

Forum

PMLA invites members of the association to submit letters, printed and double-spaced, that comment on articles in previous issues or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. The editor reserves the right to reject or edit Forum contributions and offers the *PMLA* authors discussed in published letters an opportunity to reply. The journal omits titles before persons' names, discourages footnotes, and does not consider any letter of more than one thousand words. Letters should be addressed to *PMLA* Forum, Modern Language Association, 26 Broadway, 3rd floor, New York, NY 10004-1789.

1228

Submissions to a Changed Journal

TO THE EDITOR:

I think George T. Wright goes to the heart of the matter and expresses the feeling of many MLA members when he says that “the increasing pervasiveness of new-historicist or theoretical or postcolonial or gender preoccupations” makes it “seem less likely that formal—I prefer to say literary—analysis [. . .] could make it into the pages of *PMLA*” (117 [2002]: 123). As an aside, I add that I admire Wright’s work and have used in a course on research methods his two *PMLA* articles, both of which won the William Riley Parker Prize, as models of scholarly writing.

My only submission to *PMLA* (approximately twenty years ago) managed to reach the Editorial Board, where it was turned down with the cryptic note that the article did not show “any specific approach.” However, one specialist, in recommending the work, remarked that it was likely to be of interest to a large number of readers. I could not muster the energy to submit to *PMLA* again (although I did publish in *American Literature*, *New England Quarterly*, *ESQ*, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, etc.), deterred, no doubt, by the daunting competition but also, more important, by a growing feeling that the journal was veering away from the kind of work I was interested in.

I do not know why *PMLA* dropped from its statement of editorial policy the stipulation that articles submitted for consideration should be of significant interest to the entire membership of the association. If “the entire membership” was no longer a realistic ideal, “a large number of members” could have been substituted. The proviso set a desirable direction to strive for. It seems to me now that *PMLA* is increasingly publishing articles that a large number of readers may find remote from their interest. At present, I suspect, many read only the unfailingly lively Forum, the informative items, and perhaps some essays on special topics. If *PMLA* were to survey to what extent members read the articles, the results could be revealing.

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Although *PMLA* claims to be “receptive to [. . .] all scholarly methods and theoretical perspectives,” it excludes to a large extent what Wright calls “literary analysis,” which may still be of overwhelming interest to an overwhelming number of readers. This exclusivity may not derive from deliberate policy but could be due to the adventitious factor of the selection of the consultant readers and of the Advisory Committee. I wonder how these are appointed and whether care is taken to ensure that various areas and approaches are fairly represented, as far as possible. Couldn’t *PMLA* solicit members at large to suggest names for consultant readers and Advisory Committee members, which could then be screened by the journal? A cumbersome process, but in view of the journal’s status as an icon of literary studies, any step taken to reduce inadvertent cronyism and to achieve greater reader interest would be worthwhile.

The problem is not that *PMLA* is hospitable to new approaches—which it needs to be—but that it seems to have become increasingly inaccessible to other kinds of scholarship and criticism. Can it be that high-quality manuscripts are being submitted only in these new areas? If manuscripts not embodying certain methods or approaches are consistently turned down, that could surely discourage many from submission.

Finally, members may also be chary of publishing in *PMLA* because of the possibility of their being made targets of comments sometimes bordering on the ferocious. Louisa Mackenzie (117 [2002]: 130–32) and Sherry Lutz Zivley (117 [2002]: 132) make this point. Since *PMLA* urges its members to be sensitive to the “social implications of language,” will the journal allow insensitivity of other kinds in matters of language and style? And publish, therefore, especially in the Forum, comments that are not only intemperate but at times downright vituperative?

Let me conclude by reiterating the suggestions I have implicitly made. First, it may be worthwhile for *PMLA* to survey to what extent members read the articles. If it turns out, as I suspect it might, that the percentage of articles read is unusually low compared with other journals, steps should be taken to make *PMLA* more responsive to the needs and expectations of a large majority of its members instead of becoming captive to an articulate and highly visible minority. Second, while appointing consultant readers and Advisory Committee members, *PMLA*

should solicit suggestions from members at large. Third, the editor and the copyeditors should ensure that unseemly language is not allowed to appear in the pages of the journal, even if—especially if—it emanates from big names in the profession.

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Montaigne and Scholarly Prose

TO THE EDITOR:

George Hoffmann’s Montaigne essay in the March issue of *PMLA* (“Anatomy of the Mass: Montaigne’s ‘Cannibals’” [117 (2002): 207–21]) is a model of poised, “old-fashioned” criticism. It avoids the jargon favored by some younger critics and instead gives us a close reading in historical context. Most essays in *PMLA* used to be like Hoffmann’s, and one hopes that you will print more like it. I compliment the *PMLA* editors and Hoffmann.

My work was in medieval English, and though I am not a specialist in Montaigne or in French literature I found the essay informative, civilized, and delightfully written.

Thomas W. Ross

Colorado College

Reply:

Praise that is both warm and unqualified is a rare thing. I appreciate Thomas W. Ross’s generosity, but I feel more hopeful than he about the benefit of combining the best of the new with the old. Constraints in time make it easy to understand the attraction held by expeditious approaches to literature. But the current intellectual climate also offers an unparalleled freedom to pick from a wide array of methods and disciplines. Theory as well as literary history, theology as well as social history have enriched my understanding of Montaigne; literary studies would not have tolerated such eclecticism thirty years ago.

Call me an optimist, but I also believe that a brighter future awaits academic prose. Thankfully, clear style is not the exclusive purview of any critical school, and I take heart in the fact that so many of my colleagues at Michigan, hailing from a broad