

---

## Editor's Column

# Parker Prize Winners Reflect on *PMLA*

**T**HE RECIPIENTS of the William Riley Parker Prize constitute *PMLA*'s hall of fame. Named in memory of a distinguished editor of this journal, who was also the association's executive secretary (1947–56) and its sixty-ninth president (1959), the Parker prize has been awarded annually since 1964 for one (or occasionally more than one) outstanding article published in *PMLA*.<sup>1</sup> The oldest of the prizes conferred at the MLA convention, the Parker may not provide a glittering trophy, victory wreaths, or a cordon bleu, but it is a meaningful sign of recognition by one's peers.<sup>2</sup>

The thirty-two recipients of the prize, along with the seventeen who have gained honorable mention over the years, compose an intriguing group of readers from whom to solicit views about *PMLA* past and present. In my letter to these prizemen and -women, who are listed in the September issue of the journal, I asked for comments about the processes of submission, peer review, acceptance, and copyediting and about any other aspects of their experience with the journal that they cared to write on.<sup>3</sup> I also inquired why they had sent the prizewinning essay to *PMLA*, what impact its publication in the journal had on their work and career, if any, and whether they subsequently submitted other essays. Suggesting that they comment on how the journal may have changed in the years since they won the prize, I urged them to consider my letter an invitation to be as critical or constructive as they cared to be. My thanks to the eighteen recipients who responded.<sup>4</sup> I take their comments to be symptomatic, although not necessarily representative, of the views of *PMLA* readers.

Despite my expectations of a diversity of opinions across disciplinary and generational divides, the respondents agree that they sent their lauded essay out of "deep respect for [this] scholarly publication" (Isidore Silver, 1964), "the most distinguished of its kind in literary studies" (Terry Castle, 1985), and thus out of a desire "to prove to myself that I could publish some-

thing in *PMLA*," which "Everest-like . . . was there" (Bliss Carnochan, 1970). And yet that submission may be "more of a duty for the upwardly mobile than . . . a pleasure for everybody else" also defines, for Carnochan, "the problem of *PMLA*, as an arena where spurs are won and trophies awarded." In contrast, Terry Castle and Beth Newman (1991) highlight the importance of these "careerist reasons" for the untenured. Like Castle, Newman submitted her essay to *PMLA* before receiving tenure "because . . . publication in its pages seemed a good way for someone like me (who will probably never be highly prolific) to get noticed at a time in my career when being noticed might make a great deal of difference." This sense of visibility comes from recognizing "the wide range of readers of which *PMLA* can boast" (Walter Ong, 1975), a point made by Morris Eaves (1978) as well: "I sent 'Blake and the Artistic Machine' to *PMLA* because I wanted a shot at the journal's wide readership . . . to see if I could explain myself to a broad, if academic, audience."<sup>5</sup> Thomas Caramagno (1988) emphasizes the equally important notion that submitting his essay "was also a chance to have a critical impact on scholarship" in his field.

The respondents describe in detail the effect that publication in the journal, more than the prize, had on their careers and sense of themselves as scholars. Caramagno insists that the prize made "an enormous difference in my career," by helping him get a contract for a book on the same topic, a fellowship, and a new academic position, while Newman speculates that the prize "probably got me tenure." George Wright (1974, 1981), who speaks of the "large part" the prize played in his getting an NEH grant and a Guggenheim Fellowship, shares the feeling of several others in believing that the award gave him "confidence in my choice of direction." "Publishing on Carroll's *Alice* in *PMLA* and winning the Parker prize," claims Donald Rackin (1967), "probably account[s], more than anything else, for my continued devotion to writing about Carroll since 1966." Moreover, Silver concludes, the recognition gave him confidence in himself as a scholar, "the courage to believe that my devotion to scholarship had not been entirely in vain."<sup>6</sup>

