
Editor's Column

Testing the Myths: *PMLA* Submissions and Acceptances, 1973–92

I AM OFTEN TOLD that senior members of the profession do not send their essays to *PMLA*. They have stopped doing so, according to a recurrent view, because the journal only publishes trendy articles that have a radical political agenda shaped by foreign theories. Scholarly or formal studies, I hear, have little chance of acceptance, for marginal work has not simply been given a rightful place in the journal but has drowned out all other voices. A metonymic proof presented for these assertions is that most of the articles published in *PMLA* are written by young scholars, notably assistant professors. (And yet, if anyone should be “blamed” for this development, it is those who determine which manuscripts are accepted—the consultant readers and the members of the Advisory Committee and the Editorial Board—but they are almost exclusively full professors.) More often than not, colleagues who claim that *PMLA* does not receive or publish essays by well-known senior professors point the finger at the journal’s author-anonymous reviewing policy, the lengthy evaluation process, and the slim chance of acceptance.¹

I have reflexively expressed skepticism or disbelief whenever this narrative is repeated in various fragmentary guises. For in my experience, those involved in *PMLA*’s refereeing process strive to ensure that the journal is indeed open “to all scholarly methods and theoretical perspectives,” as the statement of editorial policy prescribes, and systematically look for signs of possibly biased readings. Determined, then, to test the accuracy of this recurrent narrative, I turned to the data banks at 10 Astor Place, or, rather, to the dexterous Ariadne of that labyrinth. I am grateful to Bettina Huber, the MLA’s director of research, for organizing the relevant data to reveal submission and acceptance trends and discussing the results with me. What follows is a different

narrative about *PMLA* contributors' ranks and the role that author-anonymous reviewing has (not) played.

In an effort to highlight trends as clearly and informatively as possible, we divided the period 1973–92 into five groups of four years each and considered the ranks of professor, associate professor, assistant professor, and graduate student.² Overall, as figure 1 indicates, the number of submissions to *PMLA* has been declining since 1977, after increasing sharply between 1973 and 1976; in 1985, 1986, 1991, and 1992 the number dipped even below the 1973 level. This trend could be linked to the number of periodical publications in the field, which by one measure rose steadily from 2,877 in 1978–79 to 3,225 in 1990–91.³ However, this increase would have resulted in an expansion of publishing opportunities only if they were not diminished by a variety of other factors, such as changes in the number of active scholars in the profession. We suspect, although it is impossible to say for certain, that the decline in submissions is more closely related to the reduction in PhDs granted that began in the mid-1970s.

In keeping with the overall trend for total submissions depicted in figure 1, figure 2 shows that the average number of submissions a year for three of the four academic ranks increased between the periods 1973–76 and 1977–80, the exception being assistant professors. After 1980, the average annual number of submissions for the three professorial ranks declined (except for professors in the final period) and was lower in 1989–92 than it was in 1973–76. Over the twenty-year period under consideration, the only rank that shows an increase in the average yearly number of submissions is graduate students (49.8 articles in 1973–76 vs. 73.8 in 1989–92—a 48% increase). This trend could be attributed to the pressure on graduate students in a highly competitive job market to publish in prestigious journals early in their careers and to the “equal opportunity” they experience in a journal in which submissions

