Guest Editor's Column

AN unusual number of questions about the *PMLA* review process have come my way in recent months, so when John Kronik invited me to write a guest editor's column, I welcomed the opportunity to provide some answers. Although the statement of editorial policy that appears in every blue issue of *PMLA* describes the types of articles the journal publishes and the requirements for submission, it says little about selection procedures.

Bill Schaefer devoted a column to this topic in March 1975, when he announced a new editorial policy, and although the policy has since undergone another change, along with some fine tunings, articles still travel essentially the same path to publication. I could explain this route in several ways, but perhaps the simplest approach is to follow a manuscript from submission to acceptance or rejection.

When an article arrives at the MLA office, an administrative assistant checks to see whether it conforms to the basic stipulations of the editorial policy: it must fit the general description of a *PMLA* article; fall within a 2,500–9,000-word range (including notes but excluding translations of foreign language quotations); comply with the author-anonymous provisions; and qualify as the work of a current MLA member. From time to time the Executive Council and the Editorial Board have considered opening the journal to nonmembers, but while they have modified other policy provisions, they have let the membership requirement stand, presumably because the services of members who review articles and the support provided by dues make *PMLA* as much a membership project as an association publication. That it is such a project is most evident in the review process, which allows authors to get professional judgments on their work and suggestions for improvement, even if their essays are not accepted. Not infrequently, articles that are declined by *PMLA* go on to appear in other journals, and—also not infrequently—authors indicate that readers' comments guided them in revising.

If a manuscript passes the initial screening, it is assigned to two readers. The first can be anyone in the association who is well versed in the field and sympathetic to the approach taken. One of my responsibilities as managing editor of MLA publications is to choose these readers, and over the years I've been impressed by the many members who have been willing to review articles and write reports, sometimes three or four pages long. Because *PMLA* submissions range widely in subject matter (the 51 submissions received last July, for example, included essays on Snow White, Mexican politics, Mary Shelley, Coetzee, and Ariosto), we need readers in a great variety of fields. Fortunately, I can choose names from several sources: division and discussion group executive committees, the recommendations of those serving on MLA committees, book reviews and *Bibliography* listings, speakers at convention sessions, and the roster of individual members. I do keep track of those who have read for *PMLA* and I try not to send anyone more than two submissions a year, so that the work will not become burdensome. By noting how individual readers vote on each article they receive and by asking the editor to comment on their reviews, I have some record of readers' preferences and of the kinds of reports they write.

In assigning a manuscript to a second reader, I have a somewhat easier task: usually I need only choose the appropriate member of the *PMLA* Advisory Committee, a committee that never meets but whose members review articles in broadly defined areas. Like all association committees, this one is appointed by the Executive Council, which also determines the fields that are covered. Members serve for four years and report on the articles in their areas, contesting, confirming, or elaborating the first readers' judgments, making a case for articles that they would like to see published, and addressing matters of policy. Although the work load varies (the Shakespearean is overwhelmed; the rhetoric specialist has asked for more submissions), each member does see a fairly broad range of articles.

The package that goes to the first reader includes the article, a report form, a stamped envelope for forwarding the article to the second reader, a postcard for letting the MLA office know the date of this mailing, and a cover letter, which describes the procedure and the policy, makes some suggestions on reporting, and explains what's in the packet. The reader is asked to review the article within a month or, if that is not possible, to return the article to the MLA office at once (the packet also includes an address label). This procedure makes it possible, with the readers' cooperation, to get two reports without taking the time to have the article mailed back to the MLA office and then out again. It also means that the Advisory Committee members regularly see the reports of the first readers, a policy that some authors have questioned. Although I recognize the potential problem, over the years the system seems to have functioned well. In fact, it sometimes works to an author's advantage, because the Advisory Committee members, who help me out in several ways, can detect the possibility of bias in a reader's report. It's also fair to say that, by and large, Advisory Committee members are not at all reluctant to disagree with earlier readers' reports. When an article receives conflicting reviews, it goes to a third reader.

In fact, a principal characteristic of *PMLA* policy is that no one person can accept or reject an article: every article submitted to the Editorial Board must have two recommendations for publication; every article declined must have two recommendations against publication.

For most articles submitted to *PMLA* the review process ends with a second recommendation against publication. Only a small percentage of the articles go on to the Editorial Board, and only about five percent of all submissions are finally accepted. Those few have passed the last hurdle of the Editorial Board, often after a round or two of revisions prompted by suggestions from readers. I find it remarkable that an accepted article has been reviewed by at least nine persons: the two recommending readers and the seven members of the board.

Some writers, daunted by this scrupulousness, prefer to submit their work to a journal that requires fewer readings for acceptance. Although the review process can take as little as two months, and authors always have some type of report within ten weeks, the time can stretch when readers recommend revision, authors revise, and readers must review the new version. Even if the new version is recommended to the board, there is usually a delay before the next board meeting. At its three annual meetings (in October, January, and May), the board considers recommended articles and general questions of policy. Before each meeting, members receive copies of the articles, the readers' reports, and the relevant correspondence, along with a brief history of each article. The board's workings, which Joel Conarroe described in his January 1981 editor's column, are fairly straightforward. Each member gives his or her opinion of an article; after some discussion a consensus usually emerges. Even at this stage, an article is more likely to be rejected than accepted; despite the strong support received by articles that go to the board, fewer than half are accepted for publication. And some of these are "conditionally accepted": the board may want further revision before granting approval. The percentage of acceptances varies from one meeting to the next, of course, and the selection of articles prompts general examination of the journal's policies.

Board members serve two-year terms; though appointed in six general fields (varied from time to time), they are meant to represent, not particular areas of specialization, but a composite of the readership at large. One outgrowth of the board's discussions has been the decision to solicit articles by honorary members and fellows of the association (one by Carlos Fuentes appeared in October 1986, one by Julia Kristeva in March 1987, and one by Wole Soyinka in October 1987). Another is the introduction of issues on special topics (described in John Kronik's May 1987 editor's column) to spur submissions in fields that board members would like to see better represented in *PMLA*. There are many such fields (perhaps because of the diversity of scholarly interests the association represents), and many members complain that *PMLA* doesn't publish enough material in their fields. My solution to this problem is simple: submit more. I confess to a particular frustration with readers who quite reasonably argue that *PMLA* doesn't publish much in their fields and then go on to say that they would therefore never submit to *PMLA*.

I hope, in fact, that all members will think more about submitting their work to *PMLA*. Like the association, the journal tends to reflect the interests of those who are most actively involved with it. For better or worse, what appears in *PMLA* is what individual members decide—by their submissions and their reviews—will appear.

JUDY GOULDING

Note. Judy Goulding, who has worked at the Modern Language Association since 1969, has been managing editor of MLA publications for fourteen years. Her column is the second guest editor's column to appear since my editorship began.

JOHN W. KRONIK