

Editor's Column

EACH YEAR at our annual meeting the MLA pays tribute to members who have made exceptional contributions to scholarship. This past December, in a crowded Houston ballroom, First Vice-President Peter Demetz presented three awards. One of these, the William Riley Parker Prize, is named for our seventh executive secretary (and sixty-ninth president), a man whose impact on the study of language and literature, I have come to recognize, was immense. Given annually since 1964 for an outstanding article in *PMLA*, the award was presented to Roger W. Herzel, associate professor of theater at the State University of New York at Albany, for " 'Much Depends on the Acting': The Original Cast of *Le Misanthrope*" (May 1980). The Parker Prize jury's citation commended Herzel for combining historical and critical acuity and for demonstrating the implications for the modern theater of Molière's dramatic intent.

Our biennial prize for outstanding achievement in Italian studies, instituted in 1973 under a bequest by the late Howard R. Marraro, a member of the Columbia University faculty, was won by Nicolas J. Perella, professor of Italian at Berkeley. His *Midday in Italian Literature: Variations on an Archetypal Theme* (Princeton Univ. Press) was cited for "creatively combining topological, formal, and thematic criticism. . . . This original, challenging, and ultimately persuasive study is as bright and penetrating as the sun of its author's midday metaphor." Yet another Princeton University Press book earned the James Russell Lowell Prize, named for our second president—a man who also wrote some poetry—and given each year for an outstanding book by an MLA member. *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (1979) by Barbara Kiefer Lewalski (Alumni-Alumnae University Professor of English at Brown) was praised by a panel of five judges as a "rigorous and painstaking work that corrects many misconceptions fostered for the last half-century about the historical and intellectual contexts of the metaphysical poets. . . . Professor Lewalski's readings and rereadings of these poets establish a firmer and more exact foundation for future interpretations of their poetry."

Following these presentations and a reading of excerpts from the report of the executive director (printed in full in these pages), we heard from our president, whose study of Wallace Stevens, *On Extended Wings*, it happens, was awarded the first James Russell Lowell Prize in 1969. Much more recently, I should add, the National Book Critics Circle announced that her *Part of Nature, Part of Us: Modern American Poets* had been selected by its eighteen-member board of directors as the most distinguished book of criticism published in 1980. And as I pointed out in my introductory comments to her speech, Helen Vendler is not only a superb scholar but also a marvelous presiding officer. During her term as MLA president she conducted meetings the way she writes—with wit, precision, and intellectual force. Only once have I known our Executive Council to burst into spontaneous applause, and that single occurrence followed one of her typically trenchant observations.

The applause of the huge audience in Houston at the conclusion of the Presidential Address was spontaneous and prolonged as well. The moment was, in fact, one of those rare occasions when I wished that a speaker, like a singer or violinist, could be persuaded to give an encore. It is gratifying, both for those who were not in Texas and for those who would like to "hear" it again, to have, as the lead article in our May issue, this powerful statement. And yes, I am aware that there is a certain irony involved in publishing material likely to be "of significant interest to the entire membership of the Association" so soon after having dropped this phrase from our statement of editorial policy (see p. 343). So be it.

You will also note in our editorial statement that contributors are now urged "to be sensitive to the social implications of language and to seek wording free of discriminatory overtones." The impetus behind this exhortation, though not the wording itself, was a recommendation to the Executive Council, drafted by the Delegate Assembly at its 1979 meeting in San Francisco, "that the MLA affirm in statements of editorial policy a commitment to the use of nonsexist language in its publications." The Council regards the language of the affirmation it ultimately

adopted (after a very long discussion) to be both strong, in that even innuendoes of meaning are to be discouraged, and inclusive. The Assembly also recommended that the MLA develop guidelines for the use of nonsexist language, a project now being developed under the auspices of our Office of Publications and Research. Prose guidelines, whether they are prescriptive or merely exemplary, pose an extremely complex question, and I quote from the *Newsletter* editorial I wrote just after the heated San Francisco debate: "As an editor and an advocate of equality I am aware of the powerful tensions created by conflicting rights—by efforts simultaneously to preserve freedom of speech and to respect the dignity of all our members." Our colleagues in the National Council of Teachers of English have already established some specific dos and don'ts for their own publications. Although some of these will be helpful to us, others have little or no relevance to *PMLA*—I do not think, for example, that our contributors need to be steered away from such patently absurd terms as "gal Friday," "authoress," "poetess," "libber," or "lady lawyer."

Nor can I conceive of members of our association using ethnic slurs or other degrading terms not covered by guidelines concerned exclusively with sexism. There are, though, more subtle ways to discriminate on the basis of race, creed, sexual preference, age, or even physical disability, as well as on the basis of sex, than the use of insulting sobriquets. In seeking words to respond to the recommendation of the Assembly, thus, the Executive Council felt it important to go beyond the question of gender and to acknowledge the existence of other forms of discriminatory language as well. The MLA, as I think a careful analysis of its numerous publications will reveal, is not hospitable to demeaning language of any sort. And it is perhaps pertinent to note that among the hundreds of members who have written during the past several years to praise or damn *PMLA*, not one has suggested that the articles contain language (or material) that is sexist. This is a record we are eager to preserve.

It may well be, of course, that when we actually have persuasive guidelines on nonsexist usage in hand we will refer to them in our editorial statement. We will certainly make them available to our contributors. For now, however, in the absence of specific instructions about such usage, we express the less restricted and, we think, stronger plea to our members to be sensitive to *all* the implications of *all* language. It is a plea that would be endorsed, I like to think, by William Blake, Mark Twain, Virginia Woolf, José Zorrilla, and the other artists discussed in this issue of our journal.

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