Yet receiving the prize does not necessarily result in further submissions to the journal. To be sure, Roger Herzog (1980) subsequently sent three essays, Marshall Brown (1981, 1984) seven or eight, and Alan Nadel (1993) "most [of his] scholarly essays . . . if they're not written for a specific publication or committed elsewhere." Paradoxically, the six respondents who have not submitted any other essays to *PMLA* cite, among other reasons, the journal's prestige and broad readership: "It's hard to think that what you're doing is so good that thousands upon thousands of MLA members are likely to want to read it," writes William Andrews (1990), while Carnochan admits he "felt that once was sufficient, and maybe [there was] something of the craven thought that probably I wouldn't do as well the next time." While confessing to the same worry, Margaret Waller (1989) explains that since she has been "solicited to write essays for publication, there has really not been an occasion to submit to *PMLA* or to any other journal, for that matter." (Members of the journal's Advisory Committee cited the same

---

reason during a discussion on ways to encourage submissions from their colleagues; one member declared she was three years behind her deadlines for commissioned essays, and she supposed that a significant number of senior members of the profession were in the same position.)

Even more noteworthy than the demand for the writings of (some) senior professors, in my view, are the reasons respondents gave for not submitting work that are clearly linked to their criticisms of *PMLA*. Predictably, perhaps, what some believe the journal has or has not become in recent years is often contradicted in the comments of others; these points of contention warrant consideration for both *PMLA* and the profession. For example, Carnochan did not think another essay of his would “do as well the next time, especially [because] of the policy of blind submissions.” Brown criticizes this policy for discouraging senior members of the profession from submitting articles:

Anonymous submission has certainly affected *PMLA*'s ability to recruit the best-known and most appreciated critics. That hardly needs proving, but I can attest to the fact that some people I solicited for the special topic issue I coordinated told me they would never submit anonymously. . . . I'm not at all sure that the long-term result has been increased access for less well known scholars; the only sure result has been smaller issues.

Brown's and Carnochan's views of the author-anonymous policy are not shared by most respondents. Donald Rackin thinks the earlier policy, under which his essay was accepted, “tended to discriminate against young and female scholars as well as faculty at nonelite institutions. . . . Moreover, even when young faculty, female faculty, and faculty at nonelite institutions found a place in the old *PMLA*, it was often, I suspect, because they had powerful patrons on the Editorial Board.” Arguing that “there are many other important journals in the profession where the well known, frequently published, and/or well connected can easily get their work into print,” Beth Newman declares:

*PMLA* serves an extremely valuable service by making it possible for people entering the profession to get a very fair reading and, if their work is judged worthy on its own merit, to be published in a prominent place. The result may be a kind of crypto–New Critical esthetics of the essay itself—the critical article becomes a freestanding, autonomous object whose author is irrelevant—but I think that a reasonable price to pay (if one thinks of it as a price); in return the profession gets a flagship journal . . . that is remarkably democratic.

Paul Armstrong (1983), who shares this attitude, observes that “our profession works best when its institutions approximate the ideal of a democracy . . . and worst when it is like an exclusive club. . . . The large number of *PMLA* authors from the beginning ranks and from unprivileged institutions leads me to believe that the selection process, for all its inevitable arbitrariness, is at least the egalitarian, open competition it should be.”<sup>7</sup> And Roger

---

Herzel values author-anonymous reviewing for producing superior essays and reports: "I think that I wrote a better article because I knew that my name wouldn't be on the manuscript. . . . Likewise . . . I think that I also do a better job when the roles are reversed and *PMLA* sends me an anonymous manuscript for evaluation."

