

## **Outdated or Underrated?: Sister Miriam Joseph's *The Trivium* in Today's Writing Classroom**

*The author offers a reframing of a 1937 rhetoric textbook called *The Trivium* and proposes ways to use it as part of contemporary writing and rhetoric curricula.*

Upon immediate inspection, *The Trivium* by Sister Miriam Joseph (2002, originally published 1937) may be seen as an outdated writing textbook, belonging on a shadowy archival bookshelf; however, the textbook does not have to be written off as such. Despite being a writing textbook geared to 1930's English students from a Catholic private college, today's writing instructors may be able to mine *The Trivium* for history, complexity, and differentness, extracting benefits for post-FYC writing classrooms. *The Trivium* may provide the opportunity for writing instructors to break common presumptions that recent textbooks are always more effective, and "outdated" textbooks are less effective.

*The Trivium* is based on the medieval trivium, addressing three arts - grammar, logic, and rhetoric; yet, Joseph emphasizes two of the arts more so, that is, logic and rhetoric. Joseph provides a more authentically Aristotelian framework of the trivium than did the medieval scholars. Due to the importance of truth and universals in the Middle Ages, the medieval trivium stressed logic or dialectic much more than the other two areas of study; dialectic dominated the medieval trivium (De Wulf, 1956). Joseph, addressing the subject of communication and writing, emphasizes the more complete machinery of the trivium, equally stressing the dialectic as well as language. Joseph's instruction is therefore more authentic to Aristotelian instruction (Aristotle, 1991) than

the medieval academy instruction. Joseph rightly recognizes the Aristotelian understanding that logic and rhetoric are reliant on one another; she gives them both deserved attention, and highlights their relationship.

Therefore, *The Trivium* is surely better pedagogically suited for a writing classroom than the trivium of the Middle Ages; however, what about the implementation and implications of using such a textbook in today's second, third, and fourth year writing classrooms? Intuitively, it seems that using a 1937 writing textbook would be a lost cause. Teaching components such as logos, pathos, ethos are tough enough errands for today's writing instructors, let alone overwhelming undergraduate writers with a *system* of formal logic and language rules. Yet still, *The Trivium* possesses enough relevance and public interest to be republished by Paul Dry Books in 2002, the content mainly unchanged, albeit the inclusion of fresh commentaries which are informed by scholars in multiple fields. Since *The Trivium* formally explores the liberal arts, it is currently used in two main areas of education: classical education programs<sup>1</sup> and homeschooling programs. These programs seem

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<sup>1</sup> Rigorous classical high school education programs more so than universities. Classical Education universities such as Saint Thomas Aquinas College in California and New Saint Andrew's College in Indiana, use primary classical texts rather than textbooks.

to have created the contemporary demand for a newly published edition. In other words, *The Trivium* has not been republished for typical college composition classrooms; it is not like the *Norton Field Guide to Writing* or *The Longman Writer*, textbooks used at land-grant universities. It is not a recent textbook; it is a textbook from another era (referencing but another era which references but another era...) - and yet *The Trivium* still retains enough relevance in today's world to be republished in the twenty-first century. So questions remain to be explored: What if *The Trivium's* foreignness, rigidness, and systematic organization are studied in the undergraduate composition classroom? In other words, what if *The Trivium* is resurrected in some way? Can we implement this historical textbook artifact as a generative pedagogical perspective?

By examining *The Trivium* in this article, I will propose how and why rigid historical composition textbooks can be brought into the composition classroom, and why *The Trivium* serves as an effective artifact for students and teachers to use. First, I will address the history and motivation that conceived the 1930's trivium curriculum and Joseph's textbook. Looking at Joseph's 1937 resurrection of an "outdated" pedagogical framework provides insights into why historical hindsight can foster learning; it can also provide insights into why contemporary writing instructors should similarly resurrect a 1937 textbook in the twenty-first century. Next, I will address the benefits of the contemporarily-foreign content and language that is found in *The Trivium*. And finally, I will address how to use *The Trivium* in the classroom, that is, how to complicate the single-writing-textbook-approach with multiple textbooks, including historical composition textbooks, e.g. *The Trivium*. The overall vantage inevitably touches upon the role of history and multiplicity in the writing classroom.

