

Forum

The Decrease in Submissions to *PMLA*

TO THE EDITOR:

I read with great interest the Editor's Column in the January 2001 issue ("Lost Moorings—*PMLA* and Its Audience," 116 [2001]: 9–15): Carlos J. Alonso's assessment of the issues involved in the decrease in submissions to the journal strikes me as sensible and candid. But I think it needs to be emphasized that the problem he discusses is not necessarily just *PMLA*'s problem, and in this respect what is occurring regarding submissions to *PMLA* is symptomatic of what is occurring broadly in scholarly publishing in the humanities.

As a former journal editor (*Modern Fiction Studies*, 1993–97), I empathize with the concern over the lack of strong submissions, no matter how many submissions are being received. Further, soliciting essays through the vehicle of special issues (as *MFS* does for two issues out of four per year) does not guarantee the quality of the work submitted; it simply provides a focus for that work. I think that two circumstances contribute to the difficulties Alonso faces as the incoming editor of *PMLA*: it is true that graduate students and faculty members are being encouraged to "get their work out there" at much earlier stages of preparation, given job market and promotion and tenure pressures, but this is twinned with the fact that scholarly work is increasingly published in the form of essay collections, scholarly proceedings, special issues, and so forth, so that a large and growing pool of authors are committing their work—oftentimes at an early conceptual stage—to venues where that work is guaranteed publication from the beginning.

Over the past thirty years, there has been a large shift from publishing in refereed scholarly journals to publishing in other venues where various forms of refereeing occur, but largely through an editor who is putting together a collection. In times past, it was very difficult to get an essay collection published; currently, it is much easier, especially if the collection is devoted to a hot topic and can be developed fairly quickly. Certainly, authors under specific job or tenure pressures will be attracted to venues that can offer strong assurances of

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or promise publication in respected scholarly locations rather than to the anonymity and uncertainty of refereed publication in journals with a five to six percent acceptance rate; in this regard, “refereeing” has a wide applicability, including the refereeing that takes place when a guest editor and a journal or house editor review and edit a solicited manuscript. And many senior scholars will tell you that they almost never bother submitting an essay for publication in the current circumstances: their dance cards are full years in advance for solicited publications. Finally, editors want their journals to be read and noticed in an increasingly competitive situation; thus, solicited or special issues in which recognizable names appear have become increasingly the norm, particularly for journals that wish to significantly enhance their visibility or are reinventing themselves.

In sum, I don’t think *PMLA* is alone in this situation, or that there is something specific about the journal or its policies and review processes that has caused the significant downturn in submissions: I think it is a fact of life in an environment where the norms are changing rapidly as print gives way to electronic publication and where, for many, there is little room or incentive for pursuing traditional scholarly publication.

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TO THE EDITOR:

I read with great interest your thoughtful editorial on the declining number of submissions to *PMLA*; a day later, with the column still in mind, I received your letter urging me to “seriously consider sending [my] next article to *PMLA*.” Having published in many kinds of academic journals, including those that aspire to reach a broad, nonspecialist audience, I find myself compelled to reevaluate why ever since graduate school I have consistently ruled out *PMLA* as a potential forum for my work.

As somebody who reads more articles published in *PMLA* than most, I am in sympathy with your desire to reform the journal. I appreciate your cogent analysis of the problem of declining submissions, and I admire your determination to redress it. But while your pitch is persuasive, it is not persuasive enough. Your official discourse about the journal’s review process conflicts with the profession’s

unofficial discourse: word on the street is that *PMLA*’s review of manuscripts is arbitrary, capricious, and often unfair.

As a result, I have never submitted an article to *PMLA*—though I know many, many colleagues and students who have. While some acquaintances have published in *PMLA*, many more have been rejected (as one would expect, given the journal’s low acceptance rate). However, the fact remains that I have heard only horror stories about the review process, even from colleagues whose articles were accepted. I have read many excellent manuscripts that were rejected by *PMLA*, and I have read a number of them in conjunction with the readers’ reports supplied by the journal. In every instance, the readers’ reports tended toward the capricious. Several *PMLA* reports I’ve read conveyed a strong impression that the reader had done little more than skim the submission. As a result, readers’ reports often evidence a failure to grasp the author’s argument; they recommend that the author consider scholarship already cited in the article; they suggest an “alternative” line of argument that happens to be the very argument the article’s author pursues.

I have every reason to believe that Seth Lerer was a meticulous and responsible reader of the large number of submissions he reviewed during his time on the Advisory Committee; indeed, by helping rejected manuscripts find good homes elsewhere and by raising the issues you address in your column, he reveals his dedication and sense of professional commitment. But his letter, quoted in your column, also makes evident why so many submissions seem not to garner a fair reading, no matter how distinguished the readers assigned to evaluate them. By his own account, over a four-year period Lerer was sent a manuscript by *PMLA* for evaluation every couple of weeks. With such a relentless workload, no wonder some of our profession’s busiest members skim manuscripts and end up composing ill-considered evaluations. It is the disproportion between the care with which one produces one’s best work and the care with which it seems to be reviewed that convinces me submission to *PMLA* would be folly. And it remains totally unclear how increasing the overall number of submissions would do anything to alleviate that problem.

Having said that, I should add that I would be happy to read for the journal *occasionally* and to