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## Editor's Column

# Are You Nervy Enough for *PMLA*?

### Changes and Opportunities 1

**S**OME FORTY-FIVE years and more ago, within a decade of the close of World War II, the American fashion industry was still coming to terms with the changes forced on it by the war and with the opportunities those changes offered to any who had the wit and the will to take advantage of altered circumstances.

Before the war, the styling of the apparel American manufacturers offered to American women was largely dependent on the dictates of Paris designers. Once France was occupied, the flow of fashion concepts that had moved westward across the Atlantic into New York's Seventh Avenue garment district was disrupted. When the United States entered the war, the government placed heavy restrictions on the materials normally used in the manufacture of apparel. With the severe and sudden curtailment of commercial access to fabrics for clothing and to leather for shoes, American designers and Seventh Avenue manufacturers alike faced unprecedented problems. They had to decide whether these changes would drag them under or serve as mothers of shrewd invention.

Claire McCardell is credited with having been the most alert, the most imaginative, and the most influential of the inventors in two related and highly charged areas, each commercial and cultural. McCardell's wartime designs not only made the best of the traditional fabrics that were available, they incorporated fabrics not ordinarily associated with women's clothing manufacture. At the same time, she also seized the chance provided by the severance of ties with the Paris fashion houses; she began to advance the idea of clothing appropriate for both the bodies and the lives of *American* women. McCardell's women differed in physical type, as well as in cultural context, from their Parisian counterparts. Through

the example of McCardell's designs, women in the 1940s learned that their distinctive lives need not be limited to older fashion concepts that assumed that any stylish woman in America would wish to dress like a Parisian, whether or not those designs addressed her particular mode of living and her personal look. Call McCardell's belief that the bodies and lives of American women did not readily fit a universalist model "American exceptionalism," if you will, but that is how she and countless others responded to the opportunities offered by wartime strictures.

After 1945, hitherto rationed materials came back into civilian circulation, and lines of fashion communication were restored between New York and Paris. Word of what Christian Dior had to offer chic women in France swiftly crossed the Atlantic, and Seventh Avenue manufacturers quickly placed knockoffs of the New Look in stores. Any American woman still enamored of the French style could again be satisfied at almost every price level and mercantile outlet. However, the American apparel market was not the same in the closing years of the 1940s as before the war, nor would it ever be. Demand for the casual, convenient, reasonably priced designs for which McCardell was famous continued unabated, abetted by Seventh Avenue's further appropriation of the materials introduced during the war years.

One such innovation (which originated with McCardell) came from the realization that a woman no longer must wear nothing but shoes on her feet. Among the items rationed during the war were the leathers out of which shoes were and are traditionally constructed. As a result, McCardell had turned her attention to an area outside the boundaries of conventional fashion footwear: the world of ballet. Making arrangements with a modest Seventh Avenue firm that had been serving the ballet corps at the Metropolitan Opera and other local dance groups since its founder, Salvatore Capezio, began to work as a cobbler in 1887, McCardell called into being a ballet slipper adapted for street wear; it was an idea she continued to advance even after shoe manufacturers returned to designs based on prewar models and materials.

Flash forward to the mid-1950s. Bright futures lay ahead for the ideas born ten years earlier of opportunities seized in the midst of change. It was the Balanchine era and a generally heady time for the American design world. Certainly it was the right moment to supplement the production of traditional footwear with the McCardell-Capezio concept of ballet slippers designed to move off the stage and into everyday use. (Capezio leotards also became part of a look that continues to this day.) The marketing minds of Seventh Avenue and Madison Avenue recognized the drastic shifts in the American business and consumer mentality needed for the successful implementation of this innovation. And so a major advertising campaign was launched to promote the new product, which was inexpensive, practical, and wearable (qualities expected by smart buyers) but also (the unexpected factor) entirely different. The word *shoe* was never used, and mimetic representations of the new foot-

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wear rarely appeared. The motto used throughout the campaign expressed both a sharp challenge and a pleasing innovation: "Are you mad enough for Capezio?" That is, are you willing to open your mind to ideas you had not entertained in the past but that promise good things if you recognize the opportunities they offer?

