

# “Can You Hear Me Now, Ms. Monster?”: Anger, *Thumos*, and First-Year Composition



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In the wake of the Virginia Tech shootings, it's difficult to speak of anger in the composition classroom in a positive way. Like other authors who write about the productive aspects of anger, I find myself adding disclaimers. I want to argue in this paper that we don't do a very good job of acknowledging anger in our classrooms and that we can't use what we won't see, but in the wake of the Virginia Tech shootings, I find myself wanting to be clear that I don't mean *that* kind of anger. I mean “anger,” but not “anger.”

There are not many English words for “anger.” There's “wrath” and “ire,” although no one uses “ire” anymore and hardly anyone “wrath.” There's “frustration,” “resentment,” and “indignation,” but they don't have the emotional intensity of “anger,” a word that can slide so easily into “rage” and “violence” and, thus, “tragedy” and “horror.” This paucity of words suggests something about our unwillingness to confront anger, our belief that one should count to ten, turn the other cheek, walk away. We pretend that we are rational, logical persons, and we have tried to push *pathos* out of our public lives and, certainly, out of the classroom.

Lynn Worsham describes anger as the privilege of the powerful (“Going Postal”). Thus, one role of education is to school our anger into channels appropriate to our social class, ethnicity and gender. Consequently, as Gretchen Flesher Moon points out, emotion of any kind is rarely discussed in composition textbooks (“The Pathos of *Pathos*”). In our composition classrooms, writing is often presented as a process that is neat, clean, linear, and above all else, rational, a point also made by Laura Micciche. As she notes in her article “Emotion, Ethics, and Rhetorical Action,” *logos* has become the central concern of rhetoric (164). Certainly, there's that messy stuff about brainstorming, but everything after that—outlining, drafting, revising, editing—sounds so rational, almost formulaic in most textbooks. We don't often talk to our students about the chaos that comes with trying to communicate our thoughts to other people, nor do we talk about the emotions that attempting to work through that chaos creates, especially if that emotion is anger. Yet many of our students are often angry—with us, with themselves, with a curriculum that asks them to master a rhetorical style that does not come easily to them, with a course that can determine whether or not they can get the degree that they hope can lift themselves and their families economically. Writing is not just a means of expressing feelings, including anger. The process itself, especially as one is learning it, can produce anger. Or, at least, a certain kind of anger. Not a violent anger, but, hopefully, a productive one. “Anger,” but “not-anger.”

What we need is another word for anger. Aristotle had two words to describe what we call anger: *orge*—an irrational, strong emotion whose end is revenge—and *thumos*—a more rational emotion. *orge* is aroused by the experience or the impression of having been belittled or punished unjustly, or when someone close to one has been belittled, and its object is revenge (Cooper 250). *Thumos* is very much like anger and often associated with anger by Aristotle (Leighton 223). When *thumos* is particularly agitated or distressed, it becomes *orge* (anger). However, *thumos* is also a word that is “associated with spiritedness, and also with heart, or the seat or capacity for emotions” (Quandahl 13). It is a productive emotion that spurs us to action. It lacks the destructive quality of *orge*. Adding the Greek concept of *thumos* to our classroom discussions of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos* can provide a means for productively harnessing an emotion that is strong enough to see our students through the chaos of the writing process.

Most books on writing downplay the role emotions play in the process. A study by Gretchen Flesher Moon finds that the textbooks most frequently used in composition classes make little, if any, mention of emotion. When they do discuss emotion, it is usually in relationship to Aristotle's three intrinsic *pisteis* (*logos*, *ethos*, *pathos*). Or, they discuss emotion in the chapter dealing with argumentative papers and, then, as something to avoid (Moon 33). There is generally nothing on how emotion is part of the composing process itself, nothing about the pleasure, the frustration, the joy even, of writing (Moon 38). There are some exceptions, but these come from books that are not written exclusively, or even primarily, for students in a traditional college classroom. For example, Peter Elbow, in one of his word collages, declares that he is “tired of words” and admits that he has “always been angry at the articulate and fluent people” (*Everyone Can Write* 173). In *Writing with Power*, he devotes many pages throughout the book to using one's feelings, including anger, in ways that are productive and powerful. Ironically, while many teachers use this work as a textbook, Elbow states clearly that *Writing With Power* is intended for “a very broad audience” (6). Similarly, Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird* is written for a general audience (and one more interested in

creative rather than academic writing). However, she, too, is one of the few to openly deal with the frustrations of writing. Over and over in the opening pages of her book, she tells her audience of prospective authors that writing is hard, first drafts are terrible, and that it's ok to be angry and bitter as long as one keeps writing (perhaps about why one is so angry and bitter).

