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In a moment when nefarious political motivations regarding the upcoming fall elections would seem to hold sway over the otherwise good citizens of our country (and of others—I write this in late June 2016, just two days after the “Brexit” referendum has passed in the UK), we citizens are all the more in need of a meaningful education in rhetoric and ethics—one that is not in opposition to forces such as religious faith, for example, or other personal imperatives, but is instead in productive dialogue with it. It is a good moment, in other words, to take stock of the myriad consequences of talking past one another.

As luck would have it, we’ve long had in the works articles on this very topic, which we bring to you in this January issue of College English. Assembled not as a planned special issue, but still having a theme of sorts—through the power of editorial chance and good timing—our three featured articles work as a dialogic presentation of options that teachers of writing and rhetoric might consider for re-engaging their students (and perhaps their colleagues?) in productive ethical thinking, specifically where religious and philosophical principles are concerned. To talk of ethics, as at least one of our authors notes, is a tricky thing. We all have been part of one institutional situation or another where that word has had multiple simultaneous meanings and motivations. Still, it is our challenge as a profession to take on these difficult and sometimes diametrically opposed meanings without flinching and, in the process, try to re-invigorate—for students and the public alike—what many would argue is an endangered twenty-first-century humanities.

As such, the present me (in June at this writing) hopes that the future me (in January at the time of this issue’s publication) will have been relieved to see the results of the November presidential election (and a turn of the economic and political tide for our British colleagues). But especially if that should not
come to pass, I will be glad that you, the readers of *College English*, who are affected in both your classrooms and your communities by ill-conceived and even deliberately incendiary discourse right now, have these fine articles to offer some field-centered perspective on our decidedly non-field-specific problem. That is, how do we make informed, “good,” and ethical decisions and in doing so, how do we maintain respectful discourses and build models for communication within our institutional communities, even with those who are fiercely against us—both for the good of our students and for ourselves?

While such questions cannot ever be easily or completely answered in a matter of 100 pages of an academic journal, this issue nonetheless aims to start the proverbial conversation in whatever small way that it can. Our first respondent is John Duffy, whose article, “The Good Writer: Virtue Ethics and the Teaching of Writing,” wastes no time in clarifying that while scholars and teachers understand the three categories of the “rhetorical, linguistic, and aesthetic, and [are] skilled at teaching them,” (229) there is yet another category worthy of instruction, namely the ethical dimensions of writing and the ethical decisions that go into formulating one’s rhetorical choices. Duffy proposes that such instruction should be framed by “virtue ethics,” or “an alternative to ethical traditions grounded in rules and consequences . . . [which offers] a way of thinking beyond the critical ethics of postmodernism” (231).

Duffy undertakes as the center of his article a dissection of the (culturally loaded) terms *virtue*, *virtue ethics*, and *rhetorical virtues* as they have been employed in history and philosophy, among other fields—including the prescient aside, given the current bifurcation of our American political parties fueled in no small part by religion, that “there is nothing exclusively Christian about virtue” (236). He argues that we are “already teaching an ethics of rhetorical virtues, whether we use the word or not,” given the primacy of argument in university writing programs and the methods and principles underlying that teaching (238) as well as in some of our prominent field scholarship and statements and guidelines from our professional organizations (239). However, Duffy notes, we have some distance to go in recognizing the range of opportunities that virtue ethics might provide our students.

Resisting the temptation to illustrate through specific pedagogical examples—since, as he recognizes, “fruitful discussions of rhetorical ethics in one context may be unavailing in another” (244)—Duffy instead discusses options for virtue ethics via the concepts of *situation* and *exemplars* as broadly employed in the teaching of writing across classrooms and contexts. In doing so, he promotes the value of “a language, versatile, generative, and exacting, for the rhetorical work of creating that better world” (246). Duffy’s is an essay that offers both a deeply theoretical and uniquely pragmatic perspective on how values are, perhaps,
valued in our ongoing struggle to make students good writers and also, on some very real level, good citizens.