Fig. 1. Numbers of Manuscripts Submitted and Accepted

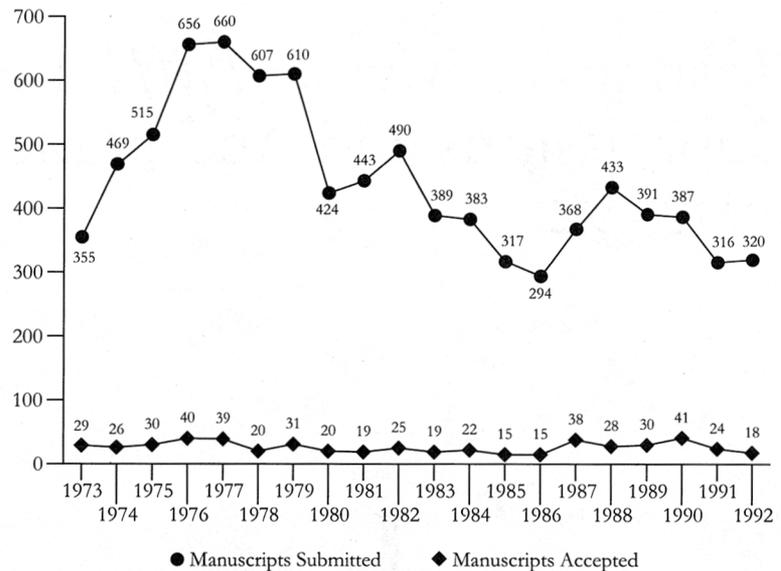


Fig. 2. Average Annual Number of Submissions, by Academic Status

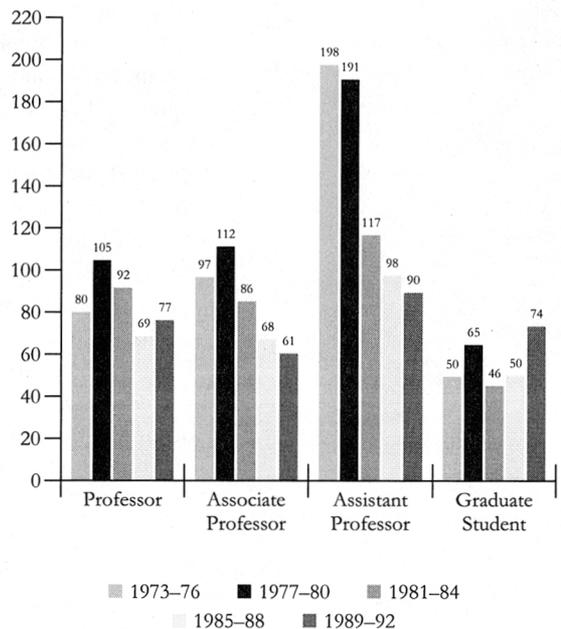
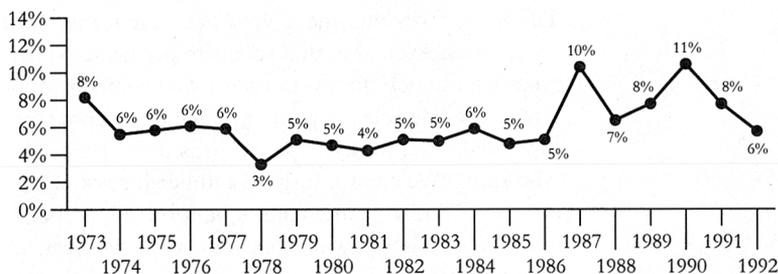


Fig. 3. Acceptance Rate for All Submissions



are refereed anonymously. Contrary to the prevailing view, the sharpest decline in submissions appears among assistant professors (198.0 in 1973–76 vs. 89.8 in 1989–92). This drop, which occurred despite the enormous pressure on the untenured to publish, could be explained in part by the reduced number of assistant professors in the profession in the tight job market of the 1980s. Associate professors experienced an intermediate level of decline (97.0 in 1973–76 vs. 60.8 in 1989–92). The smallest decline occurred among full professors (80.3 in 1973–76 vs. 76.5 in 1989–92, though the average sank to 69 in 1985–88).

Indeed, full professors have been the steadiest submitters to *PMLA* before and after the establishment of the author-anonymous reviewing procedures, which were adopted by the Executive Council at its May 1979 meeting, announced in the Fall 1979 issue of the *MLA Newsletter*, and implemented in January 1980. There is thus no evidence that these procedures have made full professors less likely to submit articles to *PMLA*. Still, when compared to the figures for other academics, the relatively small number of submissions by full professors is troubling, particularly at a time when the profession is graying. To be sure, prominent scholars whose work is solicited and accepted sight unseen by editors of anthologies and of specialized and not-so-specialized journals might be reluctant to undergo lengthy reviews when the probability of acceptance is low. But while some colleagues may be in this posi-

tion,⁴ their numbers do not account for the disproportionately low level of submissions from full professors.

