

Editor's Column

MAYBE THE IDEA wasn't all that great, although it certainly seemed so in 1973 when we revised *PMLA's* editorial policy. The hope was that under the new policy we could publish thirty-five articles a year that, regardless of subject or approach, would be truly "of significant interest to the entire membership," worth bringing to the attention of thirty thousand readers. As a profession we publish nearly a thousand times thirty-five articles every year; surely (or so we thought) *PMLA* could provide a showcase for those relatively few articles that are so far-reaching in their implications that all members of the profession, whatever their specialized interests, could read them with profit.

But it hasn't worked out quite as planned, and thus five years and more than three thousand submissions later *PMLA's* Editorial Board still finds the ideal elusive. A number of exemplary essays have, to be sure, appeared in the sixteen issues since January 1975, when we printed the first fruits of the revised policy. And all the articles to date have had considerable merit, or they would not have survived the demanding review process introduced in conjunction with the revised editorial policy. As cases in point, the articles in this issue are, I believe, splendid. Barbara Leah Harman's analysis of George Herbert's "The Collar," which I have chosen as the lead article, was described by one of our consultant readers as "simply the best essay ever written on 'The Collar' or on Herbert" ("the style is quiet but cumulatively powerful," "each sentence has a kind of carved inevitability about it"). Edgar Burde, in a fascinating biographical-critical essay, reveals the mode of disguise or dissembling by which Mark Twain converted his experiences as a Mississippi River pilot into literature. And Richard Helgerson has written a nearly definitive study, gracefully presented, of the way in which Spenser evolved as the first great English poet worthy of being called a "Poet."

Don Bialostosky's perceptive and closely argued analysis of Coleridge's interpretation of Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* forces us to reevaluate two of the seminal documents in English literary criticism. Roger Herzl persuasively argues that the decor of Molière's stage was not so universalized and unspecific as has long been believed. Edgar Branch, reproducing Artemus Ward's "Babes in the Wood" lecture—which Mark Twain called the funniest thing he had ever listened to—makes a number of interesting comments about Mark Twain's humor, and Emerson's lack of it, on the lecture circuit. This issue also includes Marijane Osborn's insightful examination of scriptural history and strife in *Beowulf*; Lawrence Thornton's lively treatment of Emma's narcissism in *Madame Bovary*; and Patricia Merivale's illuminating exploration of Gothic artifice in two of Henry James's best-known works and two lesser-known works by the Polish novelist Witold Gombrowicz. They are all outstanding articles, each of which could be read with interest by anyone concerned with literary criticism and scholarship. My point is simply that no one of the articles, much less all, is of such overwhelming importance that it compels the interest of the entire profession as we had hoped the new *PMLA* would.

Three years ago in this column I looked back on the articles that had appeared in the 1975 issues and, realizing that we were not yet receiving submissions that could be described as "earthshaking," I speculated on some of the reasons for our failure. I did not like my reasons then (and they have not improved with age), so I should like to try once more. I think it may be as simple as this: As a profession we are today so diversified in our interests—one might almost say fragmented—that we do not seem to have much to say to our collective self. Perhaps this is as it always has been and always will be, yet I cannot help feeling that our scholarship must have more common ground than recent issues of *PMLA* would indicate. As a "general" journal, *PMLA* today is as good as any such publication has ever been. It offers MLA members easy access to a wide range of outstanding articles that accurately reflect our current concerns. And even though scholars who specialize in Old English literature may not feel that an article on Flaubert has much to offer them, even though those who work with the Romantic poets may be tempted to pass over an article treating life on the Mississippi, I

would argue that *Beowulf* and *Madame Bovary*, Coleridge and Clemens, are all in the family and that it is important for us to pause, every now and then, to discover how the other half lives. I only wish that in the years ahead more of us would be willing to stand back, take a deep breath, and attempt to write articles of such scope and breadth that they genuinely demand the attention of all thirty thousand readers. It's a consummation devoutly to be wished.

This is the final issue I will see through press as *PMLA*'s editor, and thus this is my final editor's column. In spite of my lament—which is little more than a plea that our best selves be better still—I am proud of *PMLA* and deeply grateful to the hundreds of MLA members who have contributed to its success. In departing, I should just like to point out that the really good stuff scheduled to appear in next year's issues was accepted during my term as editor. The rest will have been selected by my successor.

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**Commedia Actor in Simplified Version of
Serlian Perspective Setting**
Stefano Scolari (Courtesy Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)