I recognize that as I used those terms in my article to persuade readers to act for leftist goals, I relied on leftist definitions. A greater difficulty arises, I think, when we attempt to persuade conservative or even moderate educators to follow this agenda. As California's Proposition 187 and other anti-affirmative action policies are proposed in legislatures and discussed in the media, it becomes clear that the political camps don't use the terms “oppression” and “equality” the same way. For those of us who wish to raise students' awareness of the power dynamics at work in such legislation, we must focus on how we negotiate these terms in order to speak persuasively in our classes and beyond the academic circle about such apparent ideological impasses. Just as the apparently liberal term “respect” can be co-opted to serve the status quo, so we must be wary that the concepts that motivate us to action—the perspectives surrounding what I called “liberation morality”—can be read “perversely” by the dominant powers in ways that subvert our more radical goals.

Works Cited


Imitation and Composition Pedagogy: A Response to Mary Minock

PHILLIP K. ARRINGTON

While I was reading Mary Minock's “Toward a Postmodern Pedagogy of Imitation,” I found myself increasingly frustrated by her handling of what should have been—and could have been—an intriguing exploration of how to translate some very complicated ideas and concepts on language, reading, and writing into
practical, workable terms for the classroom. I don't think my frustration arose from the subject matter of Minock's essay. Having co-authored a bibliographical review on imitation and the writing process published two years ago (see Farmer and Arrington), and an earlier article closely connected to Minock's concerns (see Arrington), I was delighted to find Minock's article in JAC and, just from her title alone, was intrigued by the issue she was about to consider.

But it didn't take very long for my delight to wane, and I soon found myself scribbling all kinds of rejoinders in the margins of her article. First, Ms. Minock's article would leave her readers with the quite misleading impression that no one in composition, postmodernist or no, had ever addressed the issue of imitation and its relationship to writing instruction prior to her essay. Yet, as Professor Farmer and I discovered in our review over two years ago, a great many compositionists have written about imitation—and most of these studies, much to our surprise in light of the emergence of the "process movement" decades ago, were eager to find and offer a variety of justifications for its continuing value in the writing classroom. What's more, scholarly efforts to justify imitation for use in process and post-process classrooms ranged from the stylistic to the "social" and intertextual. Some of these justifications—especially the more recent ones—were made and grounded in a number of postmodernist thinkers; and even our own efforts to make sense of these studies draws upon Bakhtin's insights on language and arguments, a postmodernist thinker Minock clearly approves of.

Yet our bibliography for that article takes up over five pages and, while not every source we cited was directly related to composition, most of them were. Yet, with the exceptions of David Bartholomae's nearly canonical "Inventing the University, Edward Corbett's 1971 equally canonical essay on imitation, and D. G. Kehl's 1979 article on the subject, Minock's bibliography and our own have very little in common. And for her to cite and list Louise Wetherbee Phelp's Composition as a Human Science and neglect to mention Phelp's much more on-target and, I feel, relevant 1986 case study, "Imitation and Originality in the Work and Consciousness of an Adolescent Writer" seems an odd, if not wholly inexcusable, gap in her scholarship on the subject.

Instead, readers will find ample citations to all the European postmodernist darlings literary scholars have been feeding off of since the mid 1970's. To get an article with such gross underrepresentation of the very field to which Minock belongs past reviewers supposedly familiar with the published scholarship on her subject, published in a journal about composition and aimed largely, if not entirely, at composition teachers and scholars seems to me at least a serious injustice to all the thought compositionists have put into this issue long before postmodernism became all the rage, and even during the rage itself. I recognize that it was not Ms. Minock's purpose to "properly pursue the history of imitation pedagogy" (493); but it is simply insufficient to refer readers to George Kennedy's history of rhetoric—now sixteen years old—or James J. Murphy's 1990 article, whose historical scope apparently stops at the Renaissance, when that history has continued to thrive among composition scholars themselves. At
the very least, she could have cited those in the field who have tried to make it their business to pursue this history. Perhaps historical amnesia about the scholarship and research of the field to which one presumably belongs is an inevitable symptom among those like Minock—and she is by no means the only one—who uncritically swoon over European imports but snub the apparently less exciting domestic models.

