ ‘engaging,’ and ‘readable,’ ‘a significant problem,’ and, of course, ‘the best of its kind’ has undergone and will continue to undergo changes in relation to the complex shifts of contextual forces” (10–11). Although I continue to espouse that view, each of my columns in 1994 grappled with, or at least referred to, aspects of *PMLA*'s editorial policy. In retrospect, this preoccupation is surely related to the experience of reading submissions to *PMLA*, for they inevitably raise the question, What makes a publishable essay? Those who perform such readings for the journal—the more than five hundred specialists who evaluate submissions in their fields every year; the thirty-two members of the Advisory Committee, who serve as second and more general readers; and the seven members of the Editorial Board, who reach the collective decisions to reject essays, send them back for revision and resubmission, or publish them—judge not only whether an essay is outstanding but also whether it is the right kind of essay for *PMLA*. And yet the statement of editorial policy, despite its emphasis on receptiveness to a variety of topics, scholarly methods, and theoretical perspectives, does not provide a properly nuanced understanding of publishability. The existence of such a contractual understanding is critical if referees and submitters—two groups that overlap substantially in the production of MLA publications—are to play their parts. Thus, in the belief that self-consciousness produces more-astute acts of critical reading, not

out of a desire to homogenize referees or to eliminate differences among them, I asked the current members of the Editorial Board and of the Advisory Committee to reflect on the factors that make an essay publishable in *PMLA*. I hope that their responses, which I synthesize and reproduce below, can be instructive both to referees and to the journal's future authors.

More than simply "of interest," according to the responding referees, a *PMLA* essay should be surprising, new, daring, and original. For Valerie Greenberg, a publishable article

deals with objects or questions or combinations that are fresh or daring. . . . The last article I would approve is one that rehashes very familiar intellectual territory. For me "fresh" also includes "traditional" and well-tested methods and approaches, including those that bring to mind again long-forgotten questions important enough to deserve a new hearing.

Herbert Tucker values the excitement and suspense of a piece "with flair and with a plot":

An author can begin with a closely focused instance, or two, or maybe three, and then pan out into breathtaking Cinerama, revealing to my surprise what the instance was an instance of. Conversely, a controversial-sounding or just plain large claim can swoop to ground and pounce on unexpected instances.

Charles Bernheimer looks for "originality in both the formulation of the subject to be treated and the manner of arguing the thesis" and Anne Mellor for "original research . . . and an original contribution to our understanding of the topic." Coppélia Kahn believes that an essay should use "theory or methodology in a new way; pose a new issue for debate; bring to bear on some literary question a body of material not previously considered . . . challenge some established category of analysis or interpretation (a genre, a period, a foundational term)." Elin Diamond values "the sense of learning" she experiences when an essay "proposes readings of texts that challenge me to rethink my assumptions about how I read and interpret those texts."

And yet, as Kahn suggests, echoing others, "a bright idea, a new twist, or a peevish objection just isn't enough." To be convincing, the new and original must be grounded on specialized knowledge of the field: the article must contextualize its topic and show, in Kahn's words, "a selective, focused awareness of what has already been thought and said" about the subject. Lawrence Buell insists that essays be "absolutely up-to-date" in the judgment of specialists, and Steven Mailloux likewise demands "up-to-date knowledge of the ongoing disciplinary debates concerning the text or topic discussed." Such criteria do not, however, mean burying "the reader in footnotes whose purpose seems primarily to demonstrate pedigree and affiliations," writes Peter Rabinowitz, or proliferating the kind of pedantic detail that turns an essay into what Tucker calls "a thirty-page note."

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Just as the journal's editorial process moves from the particular reading of the specialist to the general and heterogeneous reading of the Editorial Board, a *PMLA* essay should appeal to those within its field and those outside. An author can reach this wider audience in a number of ways, such as by showing strangers to the field "why the area matters," says Sandy Petrey, or what is at stake in the essay. As Rabinowitz puts it:

Since every essay can be understood as a turn in a continuing conversation—a conversation that began before many of the readers showed up—some effort should be made to introduce the newcomers to . . . what went on before they got there (and why it's important), instead of leaving them in the awkward position of outsiders.

An author can also examine the essay's theoretical underpinnings and implications and discuss its methodology. Mellor notes that "methodological subtlety, innovation, or sophistication" engages a broader audience than do concerns pertinent only to a single field.<sup>1</sup> Essays gain wider appeal, Bernheimer says, when they "draw out and make explicit . . . how particular analyses have more general applicability. . . . Articles should not only explain and expose, they should also construct a framework in which the results of the expository work are placed and evaluated."<sup>2</sup>

The responses from the Advisory Committee and the Editorial Board share the editorial policy's notion that the publishable *PMLA* essay "engages the attention of its audience through a concise, readable presentation." For Greenberg, readability means being "reader-friendly . . . clearly written so that even readers who operate from different theoretical suppositions have a good chance at following the argument, no matter how complex it may be." Kahn urges potential *PMLA* authors to see themselves as "mediating complex ideas to a wide audience only some of whom already know what the authors are talking about." Accessibility and lucidity are so critical to Kit Hume that she calls for scholars to calculate the Gunning Fog index (a readability score) of their writing and to aim for 17 or lower; in her estimation, the October 1994 issue of *PMLA* "had articles with fog indexes of 21 and 23," scores that indicate "turgid and pretentious prose."<sup>3</sup> Beyond readability, which is difficult enough to attain, *PMLA* referees ask for "liveliness of expression" (Bernheimer), "wit and energy" (Rabinowitz), "rhetorical force" and a "mastery of writing as an instrument of expression" (Carlos Alonso).<sup>4</sup>