### ***The Trivium* at St. Mary's College**

The 1930's creation and use of *The Trivium* can provide insights into using "outdated" writing and rhetoric approaches in the classroom. As can be shown, it took some justification for Sister Joseph and her colleagues to implement a trivium-based curriculum; yet the trivium was eventually embraced, a textbook resulted, and a balance of history and pragmatism was reached in the English/writing classroom. This context is important to ponder. Joseph's motivations can inform the reasons that *The Trivium* can be used today.

Sister Miriam Joseph Ruah (1898-1982), earned her Ph. D. from Columbia University, became a Sister of the Holy Cross, and taught English at St. Mary's College in South Bend, Illinois from 1931 to 1961 (Joseph, 2002). Sister Miriam Joseph headed the English department at St. Mary's College in 1935, the year when her colleague, friend, and president of the college, Sister M. Madeleva Wolff (1887-1964) announced that she was "wildly ambitious to recall peripatetic, trivium, and quadrivium curricula" in order to bring St. Mary's College beyond "standardized regulations, and the uninteresting pale" (Mandell, 1997, p. 150). Since Madeleva was highly educated in the workings of the medieval university, she felt that her education could inform such a pivotal vision. Madeleva also arranged seminars of intellectuals including Robert Hutchins (the president of the University of Chicago) and Mortimer Adler, who was an associate professor at University of Chicago at that time. From these seminars, it became evident to all involved that the medieval organization of the liberal arts would both benefit the university and the students. Madeleva then assigned Sister Miriam Joseph to adapt the medieval curricula to their current context and time. Sister Miriam Joseph, Adler, and Madeleva spent five weeks creating a course in which all incoming freshmen students at St. Mary's College would be required to take: "The Trivium in College Composition and Reading". This daily undergraduate course used literature, composition, and logic to inform the basic core

of student education. Sister Miriam Joseph wrote the textbook for the curriculum in 1937, despite that it was Madeleva's idea and motivation. Madeleva gladly gave Sister Miriam Joseph credit and the control of the trivium curricula which remained a core component of St. Mary's College for 25 years thereafter (Mandell, 1997).

Sister Miriam Joseph was not merely riding on the coattails of her prolific colleague; Joseph was an academic of her volition: an organized scholar who recognized the benefit of being informed by history. Therefore, writing *The Trivium* textbook, that is, a textbook with a distinctively retrospective view of writing, was a perfect extension of her interests and scholarship. For instance, Joseph's (1966) most famous scholastic contribution to literary studies, *Shakespeare's Use of the Arts of Language*, displays (in most precise organized form) the elements of argumentation, invention, grammar, pathos, and ethos within Shakespeare's works via hundreds of textual illustrations. In this book, she also disseminates a general composition theory behind Shakespeare's work and times (pp. 3-40). But although Joseph found past literary works to be interesting and engaging in a retrospective way, she also found the future of writing (writing as activity, i.e. composition) to be equally important: that is, the *teaching* of language and composition. From her writings, it seems that Joseph was certainly a teacher before a scholar; she always kept in mind the student. This dedication to teaching demonstrates how she uses historical perspectives and uses of writing/language to better inform her pedagogy. In one of her articles published in *College English* in 1942, "Why Study Old English?", Sister Joseph weaves the past, present, and future in order to form a rich teaching relevance – in other words, she demonstrates the usefulness of past content and past approaches when teaching present day writing and reading. In her article, after illustrating examples of Old English and providing a comprehensive Old

English course design, she writes, "And so Old English becomes a live subject – one which gives added zest to the reading of later literature and even of modern magazines, one which is related to everyday talk" (p. 567). Joseph sees history as "live" and filled with "zest"; she sees history as informing the present and the everyday. This is something to keep in mind while navigating through *The Trivium* as a textbook. Although "everyday talk" may not be explicit within the sophisticated examples and illustrations within *The Trivium* itself, Joseph was aware of the connection between "everyday talk" and densely cerebral literature and philosophy. Sister Miriam Joseph does not resurrect history in order to obscure English; rather she resurrects history to clarify the present, empower the student, and provide new perspectives via the old.