And angry our students are. Part of the anger for first-year writers may exist because their agendas may be radically different from their teachers'. As Russel Durst points out in *Collision Course*, many teachers have political goals associated with ideas about critical literacy. They want students to question assumptions and look for ambiguities in order to better understand themselves and the world around them. Micciche, in fact, states that "efforts to produce critical thinkers, cultural workers, or enfranchised citizens" are "now commonplace goals" (178). Other teachers may not articulate such explicitly political goals for their first-year writing students, but they nevertheless hold out the hope that they can teach their students to be persuasive writers, good readers, and, in short, people who live the examined life (Durst 51). Such lofty goals often create conflict, especially when the content of the course challenges students' beliefs about issues of gender, race, or class (Carroll 69). In addition, while teachers of first-year composition courses often profess interest in teaching critical thinking skills, introducing students to academic forms of writing, or at least complicating their student's three-point, five-paragraph essays, students may want only to learn how to punctuate their sentences properly. Students' agendas are pragmatic: develop a good vocabulary, learn some grammar, streamline the writing process (preferably to something that can be done in under two hours), and pass the class with at least a "C." Thus, Durst sees students as forming, however unconsciously, their own CCCC's: correctness, clarity, conciseness, and creativity (60). In this organization, time spent on brainstorming, drafting, trying out different approaches, and revising is all time wasted (Durst 83). In addition, students often characterize teachers' efforts to broaden their thinking as attacks on their own opinions (Carroll 68). Like their "voice," students see their opinions as integral parts of their true selves and fear the loss of them (Carroll 85). Students resent being pulled into a writing process that demands so much emotional investment and risks so much of their selves.

While some see the conflict between teachers and students as a difference in philosophy—the students' pragmatism vs. the teachers' idealism—Doug Hunt, in his book *Misunderstanding the Assignment*, suggests that the conflict exists in part because of the developmental stage in which first-year college students find themselves. For him, the resistance from some students to engage in the kind of critical thinking and appreciation of ambiguity that we ask of them in our composition classes is not a result of deliberate resistance on their part, but of an inability to "read" the assignment as we do. Moreover, while we want them to see ambiguities, to question cultural myths, to experiment with writing styles, to accept contradiction—in short, to engage in what is essentially a very solitary activity—the typical eighteen year old freshman is at a stage in her development when social relationships mean everything (Durst 38). Writing is certainly a social act, insofar as all communication is ultimately social, but the process itself calls for solitude. We ask students to engage in an activity that will require hours spent alone thinking, brainstorming, drafting, revising, editing, and then are frustrated when our highly social students spend no more than a couple of hours on their essays.

We do a disservice to our students when we don't acknowledge their emotions, but even more importantly when we don't provide a means for harnessing that emotion in a productive way. After all, while acknowledging our students' feelings of sadness, frustration, anger, etc. is a first step, we can't ethically leave them swirling in a vortex of emotions. Elbow advises his readers to use freewriting as an "outlet for these feelings so they don't get so much in [the] way" of writing (*Writing With Power* 15). He suggests the use of journals as a way to articulate feelings and keep them in perspective (15). This is certainly one way for dealing with the emotions, especially anger and frustration, which can come up in the classroom, and most teachers have an array of tips and techniques for working through the frustrations of writer's block. It still leaves the suggestion, however, that emotions are something which one must work through or somehow leave behind before one can get on to the serious business of writing.