The Capezio campaign of the mid-1950s reveals Madison and Seventh Avenues at either their best or their worst, depending on how one wishes to interpret such entrepreneurial enterprises. For the record, this event, packed with implications ripe for diverse interpretations by cultural historians and analysts of market forces, was hugely successful. However that may be, the purpose of this anecdote (call it a fable) is to provide an analogue to the following announcement: planned for this journal are an array of features that pose the question, Are you nervy enough for *PMLA*?—Are you willing to respond as readers to what *PMLA* offers as it, too, seizes opportunities in the midst of change?

### Changes and Opportunities 2

There are, as we are aware, many changes taking place in the scholarly and professional life to which the MLA and *PMLA* dedicate their full-time attention. Rapid changes have the power to paralyze some minds; they also provide occasions to open up new areas for analysis and debate. *PMLA* believes in seizing opportunities and making the most, not the least, of the swirl of changes within which we all function as scholars, students, teachers, and critics. To serve this cause, an abundance of new venues for intellectual work have been proposed by the hard-working Editorial Board and sanctioned by the good graces of the Executive Council. These additions will supplement and enhance, not replace or diminish, the established contents by which *PMLA* upholds its honorable place in the professional lives of those who study and teach the modern languages and literatures.

Four new features will regularly present commissioned essays on topics that engage the expanding interests of our membership, in the United States and abroad:

- Reviews of current theories and methodologies
- Essays on the state of the art in various areas of the profession
- Reports on current trends in journals, book markets, and library acquisitions
- Articles by writers outside the United States who serve for one year as corresponding contributors

In an extension of current policy, special-topic issues will begin to appear twice yearly, in January and May, as of 2003. As before, announcements inviting members to submit essays for consideration will be placed in the May issues of *PMLA* and on the MLA Web site three years before the publication of accepted items. Before each special topic appears, it will be the focus of a panel at the MLA convention.

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To whet appetites for what lies ahead, here is a list of the special topics already on the *PMLA* schedule, leading up to and following the introduction of the biannual format: Globalizing Literary Studies (Jan. 2001), Mobile Citizens, Media States (Jan. 2002), America: The Idea, the Literature (Jan. 2003), and Imagining History (May 2003). The topics for January 2001, 2002, and 2003 form a trilogy of responses to the evolving fields of internationalist literary studies.

A very special special-topic issue is scheduled for 2004, on Literatures at Large. It will feature essays commissioned by the Editorial Board from MLA members with experience in teaching outside the United States.

From time to time, papers drawn from MLA convention programs will appear in print, clusters of related talks made available to members unable to attend the original presentations. Two such papers, from the 1998 San Francisco session "Early American Cinema and Politics," appear in this issue, together with an abstract of the third paper delivered then, which will be published elsewhere; the papers are included to suggest the possibilities of this feature.

Another new feature, for which *PMLA* invites proposals from the membership at large (see 1021), is the publication of little-known documentary material, translated if not originally in English. The intention of this feature is to rescue from obscurity significant archival documents of potential interest to a wide range of members.

Consider the *PMLA* issue you hold in your hands, whose cover art evokes the blazing of stars. It contains three intriguing essays, about conflicts over language claims effecting the emergence of a powerful Nigerian literature, about links between legal charges of obscenity and the growth of the genre now known as the Gothic, and about literary representations of Lady Credit that trace perceptions of the new market society in early-eighteenth-century Britain. The two papers from the 1998 convention demonstrate interdisciplinary connections among the novel, the silent film, and political events in turn-of-the-century American society. The issue also presents letters submitted to a special-topic Forum by members who write with passion about the fast-growing field of literatures of the environment.

These essays, papers, letters, and announcements—these arresting scholarly subjects and professional debates—come to you under *PMLA*'s recently reconfigured cover design. In the months and years ahead (for keep in mind the time lapse between announced additions and published results), *PMLA* intends to work creatively with intellectual change and to seize intellectual opportunities, simultaneously initiating features and continuing the journal's strong tradition of academic leadership. The Editorial Board and I trust that our readers will indeed be nervy enough to respond to *PMLA*'s expanded program and ready to take keen interest in the benefits ahead.

MARTHA BANTA

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