Toward A New Content for Writing Courses:
Literary Forgery, Plagiarism, and
the Production of Belief

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More than a decade and a half ago, Susan Miller argued in *Textual Carnivals* that, in focusing its disciplinary research questions on process, composition has diverted attention away from the politics that contribute to a text’s social and political reception and consequences. In shaping a disciplinary research agenda around the notion that anyone can write, composition has rendered unnecessary discussions of the political forces that designate some writers “important” and others not. Miller writes,

“Good” writing, as composition can most authoritatively define it, is the result of established cultural privileging mechanisms, not of pure “taste.” The field might vividly demonstrate, in practice and in theory, that a mixture of ideas, timing, entitlements, and luck have designated some rather than others as important writers/thinkers. The field’s most productive methods of evaluation might also judge writing by situational rather than universal standards and thus insist on the arbitrariness of evaluations and their relativity to particular power structures. (187)

Miller goes on to argue that composition’s refusal to engage students in the textual politics of writing represents a larger disciplinary refusal to consider important questions of legitimacy: who writes, who gets published, who gets read, who you have to know in order to be published, and, perhaps most significantly, the relative arbitrariness of it all. Composition’s
disciplinary emphasis on a codifiable writing process that can be observed, studied, and taught has pushed to the margins questions of legitimacy. The field, after all, has been described by one of its most vocal supporters of social theory as “the institutionally supported desire to organize and evaluate the writing of unauthorized writers, to control writing in practice, and to define it as an object of professional scrutiny” (Bartholomae 327). If the field is defined, at least in part, by the study of unauthorized writing, and one of our disciplinary goals is to facilitate the production of authorized writing, it makes sense to focus our pedagogical energy on understanding what makes important writing important. There is a process at work in the cultural legitimation of texts, but the predominant versions of process in composition studies has emphasized how to write to the near exclusion of factors outside the text that contribute to belief in the value of the text.

But recent attempts to understand plagiarism as more than an immoral transgression on the part of the student (Howard; Price; Ritter; Valentine) and to distinguish among different kinds of plagiarism have created an exigence for returning to questions of legitimacy and belief. For instance, Rebecca Moore Howard argues that “patchwriting,” which she defines as “copying from a source text and then deleting some words, altering grammatical structures, or plugging in one synonym for another,” is a “primary means of understanding difficult texts, of expanding one’s lexical, stylistic, and conceptual repertoires, of finding and trying out new voices in which to speak” (Standing vxii). We all patchwrite, Howard argues. The difference between our patchwriting and a student’s patchwriting is often our ability to erase the “trail of textual collaboration” (Standing 7). What contributes to the field’s belief in the value of a published scholarly text is the very fact that it is a published scholarly text that has been peer-reviewed and selected for publication by legitimate scholars in our field of disciplinary expertise. In other words, the cultural capital that a published text carries contributes in large part to our belief in its value. Student texts carry relatively little cultural capital; such texts must produce belief in readers without the benefit of preestablished legitimizing mechanisms except insofar as the instructor alone is a legitimizing mechanism. More to the point, student texts must produce belief in the context of what Bartholomae calls “a discourse of error that
makes it impossible to praise the student paper that is disordered and disorderly” (331).

It is not the aim of this essay to argue for the legitimacy of student texts as texts; this important work has been and continues to be accomplished by some of the field’s most important thinkers. Instead, we want to consider the specific ways that renewed disciplinary attention to the production of belief in the value of a text can extend and complicate our understanding of writing as a complex matrix of composing choices. We believe that in order to expand our understanding of the work we do with texts, we must legitimate the work of both literary forgery and plagiarism as forms of writing. At the heart of both forgery and plagiarism is the concept of belief. When a writer forges a work, he or she is working to persuade readers that the text is an authentic representation of someone else’s work. When a writer plagiarizes, he or she is working to persuade readers that the text is an authentic representation of his or her own work. Both processes are, more so than straightforward writing, consciously dependent on the production of belief. It is precisely when the plagiarized text is revealed as a plagiarized text or a forged text is revealed as a forged text that the beliefs on which readers based their evaluations become exposed. Plagiarism and forgery uniquely accentuate the complex factors outside a text that contribute to a text’s legitimacy. Such accentuation holds significant implications for our scholarly and pedagogical approaches both to culturally legitimate texts and to what we have come to consider illegitimate texts.

In what follows, we argue that literary forgery and whole-text plagiarism as instances of writing dependent on the production of belief rather than as instances of anti-writing can help us understand the processes by which a text is authorized. We begin with a consideration of Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic capital, or belief in the value of the work, to establish the notion that textual legitimacy is dependent not only on the text itself but on factors outside the text. Following this, we provide an extended analysis of a representative case of literary forgery to demonstrate that an act of writing that has been dismissed for its immorality can teach writing specialists a great deal about the production of belief. We then apply those principles to the little-studied phenomenon of whole-text plagiarism in an effort to illustrate that belief in the value
of student texts is dependent on factors outside the text, factors that cannot be accounted for by plagiarism-detection services such as Turnitin.com. Finally, following John Trimbur’s (“Changing”) and Amy Robillard’s observations that increasing interest in and development of writing studies majors and minors necessitates a new approach to writing as noun—as object of study—we argue that allowing our concept of writing to include composing activities such as plagiarism and forgery necessitates direct consideration of the politics of writing in both introductory and advanced composition and rhetoric courses. We don’t call for a wholesale revision of writing curricula but rather for introducing into these curricula an attention to forgery and plagiarism as a means of drawing out key issues central to the production of belief in writing.