In "Silence: A Collage," an essay published in his collection *Everyone Can Write*, Elbow relates his experience at a workshop in 1991 at a Quaker retreat. The fragmentary essay is a celebration of silence. He says he is "tired of words. The tyranny of words" (173). The essay is also a celebration of the collage form, the force of which, he says, lies in the "embedded silence: asterisks, gaps. Parts don't 'flow' in the 'logical order' demanded by 'good writing.'" The collage is jagged and broken rather than smooth" (175). In its bits and pieces is this line: "Freewriting is an attempt to imprison people inside their head" (174). I think Elbow means this in a positive sense, in that freewriting allows writers to block out other voices and listen only to the ideas in their own heads. But the form of this essay allows me to read the fragment differently. When Elbow says that "freewriting is an attempt to imprison people inside their own head," I picture my students who can write as long as the words are ungraded and unread by eyes other than theirs. As long as the words are contained within their own notebook. As long as their words are imprisoned in their own heads. And if they are using freewriting, as Elbow suggests, to deal with the emotions that writing produces in them, that means their emotions are imprisoned, also. Their voices are trapped. If all we give our students are journals and freewriting, we have, again, walled off emotion.

Elbow's word collages suggest a form that might be suitable for expressing the frustration and anger that writing can produce in first-year composition students. Even an experienced writer as Elbow uses words such as "empty," "tyranny," "hunger," "inarticulate," and "failure" in describing his relationship to words (*Everyone Can Write* 173). Yet, at least in my classes with my mostly average students, words are part of the problem. Therefore, instead of asking them to produce an essay or a word collage, I use a visual-essay assignment that begins with literary analysis and that allows space for students' emotions in a way that is consistent with the kind of academic writing I want from them. While certainly personal, the writing that results from the assignment centers on the question of voice and authority, questions as important to academic writing as to personal narratives. What I always find surprising about this assignment—one that I initially envisioned as rather light-hearted and fun—is the amount and degree of emotion, often anger, that it generates.

We begin by reading Langston Hughes's poem "Theme for English B" in which he speculates about what "color" the page he writes will be, given the fact that his theme will be a little bit of himself, a black man, and a little bit of his instructor, a white (and I've always presumed, male) teacher. As a white professor teaching at a historically black university, I initially assumed that my students would also focus on issues of race since we were, in a sense, replicating the setting of the poem. Instead, questions of voice tend to dominate the class discussion and the essays that follow. What interests my students the most is negotiating that contact between teacher and student, negotiating the abyss between my expectations and their desire to meet those expectations both in a manner most true to themselves and, also, in a manner as streamlined as possible. Since we do this assignment towards the end of the semester after they have already had a chance to write a number of papers for me, they are already deeply immersed in their efforts to negotiate the chaos of the writing process and, as it turns out, have formed pretty definite opinions about what negotiating that chaos feels like, although most have not yet articulated those opinions for themselves. In part because I want to capitalize on Hughes's focus on the color of his theme and in part because it doesn't make sense to ask students to use words to describe their emotional reaction to using words, I ask my students to first construct a visual essay. Only after creating the visual essay are they to write a page or two explaining their argument.

The creation of this visual argument involves more than just creating a collage. Recent composition scholarship has shown that visual arguments are more than just "arts and crafts" projects appropriate for struggling writers who have difficulty writing an essay. Not only is such an approach demeaning to first-year composition students, it ignores the powerful persuasive quality of visual images. In her article on the use of visual communication in the composition classroom, Diana George points out that our students are intensely visual. Students today are bombarded with advertisements and visual images from their television sets, their computers, their cell phones, etc. Students today do not even remember a time when music was not accompanied by the visual images of the music video. As George states, "for students who have grown up in a technology-saturated and an image-rich culture, questions of communication and composition absolutely will include the visual, not as attendant to the verbal but as complex communication intricately related to the world around them" (32). The assignment of a visual essay allows students to express feelings about writing without having to first use the words creating the feeling in the first place. In the end, not all of the students follow my instructions to do the visual essay first, but most of them do, in some instances surprising themselves with the outcome.

In their essays, several of my students have commented on how important the assignment was for them in articulating—sometimes for the first time—what they think their own writing voice sounds like and what happens to it when it meets my standards. For example, after completing his visual argument, one of my students writes that "After doing this collage, I really learned a lot about myself as an artist and a writer. I figured out that I'm not that good at art, but I know that I can write." He goes on to say that he understands now that the assignment was not meant as a punishment—he *really* hated the art aspect of this assignment—but instead as something that would help the class "become more confident and open minded writers." Another student, with a similar anti-art attitude, started this assignment with words. He writes about how he went back to his dorm room and started to jot down ideas on paper. He says that it was

funny because I never asked myself until now what my voice sounded like on paper. In my poem, I explained what I want my reader to get out of my words. I want them to be able to distinguish my writing from others. I want them to feel my words as though they are in the moment. I want the words to flow through their ears with a gracious transition.