Whereas there are disagreements about the journal's author-anonymous policy, its peer-review system elicits good marks, ranging from "reasonably adequate to the needs of a discipline stretched to its limits in the attempt to capture . . . the very world of words" (Morris Eaves) to "well tailored and well managed" (Ong) and "on balance, admirable" (A. Kent Hieatt, 1984).<sup>8</sup> Indeed, prize recipients often cite the reader reports from consultant specialists and members of the Advisory Committee as a principal reason that they submitted their work to *PMLA*: "I sent *PMLA* the article because I wanted feedback," writes Thomas Caramagno: "Three other journals rejected it without comment." George Wright goes much further: "I don't know where any literary critic is likely to get more helpful criticism than *PMLA*, whether the work submitted is accepted or rejected."<sup>9</sup> And Alan Nadel, who regularly submits essays to gain "advice [that] might help me sharpen" them for another journal, indicates that he won "a best-essay award from *Modern Fiction Studies* for an essay that had been rejected from three journals, including *PMLA*," and suggests that "these prior rejections are perhaps worth noting in your column, as it may help some contributors . . . develop fortitude."

The journal's editorial and copyediting practices prompt far more ambivalent responses. At the positive end of this spectrum, Eaves regards *PMLA*

as a benchmark of academic editing. . . . Anyone sufficiently editorially minded to pay attention to the way copy is edited will notice that someone who really knows what she's doing is producing final copy for *PMLA*. When reviewers complain of the decline of editing in the modern world . . . they can measure the decline against the standard still being set by Judy Goulding [the managing editor] and her staff.

Similarly, Edward Hirsch (1992) appreciates the editorial attention and the emphasis on "clarity, fairness, and consistency," while Wright thought "the journal's excellent editorial staff" struck "exactly the right middle ground, questioning what they had every right to question and letting good sentences alone."

In dramatic contrast, Caramagno felt that *PMLA* imposed "bludgeoning conformity on my writing style. . . . Impersonalizing prose is a hopeless logocentric project that bleeds the humanity out of scholarship, and out of our discipline." Armstrong's view is no less vehement: "Never has a piece of mine been so brutally blue-penciled to fit house rules. . . . I sometimes feel in reading *PMLA* that its language is blander and more homogeneous than the ideas of its authors, and I wonder if more is lost than gained by aggressive copyediting." More typically, Margaret Waller recognizes, on the one

---

hand, that the requested revisions were justified, helping her to clarify the argument of what would become a book and constituting a powerful learning experience, but felt, on the other hand, "copyedited to death, and fitted into a mold." Newman's similar "mixed feelings" centered on the copyeditors' "efforts to avoid 'jargon,'" which "went a little too far. . . . Perhaps there needs to be a more frequent assessment of what constitutes unnecessary jargon and what has become quite ordinary in critical discourse." And if Nadel respects "the care and attention given to extremely subtle nuances of grammar and usage," he was troubled by the

indifference to the principles of rhetoric, such as style, pace, rhythm. At times a stolid literal-mindedness seemed at odds with attempts to use figurative language, and a premium on the most economic wording, sentence by sentence, undermined the fluidity of paragraphs. I was, of course, glad to take the majority of the suggestions, and able to refuse many of the others, but on rereading the essay I see that at too many points, responding at the sentence level, I lost sight of the tone.

These individual comments point to a more general sense that the journal's style is bland, turgid, stodgy,<sup>10</sup> characteristics that some respondents also associate with *PMLA*'s look and format. The journal's design and lack of visual materials contributed to Terry Castle's decision not to submit other essays:

A lot of the things I have written lately have involved illustrations and photographs. Despite the integration of some visual material into articles, the journal still seems like a very text-dominant periodical. . . . I have always found *PMLA* graphically ugly . . . and the mid-80s redesign didn't help. It remains incorrigibly schoolmarmish in looks and format.

Morris Eaves is disturbed by the journal's cover, which he deems "institutionally tacky. I hate the process blues and the grudging concession to pictures in that little window of illustration that usually opens under the title." Margaret Waller, who finds the cover and graphics unappealing, concedes that literary scholars are often uninformed about the potential use of visual materials or unable to devote the necessary time to researching and procuring them.<sup>11</sup>

And yet, it seems that you cannot know a book by its cover. Like Waller, Castle asserts that the journal's intellectual substance belies its stodgy appearance and reputation:

Intellectually, I think the journal has opened itself up admirably to new critical trends and . . . reflects changing approaches and attitudes fairly accurately. . . . But I also applaud the continuing attention to philological studies and traditional historical and/or stylistic analysis. One certainly does not feel any sort of authoritarian party line in the journal, especially as recent issues have had guest editors and special clusters.<sup>12</sup>

---

Castle's views are echoed by Walter Ong, who believes *PMLA* articles "by and large have provided challenging interpretations of information, old as well as new, and have kept the journal at the cutting edge of thought," and by Beth Newman, who states that the journal "aligns itself with no particular school (though I am aware that some people regard the theoretical engagement of the typical *PMLA* article in the last fifteen years or so as an unfortunate turn)."

Indeed, in a reflection of the "culture wars" that have divided the profession and the nation, some respondents echo Roger Herzog's view that the publication and subsequent recognition of his essay, which did not cite the purported "texts required for entering the current scholarly discourse," prove both that "the literary establishment" was not "closed to scholars interested in other questions" and that "a new orthodoxy" was not being enforced. By contrast, R. G. Peterson (1976), who has not sent an essay to the journal since his prizewinning publication because he "no longer regard[s] *PMLA* as a venue for publication of scholarship in literary history or the history of ideas," declares he is "less and less interested in the kind of politically correct criticism and theory which seems to be its predominant concern . . . [and which] reflects pretty well the established critical ideology of the association itself." This sentiment is implicitly shared by Bliss Carnochan, who has refrained from submitting because "the sort of thing I write doesn't seem to me the sort of thing likely to get printed in *PMLA* nowadays" and who admits to not being able to "remember the last time I actually read an essay in the journal," as well as by A. Kent Hieatt, who says that "*PMLA* became, some time in the last twenty years, peripheral to my own literary concerns." The notion that the journal is inhospitable to all but a narrow "political" set of concerns is particularly troubling in the comments of George Wright, who is hesitantly considering sending articles to the journal for the first time since his 1981 award:

I have to confess that I am not at all sure that the kind of articles I write would be entirely welcome by the Editorial Board, or even by the specialist readers you might call on. I'm not a new historicist, a feminist, or a postcolonialist, nor do I write on ethnic, gay, or cultural studies. I wonder if there isn't a reason to doubt whether the sort of formal studies of style that I like to do, even if tempered somewhat by the accretions of theory that I have been learning to build into my essays, would be welcome at *PMLA*. There's no doubt in my mind that excellence in its kind is still the prevailing test by which an article is judged . . . but the influence of perspectives that are ultimately political in nature seems out of proportion nowadays in the *MLA*. . . . Formerly marginalized areas of professional study have become not merely welcome in our field (which is admirable) but, as it seems, jealously central.

Whether these views are "correct" can only be determined if Wright, Hieatt, Carnochan, Peterson, and other members of the association who share their conviction take up the challenge I hereby extend to submit their work to the journal's readers, who, like the well-known toys, ultimately 'r' us. William

---

Andrews expresses my sentiments exactly: "If my comments here can convey to . . . hesitant scholars . . . a sense of the user-friendliness of *PMLA* as a reading and editorial institution, I'd feel gratified."

The ambivalence that Parker prize winners display about *PMLA* and thus about the association and the profession is at least a sign that diversity of opinions exists. Even more important, these respondents' comments should be regarded not as a critique of some distant other but as a collective auto-critique that can help to ensure that *PMLA* does not become or remain stodgy. More concretely, the criticisms of *PMLA* must be taken seriously, and where they seem on target to the journal's staff, readers, Advisory Committee, and Editorial Board and ultimately to the association's Executive Council, changes must be devised and implemented. Of course, no set of changes will fully satisfy even the circumscribed group of Parker prize recipients. As Morris Eaves reflects, in what some might consider typically postmodern terms:

I've always been struck by the tricky place *PMLA* finds itself in, kind of everywhere and nowhere, at the center of a "discipline" that has no center . . . that is really a loose, centerless network of subdisciplines. So when anyone, including myself, ventures to say anything coherent about *PMLA* we should preface our thoughts with a prethought, such as "under the circumstances. . . ." Because to some extent both the MLA and *PMLA* provide the illusion of a center where there isn't one; and that makes them easy targets, as readers of the annual parodies of the MLA convention know. Under the circumstances, then, I'd say that *PMLA* does a fine job of trying to keep up with the times in difficult times. Our business looks a lot more mixed and mixed up and wild and crazy than it did when my first article was published . . . and *PMLA* reflects that dynamic mosaic pretty well.

