FORUM

What Ever Happened to the Study of Political Argument?

TO THE EDITOR:

In March 2019 the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) resolved to "find means to study the relation of language to public policy, to keep track of, publicize, and combat semantic distortion by public officials, candidates for office, political commentators, and all those who transmit through the mass media. . . ." To accomplish this, they further resolved to "promote pedagogy and scholarly curricula in English and related subjects that instruct students in civic and critical literacy" and "support classroom practices that examine and question uses of language in order to discern inhumane, misinformative, or dishonest discourse and arguments" ("Resolution on English Education for Critical Literacy in Politics and Media"; *National Council of Teachers of English*, 6 Mar. 2019, ncte.org/statement/resolution-english-education-critical-literacy-politics-media/). The role of argumentation in English studies in this resolution seems a world away from the essays in "Cultures of Argument," the Theories and Methodologies section of the October 2020 issue of *PMLA*. Why?

To begin with, despite Pardis Dabashi's claims in her introduction to these essays about the cutting-edge theoretical views and progressive politics of her cohort of young graduate students and faculty members ("Introduction to 'Cultures of Argument': The Loose Garments of Argument" [vol. 135, no. 5, pp. 946–55]), virtually all the deliberations in "Cultures of Argument" are intramural discussions of identity politics and literary theory.

The essays rarely venture beyond the same topics and theoretical jargon of the 1980s, as epitomized by Dabashi's chastising of Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein's uncritical citation in *They Say / I Say* of a sentence from Kenneth Burke's 1941 "Burkean Parlor": "You listen for a while, . . . then you put in your oar" (qtd. in Dabashi 948). Dabashi charges that this phrase is "a phallic interjection of new knowledge" (949). Does she perhaps know of "women's ways of rowing" without

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interjecting oars? And how did Burke's ancient metaphor crime compare, in importance for the study of argument in 2020, to four years of the rhetoric of Donald Trump and his allies in politics and media, which are scarcely mentioned in the essays' seventy-five pages?

Dabashi's example forms part of her larger critique of the multiple ways in which today's literary study remains "gendered, judgmental, and competitive" (948). I largely agree with her here, as I do with Kathleen Fitzpatrick's "Generous Argument" (vol. 135, no. 5, pp. 956–62), which does, all too briefly, address "critical thinking and its most important methods of argumentation in the age of Trump" (956). But then Fitzpatrick dodges away toward a stance similar to Dabashi's feminist one, to advocate "[d]eveloping new forms of scholarly writing that approach argument in a creative rather than combative mode" (960). I would only ask whether this line of feminist theory might disable women from refuting combative sexists and Trumpians.

There is a long background story here, as traced in histories of English studies like those by Gerald Graff, Sharon Crowley, Michael Halloran, and Richard Ohmann (whose *English in America: A Radical View of the Profession* is a definitive, jargon-free Marxist analysis), as synthesized in my *Political Literacy in Composition and Rhetoric: Defending Academic Discourse against Postmodern Pluralism*.

From my book I will just sketch some of the historical points that are too extensive to document fully here. For centuries before the late nineteenth, what we now call "English" in higher education was preceded by "rhetoric and moral philosophy," centering on undergraduate instruction in public speaking and debate, primarily about political arguments. But PhD-level published literary scholarship gradually displaced rhetorical study and pedagogy, sharply inflating with the boom in graduate education after World War II—which has now gone bust. Increasing departmentalization further exiled the study of public argument to separate but unequal undergraduate and graduate disciplines in speech, rhetoric, and, most recently, composition studies.

In another bifurcation since the late twentieth century, familiar to us all, undergraduate instruction in writing, including political argument, has largely been relegated to composition programs where, under the pressure of ever increasing budget cuts, courses are now taught by underpaid graduate students and temporary adjunct faculty members, many of whose graduate studies failed to prepare them for courses on arguing political issues.

When I was a PhD student in literature at Berkeley in the early nineteen seventies, senior literary scholars were expected regularly to teach English 1B, an argumentative writing course with solid humanistic substance—often also keyed to political literacy and the New Left protest movements of the nineteen sixties in Berkeley and elsewhere, which some prominent members of the English faculty publicly supported. Several also wrote superb rhetoric readers along these lines. In those cushy days, each senior faculty member also had a graduate student teaching assistant for each 1B section. Apprenticing to them put me on a career path toward composition, with an ongoing New Left vantage point.

While completing my doctorate, and for the next thirty years, I happily taught a mix of argumentative writing and general-education-breadth literary surveys in state colleges that valued teaching commitment over publications. Despite our killer teaching load, faculty members there had a camaraderie free from the cutthroat competition bred by the publish-or-perish pressure at research universities. When we did publish, as I did in my argumentation textbooks, it was a sign of dedication, not coercion.

There is no immutable reason for English graduate programs to privilege training in advanced research or theory and publication in literature, preferably to be continued in a similar graduate program. An alternative is to add a track for preparation to teach undergraduate writing, including command of rhetorical and humanistic principles, "civic and critical literacy," and public intellectualism beyond the realm of literary scholarship—while still incorporating literary perspectives.