This articulate observation came from a student who had been struggling all semester with his writing. This is the first assignment he really connected with. He says that he "liked the collage because when I look at it, it tells a story without sentences. I can look at it and tell what my voice sounds like."

Responses to this assignment usually fall into three general categories. Some students cast me in the predictable

role of guide or midwife who helps them bring forth what is deep inside of them, while others express surprise that the assignment works at all. A third category of responses, and the one which is by far the largest, uses images of violence and anger to express the process of writing for a teacher.

This assignment with the construction paper and the glue, although it seems silly to them at first, surprises some of my students (and me) with the wealth of anger and violent imagery that it brings out about that chasm between student-writer and teacher. In describing their collages—which often feature a lot of black or red color—my students use words like “force,” “smother,” “killed,” “suffer,” “trapped,” “had to,” etc. And yet, for many of them, this violence is necessary. It brings to mind John Donne’s sonnet “Batter my heart three-personed God” in which he asks God to “break, blow, burn” him in order to make him “new.” At the end, my students could say to themselves that—not *despite* the turmoil but *because* of it—they feel more confident about their writing, that they’re surer of their voice, and that they are, indeed, writers.

For example, one collage depicts a tiny, hooded figure in the center of a piece of black construction paper. In the accompanying essay, my student has this to say:

My inner voice is an odd thing to describe. My inner voice is hardly ever heard. Most of the time it is kept confined within the gates of my mind. It hardly ever sees light. It seems that when I write papers for [my professor], my inner voice tries to come to the light. It wants to come out from the darkness so very badly but, it lacks the strength that it needs to overpower the darkness. It seems that it is a lonely soldier fighting in an endless war against criticism, envy, and fear. It fears the criticism of other people, the envy of peers and the fear of being rejected. It also feels that when it does surface, it draws too much attention from others. [ . . . ] To me, it’s an enigma. It’s like an unsolvable rubix cube [sic]; the conditions are never right for it to completely shine. [ . . . ] My inner voice is completely surrounded by darkness. Trapped and confined to its dark solitary cell. It has no face and it has no name. It just exists for the most part in silence. It waits to be released from its inhibitions and to be able to express itself fully without any qualms about the consequences.

One of the angriest collages, although I think also one of the most cathartic ones that my students produced, depicts me as a monster. Although we laughed about the blood he shows dripping from my fingers, the feelings he expresses are not funny. In his essay, he writes:

If the question was asked, “does my inner voice come out in my freshman writing papers?” My response would be Hell No!!! There are too many guidelines you have to abide by for your paper to be considered good. If I am supposed to put my inner voice in a paper, and when I get it back it’s considered to be a bad paper, well isn’t that saying my inner voice means nothing? [ . . . ] My inner voice is screaming for help. It is trapped inside because I can not let it get out. My inner voice is angry. [ . . . ] It feels like my teacher has my soul in her hands and she can do anything with it. She is a monster figuratively not literally. I can bring her what I think is the best thing I ever wrote, scratch that something I know is the best thing I ever wrote, and I guarantee she would fail me because I do not meet certain guidelines. [ . . . ] Now I know my inner voice came out through this paper, it is pissed off, and it can’t hold back any longer. It has been screaming the words, HELP ME, HELP ME. Now it doesn’t want any help all it wants is to be understood and respected. No longer will I just scratch the surface of my inner voice and no longer will my soul be trapped inside the beast of the monster. I can accept if my paper is bad under these guidelines because I don’t agree with them all, but when I am asked to put my inner voice inside a paper and when I do it’s considered bad I have a problem with that. So now when you read this I have a question for you, Ms. Monster, “Can you hear my inner voice now or do you want it louder?”

The vehemence of this response from such a quiet student surprised me, as many of the essays did. However, the anger these students express would not have surprised Aristotle, who understood well emotion’s place in rhetoric.