Some referees see the publishable *PMLA* essay as an art form. "To write an article that appeals to a wide readership in a variety of literary disciplines," observes Gail Finney, "and at the same time has something substantial to say to specialists in the field—this is an art." A difficult art, it requires the conjunction of qualities usually viewed as opposites: "Ideally, a *PMLA* essay should be both daring and persuasive, complex and lucid, theoretically enlightened and pleasurable to read," concludes Diamond. These remarks suggest that the respondents may be articulating not (minimal)

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criteria for publishability but an ideal form of *PMLA*-ness. Thus, although these articulations on publishability may be more enlightening to a referee or an author than is the succinct, even somewhat pinched, statement of editorial policy, they cannot provide, as Tucker points out, "a recipe for sure acceptance." This inability derives not only from the inevitable disjunction between a recipe and what comes out of the discursive kitchen but also from the fact that what makes an article publishable in *PMLA* shifts according to the reading practices and values of the journal's specialist readers and Advisory Committee and Editorial Board members. Indeed, as Carlos Alonso remarks, "this preoccupation with what constitutes the qualities of a successful *PMLA* article is in fact never settled in the mind of a board member; but I can already see that being preoccupied with the issue throughout one's tenure . . . is probably an integral part of the experience of being a board member." However frustrating or anxiety-provoking that uncertainty may be, it is also, I believe, part of the reason Greenberg finds the evaluations that Editorial Board members perform collectively three times a year "the fairest, most impartial court I have experienced in my many years of academic experience. In my opinion, [the board meetings] represent academic discourse at its very best—arguments are listened to, taken into consideration, and often minds are changed as the discussion proceeds. The only issue at hand is the text before us. . . ."<sup>5</sup>

The final proof of Greenberg's assertion is, of course, the texts before you in this issue of *PMLA*, which, by coincidence, represent a set of studies on criticism, theory, and authority. Mark Jeffreys examines the ideologies of lyric in contemporary criticism and anthologies and exposes the reductive strategies by which differences among lyric texts have been denied. Sharon Marcus's "The Profession of the Author: Abstraction, Advertising, and *Jane Eyre*" analyzes the positive and negative meanings of *abstraction* and, unlike other critics, shows that Charlotte Brontë and her heroine adopt anonymity or pseudonymity productively; they become their texts, enter the professional world, and in some ways realize their desires. The question of authority informs Nicholas T. Rand's introduction to Gustave Lanson's "Literary History and Sociology," an essay from 1904, translated here by Roberta Hatcher, that overturns some clichés about this founder of literary history and reveals his surprisingly modern view of what is now called reception theory. Analogously, David Chinitz's "T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide" contests the image of Eliot as modernist elitist, underscoring the importance of popular culture in Eliot's early works, his desire for an alliance with "the lower class," and his unrealized goal to fashion a new form of public art. In a final contestatory text, David Wayne Thomas demonstrates that the mathematician Kurt Gödel's concept of undecidability rests on a metaphysical foundation that is not articulated in the postmodernist appropriation of Gödel's theorem; Thomas confirms that the ontotheological abides even among anti- or postmetaphysical theories and practices. Thomas's essay is a fitting complement to the *PMLA* referees' criteria for

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publishability, which have something in common with Gödel's belief in the inherent incompleteness of logical systems.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Rabinowitz, however, does not require every article to be "theoretically self-reflective. . . . While I still admire that quality in essays, I suspect it is too idiosyncratic to stand as a general recommendation." By contrast, Bernheimer recommends theoretical essays, on the condition that they "demonstrate how the theory or theories under investigation work in practical applications. . . . Authors should try to offer some concrete examples so as not to leave theoretical speculations floating in an entirely abstract space." Greg Lucente, who argues that the editorial policy elicits "hyperrational (and, frankly, rather conservative) analysis and explication," believes that "the contents of the journal in recent years. . . are getting away from this model" and suggests an addition to the statement, "something like: 'Essays demonstrating not only critical rigor but also imaginative speculation (whether concerned with notions of history, society, gender, culture, or all of these) are also welcome.'" It should be noted that changes in the journal's editorial policy fall within the purview of the association's Executive Council.

<sup>2</sup>Surprisingly, only Mellor mentions the broader interest of essays that "cover more than one field of specialization." Suzanne Fleischman underscores the problems of working across disciplines, reminding authors who apply to literature the theory or methodology of another field to make sure that "their analyses rest on a . . . thorough . . . grounding in the other field. . . ." The respondents refer principally to disciplinary studies of general import rather than to pluridisciplinary or interdisciplinary work. This phenomenon may reflect the predominantly disciplinary divisions of the MLA, which tend to determine the categories of appointments to the Advisory Committee and the Editorial Board.

<sup>3</sup>Hume explains that "if you use *WordPerfect* 6.0 . . . in five seconds you can have the numbers for three readability scales. I'm sure that the other major word-processing programs do the same."

<sup>4</sup>In this context, Gail Finney observes that manuscripts she receives for evaluation occasionally contain "inadequate editing, egregious numbers of typos, spelling errors, and other stylistic flaws."

<sup>5</sup>One of the reasons that the "only issue at hand" can be the text is the journal's author-anonymous reviewing policy. In Nina Baym's view, however, this policy has made senior faculty members less inclined to submit their work to *PMLA*. Her conclusion would be difficult to test empirically because numerous factors could contribute to such a hypothetical decline, including the more immediate access (through commissions for articles, for example) that senior faculty members, by and large, gain to journals in their field.