

## TO THE EDITOR:

Carlos J. Alonso's column "Having a Spine—Facing the Crisis in Scholarly Publishing" (118 [2003]: 217–23) discusses two options for helping tenurable faculty members in these straitened times: emphasizing articles over books and providing a publication fund for junior professors. In fact, the real problem is the publish-or-perish condition that leads to a lot of forgettable rewritten dissertations and the kind of inflated books that David Bromwich once termed articles on steroids.

Certainly scholars should continue to carry out research and share their results, but why can't the criterion for tenure and promotion be a scholarly review of what the candidate has produced—with no automatic pass just because a well-known university press has offered a contract? That way, the changing economics of the publishing industry won't corrupt our standards, and the quality of the work will be paramount. The results of such research can be posted to an expandable, accessible humanities database, thus saving libraries from having to double their shelf space every generation.

Of course, the term *scholarly review* implies an impartial two or three examiners, an issue no one has really addressed. But that matter, as they say, is for another day.

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## TO THE EDITOR:

The Editor's Column discussion of "the crisis in scholarly publishing" was a thoughtful summary of two ways of addressing the problems caused by departmental demands for the publication of a scholarly book as a qualification for tenure. What ought to be recognized in addition to the difficulty of placing a scholarly book with a respectable press is that the requirement forces many a young scholar to stretch and pad what would be a worthwhile article or two into an intellectually thinner, unnecessarily repetitious, and largely tedious book.

Moreover, lying behind the problem is the question of why the humanities have for the last forty years or so given ever-increasing importance to publication as opposed to teaching. The question has often enough been raised—not seldom by eminent scholars and critics—and has been consistently

ignored by our profession. Some of the most cogent of the twentieth-century comments on the absurdity of the publication fetish in humanities departments are those of John Gross in *The Decline and Fall of the Man of Letters* (1969!). I will choose one: "most critics with any life in them must surely be visited by moods of *Selbsthass* in which every additional learned article, every new critical theory, seems just another nail in the coffin. What is it ultimately all for? How can anyone who tries to keep up with Wordsworthian studies find time to read Wordsworth?" (293).

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## TO THE EDITOR:

I read with interest and profound concern your recent Editor's Column regarding the heightening tension between departmental demands for publication of a book and the lessening available outlets for such works. The problem is critical, pointed out by Stephen Greenblatt's presidential letter last year.

You write of the only two solutions that have been proposed: the acceptance of two or three weighty articles as equivalent to a book and, more recently, departmental subvention of the required publication "after a book manuscript [has] gone through the normal scholarly review process and has been accepted for publication," as the MLA Executive Council recommended in the fall 2002 *MLA Newsletter*. In your column you endorse both solutions, though the former has not been used and wide institutional financial support for the latter is far from certain. In favor of publication you say that anyone who attempts to do this knows what a "compelling intellectual experience . . . the entire affair represents: the choice of texts, the marshaling of sources and evidence, . . . the reading of proofs," and so on (220–21).

I agree with this statement but must also point out that every dissertation, from which the work almost certainly derives, should include all these steps except the reading of proofs. Required publication leads "to the sort of overpublication decried as one of the principal factors that brought us to the present pass" (220). Thus I wish to put forward as a third possibility A QUITE IMMODEST PROPOSAL: that all present tenure rules be abolished, because they produce more bad results than good.