Therefore, the motivations of twenty-first century composition pedagogy align more directly than we may immediately assume. Besides the moderation of history and pragmatism within the writing classroom, many of today's composition teachers look for ways to add "zest", "liven" readings and activities, and move beyond mere "standardized regulations". Joseph and her supporting cast felt the same way in the 1930's. These same motivations can fuel the possibility of *The Trivium* in the twenty-first century writing classroom.

### ***The Trivium* and Multiple Textbooks**

As already mentioned, adopting the trivium into St. Mary's core curriculum was a new approach for that time period. Grammar, rhetoric, and logic were familiar territories in writing textbooks of the times; however, the trivium's highly structured and rigorously focused approaches in these three areas seemed quite different. Explicitly pointing back to Aristotelian principles as an explicit structure of knowledge promised a route of pedagogical exploration that differed from the typical textbook of the Joseph's era. It is important to examine the instructional display within the *The Trivium* to unpack this

pedagogical difference and advantageously use it in the classroom.

Despite the shared content of *The Trivium* with other handbooks and textbooks of the time, *The Trivium* enforces the importance of a writer who commands *past* writerly notions and techniques, and commands strict logical faculties. This is illustrated in *The Trivium* by a wide array of literary examples such as passages from Milton, Shakespeare, and the Bible, as well as the repeated references to Aristotle and Aquinas. Literary studies dominated the early twentieth century writing classroom, therefore, it is natural that Sister Joseph uses these literary/philosophical figures as separate illustrations throughout the textbook; but she also incorporates the authority of these figures into her own instruction as can be seen in this use of John Milton:

The psychological dimension of words is especially affected by their combinations. Some combinations, particularly of adjectives and nouns and of nouns and verbs, are "just right," for example the following combinations in Milton : "dappled dawn", "checkered shade", "leaden-stepping hours", "disproportioned sin jarred against nature's chime". It is fitting to speak of azure light or the azure sky or an azure evening gown, but not of an azure apron because *azure* and *apron* clash in the psychological dimension. (p. 32)

This example shows that Sister Joseph uses literary models to illustrate her point, but her language suggests that literary imitation is the only option; that is, Joseph seems to be communicating, "Milton uses combination in this way, the right way, therefore you should as well". Moreover, I would be remiss not to point out the use of "is" in Sister Joseph's instructional language ("The psychological dimension of words is especially affected by their combinations" / "It is fitting to speak of azure light..." [emphasis mine] ), thus implying a rigid objective point of view. Consequently, the arrow

seems to be explicitly and inflexibly pointing backward to the past. Historical perspectives, figures, and examples dominate Joseph's message about how writers need to write. This diversity of perspectives can be seen as a rich component to the textbook; however, as demonstrated by the "correctness" in the Milton quote, such models can interfere with a writer's content or style. For instance, perhaps *The Trivium* discourages a poetic student from using "azure sky" in a way that both rolls off of the tongue and captures an exquisite mental picture. When mixed with "correctness", this retrospection seems to dangerously restrict a writer's invention process. But is this enough reason to not use *The Trivium*? Should *The Trivium* be abandoned wholesale?

Despite the foreignness and danger of Joseph's approach, retrospection has not been totally erased from modern day writing textbooks. Today, there are retrospection-based writing textbooks focused more on the rhetorical angle – and these are republished in several editions. One example is the *Ancient Rhetoric for Contemporary Students* textbook written by Crowley and Hawhee (2009) which is currently in its fourth edition.<sup>2</sup> Similar to *The Trivium*, the textbook hearkens back to classical rhetoric and uses a number of literary examples from Shakespeare, Milton, and Aristotle; however, as this textbook's title suggests, the emphasis is not solely reliant on the past. Crowley and Hawhee adapt to contemporary students. Among the rhetorical examples from Shakespeare, Milton, and Aristotle, are rhetorical examples from Justice Clarence Thomas, Ted Nugent, and National Public Radio. Current everyday communication is connected to the past; the past is made relevant to the present. Furthermore, to