Pierre Bourdieu and the Production of Belief

Our treatment of Bourdieu’s concepts here is necessarily brief; we extract from his theory of the field of cultural production concepts that are most directly relevant to our consideration of both forgery and plagiarism as writing processes dependent on the production of belief.

Most of us are familiar with Bourdieu’s concepts of economic capital and cultural capital. Economic capital is “immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights” (“Forms” 243). Cultural capital can be defined in the broadest sense as culture as a form of power. Cultural capital exists in three states: the embodied state of cultural capital is that which is acquired on and for the body, sometimes referred to as cultivation. The objectified state of cultural capital refers to those cultural objects that can be purchased immediately with economic capital—paintings, books, monuments, and so on. One can possess a material object of culture, but in order to be able to appreciate that material object, one must possess the appropriate embodied cultural capital; one must possess, in other words, “the means of ‘consuming’ a painting or using a machine” (247). Finally, the institutionalized state of cultural capital refers to academic qualifications and highlights the prestige of certain schools over others.
Bourdieu’s concept of the field of cultural production is premised on the unequal distribution of economic and cultural capital among various members of a field. The field of cultural production is not reducible to the individuals who contribute to the work of a product: the writer, the critics, the readers, the publishers, the editors, and so on. Instead, it might be understood as “the system of objective relations between these agents or institutions and as the site of the struggles for the monopoly of the power to consecrate, in which the value of the works of art and belief in that value are continuously generated” (*Field* 78). A field is a “universe of belief” (164).

In any field, legitimation is key, and legitimation depends to a great extent on the production of belief. The structure of the field is such that all agents and institutions battle within a “space of possibles” for those position-takings that will grant one the power to consecrate works and people as legitimate. In each field, there are positions designated as having the requisite amounts of symbolic capital to legitimize the work of others. When newcomers enter a field, struggle ensues over who has the right to legitimate whom.

So then, how is belief produced? Who produces belief in a work? In Miller’s terms, how are some writers and thinkers labeled “important” and others not? Bourdieu demonstrates that a cultural work exists “as such only by virtue of the (collective) belief which knows and acknowledges it as a work of art” (*Field* 35). The designation of an “important” cultural work is not simply a matter of producing a work and labeling it “art” or “literature.” Necessary to the production of a cultural work and the recognition of a cultural work as such is the production of the object’s symbolic capital, or belief in the value of the work.

Bourdieu argues that the study of cultural works has to take as its object “not only the material production but also the symbolic production of the work, i.e. the production of the value of the work or, which amounts to the same thing, of belief in the value of the work” (*Field* 37). To do so, Bourdieu writes, such a study has to consider not just the direct producers of the work (the artist, the writer) but also “the producers of the meaning and value of the work—critics, publishers, gallery directors and the whole set of agents whose combined efforts produce consumers capable of knowing and recognizing the work of art as such, in particular teachers.”
(37). Critics and teachers and all those who participate in the production of the value of a work do so by producing discourse about the work, which is, in Bourdieu’s words, “one of the conditions of production of the work” (35). Because not just anybody is in a position to contribute to the production of such value, each statement of value about a work contains “on the one hand, a recognition of the value of the work which occasions it, which is thus designated as a worthy object of legitimate discourse . . . and on the other hand an affirmation of its own legitimacy. All critics declare not only their judgement of the work but also their claim to the right to talk about and judge it” (35–36). Who claims the right to talk about and judge forged writing? Who claims the right to talk about and judge plagiarized writing? We will argue that composition and rhetoric specialists have claimed the right to produce discourse about plagiarized writing, but we have done so primarily in ways that ignore the concept of symbolic capital in favor of a discourse of immorality, transgression, and crime. Likewise, composition and rhetoric specialists have dismissed literary forgery as a kind of parasitic anti-writing, illegitimate and therefore irrelevant to an understanding of writing.

Forgery, Imitation, and Legitimacy

Historically, we have not considered literary forgery a species of writing. Rather, it has been viewed, once it has been identified for what it is, as a kind of parasitic anti-writing feeding off the legitimacy we have assigned to the writings of the author whose work is being forged. Ironically, as a species of writing, it is marked by the forger’s focused effort to make it believable and worthy of symbolic value by carefully emulating the work of a writer whose writing has already been authorized culturally. In Reforging Shakespeare, Jeffrey Kahan represents a literary forger as “someone who creates a work in an acknowledged style and then lies about its legitimate authorship. A literary forger is not parrot or a copyist. He creates anew but within preexisting stylistic parameters” (20). Our resistance to seeing forgery as writing also reflects a disposition to view it in moral terms. We add to our construction of it as parasitic a view that sees it as fundamentally immoral, a perspective prevalent at least since
the nineteenth century when Matthew Arnold and others argued for the moral function of literature. K.K. Ruthven contends that since the nineteenth century we have construed authorship itself in terms of moral and social responsibilities absent in forgery, which immediately disqualifies it as a form of authorship (44). Dismissing forgery as a species of writing allows us to avoid asking the questions of it that we would ask of writing we consider legitimate, to avoid seeing it as a network of writing choices that shares features endemic to acts of writing in general, whether or not they have been culturally sanctioned. In short, such a view deprives us and our students of the opportunity to examine from a unique perspective the relationship between writing and the production of belief.