The expression "dynamic mosaic" captures my goals for this journal, as I begin my second (and final) term as editor. I would like to think that the essays in this number, which reread Proust, Jonson, Defoe, and Milton against the critical grain, contribute to such a mosaic. Jarrod Hayes discovers homoerotic meanings in Proust's "tearoom" that destabilize not only accepted interpretations of *A la recherche du temps perdu* but also certainties about gender categories in particular and about subjectivity in general. Richmond Barbour focuses on the pretty male youth (and actor) in Jonson's theater as a site of homo- and heteroeroticism and in so doing offers a new interpretation of the proverbial misogyny of Volpone's creator. In a study of the abiding traces of antiusury doctrine in the discourse of emerging capitalism, Ann Louise Kibbie shows how the reproductive and promiscuous female body figures the monstrous, uncontrollable generation of capital in Defoe's *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana*. Analogously, in contrast to traditional scholarship, John Rumrich argues that Milton's God does not oppose chaos but contains its material potency, depicted in representations of woman and the womb.

A dynamic mosaic? The stuff of political correctness? More stodgy blandness? The gamut of *PMLA* consumers may find evidence for all these de-

---

scriptions in the studies that follow—while five readers may agree that the author of one of the essays should receive the 1995–96 Parker prize and join the journal's hall of fame.

DOMNA C. STANTON

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Founder of the MLA's Foreign Language Program and its director during 1952–56 and author of studies about foreign language education in the United States, William Riley Parker was a well-known scholar of British literature—Milton, in particular—and at the time of his death, in 1968, distinguished professor in and chair of the English department at Indiana University.

<sup>2</sup>The five members of the William Riley Parker Prize Selection Committee are appointed by the Committee on Honors and Awards for three-year terms; the prizewinners each receive \$500 and a certificate bearing a citation about the merits of the essay. Of course, merit does not exclude luck, as Paul Armstrong, who won the prize in 1983, observes: "In retrospect, it seems more and more like winning the lottery. Obviously, I think that my essay was very good, but so were many others that year, and so were many others that didn't get past the Editorial Board. Often a career . . . seems as much a matter of chance as of merit, and the combination of luck and hard work in winning the Parker prize reflects that."

<sup>3</sup>For the record, the first woman to garner the prize was Elisabeth Schneider. Except for George Wright (1974 and 1981), she is the only recipient to have won twice (1966 and 1973), although Marshall Brown has had two honorable mentions (1981 and 1984). Since 1964 there have been six female recipients of the Parker, four of them since 1985, and two female recipients of an honorable mention.

<sup>4</sup>Paul Armstrong makes a valid point: "I'm not sure that receiving the Parker prize gives one special authority to comment on *PMLA*." I am sorry that an operation in May prevented Hans Eichner, the recipient of the prize in 1982, from contributing his views. The eighteen respondents represent winners from 1964 (Isidore Silver) to 1993 (Alan Nadel), but understandably their awards are concentrated in the last twenty years.

<sup>5</sup>An awareness of the audience, writes Marshall Brown, makes a potential contributor send essays that "are broad in their coverage, likely to touch bases with more than one kind of reader." The same idea informed the comments of members of the journal's Advisory Committee and Editorial Board on what makes an essay publishable in *PMLA*, which I discussed in my March 1995 column.