While emotion, especially anger, is absent in most modern textbooks, it plays an important role in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*. For one thing, Aristotle believed that it was important to understand the impact of emotions on an audience since, as Aristotle says, “things do not seem the same to those who are friendly and those who are hostile, nor [the same] to the angry and the calm but either altogether different or different in importance” (*Rhetoric* 1377b). In order to elicit the appropriate emotions in one’s audience, and hence feelings of either pleasure or pain depending on one’s purpose, one must understand three things about one’s audience: their state of mind, against whom they are feeling the emotion (such as anger, to use Aristotle’s example), and their reasons for feeling so. Failure to understand all three will result in a failure to persuade (*Rhetoric* 1378a). Although Aristotle says that this is true for all emotions, he uses anger (*orge*) as an example in this passage. While this may be disturbing to modern readers, Aristotle’s contemporaries were being instructed in the importance of producing anger in their audience in order to, in

turn, impact their judgment. Aristotle is not privileging anger, but neither is he denying its place in rhetoric.

As noted above, *orge* is an emotion that arises when one feels that someone has unjustifiably criticized or belittled one. In addition, it is always directed toward a particular person against whom one desires revenge (*Rhetoric* 1378a). *orge* requires action. This makes *orge*—anger—a much more specific emotion for the Greeks than for us. As George Kennedy points out, Aristotle's definition excludes the possibility of being angry at an unknown person who dents one's car in a parking lot, for example, or the anger one nation may feel towards another (Kennedy, fn 9). As neither of these actions can lead to individual action (because we don't know what person to direct our anger towards), neither one are examples of *orge*. The coupling of *orge* with action explains the prominence given to anger in the *Rhetoric*. Like other emotions such as pity, anger leads to action, and, of course, this is the role of rhetoric in the larger sense—to persuade to action.

While *thumos* is closely associated with *orge*, it is not synonymous with the term, as a key component of *orge* is the desire for revenge. In a sense, *orge* is a particularly agitated form of *thumos* coupled with action. While both *thumos* and *orge* are extreme states of emotion, *orge* can be more irrational than *thumos* (Harris 54). *orge* leads to action, but revenge can be delayed by circumstances. It is also not politic to express *orge* towards those in a superior position to oneself, even if that person has unjustifiably belittled one. Aristotle, thus, switches to *thumos* when discussing the emotion associated with what we might think of as delayed revenge.

In addition to this frank discussion of revenge, which might surprise modern readers, Aristotle also discusses with equally surprising frankness the pleasures of *orge*. According to Aristotle, anger (*orge*) is always accompanied by pleasurable feelings because it “is pleasant for him to think he will get what he wants” (*Rhetoric* 1378b). Moreover, since it is not pleasurable when one does not get what one wants, the angry person never yearns for what is impossible to attain. In this passage of the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle switches from his use of *orge* to *thumos* to describe the emotional state of agitation that does not, however, anticipate revenge. This is a fine distinction that is not always clear in the translation of this passage. Kennedy's translation of Aristotle's line in which he quotes a passage from the *Iliad* reads: “it has been well said of rage [*thumos*],

A thing much sweeter than honey in the throat, it grows in the breast of men” (*Rhetoric* 1378b; bracket in original trans.)

J.H. Freese, on the other hand, translates *thumos* here as “anger.” Kennedy's translation of *thumos* in this instance as “rage” is closer to the original, but nevertheless a little imprecise since “rage” carries a connotation of a brutish sort of irrationality. What Aristotle was trying to convey was the feeling of passion, of spirit, of a strong desire to change the present situation, but one that has not yet risen to the performance of a particular act of revenge. As a pleasurable experience, it cannot be associated with frustration. There is a plan, a direction to the emotion that foresees a favorable outcome.

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle complicates his definition of *thumos*. While Aristotle's discussion of *thumos* in the *Rhetoric* suggests an almost inevitable transition of *thumos* to *orge*, he finds in the *Nicomachean Ethics* a place for *thumos* in situations where *orge* is inappropriate or ineffectual, and not just because revenge would be impractical. This occurs in his discussion of the virtue of courage. Aristotle spends considerable time defining courage. Courage, he notes, is not courage when a man appears brave who has no real sense of danger. Drunken men often appear brave because they overestimate their abilities in a fight. In a similar manner, men who have often fought and won are sometimes as sanguine as the drunken man, although their belief in their own invincibility arises from experience rather than drink (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1117a). None of these, according to Aristotle, are courageous men. Interestingly, neither is the man who exhibits *orge*.