The irony in all of this is heightened by the role that imitation, which shares with forgery an emphasis on writing that impersonates texts already assigned cultural value, has played in education over the centuries to develop students’ abilities in rhetoric. Ruthven argues that “imitatio [in classical rhetoric] nourished the production of texts which blur the distinction between emulation and forgery” (124). The pedagogical value of imitation derives from its potential for helping students incorporate into their own rhetorical repertoires the strategies that have authorized the work of writers who have preceded them and that, in turn, promise to authorize their work to the extent that they can replicate in their writing the patterns of discourse they imitate. George Rowe has noted that some Classical and Renaissance rhetoricians, particularly Seneca and Quintilian, take imitation beyond “imitation as copying” and stress the need for the developing rhetor to “transform [the] model in a manner suited to the imitator’s personality and situation” and even “to compete with and surpass a model rather than merely alter it” (13–14). With regard to Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic value, two points stand out. First, whatever the ultimate purposes and nature of any particular act of imitation, it begins with replicating writing that a culture has identified as something special. Second, even when imitation apparently goes beyond emulation, transformation and transcendence typically involve incorporating systems of established cultural values not present or at least not foregrounded in the models being emulated. As the writer transforms and transcends the model, the cultural authority that his or her writing accumulates will be a function of the writer’s ability to realize in the
writing patterns of discourse not present in the model being imitated but valued in the culture to which he or she addresses the writing. While imitation and forgery are joined by these two fundamental principles, it is ironic that imitation remains for many a valuable pedagogy while forgery is shunned as a kind of anti-writing completely irrelevant to the work of writing instruction.

Symptomatic of our inclination to dismiss forgery as a form of writing that can tell us something about the work of writing useful in a writing classroom has been our forensic approach to it. That is, identifying forgeries has often been represented as a kind of detective work in which a literary sleuth subjects the materials of writing—paper, ink, watermarks—to forensic analysis and based on this analysis determines once and for all whether the document is authentic. Examining the work of writing represented in the text of a forged document has been a problematic afterthought. Yet, it is precisely the analysis of this work that is essential to understanding the nature of the cultural authorization of written texts and that is of pedagogical value in writing instruction. This is not to say that forensics plays no part in the cultural process of authorization; rather, it is to say that the typically overlooked dimensions of forgery—the dimensions having to do with what the forger does as a writer—deserve careful attention in efforts to understand how belief develops in our assessment of written texts and to transfer this understanding to writing pedagogy.

Between the autumn of 1774 and the late spring of 1795, William Henry Ireland forged what have come to be called the Shakespeare Papers, a series of documents culminating with a complete play (Vortigern) that he represented as a “lost” Shakespeare manuscript purportedly found in a trunk of miscellaneous papers in Shakespeare’s handwriting. Ireland’s case offers a useful instance of literary forgery through which to examine the work of writing that forgery entails, including the work concerned with the cultural credibility of written texts. Ireland’s forgeries included legal papers, a profession of religious faith, a love letter, correspondence between Shakespeare and various business associates (including Queen Elizabeth), a purported original manuscript of King Lear and a fragment from Hamlet, the fragment of another play (Henry II), and various receipts and notes. Admittedly, all sorts of warning signs go off at the very
suggestion of using such materials in a writing course. First of all, this material is concerned with the production of literary texts as opposed to the kinds of texts students are invited to compose in a writing course, and second, the material is generally considered to be spurious and therefore not representative of real writing. What, it may be asked, can these kinds of materials have to do with helping students to develop their writing abilities? To the first concern, we say that, whatever the nature of the material, if it can be used to reveal aspects of the work of writing from which students can learn, it belongs in a writing course. To the second, we say that the very spuriousness of forged materials throws into high relief dimensions of the work of writing less immediately visible in what is perceived to be legitimate writing because the forger’s work depends so much on her ability to succeed in these areas. A final concern might focus on the possibility that attention to literary forgery in a writing course might spin into another kind of literary analysis that distracts from the necessary attention to writing. As long as the focus remains on the ways in which forgery reveals aspects of the choices writers make as they compose, attention will stay where it should be—on the work of writing.

Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic capital explores the ways in which this capital depends on a culture’s predisposition to believe in the value of something. If an audience expects a text to have value, that text may have value for that audience even when other criteria used to establish value might deny the text the value its author hopes for. With Shakespeare serving Foucault’s ultimate-author function in the late eighteenth century, Ireland chose wisely in identifying a target for his forgeries. In fact, his forgeries succeeded for as long as they did largely because they addressed an audience that mixed Shakespearian idolatry with an incredulity that a stash of Shakespeare’s papers had not yet been found. At one point in his Confessions, he states that had it not been for the enthusiastic response to his first forgery and the observation by those around him that “in all probability many papers of Shakespeare’s might be found by referring to the same source from whence the [mortgage deed] had been drawn,” he “never should have attempted a second document” (55). Still, even as Ireland sought to mine this kairotic moment, he also worked to make his forgeries approximate the specific discourse features that his audience found to be so distinctive in Shakespeare’s plays.
Audience awareness and audience analysis have long been staples of writing instruction, yet in Ireland’s attention to the timeliness of his efforts and the role that audience expectations played in rendering his forgeries credible, he provides a slant on audience awareness not commonly addressed in textbook and classroom discussions of the subject. Exercise after exercise may invite students to identify an audience(s) and to articulate the assumptions, opinions, and perspectives an audience(s) brings to the writing, but exploring what an audience is seeking as they engage with a text complicates how students are invited to think about the role of audience in the work of writing. Ireland, like most forgers, understood that the success of his writing depended on his audience’s desire to come upon the text he was composing. Extended to the writing classroom, this translates to having students include in their approaches to the subjects they select and the audiences they anticipate questions about the cultural and communal expectations that permeate the world in which they live and write, including audience expectations about student writing.