Nicely complementing the perspectives offered in Duffy’s piece is Michael DePalma’s “Reimagining Rhetorical Education,” in which he approaches the quandary of how to make a “good” writer from his perspective as a scholar of religious rhetorics. DePalma argues,

Although there is a lot of important research in religion and composition that offers pedagogical recommendations for working with religiously committed writers, scholars have yet to fully consider the ways work on religious rhetorics might benefit all writers. More specifically, we have not considered how courses on religious rhetorics can cultivate civic capacities that are valuable to writers from a range of backgrounds. (256)

Through an examination of three local case studies/pedagogies wherein civic discourse in the writing classroom has been informed, rather than constricted, by religious students’ practices and beliefs (at the University of Tennessee, Syracuse University, and his own institution, Baylor University), DePalma contends that such cultivation of “writers’ civic capacities” through dialogue with religion transcends faith-based institutional settings (260).

While DePalma’s piece is not constructed as a response to Duffy’s argument, I think it is still a productive companion to it, given that DePalma’s argument for a recognition of religious difference and students’ need to incorporate their faith-based beliefs into their postsecondary rhetorical education is backed also by his assertion that “[i]t is not enough to address questions of ethics, truth, and justice in general terms, since, especially in cases where religion is concerned, these constructs take on very particular meanings with very particular consequences” (257). In other words, while Duffy would argue that virtue ethics transcend religious boundaries, DePalma wishes to highlight those very boundaries, as they also contain hard lines typically difficult to cross in writing classrooms (or other nonsectarian settings). For example, DePalma highlights several research questions that Jeff Ringer, at the University of Tennessee, asks his own writing students to investigate, among these “[h]ow might we understand . . . vernacular religious creativity as rhetorical? What possibilities might vernacular religious creativity offer for ethical and effective civic engagement?” (258).

The courses and approaches profiled by DePalma here will be, to some CE readers, alien to their own ways of teaching writing and rhetoric. As a nonreligious person myself, who actively avoids discussions of faith in my own classes, I was surprised to learn that more than 84 percent of the world’s population identifies with a religion (DePalma 14). But such realization is the root of DePalma’s argument: that religion is a significant factor in how students shape themselves as rhetors, and so we must find productive ways to engage this condition rather
than actively avoid it—as I do—even as we do not need (nor do many of us want) to standardize or brand the notion of religion itself in the process. As DePalma cautions, in his concluding thoughts, “A course of this kind is destined to fail if an instructor is perceived to be proselytizing or trivializing religious commitment. We therefore need to think at length about our positionality and the performance of our identities when teaching such a course” (270). Indeed, I would say that such an admonition about positionality could apply to **any** course we teach.

On the point of religion and writing education, Heather Thomson-Bunn rounds out our group of authors in this issue with her piece, “Mediating Discursive Worlds: When Academic Norms and Religious Belief Conflict.” Thomson-Bunn’s stake in this issue’s discussion of religion, ethics, and rhetorical education is to present what she calls “the competing discourses of Christianity and composition” and the recognition that of all faiths represented in the first-year writing classroom,

Christian students—perhaps due to the rhetorical frameworks they are used to, the historical tensions between Christianity and higher education, the cultural power Christian discourses seem to wield, or the particular ways in which Christian discourses affect student writing and engagement—are the ones with whom instructors appear to have the most frequent conflicts. (278). As part of her ongoing research into these conflicts, and in somewhat of a contrast to DePalma’s focus on the pedagogy of a broader religious rhetorics-focused course itself, Thomson-Bunn interviewed forty writing instructors for this article to learn more about their own biases and perceptions when teaching Christian-identifying students. Her goal in these interviews was to gain an “[u]nderstanding [of] some of the ways in which instructors perceive Christian students to be violating academic norms” which in turn might help “provide a fuller sense of how and why religious discourses cause conflict in English courses” and ultimately reframe those conflicts for productive ends (279).

Thomson-Bunn focuses her questions to instructors on four broad categories: critical thinking, audience awareness, appropriate use of evidence, and tolerance. In doing so, she finds that, among other revelations, religious beliefs are often relegated to personal writing assignments and that the division between the academic and the personal is where faith-based arguments encounter an ongoing point of contention for students who wish to incorporate their beliefs into research projects (12; 16). Based on these and other findings that would indicate a chasm between the beliefs students want to articulate to further explore questions and problems in the writing classroom, and many instructors’ inexperience with facilitating pedagogies that would bring out this necessary “rhetorical dexterity,” as Thomson-Bunn terms it (286), she ultimately argues
that “what may first appear as intolerance or a lack of critical thinking [from students] may actually be a struggle to work through new ideas” (291) and, as such, would benefit from further “thoughtful conversations about the tensions between religious discourses and academic norms” in the writing classroom (293). Such a position is aligned with DePalma’s and also adjacent to Duffy’s, as far as this issue’s conversation is concerned, since it calls for a greater recognition that Americans’ views on religious faith, and their rhetorical import in the classroom, does inform our practice—even as it can mislead and misinform as well.

