
As a long-time, closet reader of fairy tales with a secret sympathy for magic, I approached this book with great anticipation. I found a well-researched and interesting introduction to important historical views on the links between magic, rhetoric, and composition. However, I also found myself frustrated by the text’s failure to address several of the objections to “magic thinking” that Covino himself raises in the introduction.

To begin with, Covino inadequately articulates his relationship to other scholarly treatments of magic and composition. In his introductory chapter, Covino cites scholars like Janet Emig, Richard Young, Jacqueline de Romilly, Paolo Freire, and W. Ross Winterowd, who argue that the Romantic tradition of “magic thinking” in writing disempowers students by mystifying the writing process and preventing what Freire calls “critical consciousness.” These theorists oppose “magic thinking” and emphasize the power of writing and literacy to transform thinking and society. Persuaded by Covino’s own citations of these scholars that magic does not belong in the composition class, I was then surprised to find that Covino advocates magic while claiming the same transformative project. Covino argues that because “magic thinking” has such a long historical relationship with heterogeneity, indeterminacy, multi-voicedness, etc., retaining its vocabulary and concepts can contribute to our modern project of increasing critical literacy and intellectual freedom. But in the process of claiming common cause with composition theorists like de Romilly and Freire, he glosses over the fact that their solution is to reject “magic thinking” while his is to embrace it.

His apparent solution to this contradiction is to define two categories of magic. For Covino, generative magic “seeks novelty and the elaboration of competing ‘decrees’” and it always works against “contemporary cultural pieties” (94). Arresting magic is coercive and authoritarian, a stultifying substitute for thought or action. Apparently Emig, Freire, de Romilly, and others object to what Covino would call “arresting” magic, and Covino is claiming that generative magic is the only effective answer to this arresting force. Unfortunately, Covino does not explicitly articulate this bridge between their work and his. Furthermore, for his distinction between these magics to be helpful in the composition classroom, we need to know more about how we could incorporate generative magic in our pedagogy while excluding all arresting magic.

Second, although Covino wants “to dispel the opposition of magic and science,” he again raises concerns that he fails to address. Early
scientists justified their rejection of magic by arguing that "magic" claimed to affect material reality while actually affecting only human belief. Covino celebrates magic's role in shaping belief while ignoring its generally misleading claims for effecting physical change. Historically, the magic worldview saw intelligences everywhere, making discourse "at once invocative, value-laden, interactive, and indeterminate,...an exploratory act,[and] a range of appeals to the mysterious" (59). On the other hand, Covino claims that science—because it did not see the universe in terms of myriad, volitional intelligences—fostered "determinate language" without ambiguity or animation. Covino's terms clearly link magic thinking with current theoretical preferences for indeterminacy and multiplicity while sidestepping the question of whether or not seeing rocks and trees as intelligent beings is empowering or disempowering for would-be rhetors. Thus, while Covino does demonstrate persuasively that magic still has effects in our society (e.g., the "arresting" magic of psychics, tabloids, and psychoanalysts), he does not really address the science/magic opposition or adequately explain how "generative" magic can be an effective tool for social transformation.

In Chapter One, Covino traces interesting similarities between rhetoric and magic, arguing that both are the achievement of "real" effects on individuals and society through words and other symbolic practices, and that both require close attention to specific, constantly changing circumstances. However, he uses these similarities to redefine all magic as rhetoric and all rhetoric as magic, an equation which he recognizes as a "sleight-of-definition" but justifies on the basis of their historical "real commonality" (29).

He demonstrates this historical commonality more fully in Chapter Two, which traces the history of "phantasy," his term for the imagination as it relates to composition. Covino usefully extends de Romilly's discussion of magic and rhetoric in ancient Greece to include materials from the early modern period, through the nineteenth century, and into the tabloids of today. This history helps us see previous links between rhetoric and magic and the role of "phantasy" in the production of discourse. Clearly, many Renaissance scholars conceived of magic in rhetorical terms, and clearly magic discourse has shaped and does shape belief (although again Covino conveniently ignores Renaissance beliefs that it shaped the physical world as well).

Much of Covino's research is fascinating, and his claim that magic can help us escape the "logical binaries" of Western thought and renew our awareness of contingencies and associative links is definitely appealing. Covino argues that "magic" may be a useful term for the role that imagination, intuition, and instinct play in writing. For this term to be useful, however, he needs to demonstrate more fully how its use would facilitate
our incorporation of imagination in our writing or pedagogy—a practical question he never addresses.

Chapter Three documents the replacement of "phantasy" by Enlightenment rationalism. In this chapter, Covino cleverly connects modern opponents of magic to the now-discredited Enlightenment faith in "truth" and "reason." By the end of this chapter, magic has become firmly associated with disruptive and liberatory rhetoric, and its opponents—both ancient and modern—are portrayed as authoritarian dogmatists working to uphold the status quo.

In Chapter Four, Covino uses Adorno's work on the discourse of astrology to analyze the rhetoric of horoscope columns. He demonstrates that this popular form of "arresting" magic combines a surface emphasis on personal success and individualism with advice that is almost always geared toward increasing conformity and cooperation.

Chapter Five traces the exuberant resurgence of magic practices and philosophies during the last twenty years as astrology, witchcraft, and paganism have become increasingly popular and commercially successful. Since such forms of magic and magic thinking seem to be here to stay, Covino suggests that we use generative magic to combat these arresting forms. The implication is that only "good" magic can effectively fight "bad" magic.

Covino does discuss a few scholars who advocate rhetorical play or other non-magical avenues to critical literacy. For example, Gregory Clark recommends dialectical exploration and negotiation as a means of resisting coercive, authoritarian limits on thought and action and as a way to find practical yet recognized contingent solutions for community problems, without employing the magical vocabulary Covino advocates. Like Freire, who argues that we should teach critical thinking in order to disrupt "magic consciousness," Clark wants to use negotiation and rhetorical analysis to expose the world as transformable rather than fixed. Covino apparently feels that all transformative dialogue is really a form of magic, and he criticizes Clark's method because it leads to "practical and generally agreeable solutions" rather than an "oracular voice of absolute refusal" (113). Yet when Covino does want to find a way for "generative magic language" to be "socially engaged" rather than "socially estranged," he finds all attempts to engage in such practice inadequate. Significantly, none of the witches, philosophers, or cultural critics that he discusses manages to meet his standard, leaving us with a potentially attractive goal but without much direction.

Covino is trying to contribute to a crucial project: helping our students (and others) to develop critical or generative literacy, or the ability to recognize and respond to complexity and ambiguity in the world around us. And I agree with Covino that we are bombarded today
by a variety of "arresting" magics—in advertising, government, some public education, and elsewhere. Covino argues, however, that resistance to arresting magic "requires phantasy" (106). Early in his text, he assures us that we all "prefer a 'magic rhetoric' if this means preferring a fertile, dynamic and fluctuant imagination to its opposite" (16). While we probably all do prefer a dynamic to a stagnant imagination, in the end Covino begs the question of whether or not this is what preferring magic means. For some, the generative magic that Covino suggests may be an effective response to this bombardment. More power to such "magi-rhetors"! Nevertheless, Covino does not persuade me that we must all reconceive rhetorical analysis and dialogical social activism in magical terms in order to be effective.

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