When Minock does descend into imitation's long and complex history, she quite expectedly invokes the sophists' use of it—the sophists being to postmodernist thinkers and their disciples in composition what African folkart was to Picasso's cubism—and describes Quintilian's ancient imitation exercises. Minock parenthetically describes this flashback as "an important postmodern reversal of anteriority" since the sophists and Quintilian are treated as an "echo of the insights of Bakhtin, Derrida, and Lacan" (493). Yet she neglects perhaps Quintilian's most significant insight about imitation, one which I think would have fit in quite well with the agonistic view of imitation she later expresses, which he offers in Book X as he links the art of paraphrasing to imitation: "But I would not have paraphrase restrict itself to the bare interpretation of the original: its duty is rather to rival and vie with the original in the expression of the same thoughts" (v. 5). I should think that Minock could have used this passage in her discussion since it certainly expresses, briefly and clearly, one of Quintilian's keenest "psychological insights" (493) about imitation—and one that takes a Lacan a good deal longer to express, if he ever quite does. In fact, if Minock is worried that students should be able to "match the rhetorical ethos or the dialogic stance of the author" and "absorb or imitate any of the syntax or the rhetorical strategies" of an author's text rather than freezing up in their efforts to avoid copying and plagiarizing it, Quintilian's comment would have helped her make her case, though I remain somewhat wary of largely identifying—and even defining—imitation as discursive "appropriation" and nothing more (Minock 489-90). Minock is much closer to Quintilian's insightful comment when she observes that scholars like Toril Moi's and Calvin Bedient's writing show that they have "vied" with their text sources and "infiltrated" it by "robbing" that source's style and terminology, but I doubt Quintilian would have used "robbing" to describe this process and I wonder, as Minock does not, whether we should "allow" our students "such licence" (490).

Minock may not have cited this passage from Quintilian, though, because, being but a mere "echo" of his postmodernist betters, Quintilian's definition flies in the face of one crucial postmodernist assumption about imitation, especially in her invocation of Derrida: Quintilian does believe there's an "essential," "original" meaning and intention in an author's words that's paraphrasable, imitateable, and not to be plundered, no matter how cagey one's theoretical justification. Minock's Derrida does not, or so it seems. I say "seems" because Minock might want to read, if she hasn't already, Reed Way Dasenbrock's valuable examination of how the luminous Derrida responds when he has "essential" and "original" meaning "misread" by fellow critics, Searle and
Gadamer. At the end of Dassenbrock’s detailed account of the ‘l’affaire Derrida,” he draws several telling conclusions that bear on Minock’s attempt to revamp imitation according to postmodernist theories, but the most significant one for my purposes is this one:

The fields of composition and rhetoric have been slower than literary theory to be influenced by poststructuralist theories of textuality, despite all the talk about “writing” in those theories, and surely one reason why is that writing instruction seems utterly impossible unless one assumes that student texts are authored and thus that students are authors in control of (or capable of being taught to take control of) the texts they produce. (276-77)

My point in quoting this passage is simply to suggest that, while there is much in postmodernist theorizing—Derrida’s included—that composition teachers need to know about and consider, there is nothing in it we must simply accept as “true” about reading, writing, or imitating other writers and, thereby, impose these truths onto our classroom teaching.

In fact, once Minock gets around to describing her “experiments” in applying postmodernist ideas to the classroom—I found myself nodding in agreement (502-05). The questions she uses to prompt students to imitate the academic discourse they so often dislike, find “boring,” or can’t understand seem to me worth adopting and trying. In fact, from time to time I’ve used different versions of them myself. But these questions are hardly so radical to need the theoretical scaffolding she erects to justify them; and I caught myself wondering at the end of this pedagogical section—regrettably the shortest part of the article—whether the lengthy sections on theories were necessary at all or whether, given her pedagogical translation of them, other theories—the reader-response theory of a Norman Holland, say, or the “subjective criticism” of a David Bleich—could easily replace Bakhtin, Derrida, or Lacan with barely a ripple in her application.

Unfortunately, for me at least, the pedagogical experiment she describes is little more than suggestive; and I grow weary of those in composition who imply that their approach, however theoretically grounded, worked “magic”—the final subhead of Minock’s article—when they offer not one scrap of evidence to support such advertisements (505). Maybe in Minock’s postmodernist mind evidence for claims about her or any other approach is a modernist prejudice, an essentialist anachronism we’re better off for having exploded, along with originality, intended meaning, and a lot of words I find I cannot do without. If so, why bother to describe your approach for readers at all? Why bother to write academic articles?

It would have been so much more helpful had Minock decided to shorten her postmodernist preamble and focus more on how her students ended up unconsciously imitating some of the texts they read and wrote about. Or to have shown readers some examples where her tricks didn’t work so well. Or to have explained to us how she “grades” all these postmodernist imitations (since, I take it, she still must grade her students’ work, grading being the one institutional
necessity I haven't heard too many postmodernists try to critique, much less change). This at least would have given me, and her readers, some bases for determining whether “magic” had indeed occurred. After all, when David Copperfield does his magic, we see the evidence for it right before eyes, even though we know we've been tricked. In Minock's article, we're promised magic but don't get to see one single trick. The tricks we do see in the long theoretical section have been done before—and too many times, for my money!

Minock has made her choices, I suppose; but I sincerely hope hers is one text that will not be “imitated”—by either students or composition scholars who write about imitation in the future.

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Imitation Pedagogy: Postmodernist or No
A Response to Phillip Arrington

MARY MINOCK

First of all I want to thank Professor Arrington for reading my article. His passion for imitation pedagogy is obvious, if his passion for postmodern theory is less apparent. It is, of course, tempting to take Professor Arrington to task for taking me to task for not pursuing other avenues besides the postmodern to explore imitation pedagogy, for if he was “delighted to find Minock’s article in JAC and, just from her title alone, was intrigued by the issue she was about to consider,”