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.

David Galef
University of Mississippi

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).

Wendell V. Harris
Santa Fe, NM

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.

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First, a brief history. Tenure rules do not trace back to the Torah or any other such authority. Indeed, they did not exist until near the beginning of World War II. Earlier one could remain forever at the assistant professor level. But then, as I remember it, Harvard established the rule of granting tenure as one's seventh year begins, with concomitant promotion to associate professor—or immediate termination. Where Harvard led, the rest of the country obediently followed. Given the serious shortage of faculty members after the war, there was no problem. This happy state continued until the late 1960s or early 70s, when our graduate schools began doctoring more candidates than they could place.

Now, two postulates. First, our primary obligation is the teaching of our students, not the production of research, which must be secondary. Second, the danger that as teachers we must avoid is the failure to keep our teaching vital. One can and should prevent stagnation in a variety of ways: by original research, which forces us to reconsider various aspects of our subjects; by attendance at regional and national meetings, where one can mix with fellow specialists in discussion of their subjects; and by attending summer seminars, a rarity.

As for the first postulate, the secondary status of research to teaching, let us be honest: no one in the real world gives a damn about our publications. Only our fellow specialists care. Why do it, then? Because, as I have stated, undertaking it can—or at least should—keep the subjects of our classes vital to our students and ourselves as we explore new ideas in our field and revise our class discussions to include them. And we can speak with the authority that goes with such discoveries.

Everyone is familiar with a distinct though rarely mentioned evil that our present tenure system produces. New assistant professors holding a recent doctorate are faced usually with a four-course teaching load, surely including some freshman composition and mastering of unfamiliar textbooks. Both are time-consuming. New professors have problems of establishing themselves and their families in a new community. On top of this, they must publish rather than put their classes first, and they have at hand only essays produced in graduate seminars and a dissertation, which may be ready to submit with a few changes to a publisher. Such a system establishes a false superiority of research to teaching.

But then they receive tenure and have ahead of them perhaps forty years as professors. Regardless of how poor their classroom work is, they cannot be fired. It should come as no surprise to find that almost everyone relaxes for the first three or four years, at which time a crisis, recognized or not, occurs: with tenure instructors may undertake further research, even though it is no longer required; or, all too often, they may continue to teach as always, with personality frequently more important than content, with steadily yellowing lecture notes, and without any fresh ideas about the subjects. Previously forced to keep up, with tenure they no longer have such requirements. Not everyone is a self-starter. I assert that the so-called protection that tenure provides has been mostly used to protect the increasingly incompetent (who may not realize or even care about their condition). Any competent faculty members who are professionally mistreated do not need its protection: today we have professional support organizations and lawyers.

I urge then that we continue to appoint new doctorates as assistant professors but no longer distinguish tenure and nontenure tracks. Surely it does not take six years to determine whether the neophyte will be a good colleague. Surely those who are thought not to be will be dismissed after the first or second year. Thereafter for promotion they must prove their value to the department as teachers whose activities evince new ideas that are shared with students. With such accomplishments they proceed to upper classes and graduate seminars. Only an actively publishing scholar should handle graduate classes and direct dissertations. This is not to relegate the teaching of composition and rhetoric to a lower status: outstanding achievements in such subjects are equally worthy of recognition.

William B. Hunter
Greensboro, NC

To the Editor:

Recent editorials by Carlos J. Alonso and others have suggested that there is a crisis in scholarly publishing such that young scholars up for tenure have been unable to place their books. However, I received a PhD in 1995 from the University of Washington in Seattle and since have published two books, C*omedy after Postmodernism: Rereading*

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