According to Aristotle, *orge* is not a necessary component of courage, although *thumos* often is (Harris 98). *orge* can be irrational, and *thumos*, although also intense, less so (Harris 54). Here, *thumos* is associated with passion. Passion (or *thumos*) is what aids the brave man “to act for honor's sake” (Harris 78). The best courage is one to which “choice and motive” has been added to passion, suggesting again that irrational *orge* is not really courage (*NE* 1117a). Aristotle states: “Men, then, as well as beasts, suffer pain when they are angry, and are pleased when they exact their revenge; those who fight for these reasons, however, are pugnacious but not brave; for they do not act for honor's sake nor as the rule directs, but from strength of feeling; they have, however, something akin to courage” (*NE* 1117a). Thus, *thumos* is part of courage when married to rational choice.

Aristotle goes on to note that courage consists of both feelings of confidence and fear, and while the examples he uses here are the battlefield or the boxing ring, what he describes is easily recognizable by any writer. The end of a courageous act is something pleasant. For the boxer, according to Aristotle, it is the glory one receives upon winning a match. For the writer, it is the publication, won only after hours spent toiling alone, risking (and often enduring) rejection. For our students, the end is the passing grade and (perhaps) the knowledge that each step taken makes

the next one easier. Courage is possible because of *thumos*.

To return to Aristotle's definition in the *Rhetoric* of *thumos* as a "thing much sweeter than honey in the throat," there is a further argument against translating *thumos* in this passage as "rage" (*Rhetoric* 1378b). This argument comes from Aristotle's insistence that virtue lies in the mean (*NE* 1106b-1107a). The virtuous man experiences passions, such as anger or pity, neither too much nor too little (*NE* 1106b). To feel passions well is "to feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way" (*NE* 1106b). To be virtuous is not easy, as it is not a part of our character given to us by nature. Rather, according to Aristotle, we learn virtue by seeing it modeled by teachers and by practicing it in the company of others (*NE* 1103b). To find the middle ground, to learn to feel emotions, including anger, neither too much nor too little, is not easy, as Aristotle remarks. Again using anger (*orge*) as an example, he notes that "anyone can get angry—that is easy— [ . . . ]; but to do this to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way, *that* is not for everyone, nor is it easy; wherefore goodness is both rare and laudable and noble" (*NE* 1109a). Later in Book VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics* in his discussion of continence and incontinence, Aristotle is clear that anger (*thumos*) is a positive quality, incontinence being associated with softness and effeminacy and an unwillingness to stand firm in one's opinions.

Emotion has always been a part of rhetoric. Returning to an Aristotelian concept of the place of emotions (including anger) in rhetoric can serve a two-fold purpose. First, it can be a productive means of negotiating the chaos of the writing process. Second, for those teachers who see part of their responsibility in the first-year composition course as a socio-political one, the return of emotions to rhetoric can fuel ethical behavior, a point made by Worsham when she asserts that "our most urgent political and pedagogical task remains the fundamental reeducation of emotion" (216). Worsham believes that the primary purpose of pedagogy is to "organize an emotional world, to inculcate patterns of feelings that support the legitimacy of dominant interests, patterns that are especially appropriate to gender, race, and class locations" (223). This position is not far off from Aristotle's view of the social importance of emotions, which he saw as connected with virtue and ethics. For Aristotle, a capacity to feel emotion is a social capacity (Quandahl 14). In the *Ethics*, Aristotle states that emotions are given to us by nature, but are developed through our interactions with others. Nature gives us the capacity to feel, while our interaction with other people and the world develops them (Quandahl 14-15). Virtues are "dispositions towards *praxis* and *pathos*, toward acting and being acted upon, doing and feeling" (Quandahl 15). Our ethical behavior, thus, depends on our capacity to feel emotion (Quandahl 18). Therefore, if virtue (or ethical behavior) depends on the capacity to feel *and* we ask our students to develop virtues (as Durst, Micciche, and others, suggest) and express them in writing that accepts ambiguity and questions the easy answer, then we must expect and provide places for emotion in student writing.

