

journal, for example, will not publish their nine-year-old articles with afterwords attached. It will ask for a rewritten version.

A reversal of the anonymous-submission policy would cause a drastic decline in submissions by excellent but unknown writers; in competition with a Fish, the cards are stacked against them, or—as the German phrase goes—“sie können gegen den Fish nicht anstinken.”

SIEGLINDE LUG
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To the Editor:

PMLA's practice of anonymous submission and evaluation of manuscripts suggests, as Stanley Fish notes in his guest column, a belief that ignorance of authorship “‘ensure[s] that in making their evaluations readers are not influenced by factors other than the intrinsic merits of the article’” (739). Well, we subscribers want to appreciate intrinsic merit, too. Are we being prevented from doing so by *PMLA*'s practice of providing us with the names of its contributors, as well as introductory “Notes on Contributors” that generate professional profiles?

The fact that *PMLA* withholds from its readership the “privilege” of blind evaluation enjoyed by its sequestered Editorial Board bespeaks, I think, an unconscious agreement with one of Fish's arguments against anonymity. I imagine that *PMLA* hopes its readers would recognize that (for example) Richard Levin's March 1988 article attacking feminist thematics was something different from an anonymous article attacking feminist thematics, largely because Levin, in previously published work, had helped to shape the debate on the subject. As Fish writes, “there are words that matter more than other words spoken by those who address a field that they themselves have in large part constituted” (741). To conceal authorship is to withhold valuable information about an article's context, from editors no less than from subscribers.

GRACE TIFFANY
University of Notre Dame

To the Editor:

I would like to take up a point made in passing by Stanley Fish in his guest column. He says that he is grateful to the Spenser Society and other professional organizations because “were it not for the opportunities made available by these organizations there would be nothing for us to do” (743). I disagree. One of the greatest weaknesses in departments of English is that most of us are only superficially aware of languages and literatures other than our own. What we should do is reward people who

learn a language and its literature. Doing so would substitute greater learning for the increasingly sterile shifts we are put to. It would also reduce the provinciality of our work and ground our theorizing more firmly. It would say to the community that we are not bound by an outmoded nationalism or linguistic chauvinism, and we would be able to place our own literature in the context of other literary traditions (an activity that is not meant to be taken as theory-neutral) rather than of new interpretive modes. One can think of numerous additional benefits that might flow from my proposal—for example, more and better talk between members of the various language departments—and at least for now I can think of no drawbacks.

I do not mean to imply that there is no serious scholarly work to be done or that no innovation is possible, but I do think we have reached a point of diminishing returns when, as in my university, there are eighty or ninety “researchers” for literature in English and perhaps fifteen for all of European history. We should accept the fact that we exist in the numbers we do primarily to pass on a tradition, not to add to a body of knowledge, and we can deepen and broaden that effort in a single stroke. I propose that the MLA establish a committee (!) to look into the advantages and disadvantages of my proposal. The point of all this is to make it possible for people to be promoted for learning a language and literature. We need to expand our notion of what we should be rewarded for.

ROGER SEAMON
University of British Columbia

To the Editor:

It is so obvious that the merit of an essay is independent of our feelings toward the person who wrote it that Stanley Fish has to use a sleight of hand to “prove” his argument that “the identity of the men and women who propose to speak about [whatever the subject of the essay may be] cannot be irrelevant to a judgment of the merit of what they have to say” (741). He does so by first pointing out that the merit of an essay is based on criteria or standards such as “a set of authorized . . . methodologies, . . . a list of the tasks that particularly need doing, . . . arguments that are properly literary . . .” (740), which are, of course, “a product” of “professional and institutional conditions” (740), which are, in turn, created by human beings. Fish then jumps to his conclusion that since human beings create the standards by which we judge an essay, their “identity . . . cannot be irrelevant” to our judgment of the essay's merit.

The sleight of hand has two parts: First, the authors of the essays are not necessarily (or usually) the authors of the standards. Second, and more important, even if they were, the value of the standards or criteria is based

not on the reputation of their originators but, as Fish himself admits, on the fact that these criteria have “been found to be persuasive by a significant number of workers in the profession” (741). Thus (to choose one of Fish’s examples) the fact that we could, in theory, reject an essay by Fredson Bowers on the editing of a text by the use of criteria that originated in the earlier works of Bowers would not be a contradiction, since the criteria achieve their force by virtue of their having persuaded us, the “workers in the profession,” and not because they originated in an essay written by Bowers.