It is possible, of course, that the decline in submissions to the journal over the past twenty years derives from the low acceptance rate, which may have discouraged potential contributors. As figure 3 indicates, the acceptance rate varied between

3.3% and 6.1% during 1974–86, rising to 5.7–10.6% during 1987–92, perhaps because the series of special-topic issues announced and published in that period prompted more-focused submissions and found more-receptive referees.⁵ During 1973–76, when the number of submitted manuscripts grew by 85%, the number accepted increased only by 38%, and the acceptance rate thus declined from 8.2% to 6.1%. This widened disparity between submissions and acceptances may have contributed to the subsequent drop in manuscripts sent to the journal. Indeed, since full professors saw the sharpest reduction of any group in acceptances during 1973–80 (fig. 4), the 8.2%-to-4.7% decline in the overall acceptance rate in this period may have had a particularly negative effect on submissions from their rank at the end of the 1970s.

And yet full professors have fared relatively well under the author-anonymous reviewing policy, as figure 4 confirms. After a steep decline—11.8% to 4.8%—from 1973–76 to 1977–80, the acceptance rate

Fig. 4. Acceptance Rate by Academic Status

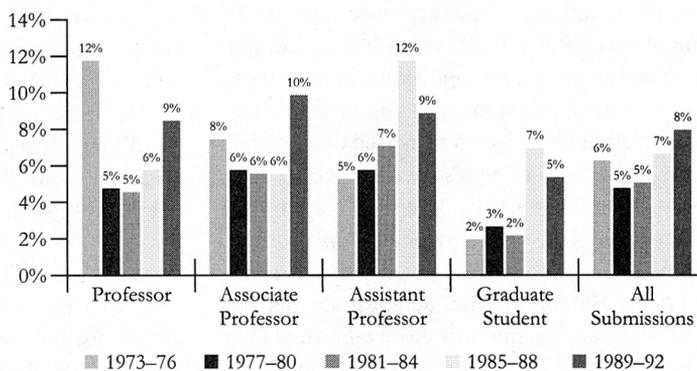
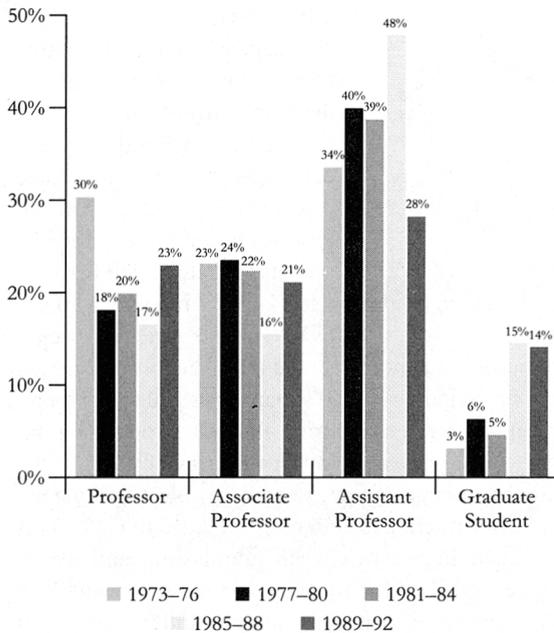


Fig. 5. Percentage of All Manuscripts Accepted, by Academic Status



for full professors increased to 8.5% during the 1989–92 period. A similar pattern is evident among associate professors, whose acceptance rate fell somewhat from 1973–76 to 1977–80 (from 7.5% to 5.8%), held steady through 1988, and then rose to 9.9% in 1989–92. By contrast to senior faculty members, assistant professors and graduate students experienced a sharp rise in their rates of acceptance between 1973 and 1988 (from 5.3% to 11.8% for assistant professors and from 2.0% to 7.0% for graduate students) followed by a fall (to 8.9% and 5.4%, respectively). By and large, 1989–92 shows small variation in the acceptance rates for all professorial ranks: 8.5%, 9.9%, and 8.9% for full professors, associate professors, and assistant professors. But the percentage of manuscripts by graduate students among all those accepted increased dramatically from 3.2% to 14.2% during these twenty years (fig. 5).