To close this issue, we shift gears somewhat—as is often the case with the content of our review essays versus our featured articles—to bring you a wonderful review essay by Brenda Brueggemann and Rachel Gramer that is not on religion, rhetoric, or writing classrooms, but instead on the ways in which misconceptions, conflicts, and identity politics can affect our professional pursuits, particularly for female academics. As editor, I have been eager—the word that comes to mind is itching, actually—to publish more work that concerns itself with problems in the profession as a whole. As I’m sure most, if not all, readers of CE can observe, we live in dangerous times for academic labor and scholarship in the humanities—due to national and international crises that serve to make English studies, among other fields, seem less instrumental and more decorative than other things (like business, for example) and less worthy of funding. But we cannot do the work needed to advance our field—not just research, but also good teaching—if our working conditions do not support it, and we cannot contend with the core concerns of the humanities if we are working within a system that promotes inequitable models of labor—including those that divide along gendered lines—and further stratifies the endeavors of teaching and research/writing/publishing in order to accommodate corporate and/or outdated models of higher education.

So it seems that in a journal like College English—which, as I’ve hammered home in many past introductions, is for the widest possible swath of postsecondary scholar-teachers in English studies—there ought to be some concerted attention to not just the products of our discipline, but also the labor of that production. Additionally, as diverse as English departments are (or aim to be), that discussion of labor ought to pay some attention not only to general labor conditions, but also to those cognizant of the difference gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation play in how labor models are constructed and sustained. As such, I’m pleased to feature in this issue Brueggemann and Gramer’s review essay, “No Day at the Beach,” on three titles related to gender, race and ethnicity, and the profession: Presumed Incompetent (2012), Rewriting Success in Rhetoric and Composition Careers (2013), and the slightly older, (and arguably foundational in relation) Women’s Ways of Making it in Composition (2008). These are complex,
important books that Brueggemann and Gramer put in dialogue with one another and with their own personal and professional experiences as women scholars in Rhetoric and Composition.

As Brueggeman and Gramer note in their discussion of the volume *Presumed Incompetent*, while describing conditions that would seem to be a central concern in all three works under review, “it is a problem—of power, structure, and paradoxical expectations—that both precedes and infuses academic workplaces” (301). Brueggemann and Gramer assert that these titles have emerged . . . from a complex disciplinary landscape: the first wave of composition scholars established our field, creating a discipline out of textbooks and lore (before we even called it lore); the second wave added their growing clout to make our field even more robust . . . and now the third wave (represented in the editors of these collections), with additional distance from those origins, is looking back, assessing how far we’ve come (or not), and rewriting the scripts we’ve been given and the ones we’ve written ourselves into. (301–2)

Further, these books remind us of the common struggles that women in academia, including women of color, continue to face or the “four predominant themes that shape women’s lives in the academy overall, and in rhetoric and composition as a field more specifically: knowing, balance, mentoring, change” (302). Brueggemann and Gramer’s review is an elegant and insightful take on professional issues that confront many of us, and continue to complicate—both for good and ill—our identities and career trajectories, including but not limited to the importance of mentoring in our personal and professional lives. Indeed, there are far too many insights in Brueggemann and Gramer’s piece to spotlight them all in this introduction; theirs is an essay not easily encapsulated within the genre of the editor’s introduction. But let me leave you with the conclusion of the review, which I hope will entice you to read the piece in full, eager to see how these authors come to ultimately rest their ideas in this final place:

While these three edited collections document change/s at many turns, we believe that they also continue to call for—and call us toward—change. In reading across, through, and with these texts and the voices and perspectives of the 68 authors represented in them, we’ve noted the places where we still see change in the making, needing to be made, and being questioned . . . We’ve questioned the way we typically value knowing (over learning) in the academy. We’ve suggested needed changes in the way we, especially as academic women, make “balance” a (too primary) be/am. We’ve called for changes in the way we imagine and make mentoring happen, moving it more toward mutuality and also networks of allies rather than paired knower-learner units. And finally, we’ve considered an approach to change from a more toggled perspective, where change is held in both belief and doubt as “a good thing,” and where the myth and mirage of change does not become the never-ending means to a never-reached end. (315–16)