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<sup>2</sup> Despite the title, *Ancient Rhetoric for Contemporary Students*, which may imply that the textbook is strictly focused on rhetoric rather than composition, Crowley and Hawhee have proclaimed that writing/composition is the "most important pedagogical feature" of their textbook (p. xiv). They have crafted the textbook to foster active composition and writing practice.

combat such an objective point of view as seen in *The Trivium, Ancient Rhetoric* presents canonical literary figures very differently; after a passage from Milton's "Il Penseroso", Crowley and Hawhee write, "Once again, Milton's performance suggest that arguments can be found to attack or defend anything or anybody, depending on the situation" (p. 192). Instead of Milton's writing being depicted as the ideal, Milton's writing is depicted as a *possibly* effective model that is contextually adaptable.

How might this contrast between these two related textbooks be useful? It can provide a commentary about how historically different writing instruction is negotiated within textbooks. A more consummate foreignness is found with *The Trivium* today. In today's context, Sister Joseph's *The Trivium* has more in common with Madeleva's implementation of trivium curriculum in the 1930s, than the contemporary-throwback approach of Crowley and Hawhee. Crowley and Hawhee adapt to the present period and context; Sister Joseph cannot adapt to the present period and context because her text is a rigid historical artifact. *The Trivium's* reliance on logic, absolute claims, and formalism seems to directly oppose the relativisms and flexibilities sown in *Ancient Rhetoric for Contemporary Students*; *The Trivium's* absolutism seems to squash individuated differences celebrated in more recent post-process composition studies. Even before the post-process movement blossomed into fruition in the 1990's, the process composition movement combated such hindsight-based absolutism. As the researchers Rohman and Wlecke explain in the influential yet dusty 1964 study, "Pre-Writing: The Construction and Application of Models for Concept Formulation in Writing",

Typically such [traditional] approaches stress only the virtues of hindsight – the 'rhetoric of the finished word' – without giving attention to the primary necessity of insight – the stage of discovery in shaping experience into perspective. To

be complete, a theory must assume that the mind is not simply a mirror; it is in addition a lamp. (p. 20)

Based on this laudable mission of discovery that is still posited today in writing classrooms, *The Trivium*, a textbook based on hindsight, does not seem to be capable of modern day pedagogical traction. On the surface, *The Trivium* certainly appears to be geared toward a strictly mind-as-mirror model: that is, the student learns how to write from *The Trivium* and the student replicates these techniques in their writing. On the surface, there appears to be a one-to-one, rinse-and-repeat correspondence.

But what about beneath the surface? Can *The Trivium* be reconciled with the statement made by Rohman and Wlecke? Is *The Trivium* purely hindsight captured in a writing textbook, or can it be used as a "lamp"? It seems to me that *The Trivium's* content certainly advocates mind-as-mirror based writing pedagogy – but this is not the only dimension of this textbook. After all, cannot a mirror reflect the already existing light (i.e. mind-as-lamp) in order to increase light radiated? But how exactly? Perhaps by inviting plurality in the classroom: teaching *The Trivium* beside other more contemporary textbooks – and making sure that some of the additional texts oppose *The Trivium's* point of view. For instance, a teacher can use *The Trivium* alongside Lunsford and Ruskiewicz's (2009) notable textbook, *Everything's an Argument* and/or alongside [Graff](#), Birkenstein, and Durst's (2011) *They Say, I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*: textbooks that use contemporary examples and celebrate more rhetorical and logical flexibilities.

This deliberate undercutting pushes students to understand the multiplicity of perspectives; while it simultaneously pushes teachers to embrace multiplicity and flexibility. And this invitation for complexity is a notion that is taken up in more recent composition studies. For instance, in her article, "Dusting Off