Bourdieu argues that any analysis of a cultural work must take as its object both the material production and the symbolic production of the work. The interplay between the material and the symbolic is evident in Ireland’s recognition that his forgeries would be perceived to be authentic to the extent that they replicated a constellation of interdependent materials within which any piece of authentic writing operates. He recognized that he was not imitating individual documents, as he had in school, but rather that he was imitating a constellation of documents, and the credibility of his forgeries derived from the apparent integrity of the relationships among the documents in this constellation. In *The Great Shakespeare Fraud*, Patricia Pierce indicates that Ireland “learned that the more papers there were, the more their authenticity was confirmed. It was another reason to create short legal documents and playhouse receipts. They were useful props for the more ambitious forgeries” (69). Throughout his succession of forgeries, Ireland planted cross-references in an effort to replicate the kind of interplay among documents in which any piece of writing participates, whether or not the writer is consciously aware of it. His efforts focused on generating in his forgeries “a range of interconnected allusions to a past age, from its small towns to its London
stages. Linked by similar orthography and paleography, the documents create a circular verisimilitude of literature and history validating each other” (Kahan 36). Thus, Ireland forged a last will and testament in which Shakespeare refers to a new play “neverryette Impryntedd called Kyng Vorrtygrene.” Of course, the final test of his forgeries was the extent to which the constellation of documents he created fit within the larger constellation of documents that the audiences of his day attributed to Shakespeare. To the extent that his collection of forged documents lined up with the collection of documents attributed to Shakespeare and his time, his public would be inclined to regard his writing as authentic. As noted above, however, this public’s eagerness to believe rendered them less than rigorous in their analysis of the documents Ireland produced.

Ireland’s calculated effort to connect the documents he forged to one another and to the larger constellation of documents associated with Shakespeare highlights a dimension of writing often left unexamined in writing instruction. Writing instructors have for so long focused on the production of an individual piece of writing that gets graded and returned that students have come to think of writing in terms of single documents. Even with the emergence of portfolios, which on the surface seem to constitute the kind of constellation that Ireland was attempting to emulate, the papers included in portfolios are often seen as an accumulation of relatively isolated documents. Certainly, writing instructors recognize that these papers were written by a certain writer and share certain characteristics, but seldom is there much attention to the constellatory dynamic that enjoins one piece of writing to all of the others. Yet, this understanding is central to what the work of writing means. It’s an understanding that invites a writer to transform a discarded piece of writing into a new text or to write again something that has been written before but to do so within an entirely new set of rhetorical opportunities and constraints. In fact, this dynamic is so essential to writing that, as forgers such as Ireland recognized, it is one measure by which writing is seen to be authentic.

Bourdieu also recognizes the critical role that the discourse community plays in determining symbolic value, asserting that the critical and evaluative discourse about a work constitutes, in part, the symbolic production of a work. For Ireland, evoking a positive response from the
critical community demanded not just that he replicate through his imitations works thoroughly established as cultural icons but also that he draw on his own abilities as a writer to add value to the works he presented to the community. Early on, he prided himself on his ability to improve on Shakespeare and in effect viewed his forgeries as more than imitations. In his *Confessions*, his description of his forged manuscript of *King Lear* and the forged fragment of *Hamlet* characterizes his work as collaborative. At one point, he cites two lines that appear after Lear’s death and quotes the seven lines he substitutes for the two. He then asserts, “As I did not conceive such a jingling and unmeaning couplet very appropriate to the occasion, I composed [the seven lines], which I was so arrogant as to believe would not injure the reputation of Shakespeare” (118). If he appears to be modest here, the apparent modesty disappears with his subsequent appraisal of the effect of the alterations he inserted into the manuscript: “As I scrupulously avoided in copying the play of Lear, the insertion of that ribaldry which is so frequently found in the compositions of our bard, it was generally conceived that my manuscript proved beyond doubt that Shakespeare was a much more finished writer than he had ever before been imagined” (118). The point is reiterated in his subsequent assessment of the changes he made to the *Hamlet* fragment that he forged: “The variations introduced by me in the pages of Hamlet thus executed, tended to strengthen the former opinions as to Shakespeare’s correctness as a writer, while every thing appearing unworthy of our bard was laid to the charge of the players and printers of that period” (119–20). Kahan argues that Ireland’s improvements were designed to appeal to the Neoclassical sensibilities prevalent at the time Ireland was writing or, in other words, to appeal to a system of values that resided outside of the cultural authority granted to Shakespeare but that was as or even more compelling for a contemporary audience. The resulting mixture of imitation and transformation highlights the complex way in which symbolic value accrues to a work through its simultaneous attention to the diverse sets of values operative in any culture.

