

## Playing the Author: Creative Analysis in Classical Literature Courses

Many instructors of Classical drama assign performative projects that ask students to adapt a scene from a play into a modern context. Such projects are successful both because they are engaging and because they require a nuanced understanding of the text. In this paper, I argue that creative assignments in which students “play the author” – that is, write on a topic of their choice *in the style/genre* of a particular ancient author - are successful in non-performative contexts, as well, as they require students to practice traditional analytical skills. I know I am by no means unique in my approach, and that my argument may seem to lack insight to instructors who already utilize creative assignments. However, I hope to help instructors who wish to start incorporating such projects into their curriculum; therefore, I also describe some of the creative assignments I have implemented and present one student’s successful contribution as a case study.

Creative approaches to academic subjects are by no means new. As Baer and Garrett put it, “often the best way to teach content knowledge is to get students to think about it in some way – to become actively engaged with the content to be learned” (2017: 49). Yet, with some exceptions (Cummins 2009), college literature courses seem to favor traditional analytical essays, perhaps due to fear that creative assignments are too “easy” and a preference for students to develop skill in making arguments supported by textual evidence (Crimmel 1996). In reality, “playing the author” assignments require *both* creativity *and* traditional analysis. If a student is asked to write a Herodotean historical account, for example, she must consider the following: what is Herodotus’ purpose? How are his histories structured? How does he handle his sources? What stylistic and/or rhetorical devices are used? Students must use specific passages from the text to answer these questions; then, they must replicate this process to create their own

Herodotean historical account. “Playing the author,” though it seems like a fun assignment, is also an analytical project.

I have increasingly used such assignments in my lower-division literature courses, since they not only engage the students but also require them to understand and apply concepts such as genre, tone, structure, and style. These assignments also solve a problem with traditional essays: that is, some students have never written an analytical essay and therefore benefit from *modeling* a readily-accessible text rather than finding extrinsic methods of analysis. One assignment I use asks students to write a traditional myth *in the style of* the Homeric hymns. Thus, students must pay attention to (among other things) the hymns’ tone, narrative structure, and epithets. Another assignment asks students to write a historical account of a modern event in the style of Herodotus, without using modern methods of research like the internet or textbooks. Students gain an appreciation of what it means to write a history without easy access to multiple sources, while imitating Herodotus’ organization, style, characterization, etc.

My most successful assignment, however, was for a survey of Latin literature in translation. In this course, which was arranged by genre, students “played the author” by writing a Plautine scene, a Ciceronian speech, the prologue and outline of a Vergilian epic, or a Juvenalian satire. The *subject matter* of their work, however, was their choice. In addition, they wrote a traditional analytical paper in which they explained *how* their adaptation drew on the ancient author’s work, comparing passages from their own text to passages from the ancient text and thus arguing from evidence in a systematic way. The students greatly enjoyed the assignment, and they not only adapted the ancient genre to a modern context successfully but also demonstrated that they were able to analyze their own work *and* the works of ancient authors. One of the best submissions I received, which I hope to share at the CAMWS meeting,

was a Ciceronian defense of the Kardashians, along with an excellent analysis of what made this defense “Ciceronian.” The student revealed an understanding of Cicero’s rhetoric, argumentation, and specific stylistic devices, thereby convincing me that “playing the author” – especially when coupled with a scholarly analysis – is a useful pedagogical device.

### Works Cited

- Baer, John and Garrett, Tracey. 2017. “Accountability, the Common Core, and Creativity,” in *Nurturing Creativity in the Classroom* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition), edd. Ronald A. Beghetto and James C. Kaufman. Cambridge University Press.
- Crimmel, Hal. 1996. “Prudes and Conservatives; or, Everyone Does It But Literature Teachers: Creative Writing Assignments,” by Hal Crimmel. Presented at the Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (47th, Milwaukee, WI, March 27-30).
- Cummins, Amy. 2009. “Tell Me a Story: Effective Use of Creative Writing Assignments in College Literature Courses,” in *Currents in Teaching and Learning*, Vol. 1 No. 2.