

Editor's Column

It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there.

William Carlos Williams, "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower"

A POEM, Williams' friend Ezra Pound said, is news that stays news. A plausible variation would suggest that criticism is news about news. Information once removed, of course, generally lacks the perennial freshness we associate with primary texts, but at its best literary criticism does maintain its capacity to challenge our assumptions. I make these observations as a prelude to critical analyses of artists ranging from Bodel and Flaubert to Thackeray and Eliot. It strikes me that these diverse papers may well bring the same news to succeeding generations of readers that they bring to us today. Scrupulously researched and carefully written, they represent durable artifacts in a world filled with disposable trifles.

It may be, in fact, that some of these essays will find an even larger audience years from now than they do in 1980. *PMLA*, we know, is frequently read not in one's living room, with coffee—or children—at hand, but in a quiet corner of a library, note cards at hand. Housed in inviting archives, these articles will be tracked down by inquisitive scholars in the throes of research projects. I suspect that our authors will find here their ideal readers, kindred spirits able to evaluate fully the thoroughness and validity of an article's findings. A scholar (like a poet) is engaged in a timeless dialogue with sympathetic strangers he or she will probably never meet. And the scholar is additionally blessed: in the pleasing pains of research and composition, in the tonic shock of publication, and, finally, in enshrinement as a permanent part of a humane tradition. There are worse ways to spend one's life.

If I am aware, though, that the gratification attendant on reading *PMLA* is frequently deferred, I also know that not all our members are attracted to all the pieces in any given issue. Were there world enough and time we would all be polymaths; but there isn't, and we aren't. I do not like, as a result, the assertion in our statement of editorial policy that the journal "publishes articles . . . that are of significant interest to the entire membership," and I am working with the Editorial Board and Executive Council on wording that will more accurately reflect our actual practice. I do feel that *PMLA* is sufficiently different from more specialized publications to justify our seeking out resonant essays likely to attract not necessarily that mythical "entire membership" but at least a large audience. Some of my collaborators, though, believe that we should also publish sharply focused inquiries on little-known works, provided the scholarship is exemplary. Whatever our minor differences, we all agree that the journal should be receptive to a variety of methods, subjects, and points of view and that the ideal essay should both exemplify the best of its kind, whatever the kind, and make a significant contribution to humanistic knowledge. The new statement, once carved in marble, will reflect these views.

As for the papers in this issue, all of which evoked unusually strong recommendations, I suspect that they would be acceptable under any sensible editorial policy. Each article in *PMLA* is now read by at least nine persons, an academic equivalent of the Supreme Court. The wondrous ways of this elaborate and thorough process are worthy of admiration—and quotation. Of Morris Eaves's astonishing essay on Blake and romantic aesthetics, our advisory editor, a savant usually given to understatement, wrote, "It is exactly, to my mind, what a *PMLA* article should be: original, broad, a locus for discussion and further criticism, and of first importance." Eaves was awarded the 1978 William Riley Parker prize for an earlier essay, also on Blake, and I welcome him back to these pages. Our advisory editor said that John O'Connor's discussion of narrative structure in Flaubert's *Trois Contes* "reads a familiar text in a way that convincingly renews it"; during the Editorial Board meeting one especially hard-to-please member described the article as "aesthetically engaging and complex," *mots* that strike me as eminently *justes*.

Carolyn Dinshaw's essay on the medieval idea of games, our specialist reader wrote, "makes one continually aware that Bodel's play alone is not the issue, but rather a broadly based view of the nature of medieval drama. The article will definitely become one of the two or three 'musts' in the bibliography of the play and for the theater of the period in general." Dinshaw is a graduate student at Princeton, where Maria DiBattista is on the faculty—should this fall issue feature an orange cover? DiBattista's essay on charades (one-word tableaux) in *Vanity Fair* impressed our advisory editor as "rich, original, and suggestive," and the Board concurred. This article, in fact, sent me back to a novel I had not opened for twenty-five years. Daniel Harris' illuminating reading of "Journey of the Magi" also received accolades, from our specialist reader ("exemplary of what structuralist theories about reading texts have aimed for"), advisory editor ("provocative brilliance"), and Board ("subtle," "helpful in correcting the idea of Eliot as an invisible poet"). And Judith Ryan's analysis of the transition from realism to modernism, a discussion that includes James, Musil, Broch, and Woolf, was described by its various evaluators as "powerful," "substantial," and "precisely what *PMLA* should publish."

It is clear, of course, that *precisely* what our journal should publish is not really a matter on which everyone can agree. I trust, though, that you too will find things to admire in these essays, whether your reading takes place today, tomorrow, or years from now.

JOEL CONARROE



Becky, dagger in hand, being presented to the great personage, His Highness the Prince of Peterwaradin, after her first performance as Clytemnestra in the charade of "Agamemnon." (Thackeray's illustration, *Vanity Fair* [London, 1848], Ch. li; reproduced by permission of the Morris L. Parrish Collection of Victorian Novelists, Princeton University Library.)