For example, in her study of the narratives of working-class students, Janet Bean suggests that students can use emotion in their essays to help them make sense of the world and to create a space to critique metanarratives, such as what she calls "'bootstrap' ideologies of individual opportunity and responsibility" (Bean 103). Students employ "feelings of obligation, gratitude, anger, and nostalgia" as a means of "social action" via their narratives (Bean 105). To dismiss such emotions as irrational or out of place in academic writing is to deny students the opportunity to make sense of the world. When we dismiss their emotional writings because we don't or won't appreciate the view of the world from their eyes, we "misread" their essays in much the same way that they "misread" our assignments, although I would suggest that our misreading in these instances is far more deliberate and conscious than theirs.

We also "misread" our students' writing when we fail to consider how emotions can alter judgments—our judgments of their writing, their judgments of the assignment, and even their own judgments of their writing. According to Stephen R. Leighton, implicit in Aristotle's works are two main ways in which emotions can change judgments. First, judgments may change as a result of emotion (Leighton 210). This is similar to the ethical error in which I know A, but do B, because of viciousness or a lack of goodwill. Here, I know A, but because I feel B (perhaps love for the other person), I do C although I know D to be correct. Emotion may also change the way I perceive something. I may be so angry that I "mishear" something (Leighton 212). Or, I may be so excited that I "misperceive" something (Leighton 213). Or, maybe, my love for something may preclude all other feelings (Leighton 211). Perhaps, the emotion I feel may cause me to give greater attention to some one detail than another, thus distorting my perception (Leighton 216). All of these are some version of "misreading" the situation and, unlike the first example, are disingenuous. In this case, I know A, but because I feel B, I do C, never knowing that D is correct because I have misinterpreted the situation. For Aristotle, emotions can arise from simply the appearance of something (Cooper 246). Aristotle refers to this as *phantasia*, "according to which something may appear to, or strike one, in some way (say, as being insulting or belittling) even if one knows there is no good reason for one to take it so" (Cooper 247). Because I *think* I know A, I feel B, even if A appears as something totally different to someone else.

Therefore, emotions can change a student's judgment of her own work, despite appearances. She may see it as better than it actually is (perhaps reacting against a teacher whom she perceives as belittling her or unfairly

criticizing her). She may perceive her writing as worse than it actually is (because she overstates or misreads the criticism). Perhaps, too, she changes her judgment of herself as a writer or even of herself as a person based on her perceptions. Elbow devotes an entire chapter to this idea in *Writing With Power* (again, ironically, a book not specifically written for composition students). He relates his own feelings of nausea that often hit him as he revises. He counsels his readers not to give in to the “revulsion” or “disgust” that they may feel: “the feeling that all this stuff you have written is stupid, ugly, worthless—and cannot be fixed” (173). He advises his readers to “[g]et rid of what’s absolutely impossible, sweep the extra pieces under the rug, touch up the blemishes, and wipe up the blood and be done with it” (174). We can’t discount students’ emotions. We have to talk about the blood.

What we feel in trying to negotiate the chaos of the writing process is also felt by our students. The difference, of course, is that our students have less experience controlling their frustration or channeling their anger in socially-appropriate ways, and they have even less opportunity to appropriately express that anger in a classroom. While our students might seek revenge through the course evaluation (revenge being, again, a necessary component of *orge*), they are really experiencing what the Greeks would call *thumos* and what they, lacking an equivalent word, call anger. Ideally, this intense emotion produces not a vengeful act, but a productive force resulting in a powerfully persuasive essay. Perhaps (indeed) to expect over-worked and underpaid composition instructors to not only teach their students to be persuasive writers, but also to teach them to be noble and good is asking a lot of them. Nevertheless, the student who can learn to feel anger in the right way at the right time and to then express it to the right extent may not only find writing more pleasant (again, *thumos* being a pleasurable experience), but may also carry that virtue into other aspects of her life.

On the other hand, perhaps it is not too much to expect composition instructors to work towards producing noble and virtuous students. After all, rhetoric plays a part in politics. Certainly, this is at the heart of Worsham’s argument. And, Jasper Neel reminds us, “the teaching of writing is and must be a political undertaking” (15). Aristotle also understood this point. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he explicitly places rhetoric among the sciences used by politics, the end of which “must be the good for man” (*NE* 1094b). For Aristotle, happiness “is the best, noblest, and most pleasant thing in the world” (*NE* 1099a). It is achieved through living a virtuous life that includes the doing of virtuous acts. The latter is important: “the man who does not rejoice in noble actions is not even good; since no one would call a man just who did not enjoy acting justly, similarly in all other cases” (*NE* 1099a). For Aristotle, “those who act win, and rightly win, the noble and good things in life” (*NE* 1099a). Thus, both *thumos* and *orge* are important emotions as both reflect a spiritedness that leads to action. It is not enough to possess a virtue; one must act on that virtue. As the end of rhetoric serves the end of politics whose final end is the happiness of its citizens, such happiness issuing from the living of a virtuous life made possible by the state, then it is never “just rhetoric.”