Forgery exaggerates, and therefore makes particularly visible, intertextuality and the role it plays in the production of belief. As Ireland attempted to produce what appears to be a Shakespearean text and to improve upon it, he exemplified one way in which intertextuality operates
in all texts. Most writing students can readily recognize in the abstract the concept that all writing is situated within the works that contribute to the writer’s knowledge and ability, but how this works in practice or why it is worth understanding escapes them. By working so diligently at embedding a piece of writing within the work of another writer even as he or she tries to transform and transcend that work, the forger reveals most obviously how a piece of writing draws from and modifies the world of texts within which it is situated. The proliferation of textbooks focusing on teaching students to write with sources moves toward helping students understand how their writing is situated within an ongoing conversation but does so by seeing this situatedness as a function of accumulating sources to the issues and ideas students want to address. Watching the work of forgery as writing enables them, on the other hand, to explore how the writer swims in the “sea of former texts that surround us, the sea of language we live in. And we understand the texts of others within that same sea. Sometimes as writers we want to point to where we got those words and sometimes we don’t” (Bazerman 83–84). Literary forgery affords students the opportunity to see writers swimming in this sea and quite consciously accumulating value to their work through the connections they mine between their texts and the texts and language in the sea that surrounds them.

The perceived cultural value of a document, in Bourdieu’s scheme, depends on a second kind of constellation—the constellation of conversations that build up around the forged documents. Bourdieu argues that the critical and evaluative discourse about a work constitutes in part the symbolic production of that work. A forger tries to influence this discourse by embedding forged documents within a narrative that explains their provenance. One of the most difficult tasks Ireland faced in sustaining the believability of his forgeries involved adjusting the narrative to accommodate new questions that were always being asked regarding their authenticity. In the end, the narrative became so convoluted due to his concern that a Shakespeare relative would show up and would claim legal rights to the trunk of forged documents that it defied credibility. As his interest shifted from an attention to the documents’ symbolic capital to their economic capital, details were introduced into the story that were as farfetched as the orthography of the documents
themselves. However, before the narrative got stretched to the point that it began to defy credibility, which helped to initiate questions about the authenticity of the Shakespeare papers, Ireland managed the narrative with enough care to enhance the papers’ credibility. In its earlier stages, the narrative wrapped around the forgeries shared the attention to detail often evident in the forgeries themselves. Just as he forged documents cross-referentially so that the collection in its mass and its mutually reinforcing particulars accumulated authenticity, episodes in the narrative referred to one another and thus created a matrix of information that made it seem as if the narrative could not have been contrived. As Ireland announced the discovery of a “lost” play (*Vortigern*), many wondered why the play had never been produced or published in Shakespeare’s day. In response, Ireland forged a series of letters between Shakespeare and the printer to indicate that they could not agree to financial terms for publication, an explanation which was not fully satisfactory.\(^1\) Nevertheless, as Kahan notes, on the whole, “How carefully constructed the story was! . . . Ireland had created an entire history of recent experiences, vague enough to be filled in, detailed enough to be believable” (55).

The fictional narrative that Ireland constructed around the papers to make their provenance believable, when combined with the story of his composing these materials as recorded in his *Confessions*, can be useful in reminding students both that every written text has a history and that this history can have consequences for its credibility. Perhaps using Ireland’s example to explore the relationship between a text’s history and its symbolic value can also be used as a springboard from which to develop students’ metacognitive awareness of the work that writing entails. That is, if students are encouraged to keep track of the compositional histories of the texts they create and to reflect on the stories underlying the creation of these texts, they will be performing the kind of work called for in Berthoff’s concept of a “dialectical notebook” (13) and Salvatore’s “triadic (and recursive) sequence” (447). As Berthoff, Salvatore, and others have demonstrated, this work is essential to their becoming the active learners conscious of choices and the effects of these choices that critical writing and reading require.
Whole-text Plagiarism and the Production of Belief

The study of literary forgery, as demonstrated by the example of William Henry Ireland’s Shakespearean forgeries, foregrounds the role that symbolic capital, or what Bourdieu also refers to as “belief in the value of the work,” plays in the cultural authorization of texts. Perhaps most significantly, literary forgery foregrounds the interplay of material and symbolic production requisite for the production of belief in the cultural value of a text. The cultural politics of plagiarism, examined within the framework of Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic capital, are also largely dependent on the production of belief, but it is our contention that, despite a relative proliferation of recent scholarship on plagiarism, composition studies remains more interested in the material production—which includes both prevention and detection—than in the symbolic production of plagiarism. Composition’s disciplinary attachment to the process paradigm together with a deep investment in our collective professional ability to differentiate between the “authentic” and the “fraudulent” have rendered the symbolic aspects of plagiarism unavailable for analysis. Just as English studies’ dismissal of forgery as a species of writing has allowed us to avoid asking questions of it that we ask of legitimate writing, so too has our near dismissal of plagiarism as anything other than an academic crime allowed us to avoid confronting asking questions of it that we ask of legitimate writing. These questions we avoid have everything to do with belief.

