

“‘Literary Offenses’ and Other Contentious Matter”

A one-day conference on Literary Controversy  
in Great Britain and the United States (1800-1900)

Centre Interlangues Texte, Image, Langage

University of Burgundy

Friday, 22 September 2017

This one-day conference will address the subject of controversial or polemical texts such as reviews, essays, letters, prefaces and/or postfaces published between 1800 and 1900 in Britain and the United States. It seeks to open fresh approaches to controversies or polemics by focusing on literature and the literary aspects of these questions. Indeed, if controversy can be defined as a debate between two or more parties with different viewpoints before an audience, studies have mainly come from the fields of social sciences and science studies, with some interest in rhetoric and/or argumentation. However, literary controversies are as important as scientific ones for the constitution of the public, democratic debate as it was shaped in Britain and in the U.S. in the nineteenth century. Controversies and polemics contributed to legitimizing some literary genres; they gave publicity to new or avant-garde authors; they redefined the content and contours of the public debate.

Surprisingly, most controversies or polemics have elicited scant attention from literary or cultural scholars: no single history of controversy either in the U.S. or Britain exists, and partial histories or studies of more limited controversies are rare. This one-day conference seeks to address such neglect and to bring together scholars in literature, history, cultural studies or rhetoric interested in various quarrels, scandals, polemics and debates of the nineteenth century. Transatlantic perspectives are especially encouraged.

If we envisage controversy as a means of reconfiguring both the literary field and the public debate, perspectives could include:

- reasons for controversies and polemics in literature
- issues of nationhood and/or ethnic/sexual/religious identity
- personal/group legitimacy and authorship
- the meaning and value of agreements and disagreements and their consequences on the public debate
- participants, institutional positions, and degrees of involvement in controversies
- the different media used in controversies (which periodicals? which formats?)
- the discursive conditions of debate, and the constraints at work in literary

controversies

- the issue of explicit or implicit limits, and transgression: when does a polemic morph into a full-fledged controversy?
- the beginning, development, and ending of controversies: is there a pattern for nineteenth-century literary controversies?
- The importance of literary controversy as opposed to other controversies for re-shaping both literature and the public debate
- The place of literary controversy/polemic in literary history

Proposals can address, but are not limited to, controversies such as ‘the fleshly school of poetry’, the definition of ‘modern culture’, literary realism vs romance, obscenity in fiction, literary nationalism (including British attacks on American literature & American defences—and criticisms—of American literature), the “republican” novel with its civic utility vs the “liberal” novel with its greater emphasis on aesthetics and individualism, “masculine” vs “feminine” writing, James Fenimore Cooper’s quarrel with America, Hawthorne and Melville’s rumoured estrangement, Mark Twain’s attacks on Cooper and the many negative, if not savage, contemporary reviews of works now considered classics.

Send 250-300 word abstracts with a short bio-bibliographical notice to Bénédicte Coste ([benedicte.coste@u-bourgogne.fr](mailto:benedicte.coste@u-bourgogne.fr)) AND Mark Niemeyer ([mark.niemeyer@u-bourgogne.fr](mailto:mark.niemeyer@u-bourgogne.fr)) before 30 April 2017.