To be sure, these statistics do not reveal whether there are correlations between particular topics or critical approaches and the rates of acceptance among different ranks. But the statistics demonstrate that prevailing views about the ranks of those who send their essays to *PMLA* and of those whose work gains ac-

ceptance are inaccurate, as is the theory that author-anonymous reviewing has driven away full professors. The *idées fixes* that these views represent inscribe the myth of exclusion that seems to permeate North American society today, the sense that someone different from me is being privileged and has become the preferred other at my expense. Was it not Emerson who said, “We cannot forgive another for not being ourselves”? If the other cannot be forgiven, perhaps myths that do not fit what appear to be the facts can at least be forgotten.

Coincidentally, the essays in this issue of *PMLA*, which were accepted under the journal’s author-anonymous reviewing policy and written by two full professors, an associate professor, and an instructor, grapple with the different ways in which nation or (imagined) community may bond in solidarity against a perceived enemy. Lawrence Lipking examines Renaissance poems by Milton and Camões that articulate the myths and grievances that bind a nation together. Whereas Lipking depicts Milton’s colonialist yearning to see Ireland and England conjoined, Elizabeth Butler Cullingford studies gendered metaphors in Irish texts that, casting Britain as Rome and Ireland as Carthage, enlist classical tropes to sustain militant solidarity in an anticolonial, nationalist cause. Gary Rosenshield sees in Rybakov’s *Heavy Sand* (1978) an attempt to overcome the demonizing of the Jew, which in part united Russians, and to create instead a cementing memorial for the Jews murdered by Nazis; but he concludes that this problematic novel ultimately de-Judaizes—and thus denies—the Holocaust’s victims, in keeping with dominant Soviet ideology. Finally, Richard Heinemann’s dialectical reading of the protagonist’s obsession with an invisible enemy in “Der Bau” shows that for Kafka the bureaucratic mind encompasses not only a preeminent need for order and security but also a longing, based on a sense of duty, for solidarity with others.

Heinemann’s engagement with sociology, Cullingford’s and Rosenshield’s with history and politics, and Lipking’s with Renaissance colonialism and cartography highlight the kind of pluri- and interdisciplinary work in literary studies discussed and evaluated in this issue’s Forum. In a new approach to the Forum, readers of *PMLA* were invited to submit statements on the ways in which the goals of interdisciplinarity have and have not been realized in their fields. The response,

which was gratifying in its size and the diversity of views expressed, suggests that other concerns in the profession can and should be addressed in this manner. The next special-topic Forum, on the personal in scholarship, will appear in the October 1996 issue. It should be noted that the journal's author-anonymous reviewing policy does not apply to the Forum. If myths die hard, those who still believe in the negative effect of that policy on their academic rank should be more impelled to send Forum texts than essays to *PMLA*. Only time—and data banks—will tell.

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Notes

¹These views were expressed by some of the Parker Prize winners I cited in my October 1995 column. The notion that *PMLA* favors young, untenured, little-known scholars at unprestigious institutions was mentioned both by academics who are critical of certain trends in contemporary literary studies and by those who advocate, or consider themselves beneficiaries of, author-anonymous reviewing. Of course, not all MLA constitu-

encies agree with these views. Some believe that the work of scholars of color is not acceptable to—and thus not accepted by—*PMLA*'s referees because it does not traffic in what the critics perceive to be the dominant theoretical and literary discourse. In a recent meeting, some scholars of color criticized author-anonymous reviewing, but for reasons different from those I have cited. As one participant put it, "Author-anonymous reviewing represents equal opportunity, but we need a process that embodies the principles of affirmative action." Although I do not discuss those concerns in this column, which focuses on rank, they need to be addressed and will be in a future column.

²We did not consider independent scholars, instructors, and lecturers because the numbers of essays they submitted are small.

³These figures represent the number of items in the *MLA Directory of Periodicals*, which encompasses journals and monographic series that fall within the subject scope of the *MLA International Bibliography*, including language, literature, linguistics, and folklore. This directory is not exhaustive, but its contents are relevant because scholars use it to find outlets for publication.

⁴For an expression of this view, see the October 1995 Editor's Column (984–85).

⁵Following are the special topics published during the period of the data, with the years when they were announced: 1987—African and African American Literature, The Politics of Critical Language, Canons; 1988—Cinema, Theory of Literary History, Performance; 1990—Literature and the Idea of Europe. With the exception of Canons, which never came to fruition, these special topics appeared between January 1990 and January 1993.