These student essays illustrate the role of emotion in the writing process. Just as Bean found her working class students using emotion to make sense of and resist metanarratives such as the Horatio Alger dream of success through individual hard work, my students use emotion, specifically *thumos*, to resist and negotiate my expectations for their writing. Narratives that give a place to emotions create a site for potential critique, at the least upsetting “the privileged position of rationality” (Bean 104). This particular assignment, which required my students to construct a visual essay, bypassed rational discourse altogether in favor of a literacy based on images and emotions. Wendy Ryden defines our preference for rational discourse over messy, emotional narratives as the desire for a rhetoric of kitsch. She defines kitsch as the “suppression of difficult truth in favor of a more palatable, superficial aesthetic of consensus” (84). Students who can acknowledge *thumos*, even if they characterize it as anger, and deny a rhetoric of kitsch can find reward.

In addition, we should consider what it is we are really doing when we deny emotions such as anger a place in our classrooms. Who benefits? The Greeks’ relationship to anger was complex. In a time of political unrest, they devoted a lot of time to writing about anger control, as William Harris notes. Extreme anger (*orge*), again according to Harris, could lead to madness (344). It was often associated with women, who, the Greeks believed, were not ruled by reason (Harris 272). Anger was conceived as a problem with slaves, both in terms of the slaves provoking anger and in terms of the slaves feeling anger (Harris 318-19). What madmen, women, and slaves had in common was the potential to disrupt the social and political order with their anger. Anger control served those in power because it allowed for the smooth operation of the family and, by extension, the state (Harris 407).

There is, indeed, too much anger (*orge*) in our society, and there has been, as Harris notes, too much misguided discussion of the positive aspects of anger and the danger of keeping anger “bottle[d] up” (Harris 218). Too often, such a philosophy has led to the acceptance (and even encouragement) of expressions of anger, which can be hurtful even when not physically expressed. Nevertheless, even Harris, who ends his work on anger with the suggestion that we might all benefit by following the Stoics and denying anger a place in our emotions, contradicts himself by declaring that we should leave anger some place in our lives, especially if it can be used productively to enact social change.

The concept of using anger (*thumos*) to enact social change gets us back to our question of who benefits when emotions, especially strong emotions, are denied a place in our classroom. When rational discourse is valued above all else, it is easy to dismiss passionate discourse (“I can’t talk to you while you’re being so emotional!”) Isn’t everyone entitled to feelings of passion and spiritedness? And to return to the writing classroom, in particular, isn’t everyone entitled to a strong, passionate voice and a spirited form of literacy? Looking back through history, it appears that society benefits when madmen, women, and slaves find their *thumos*-infused voices.

Those of us who write understand that writing is messy. We’ve immersed ourselves in the process over and over again and, through experience, we trust that we will come out on the other side again. Our students, on the other hand, enter the chaos of the first-year writing course as novices. Some of them have not reached a stage in their development that will allow them to see shades of gray, to deal with ambiguities, or even to sit alone for the hours on end that is required for producing good essays. Thus, they resist us and the writing process and are angry that we force them into it. Others find the ambiguities easier to deal with, but are still not experienced enough to entirely trust the process.

I realize, of course, that we live in a society that has seen an explosion of school violence in the last several years and that the suggestion that our students might benefit by cultivating an emotion very much like anger may seem naïve, at best, and dangerous, at worst. Yet, if we take our cue from the Greeks who found a positive place for *thumos*, then we, too, can perhaps find a way to make such a powerful emotion productive. When we make room for emotion in the classroom, perhaps through assignments which tap into students’ vast visual literacies, when we welcome anger and harness it in ways that are productive, we give our students tools for negotiating the writing process.

And to answer my student’s question: yes, I can hear you. More importantly, I think you can now hear yourself.

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