But Fish could, I believe, grant my argument at this point and ask simply that along with the criteria that we all accept (and that are, in my view, independent of the reputation of the author) we add the *additional* criterion of the reputation of the author. The answer, it seems to me, is that such information would either be irrelevant (as it usually is to most of us when we are asked to read a manuscript) or information that interferes with our judgment. And this interference is what we mean when we say that a judgment is “biased” or that we are “playing politics” (745), as opposed to judging objectively and professionally. It is possible, of course, to describe as “political” or as “biased” any action that reflects our interests or the interests of our profession. But to do so would make these words almost meaningless and, in any case, contradict the commonly accepted meaning, namely, that “playing politics” is to ignore our professional standards and judge the work or the performance on the basis of our feelings toward the performer.

When we do so, whether in judging an essay by a student or a colleague, a performance by a baseball player, a pianist, or a bricklayer, we violate the value that our society places on equality: everyone has to meet the same standards. If this value is as strong as I think it is, then even if the MLA were to change its procedure to allow readers to know the author of every manuscript, that knowledge would, almost always, be irrelevant. Fish is, in this perspective, attacking a basic value, not just a procedure, as his argument assumes.

LAWRENCE W. HYMAN
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Reply:

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Geoffrey Harpham, is, I think, right to detect a “tonal instability” in my essay, and he is right also when he specifies as its source the occasional surfacing of an “untenable opposition of interest to transcendence.” The opposition is untenable because it reproduces a distinction I am at pains to deny, the distinction between the values that inform professional practice and the “higher” values to which a profession might pledge allegiance. In arguing against that distinction I may have seemed to be saying that the content of professional practice is “mere”

interest; but in fact the notion of “mere” interest is one of the things I was attempting to debunk by pointing out that part of a profession’s work is to produce the standards by which its efforts are to be evaluated. I was saying not that measures such as “merit” or “the public good” or “educational excellence” were irrelevant to professional life, but that professional life was already instinct with such measures and with the values informing them, and that therefore it was a mistake to critique professional life on the basis of something it already contains. As Harpham says (and as I *thought* I was saying), “‘interest’ can authorize a multitude of actions, some of which appear ‘disinterested.’” I would even omit his “appear” since, in the context of the profession’s sense of itself and its purposes, its actions (or at least some of them) *are* disinterested. (When Charles Wilson infamously declared many years ago, “What’s good for General Motors is good for America,” he *meant* it.) When Harpham observes that if “we explicitly embraced professionalism as the horizon of our interests, we would not have a profession at all,” I not only agree with him but would go further: we could not embrace professionalism (as in “mere” professionalism) as the horizon of our interests, because any professional agenda includes the claim to be founded on something larger than those horizons. In short (and this is the conclusion of the essay “Anti-Professionalism” to which Harpham refers), it is my contention that “mere” professionalism (the realm of “just self-promoting interests”) doesn’t exist and since that is my contention I could hardly be urging that we embrace it.

In fact I could hardly be urging anything at all, and this is the second point on which Harpham and I are more or less in agreement. He thinks that I urge “professionals to make a clean break with their present delusions,” but of course if professionalism is itself the site of those delusions, and if they are not delusions at all but the beliefs and convictions without which professional (or any other) activity would be impossible, then the idea of making a clean break with them is incoherent. If I seem at moments to be embracing this incoherence, it is because I flirt with the temptation to turn my epistemological argument into a political program; that is, I am tempted to move from the assertion that value is always a function of interest to the recommendation that we frankly acknowledge the interested status of our (so-called) values. But such a recommendation would assume that an ability to give an account of our values could alter our relationship to them and enable us to see them as they “really are” (i.e., not values), and that assumption would return us precisely to the foundationalism and essentialism I am arguing against. This circuit of error has been the object of analysis in several recent pieces (I call it “anti-foundationalist theory hope”), but in 1979 I had not yet seen it clearly enough to avoid its attractions.

While Harpham focuses on possible inconsistencies and contradictions in my argument, other readers find