



April 2016

## From Trump to Pope and Back Again

Aaron R. Hanlon

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine>



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Liberal Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Hanlon, Aaron R. (2016) "From Trump to Pope and Back Again," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 104 : Iss. 3 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol104/iss3/6>

This Features is brought to you for free and open access by the Colby College Archives at Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Magazine by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.

# From Trump to Pope and Back Again

An English professor and political commentator hazards an opinion—that public writing is worth the risk

By Aaron R. Hanlon



**I** didn't go to graduate school for six years to write about Donald Trump. At times it even feels vulgar to write about politics in national media, not because it is, but because the same media culture that pays me—a professor—to write critically about Trump is also invested in the idea that liberal bias in academe is a threat to intellectual diversity.

But I do write polemical things about Trump, for the *New Republic* and *Salon*, among other media outlets. For example: "The day before Donald Trump called for a 'total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States,' he cited political correctness as a serious contributing factor to the San Bernardino attack, a move that neatly united his disdain for 'p.c. culture' with his disdain for the Muslim community."

I don't see a threat to intellectual diversity there. And this is why.

Colleges—and by extension, faculty—are under a lot of pressure to show that we're open to a range of ideas across the political spectrum, welcoming to students and colleagues of different political persuasions, and ultimately challenging each other's views with rigor and care befitting an institution of higher education. Even if we're realistic about the fact that all of us—students, staff, faculty, alums—are political beings with values that shape our thoughts and actions, the wider political culture demands objectivity even as it continually fails to deliver it.

One way out of this conundrum for faculty who do public political writing is to bring in our research expertise (easier for some than others). As a scholar of the Enlightenment, I might invoke the Second Earl of Rochester to sympathize with Jon Stewart's obscene rants against Fox News or criticize Trump's demagoguery by rehashing the 18th-century history of the Bill of Rights; but academics and polemics don't always converge in fruitful ways. Even within a political essay that draws on my scholarship, I necessarily depart from the high-minded pose and the language of objectivity with which professors typically proceed in our teaching and scholarship. Public writing is a civic exercise, which is to say a messy exercise that takes place in an environment with little time for footnotes or equivocation.

Another way out is to stop polemical writing altogether, because, after all, writing can get you in trouble. The British poet Alexander Pope reminds us of this in a fictional dialogue with a friend who urges Pope to stop writing:

Alas, young man! Your days can ne'er be long!

In flower of age you perish for a song!

In those moments of outing myself as a political being, I think of the protracted public battles Pope started and endured, and I ask myself whether writing is worth the



risk. Throughout the poem, however, Pope resists his friend's warning, arguing that his writing is not only worth the risk, it's how he calls attention to injustices that the law fails to address:

What? Arm'd for virtue when I point the pen,  
Brand the bold front of shameless, guilty men.

The point, then, is twofold: we can't avoid the fact that public, polemical writing always risks making enemies; but it's also an important way of drawing attention to injustice, of reaching with words those powerful enough to avoid answering to the public in any other way. Accordingly, it's important to me that students understand that writing—even obscure poems and novels from hundreds of years ago—was never just ornamental.

Public writing reinforces one of the most crucial lessons of a literature course, the importance of persuasive argument. When we evaluate and interpret novels or poems, we're practicing the same skills, and operating with the same inherent challenges, as in the act of political decision making. Like the "real world," literature has facts—etymologies, publication dates, historical events—that guide our understanding of what is being said. And like the "real world," literature has moral ambiguities: Is Gulliver an ethical character? Was Pope being ironic? In our daily lives, do we not ask—are we not forced to ask—"was President Obama behaving ethically?" "Was Governor LePage being ironic?" These kinds of questions continually inform our political choices and advocacy.

In the study of literature, as in civic life, then, disagreement is inevitable, even when we agree on the facts. In other words, an appeal to fact, or a

repudiation of an adversary's "bias" or "subjectivity"—both of which are common in contemporary political discourse—is simply not enough to render interpretation and persuasion obsolete. Though facts and scientific discoveries are indispensable in decision making, no test exists, or ever will, by which one fundamentally proves whether the death penalty is moral or immoral, whether a politician or a character behaved ethically, or whether the outcomes of war were worth its casualties. Such questions can be informed, but not conclusively answered, by fact.

Thus, when students learn how to analyze and write persuasive, evidence-based arguments about literature, they're also learning how to put opinion aside and address questions of value with rigor and integrity. Evaluating, understanding, and taking a position on questions with no easy answers—not just design problems or engineering problems, but problems of what to think and do—are all precisely what we've demanded of effective citizens even before those major liberal revolutions of the 18th century. Further, approaching questions of value and disagreement with care and measure in addition to rigor is important to teaching as well as public writing. The ability to entertain the negation of one's own position—the basis of critical thinking—is a powerful tool of persuasion; but it also facilitates the humility and the tolerance for uncertainty that teaching and learning require. When I try—sometimes fail—to model this kind of thinking and writing in a public capacity, I also aim to provide students with a sense of what it means and what it looks like to advocate rigorously for what we think is right, even when others (including students) disagree.

As students mature intellectually, they come to understand that, in a great, busy world, you usually have to persuade people to care about what you care about. This is especially the case if you care about people or issues relegated to society's margins. Though I choose to advocate in my public writing for the marginalized or less powerful—students maligned in the media, minorities campaigning for safety and inclusion, the liberal arts and sciences tradition, the humanities in this age of "disruption," and, of course, the 18th century—I want students to have the tools to do the same for whatever is most important to them. This, then, is the best way to be openly political and to promote intellectual diversity: to give students what they need to become your most formidable interlocutors if and when they're so inclined.

*Assistant Professor of English Aaron R. Hanlon is an expert in the field of 18th-century British literature and a regular contributor to the Atlantic, the Huffington Post, and other magazines and websites.*