

in progress...

Volume 3, Issue 1
April 2005

The Department of English Newsletter

What's in a name? Some have been wondering if the title *in progress* denotes a kind of clever Modernist (High-Modernist? Postmodernist?) project. Others undoubtedly have considered the title to be an allusion to the expressivist tradition in composition studies ("process, not product"). And, following on this, still others have considered it a euphemism for outright laziness. Perhaps, in typical postmodern fashion, it is a combination of all of these. . . . As the current issue demonstrates, though, the newsletter's purpose is always betrayed (or rescued) by the seriousness and acuity of the work it publishes. Included in this issue are excerpts from the dissertations of Alicia Tomasian and Joshua Sunderbruch, and abstracts of current research being conducted by Teresa Chung and Xilao Li.

"I will speak as liberal as the north"

Alicia Tomasian's dissertation "Women on Trial: Sexuality, Justice, and Persuasion on the Renaissance Stage," uses crime pamphlets, ballads, trial transcripts, and letters to examine transgressive dramatic characters in the context of women living in and around London. The following excerpt is from the chapter, "I will speak as liberal as the north": Women Witnessing for Women in *Othello*:

Of course, Emilia has been acting on her lady's behalf before this break. As Bradley and others have mentioned to discredit her, we find out that she has done more than keep watch for those attempting to enter the bedchamber. She has listened very closely to the action inside, ready to report to Iago even as Desdemona begins to fall apart, unable speak for herself:

Emilia: Alas, my lord hath so bewhored her,
Thrown such despite and heavy terms upon
her,

That true hearts cannot bear it.

Desdemona: Am I that name, Iago?

Iago: What name, fair lady?

Desdemona: Such as she said my lord did say I was.

Emilia: He called her whore. (IV.ii.121-126)

While it may be unseemly to picture Emilia, ear pressed to the door, she has already been cast as a much needed defendant of Desdemona's fidelity. Given Othello's agitated state, we should not assume Emilia is listening for sex. What she is listening for is exactly what she hears, cruel and abusive treatment of her lady, to which she should be and is a witness. Further, it was probably not unusual to have an attendant in the bed chamber even when an upper class couple were in bed together. In the divorce trial of the Earl and the Countess of Essex (the infamous Frances Howard), various servants claimed intimate knowledge of the marriage. One of the attendants, Catherine Dandenell, testified that the couple "lay together many nights" and that she had "found them together in naked bed." Several other servants claimed to have seen them "in naked bed together," and George Powell claimed "that it was commonly reported amongst the servants of the house that they did lie together." Court records indicate that such habits were common among the gentry.

Pedagogy of Argument

Joshua Sunderbruch's dissertation, "Pedagogy of Argumentation," develops a model for argumentation grounded in theory but devised for the composition classroom. The excerpt below, which is taken from Chapter Four, establishes the need for argumentation in the composition classroom. The previous two chapters have addressed the state of the field and available theories of argumentation; Chapter Four counters claims that argumentation has no special value to first-year composition:

Navigation requires what are, relatively, fixed points. The magnetic north pole, relative to the navigator, is fixed—it does not matter that the earth and the pole are hurtling through space and spinning around another axis, because the boat is, too. The navigator uses the magnetic point to plot a course depending on where the boat is trying to go.

Using a different point (e.g. constellations, the sun, an object on the horizon) is dangerous because they are not fixed, though they might be more intuitively “right” or easily perceived. After all, I have to trust the compass that north is north, and I can see the sun. Unfortunately, with the curve of the Earth and the lack of a constant relative bearing from the sun, many sailors have died or gotten lost for long times. Compasses do, sometimes, fail. But the magnetic north does not. If I want to get from A to B, I know how to do so. Along the way, I might encounter barriers and storms. This is why a single rule cannot be written for sailors, and they must learn their craft by experiencing the various forms and complications. The creation of a reliable compass opened up exploratory navigation in a dramatic manner, because it meant that sailors could go “off the map” and find their way home again—with the fixed point of bearing they could draw charts that reliably told them where they were in relation to everything else.

Argumentation is like navigation, with logic as the magnetic north. If we bear constantly, without concern for complications or goals, then we are in trouble of getting lost. On the other hand, if we maintain our fixed point we can break course. We have the freedom to go “off the map,” because in the course of plotting a new map we can find not only where we have been but also new courses with the luxury of being able to chart where we are and where we have been. As counter-intuitive as it may seem, having a fixed point gives us a freedom that the denial of such a frame of reference does not. It certainly gives our students a sense of security far better than vague reassurances might. Validating a student blithely is much like wishing luck to a voyager without a direction; it’s a sweet sentiment but one that will not prepare them for the obstacles that they will face. With argumentation (the ability to chart a position in relation to logic, the capacity to understand how a claim relates to self and others) to direct them, the student is a lot more prepared for that moment that their thoughts must go “off the map.”

Politics, Politeness, and the Public Sphere

Teresa Chung is working on “Politics, Politeness, and the Public Sphere.” What follows is a portion of the the abstract for the project:

I am interested in the tension between two opposed ways of conceptualizing the development of the public sphere

in the eighteenth century. During that period, republicanism seems to have been privileged as the site of theorizing the political public. In contrast, the older practices of courtliness and the increasingly popular ones of civility and politeness were cast as less desirable and more problematic ways of conceptualizing the political public. With its invocation of relations of dependence, courtliness went against the seemingly democratic thrust of the republican public sphere, while civility and politeness appeared to depoliticize the public sphere altogether with their emphasis upon sociability over virtue. At the same time, civility and politeness were sometimes presented as ways to expand, and thus truly democratize, the public sphere, by including such previously excluded populations as women and the commercial classes. So what exactly is the relation between republican and polite theories of the public? Can theories of politeness inform a specifically political practice, and a democratic one at that?

Mark Twain and China

Xilao Li is completing a paper that reviews the history of the Chinese appreciation of Mark Twain from 1906 to the present. During the different periods of time while China witnesses tremendous social, political, cultural, and literary changes and developments, Mark Twain has been variably seen as a humorist, a satirist, a realist, a social critic, a model of democracy, a humanist, and always as a real friend of the Chinese people. Tracing the link between the status of Mark Twain’s reception to the context of historical situations and circumstances over the span of a century, the paper takes a closer look at several milestones, such as his first appearance as a romantic and sentimental writer with the translation of “The Californian Tale,” the first booklength translation of his *The Diary of Eve* in 1932 with the encouragement of Lu Xun, the greatest contemporary Chinese writer, the 1935 centennial celebration, the translation of *Huck Finn* in 1942, the appropriation of Twain in the government’s political campaigns against capitalism and imperialism in the 1950s, the sufferings of Mark Twain scholars during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s, and the booming of the publication and scholarship of Mark Twain in today’s much-modernized China.

Editorial Staff:

**Kurt Neumann
Seema Kurup
Chris Padgett**