

Editor's Column

SHOULD *PMLA* commission essays? The question arose unexpectedly before the Delegate Assembly at the 1978 Convention when the Assembly's Liaison Committee, in recommending a policy of anonymous submission, added that such a change should not affect the journal's right to commission papers. Since the existence of this editorial prerogative came as a surprise to some delegates, debate was inevitable. The ensuing discussion, however, though revealing certain fears, ended on a note of accommodation.

Those on the negative side of the issue made several persuasive points. Choosing from about seven hundred submissions, we now publish no more than thirty-five essays a year. Since it is so difficult to enter *PMLA*'s charmed circle (the acceptance rate works out to something like one in twenty), reducing the available slots by even one or two a year would be detrimental to the democratic process that accounts for much of our strength. Why make any exceptions to the policy of publishing only papers that have survived nine peer evaluations? And why extend a special invitation to those who don't need it—eminent critics who would probably place their work anyway? Besides, it doesn't make sense to assure *anyone* a place in our coveted pages: we reject essays by distinguished scholars every month.

As a former university ombudsman I have the tedious habit of discovering merit on all sides of most issues, and in this case I find the arguments in favor of commissioned articles to be equally convincing. When a particularly timely or stimulating paper or debate enriches our annual Convention, wouldn't it make sense to give those not in attendance a chance to share in the experience through the pages of our Association's journal? We do, after all, publish the annual Presidential Address, assuming—quite rightly, I think—that it is for all members, not just for those who hear it, and that its inclusion adds distinction to our May issue. And wouldn't it make sense, following the death of a writer such as Vladimir Nabokov or Allen Tate, to ask Dabney Stuart or Helen Vendler or M. L. Rosenthal (among numerous candidates) to write a commemorative essay? Moreover, since certain areas of study have been underrepresented or even ignored in our pages, would it not be wiser to attempt to redress the imbalance than to wait (perhaps forever) for the problem to solve itself?

One might argue, too, that since many periodicals at the forefront of critical thought attempt to ensure their readability and influence by seeking out gifted writers, some scholars, especially those with a good deal of visibility, are reluctant to submit essays without a guarantee of publication and hence are unwilling to send their seminal efforts to *PMLA*. While this situation clearly challenges us to devise some way of inducing all our colleagues, whatever their degree of prominence, to send us their most stimulating work, our response must not be at the expense of our peer-review process. Aggressively encouraging submissions entails no risks that I can think of, but any significant move toward commissioning has disquieting implications. I cherish the sense I now have that any essay sent to us has as good a chance of being accepted as any other essay of equal merit, that an unknown assistant professor may appear in our pages next to an *éminence grise*. In fact, during our Convention party for those whose articles appeared in 1978, I was impressed by how young many of the celebrants were. All the guests were there because their work had been found worthy by a panel of judges.

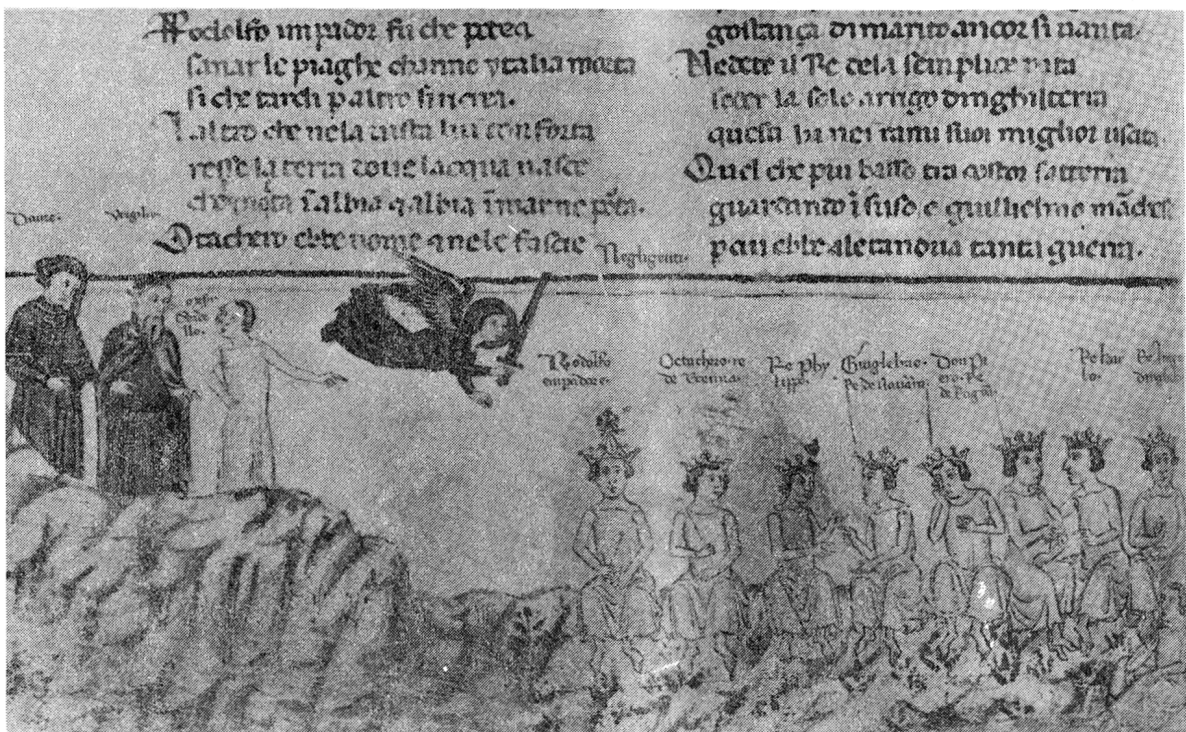
My overall view on this subject, finally, is that *PMLA* ought to have the option to commission articles but should exercise it only on exceptional occasions. This, I take it, is also the view of the Assembly, which voted both for anonymous submission *and* for the right to commission essays. I appreciate being encouraged to maintain this flexibility, since I welcome any means to make *PMLA* as readable, provocative, and substantial as possible. I will use the prerogative with restraint and will try to be sensitive to its implications.

In writing here about this general question, I do not mean to slight the essays appearing in this issue, essays that, though chosen during my predecessor's editorship, I am pleased to present. It has, as you know, become something of a convention in this column to describe (often in glowing language) the articles being introduced. What I might say, by way of appropriate praise, is that each of these papers, having arrived unsolicited, has tenaciously withstood our review

process: each was sent first to a specialist reader, then to a member of the Advisory Committee (and on to a referee if they disagreed), and finally, bolstered by two positive recommendations, to the seven-member Editorial Board, where it was accepted only after rigorous evaluation.

That a paper is published here does not mean that it was endorsed by every member of the Board. Some took exception to certain essays, and virtually all argued for papers that were not finally selected. Each article in the issue, however, received sufficient support (some, in fact, getting unanimous approval) to justify being sent out to our diverse and highly critical membership. I trust that you will agree with, if not all, then at least some of the choices made by your Board as it responded, according to its lights, to these rich, and richly varied, presentations.

JOEL CONARROE



Sordello Pointing Out the Negligent Princes to Vergil and Dante

Holkham Hall, Library of the Earl of Leicester, MS 514. From Volume II of Peter Brieger, Millard Meiss, and Charles S. Singleton, *Illustrated Manuscripts of the Divine Comedy*, Bollingen Series No. 81 (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969).