Instructor's Manuals: The Teachers and the Practices They Assume", Nedra Reynolds (1995) critiques textbooks, writing, "IMs are understandably contradictory given the nature of our rapidly-evolving field, but publishers might do more to represent the complexity of teacher, students, and classroom practices, rather than attempting to simplify instruction" (p. 21). I think harnessing multiple differing textbooks is one way to "represent the complexity" in a fashion that combats against publisher's poor attempts to diversify – in a way that embraces complexity in a Foucauldian fashion. And as Foucault (1972) articulates about any "book" and therefore any textbook included: "The book is not simply the object that one holds in one's hands; [...] its unity is variable and relative. As soon as one questions that unity, it loses its self-evidence; it indicates itself, constructs itself, only on the basis of a complex field of discourse" (p. 23). This questioning and challenging is the goal of using several writing textbooks - as well as the goal of this article. *The Trivium* can be accepted, questioned, and embraced as a means to generatively increase the complexity of discourse in a way endorsed by Foucauldian archaeology: that is, not trying "to repeat what has been said by reaching it in its very identity...It [archaeology] is nothing more than rewriting: that is, in the preserved form of exteriority, a regulated transformation of what has already been written. It is not a return to the innermost secret of the origin; it is the systematic description of a discourse-object" (Foucault, 1972, pp. 139-140). Therefore, using *The Trivium* alongside other textbook ensures "rewriting", "transformation", and discourse in way that stresses rhetorical (re)invention rather than textual rigidity.

### Problems with *The Trivium*

It seems that *The Trivium*'s "preserved form of exteriority" may be problematic for writing departments. *The Trivium* seems to play right into the hands of textbook critics such as Kathleen Welch (1987) who say that textbooks

can decontextualize and show students that language is "banal, boring, and not central to anyone's life" (p. 279). To use the "outdated" *The Trivium* in today's composition classroom, we do not have to fight Welch in her claim but rather enthusiastically nod and proclaim "Exactly!" *The Trivium* is a textbook that rejoices in the archaic – and therein is its purpose. If taught alongside other more "relevant" textbooks, *The Trivium* provides difference, different perspectives into writing, rhetoric, and language: an "outdated" perspective that is mostly ignored in this postmodern age because we "know better". Another way to think about this "outdated" perspective within postmodernity is in terms of undemocratic texts within a democracy. *The Trivium* can be viewed as an undemocratic text: uncompromising and singular with a unidirectional view of language and composition. Yet as Nathan Crick (2009) tells us about the value of seemingly undemocratic texts within a democratic culture: "a discourse that nominally might reject everything democratic may, in its actual performance, represent the height of democratic possibility" (p. 373). This viewpoint does not stand alone. Depalma, Ringer, and Webber (2008) promote a similar view in their article, "(Re)Charting the Discourses of Faith and Politics, or Rhetoric and Democracy in the Burkean Barnyard": an article that addresses the anarchic nature of democracy as promoted by Kenneth Burke. The authors seem to indicate that Burke would agree with Crick's viewpoint: extreme non-deliberative views belong in democracy if a democracy is to be truly an arena of freedom and choice. In sum, by using *The Trivium* alongside other textbooks, we can climb to a zenith of "democratic possibly" via a performance of difference like Crick suggests; however, this climb is far from arduous. Obstacles will accompany the journey.

The most obvious obstacle is the inaccessibility of *The Trivium*'s content. For the most part, in today's composition classroom, classical rhetoric and formal logic are glossed

over at best. These areas are seemingly “not central to anyone’s life”; today, writing can be taught without referring to classical rhetoric and formal logic; and many times it is, especially in FYC classrooms. Yet there are attempts, such as the earlier mentioned Crowley and Hawhee textbook: a textbook that uses classical rhetoric in a way that ostensibly relates to the everyday lives of contemporary students. Despite these authors’ mission to resurrect the past in a way akin to the spirit of *The Trivium*, there is still a major absence, an absence of a key ingredient that flavors *The Trivium*: formal logic. *The Trivium* devotes almost half of the textbook (pp. 109-224) to formal logic including chapter headings such as “Relations of Simple Propositions” and “Relations of Hypothetical and Disjunctive Propositions”, an extensive discussion of syllogisms, and meaty section on Latinate fallacies: all discussions illustrated by literary examples, formal notations, and Venn diagrams. It is no surprise that Crowley and Hawhee decided to avoid a similar approach to logic. Their section on logic ignores Latinate fallacies, logical notations, and Venn diagrams; furthermore, their section occupies a mere 36 pages (pp. 158-194), less than 8% of the textbook. Formal logic does not seem to be a primary concern in *Ancient Rhetoric for Contemporary Students*.