As we hope is clear at this point, we are interested here not in condemning the entire process movement in composition studies; to do so would be to do nothing less than shoot ourselves in the foot, for it would be quite foolish to ignore decades of research that indicates the importance of process in teaching students to write with confidence and maturity. Rather, we want to sketch out some of the issues that a course dedicated to studying the cultural politics of writing might legitimately take up. A course in which students consider the “cultural privileging mechanisms” that authorize works and writers as legitimate is one in which students question the ways that, for example, forgers persuade an eager public that there are newly discovered works by Shakespeare, or the ways that the conditions of the writing classroom constrain the ways that
a student can persuade the teachers that a plagiarized text is authentic own.

If the eighteenth century will go down in textual histories as the “Age of Forgery,” the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries may very well be known as the “Age of Plagiarism.” As headlines tell us almost daily, the Internet is purportedly causing a radical shift in emphasis from authorship as intellectual work to authorship as commodity. In a recent article in *Technology Review*, Ed Tenner argues that the “rise of the plagiosphere” results in writers’ “sense of futility.” Tenner writes,

> What NASA did to our conception of the planet, Web-based technologies are beginning to do to our understanding of our written thoughts. We look at our ideas with less wonder, and with a greater sense that others have already noted what we’re seeing for the first time.

The so-called plagiosphere has been billed as a temptation to struggling students with questionable morals and a nemesis to writing teachers everywhere. Surveys and newspaper reports tell us that the Internet is the cause of an alarming rise in plagiarism cases at the same time that students with “anonymous purchasing power” (Ritter 618) are reportedly feeling more and more alienated from and suspicious of the very concept of academic authorship (Spigelman; Ritter). Authorship scholars in composition studies argue that the appropriate response to Internet-based plagiarism is not detection, but prevention, in the form of revised teaching practices (see, e.g., Howard, “Forget”).

Keeping in mind Bourdieu’s claim that discourse about a work constitutes, in part, the production of the belief in the value of that work, it bears mentioning that the forms of plagiarism that, until very recently, compositionists have produced discourse about are those against which process pedagogy seems to be a reliable check. Composition’s disciplinary attachment to process has resulted in discussions of plagiarism that locate the “problem” of plagiarism in the process itself. If a student has plagiarized and we work from the assumption that the student has done so unintentionally, then the reasonable response to this transgression is to attend to the student’s writing process. Somewhere along the way—while prewriting, while drafting, while revising, while integrating sources—
the student lost track of which words belonged to whom and inadvertently passed off others’ words as his or her own. So-called cut-and-paste plagiarism can be remedied with more classroom attention to citation. “Patchwriting,” in Howard’s conception of it, is just one step in the process of acquiring information literacy and it, too, can be remedied with more classroom attention to close reading and practice with paraphrase. But what about the form of plagiarism that seems cut-and-dried, that process pedagogy cannot necessarily prevent? Kelly Ritter argues that the field’s refusal to consider students’ complex reasons for purchasing whole texts from online paper mills has allowed these mills “to prosper in the absence of true critical reflection on their persuasive power” (602).

In short, the practices of cut-and-paste plagiarism and patchwriting are worthy of our time and attention while whole-text Internet plagiarism has been dismissed as immoral and unfortunate yet somehow inevitable.

In any cultural field, Bourdieu argues, the primary tension is that between economic and cultural capital. Composition studies, like any other field of cultural production, is premised on this tension between economic capital, which can easily be handed off to another person in the form of material wealth, and cultural capital, which depends for its legitimacy on the concealment of its root in economic capital. For many outside the university and even within the university but outside of the field of composition studies, writing skills are understood as a form of economic capital, a necessary but not sufficient component of a college education designed to secure for students good jobs upon graduation. But for many of us within the academic field of composition studies, writing is understood not as a skill, not as a form of economic capital, but, instead, as a way of learning and knowing, a complex way of being and relating to the world. Writing is, for many in composition studies who devote their working lives to the study of writing and teaching writing, a form of cultural capital. This tension between an understanding of writing as economic capital and writing as cultural capital is largely responsible for the field’s ambivalence about student texts as authoritative—either within the classroom setting or outside of it.

Ritter’s work on online paper mills and first-year student writing provides concrete evidence that this tension between a conception of writing as a form of economic capital—literally, a product—is at odds
with a conception of writing as a form of cultural capital not just for university faculty and administrators but for students, too. Drawing on the work of Andrea Lunsford and Susan West, Ritter argues that “as our culture increasingly privileges the property values of texts—including, perhaps, that which is bought and sold under unethical circumstances—our students will increasingly see their own writing and the writing of others as nothing more than a commodity itself” (617). Ritter challenges the disciplinary assumption that whole-text plagiarism is necessarily intentionally unethical. Because there is practically no place for composition’s disciplinary discourse on process to intervene in cases of whole-text plagiarism, the default response—at least as it has been represented in the scholarship—is punishment rather than pedagogy. But Ritter’s argument suggests that students’ decisions to download an entire text off the Internet and turn it in as their own are guided by more than the desire to deceive their teachers. Students, it seems, understand the politics of authorship in ways that compositionists often don’t give them credit for. Ritter argues that “first-year composition students, skeptical of their own abilities as new agents in academic discourse and aware of the prestige that published authors gain in the academy, might seek out these ‘complete and coherent’ products elsewhere” (608). Ritter suggests the possibility that students’ motivations for whole-text plagiarism are to succeed in their writing courses (608), not necessarily to deceive their teachers by passing off the work of others as their own. Of course, to suggest that the twin motivations of success and deception can be so easily separated would be naïve, but the fact that we can see here a shift away from attributing plagiarism to students’ wholly unethical motivations provides a point of entry to a more disciplined consideration of the factors that contribute to belief in the value of student writing.