As humanistic undergraduate and graduate curricula are now being strangled by contrived economic austerity, an ever smaller number of new faculty members can expect to continue teaching courses at the level of their graduate studies in literature or theory. Thus, graduate and hiring departments should defetishize advanced literary study and use some of the money spent on it to prepare and hire tenure-track faculty members to teach the larger number of writing courses, where we can hope they will be able to teach

subjects like those in the NCTE resolution. If this ever happens, graduate students and junior faculty members might also largely be spared the "gendered, judgmental, and competitive" race for publication and dwindling jobs that the authors in this cluster of essays rightly deplore.

Donald Lazere
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Reply:

I'm grateful to Donald Lazere for his response to the "Cultures of Argument" cluster. I agree with many aspects of his central claim. But where he seems to see argument as one thing, I see it as many.

Kathleen Fitzpatrick and I claim in our essays that literary studies should reevaluate its habit of negatively constructed and often combative argumentation. We did not claim that we all might also consider effacing ourselves when confronted with a misogynist or a neo-Nazi. Nor, for that matter, that we should not also spend time "defetishiz[ing] advanced literary study." And yet, Lazere disagrees with us on the grounds that scholarly argumentation based in collaboration "disables women from refuting combative sexists and Trumpians." This alleged disagreement with my and Fitzpatrick's positions is based on a conceptual leap resulting from an apparent unwillingness to distinguish between contexts where negative argument might be warranted and contexts where it might not. Just because I promote patience and generosity in one context doesn't mean I can't or don't promote quickness and combativeness in another. Resistance to making distinctions is one of the bad habits of English studies, born out of the discipline's historical hostility to Enlightenment reason. I think as a discipline we should get better at making distinctions. While reason has certainly been at the root of many evils, it's also what allows me to write this letter and for you to read it.

And even in the literary critical arena that my co-contributors and I took as our object of inquiry, there are many situations, I argued, that call for negatively constructed arguments. I construct them all the time. In "The Loose Garments of Argument," my introduction to "Cultures of Argument," I cite the issue of justice (e.g., gender equality and antifascism) as an especially good example of such an occasion. In other words, on these points Lazere's argument is with someone, but that someone is not actually me, or Fitzpatrick. It's an excellent example of how disagreements in English studies, though habitual, can be, and often are, needless. Were we better at making distinctions and reading carefully, we might find ourselves disagreeing less, thereby allowing our disagreements to mean more.

Lazere seems to think that we must always argue combatively so as to prepare ourselves to argue combatively with social and political wrongdoers. But if I argue in one way in one context (say, in a literary critical article), there's little stopping me from arguing another way in another context (say, at a restaurant, on the street, in a different literary critical article). Surely part of the project of "civic and critical literacy" is to understand the stylistic multiplicity of argumentative practices. If a neo-Nazi can mask their nefarious intentions through deceptive rhetorical means, then why can't I clothe my ethical intentions in different argumentative guises? And as far as refuting sexists goes, even a cursory glance at the history of feminist thought suggests an array of argumentative strategies. Christine de Pizan argues differently than Hélène Cixous, who argues differently than Kimberlé Crenshaw, who argues differently than Judith Butler, and so on. These thinkers are skewering combative sexists, but the skewering method looks different in every case.

Then there is the question of setting. If the combative sexist is in the academic environment, the expectation might be that everyone in it would welcome an aggressive refutation, since we like to consider ourselves an enlightened community. But if the combative sexist is a senior scholar and the object of their sexism is a contingent faculty member, a graduate student, or a junior scholar, chances are high that the latter would strategize very carefully about how—or if—they would want to combat that sexism through argumentation, aggressive or otherwise. Will this aggressive refutation endanger me professionally and therefore economically?, they might ask themselves. As for the extramural setting: What kind of combative sexist are we talking about? A raving drunk at the bar unworthy of my argumentative breath? Someone who seems

otherwise intelligent and able to listen to reason? Someone I spot out of the corner of my eye as I walk home alone on a deserted, unlit street at night? Someone in between all these things? And Trumpians: again, aggressive argumentation is not the obvious choice, not just because even the most robust arguments have proved incapable of convincing them of anything other than what they already believe, but also because of the corporeal risks that argumentation can invite. Sometimes the power dynamics—economic, social, political, physical—of the site of argumentation are such that the person on the receiving end of argumentative combativeness can or would do nothing to endanger the professional, not to mention personal, safety of the arguer. But many cannot take such trust for granted, not even in our most ostensibly protected academic sites of disagreement. Indeed, though combative argumentation may often be warranted, there are contexts in which one might think carefully about how to go about it, or whether to go about it at all.

Many who've read "The Loose Garments of Argument" have taken me to be against disagreement. This is not the case, as I discuss toward the end of the essay. Neither I nor any of the contributors to the "Cultures of Argument" cluster advocate for a meaningless and intellectually impoverished pluralism of views. My point, simply, is that we might not take disagreement as the default setting when it comes to creating literary criticism. That we ought to think through the material and epistemological axes along which we mobilize our disagreements and not be afraid to agree more often. Just as disagreement is often a sign that I am thinking, agreement doesn't have to be a sign that I'm not thinking. It can simply mean that I'm reading carefully. It can mean that I'm listening.

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