From this example, it seems clear that contemporary emphasis on formal logic has waned. As pointed out in Debra Hawhee’s (1999) “The History of Composition and the Harbace College Handbook”, a “critic C” of the 1966 Harbace Handbook criticizes the handbook’s insistence on the gregarious instruction of logic stating, “Any discussion of formal logic would of necessity have to be so short as to be almost worthless. Furthermore, most English instructors are not qualified to teach the subject; it should be left to philosophy departments” (p. 508). Hawhee’s “critic C” provides a fair perspective that I am sure represents the way that many writing departments would react to the logic-saturated

*The Trivium*; even if *The Trivium* was taught alongside several other more modern-day writing textbooks, these objections would surely arise and rightfully so. *The Trivium* may immediately seem more fitting in a philosophy or logic classroom where instructors may be more qualified to teach it.

Diversifying writing instruction using logic is a difficult mission to assume. Still, it seems a bit rash to ignore this dialectic dimension of writing, especially when teaching argumentative / position papers in the classroom. Like Aristotle (1991) advocates in his *On Rhetoric*, Joseph instructs students about the cooperation of rhetoric/language and dialectic/logic within her textbook. In Joseph’s (2002) introduction to *The Trivium*, she states “Just as rhetoric is the master art of the trivium, so logic is the art of arts because it directs the very act of reason, which directs all other human acts to their proper end through the means it determines” (p. 10). According to Joseph, rhetoric concerns effective communication to audiences, and logic concerns the conformity of thought with reality. Both components are emphasized in this textbook: an approach that is not new to the history of rhetoric and thought, however, such revitalization is certainly new and diverse for today’s writing classroom that largely ignores logic.

Multiple perspectives (Joseph’s emphasis on logic included) can be embraced instead of shunned or delegated to other disciplines. Some textbooks have tried to diversify their approaches within a single textbook, but although such diversity and mutability can be seen as unique and more marketable, the same variety and complexity may still “confuse new teachers” (Reynolds, 1995, p. 17). This is a point worth considering. Similarly, if an inexperienced composition teacher increases pedagogical diversity by choosing *several* textbooks to teach (one perhaps being *The Trivium*) they may have a difficult time picking the multiple textbooks as well as teaching them. As we know from

standing wide-eyed before the plethora of textbooks offered by publishers at the CCCC book fair, picking a textbook can be overwhelming, let alone picking several *purposely diverse* textbooks. Overall, an instructor that is familiar with the field and the history of textbooks would be better suited to this pedagogical approach. I am sure that resources can be made available to these inexperienced teachers (e.g. textbook lists, a website with sample textbook pages, etc.); however, the inexperienced writing teacher can certainly complicate the multiple writing textbook approach – especially when more complex textbooks are used. Perhaps a middle ground can be reached. Instead of using several full textbooks in the classroom, a teacher can compile a course packet of diverse composition textbooks and teach a composition class via a course packet: a solution that allows teachers to be comfortable with the complexity of multiple textbooks, and a way to keep costs down for students.

### Final Thoughts

Sister Miriam Joseph's *The Trivium* is a 1937 implementation of Aristotelian writing curriculum; if used today, *The Trivium* would be a present-day repurposing of the 1937 historical curriculum. *The Trivium* possesses notable historical layers of writing and language instruction. As explored in this article, we can see that these ostensible layers may be used in productive ways. Therefore, the larger question behind this dialogue with *The Trivium* seems to be: how much of a place does history have within the writing classroom? Hopefully, by examining the uses of *The Trivium*, some light has been shed on this question that may redeem "outdated" textbooks such as *The Trivium*, older rhetorically orientated textbooks, and Aristotelian curriculum in the writing classroom. In the Foucauldian sense, history constructs the present; history generatively complicates the present. And it is *The Trivium*'s outsider status as a historically orientated and framed textbook

that can generate complication, moving students and teachers beyond "standardized regulations, and the uninteresting pale" much like Sister Madeleva intended.

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*Hurley is a writing instructor and Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Writing & Rhetoric at the University of Rhode Island; email ghurleyuri@gmail.com.*

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