Ritter’s analysis of online paper mills establishes whole-text plagiarism as a writerly choice, one that students make in the context of composition studies’ disciplinary discourse of process and pedagogical discourse of student error and illegitimacy. Ritter shows us that “first-year composition students today carefully weigh interconnected economic, academic, and personal needs when choosing whether to do their own college writing and research or purchase it elsewhere” (602; emphasis added). Almost all of composition studies’ scholarship on plagiarism
that foregrounds the importance of a student’s intentions imagines such intentions, when present, as deceitful. Students who unintentionally plagiarize are imagined to be merely ignorant of academic citation conventions. Ritter complicates these constructions of the student by acknowledging that it is entirely possible that students’ intentions are neither to deceive nor are they necessarily ignorant of academic citation conventions. Instead, Ritter suggests a third motivation behind students’ decision to download a whole text: “a lack of recognition on the students’ part that authorship is valuable and that published writing is more than a product for the taking” (606).

Our analysis of Ireland’s Shakespearean forgeries helps us see that symbolic capital accrues from factors outside the text that function to lend credibility to the authenticity of a text. The receipts, the notes, the fragments of already authorized plays, all of these together constitute what we call a constellation of documents that lends credibility to the authenticity of the forged document. To Ritter’s analysis of whole-text plagiarism that provides us with a new understanding of students’ motivations for downloading whole papers, our analysis of Ireland’s forgery contributes a new possibility for understanding how students might succeed in persuading us of a text’s legitimacy. In what follows, we discuss a situation involving a hypothetical student, one who downloads an entire text from an online paper mill and turns it in to a teacher in a process-based classroom in which evaluation is portfolio-based. We recognize the methodological and theoretical problems that come with positing a hypothetical student; erased are any consideration of age, race, gender, class, ability, and educational background. Because of this, we risk defining the student only by studenthood, a critique Richard Ohmann made long ago. We believe, however, that it is the institutional and disciplinary contexts that matter more in the following discussion. The hypothetical student we invoke below is compelling to the extent that it is recognizable, that it resonates with our collective understanding of the context in which we teach writing. We want to speculate on the ways that composition studies’ emphasis on writing as a process might condition the means by which students work to persuade us of a plagiarized text’s legitimacy. If in the so-called real world readers are persuaded by notes and fragments and receipts that form a constellation of documents, what
might teachers in a process-based composition classroom be persuaded by?

The academic concept of writing as a form of cultural capital depends for its legitimacy on Bourdieu’s broadest definition of cultural capital: culture as a form of power. While most compositionists and most academics would probably reject a notion of writing as objectified cultural capital—as a cultural object that can be purchased immediately with economic capital—Ritter’s examination of online paper mills demonstrates that some students do indeed understand authorship as a commodity to be traded for a good grade. Bourdieu also reminds us, though, that possession of a material object of culture is not in itself sufficient for appreciating the value of that object. One must possess “the means of ‘consuming’ a painting or using a machine” (“Forms” 247). While it may be true, from a teacher’s perspective, that it is students who do not possess the means of appreciating the value of the text, from a student’s perspective, it is the teacher who does not appreciate the economic value of the text. It might even be argued that students who take the time to work backward from a plagiarized text to re-create the invisible process of the anonymous author in the form of drafts, notes, and commentary possess knowledge of the basis against which teachers judge the “authenticity” of a text.

Put differently, our disciplinary dismissal of whole-text plagiarism as a form of anti-writing has blinded us to the possibility that a student’s decision to turn in a text completely written by an anonymous, absent author might represent teachers’ success in teaching that writing is a process. When a student in a process-based composition classroom downloads a full text, he or she knows that he or she must then work backward to re-create the process that led to the finished product. To do so, the student forges earlier drafts and notes that will, when presented to the teacher, likely contribute to the full text’s credibility. Process in this case has become a “fact” of the writing classroom, the answer to a question we posed decades ago, a question that does not take into account the production of belief in the value of a text.

In the hypothetical case of the student who works backward from a purchased text to re-create the invisible process of the anonymous, absent author, it’s not the text itself that is deemed legitimate, but the constella-
tion of documents—often known in composition studies as the portfo-
lio—that renders the work (the process) legitimate in the teacher’s eyes. 
Forensic approaches to plagiarism detection, most notably subscription 
services such as Turnitin.com, are incapable of taking into account the 
constellation of documents that contributes to a text’s symbolic capital. 
Such detection services are the modern-day equivalent of the detective 
work employed to determine the authenticity of forged documents in 
Ireland’s day.

Whole-text plagiarism defies process pedagogy because it demon-
strates so clearly the ways that belief in the value of a text is dependent 
on factors outside the text—on a constellation of documents that together 
comprise the processes that compositionists depend upon as evidence of 
student writing’s authenticity. When students work backward to create 
the process of the absent, anonymous author of the texts they turn in, they 
demonstrate to us that we have been successful in teaching that writing 
is about process. They’ve repurposed our central concept. If this is true, 
we believe that composition’s reliance on process as a check against 
plagiarism will not be sufficient. We need, instead, to shift our 
disciplinary concerns to the politics of writing, to “judge writing by 
situational rather than universal standards and thus insist on the 
arbitrariness of evaluations and their relativity to particular power 
structures” (Miller 187).