<sup>6</sup>Conversely, the admission by William Andrews (1990) that "when I was notified that I had been selected to receive the . . . prize, I remember my first thought was, if my essay wins the Parker . . . what's happening to the quality of *PMLA*?" seems a variant of Groucho Marx's bon mot that he would never join a club that would admit him.

<sup>7</sup>The civic analogy recurs in an observation by A. Kent Heat (1984): "the most telling criticism of *PMLA*'s bureaucratized process is that it aspires to the condition of a national legal system." He counters that "bureaucratically expensive and time-consuming procedures need to be built in to insure that justice is at least sometimes done."

<sup>8</sup>Even Edward Hirsch (1992), who felt his essay was under consideration "for what seemed like an inordinately long time," allows that this unfortunate delay "was perhaps made up for by the excellent comments I received from the readers."

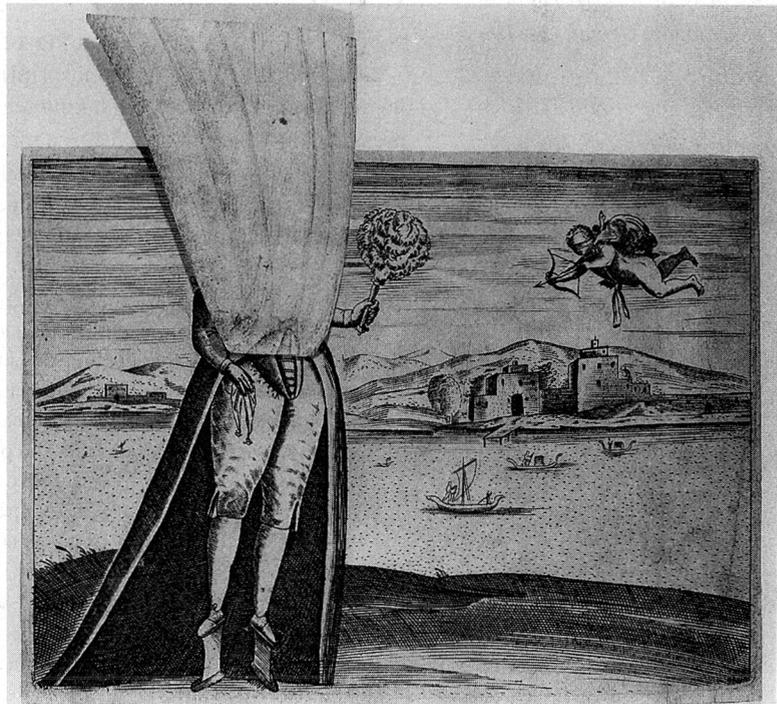
<sup>9</sup>In connection with the peer-review system, Caramagno raises a subject of current concern to me: "as literary studies become more and more interdisciplinary, journals will have to make special efforts to retain the services of experts in other fields who can construc-

tively comment on attempts to bridge the gap between fields." I hope that some of the letters on interdisciplinarity for the March 1996 Forum will tackle the problem of ensuring that multidisciplinary essays are assigned to readers who are sympathetic to such work and knowledgeable in relevant areas.

<sup>10</sup>Hirsch would like to see articles that are "a little more essayistic, more formally conceived and beautifully written," but finds the predominance of "merely adequate" writing "a problem in contemporary scholarship that goes well beyond *PMLA*."

<sup>11</sup>Waller's comments bear out my own experience in recent months, as I have urged *PMLA* authors to find visual materials that can enhance their essays. It is undeniable, however, that the expense of obtaining camera-ready pictures, which, under the journal's current policy, authors bear, can represent a financial burden for scholars who are untenured or whose institutions do not subsidize research costs.

<sup>12</sup>Castle is one of the rare respondents who mention the journal's special topics and clusters.



Lifting the hinged skirt of a finely dressed sixteenth-century Italian woman reveals men's breeches underneath. *Venetian Woman with Moveable Skirt*, c. 1590, engraving, 5½" × 7½" (14 × 19 cm). All rights reserved, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 1955 (55.503.30).