Literary forgeries are successful to the extent that they share cultural 
space with their legitimate counterparts and to the extent that they are able 
both to meet cultural expectations and to create new cultural expecta-
tions. Ireland’s audience indicated a willingness to believe in the exist-
ence of an as-yet-undiscovered Shakespearean play, and this willingness 
to believe contributed in large part to Ireland’s success. Whole-text 
plagiarisms are successful to the extent that they share cultural space with 
what composition has authorized as legitimate student writing; that is, 
whole-text plagiarisms are successful when they work backward to make 
visible a writing process that includes a constellation of documents that 
composition studies usually refers to as the portfolio. As professionals 
concerned with understanding writing culturally, academically, and 
pedagogically, compositionists can only benefit from a reintroduction of 
the politics of writing into our conversations. Consideration of forgery
and whole-text plagiarism as forms of writing that make visible the production of belief rather than as forms of parasitic anti-writing forces us to change the ways we talk with students about what writing is, what it does, and how it does it.

Perhaps the most significant implication for the work we do with student writers will result from a consideration of both the material production and the symbolic production of texts. As a field, composition studies has long taken as its object of study the material production of student texts. Recent scholarship challenging plagiarism as a necessarily immoral affront to traditional textual values constitutes what we see to be a first step toward disciplinary consideration of the symbolic production of texts. The next step, we believe, is to make central to our writing classes the question of how belief is produced.

While morality has long been associated with authorship, and immorality with plagiarism, one way to extricate immorality from plagiarism is to talk with students about the differences between what John Sumser calls the modernist labor theory of value and the postmodernist exchange theory of value (299). John Locke’s labor theory of value is modernist in that it is “tied to production and rationality,” while Marx’s exchange theory of value, defined in “direct contrast to labor theory,” is postmodern “in the sense that it allows for a concept of value that is continuously shifting, unrelated to any objective conditions and beyond any moral judgment” (299). Sumser explains that when “exchange theory was defined in direct contrast to labor theory . . . because it was a contrast between a sociologically descriptive term and a moral term, it was apparent that exchange theory described an immoral system” (299). Likewise, when plagiarism is defined in direct contrast to authorship, a term that carries with it associations of originality, morality, autonomy, and propriety (Howard, *Standing*), it becomes apparent that plagiarism is necessarily immoral. Yet, Sumser argues that when “exchange theory is separated from its contrast to labor theory, then it is just a sociological description—accurate or useful but having nothing to do with morality” (299). When plagiarism is separated from its contrast to authorship, when plagiarism becomes an instance of authorship, it, too, might become just a description: “accurate or useful but having nothing to do with morality.”
Sumser’s distinction between the labor theory of value and the exchange theory of value is pertinent to this work because discussions of the politics of writing necessitate consideration of a text’s exchange value. Exchange value—or, in Bourdieu’s terms, symbolic capital—accrues to a text not as a result of the writer’s process but as a result of factors outside the text that are largely beyond a writer’s control. Miller would say that outside of the classroom, writing is judged “by situational rather than universal standards” and that such evaluations are largely arbitrary (187). Sumser makes concrete the politics of such arbitrary evaluation:

It doesn’t matter, then, if a report or a memo is better prepared in terms of research or writing or because it is more accurate or because it is true. A memo either works or it doesn’t and that is based on, as the postmodernists would say, extratextual considerations such as the perceptions of those involved, the political ramifications of a situation, or the significance of any action for the various people involved. (302)

The difference between the labor theory of value and the exchange theory of value is evident, too, in Ritter’s argument that disciplinary attention to whole-text plagiarism can help us understand “how students reconcile the warring concepts of author and consumer in the space of their own writing” (604). Students who purchase whole texts from online paper mills and then work backward to produce the constellation of documents that validate the texts’ authenticity in their teachers’ eyes demonstrate a complex understanding of both the material and the symbolic production of a text’s value. In the rhetorical situation of the classroom and of many writing pedagogies, symbolic capital accrues to a material text to the extent that that text is represented as the culmination of a process.

Conclusion

We have argued here that forgery and plagiarism are particularly useful ways of exploring the political and cultural situatedness of writing and, in the process, of giving writing courses—introductory through ad-
vanced—a content that is thoroughly relevant to the work students undertake in these and other courses. We have drawn on a specific case of literary forgery and on the hypothetical but entirely probable case of the student who works backward from a wholly plagiarized text to simulate the writing process because we believe that these dimensions of writing are critical for our own understanding of what we do in the writing classroom but also for students’ understanding of the kind of work they are being asked to do in a college writing course. Examining forgery and plagiarism as instances of writing yields insights into the interplay between the ways a writer tries to accumulate value to his or her work and how and why a culture accedes to or resists this effort. In short, we propose that the study of plagiarism and forgery be used to introduce the politics of writing as the content of introductory and advanced writing and rhetoric courses.

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Notes

1. This explanation doesn’t clarify why the play had never been produced. In addition, it ignores the relatively diminished concern with which Shakespeare would have regarded publication because, as someone who wrote for the stage, he would have understood that, once the play was published, it became available to other acting companies to mount productions without compensation.

Works Cited


Robillard, Amy E. “*Young Scholars Affecting Composition: A Challenge to Disciplinary Citation Practices*.” *College English* 68 (2006): 253–70.


