

Literature

The past academic year has seen members of the Literature faculty at MIT make significant strides both individually and collectively in research, teaching, service, and outreach. We worked not only on maintaining a level of excellent performance for our students and in our research careers, but also on raising the visibility of, and making the case for, the study of literature and the humanities at MIT and in the 21st-century world. We remain committed to innovative, collaborative, and interdisciplinary research as well as to the more established model (the effects of which are often more quietly diffusive) of the individual research career with a strong disciplinary identity. As we see it, disciplinary rigor and fruitful interdisciplinary work are complementary. And while fully engaged in a variety of successful research and publication ventures, we also remain committed to the cause of general education, playing leading roles in the Institute's undergraduate curriculum and in recent efforts to revise and improve it.

The following highlights some of the section's most notable ongoing work and accomplishments. Note that since two faculty members (Peter de Florez professor of humanities Henry Jenkins and Professor William Uricchio) codirect the Comparative Media Studies (CMS) program, many of their activities appear in the CMS report.

New Developments

In the early spring of 2007 we completed the fourth successful entry-level hire in three years, effecting an important demographic shift and inaugurating a phase of significant renewal and revitalization for our faculty. The moves we have been making extend our range in new directions (particularly toward what is now being recognized as "world literatures in English") while at the same time manifesting our commitment to the disciplinary rigor of a rich historical curriculum.

Our new colleague, Arthur Bahr, was far and away our first choice in the search for a junior Medievalist. A 2006 PhD from the University of California, Berkeley, Bahr is trained primarily as a Middle English specialist, though he is more than competent to teach Anglo-Saxon as well (he is also versed in Latin, Old French, Old Norse, Middle Welsh, and Greek). He has completed a fascinating dissertation titled "Convocation and Compilational Play in Medieval London Literary Culture," which situates texts by major poets such as Chaucer and Gower, along with works by lesser known figures, in the social dynamics of 14th-century London's mercantile and governmental elites. Bahr is interested in the status and material circumstances of the compilation, a kind of proto-anthology format in which many famous medieval texts appeared cheek-by-jowl with all manner of other writings, fictional and nonfictional. He considers the motives and interests driving the artful construction of compilations, the difference it makes to find familiar texts compiled with unfamiliar company, and the ways in which the formal questions facing a "compilator" came to stand in for questions about the unity, diversity, and viability of the social milieu in which these texts were assembled.

We imagine that Bahr's interests in this particular phase of book history will naturally lead him into fruitful collaboration with CMS, as that program looks to expand its

efforts into earlier historical periods and broaden the range of media it studies. Bahr has also had considerable teaching experience at Berkeley, where he won the campus-wide Outstanding Graduate Student Instructor Award in 2003. He has great range as a teacher, which of course makes him all the more appealing in our program: in addition to classes in his core area (including Medieval literature surveys, Chaucer, Romance, and classical literatures), he is qualified to teach such popular Humanities, Arts, and Social Science Distribution Requirement (HASS-D) and Communication Intensive in the Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences (CI-H) classes as Foundations of Western Culture: Homer to Dante and Forms of Western Narrative.

Bahr will admirably complement our strong (now even stronger) cohort of recently hired assistant professors (Sandy Alexandre, Alisa Braithwaite, and Sarah Brouillette) and will doubtless join with them in instilling new vigor into our program for years to come.

Our common awareness of a new environment both within our ranks and in wider reaches of the Institute encouraged us to hold our first faculty retreat in some years, in order to take stock of our strengths, weaknesses, challenges, and opportunities. We engaged in a stimulating day's worth of discussion at Endicott House in May, by happy coincidence one week after the School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences heads' retreat convened by dean Deborah Fitzgerald. We look forward to more regular gatherings for collective deliberation and strategic planning.

In keeping with our emphasis on increased visibility and outreach, we have launched a new website (thanks especially to the zeal and precision of associate professor Shankar Raman) and begun what we hope will be a regular series of visits by prominent authors. We inaugurated the series this spring, hosting a public reading and an informal seminar for MIT students by renowned novelist and essayist Jamaica Kincaid, and we have plans to host fiction writer Vikram Chandra for a similar event in the fall. These visits help demonstrate the vital link between academic study and contemporary developments in literature and offer occasions for beneficial new partnerships with other MIT programs (so far, with Writing and Humanistic Studies, Women's and Gender Studies, and the MIT-India Program). We have also begun a successful weekly "tea" gathering for literature students (and others as well), a small but useful way to cultivate a community around humanities interests. One of our part-time staff members now assumes responsibility for special events and outreach, and one of her current projects is the compilation of a database on former MIT students of literature, from whom we hope to learn more about the difference that studying our discipline can make in a variety of professional and civic contexts.

Research and Publications

This year, Literature faculty members published or completed several major projects. Professor Diana Henderson's second book, *Collaborations with the Past: Reshaping Shakespeare Across Time and Media*, was published by Cornell University Press and has already started to generate significant discussion about the "remixing" of Shakespearean texts and themes over the past several centuries. Professor Henderson's book exemplifies the long-standing engagement of several of our most noted faculty with questions surrounding the reuse, recontextualization, and (in a new term of art) "re-mediation" of

cultural artifacts or events. Professor James Buzard's new coedited book *Victorian Prism: Refractions of the Crystal Palace* (University of Virginia Press; a collection of essays on the afterlife of the famous Great Exhibition of 1851) takes a similar approach. Working on very different materials, Professor Henderson's and Professor Buzard's projects both inquire into the latent possibilities that only later generations of performers, theorists, or authors may locate, for reasons arising from their own times and places, in the works of earlier makers of culture. This is a perspective on humanities research that seems especially valuable in the context of today's global circulations of capital and culture.

Professor Buzard's "Conflicting Cartographies: Globalism, Nationalism, and the Crystal Palace Floor Plan," included in *Victorian Prism*, considers the tension between universalist and nationalist models for organizing the displays at the Great Exhibition, a tension whose full implications are still being explored. Professor Peter Donaldson's ongoing, internationally recognized work on Shakespeare in performance is of course relevant here as well; new developments in that work are mentioned later in this report.

Other new Literature faculty publications include senior lecturer Wyn Kelley's edited volume *A Companion to Herman Melville* (Blackwell, 2006), a major collection of essays by 35 leading specialists in the field, and her own *Herman Melville: Benito Cereno* (Bedford/St. Martin's, 2006). Continuing distinguished work at the frontier of literature and music, Professor Ruth Perry has edited a special double issue of the journal *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* on "Ballads and Songs in the Eighteenth Century," authoring the introduction and an essay for the volume. Professor Perry's biography of important 18th-century ballad collector Anna Gordon Brown is in progress, and her major 2004 book *Novel Relations*, on reorientation of family in 18th-century literature and society, continues to generate strongly positive reviews and serious debate.

Some important new refereed-journal publications by our faculty include Homer A. Burnell career development associate professor Noel Jackson's "Archaeologies of Perception: Reading Wordsworth After Foucault" (in *European Romantic Review*), associate professor Mary Fuller's "Making Something of It: Questions of Value in the Early English Travel Collection" (in *Journal of Early Modern History*), and Professor Raman's "Marvell's Now" (in *Early Modern Culture*). All of these are mature, metacritical essays that do more than offer new interpretations of texts; they use close textual analysis to raise important questions about the state of critical practice in the areas of literary study to which they pertain. Also noteworthy are Professor Brouillette's articles "The Northern Irish Novelist in Ronan Bennett's *The Catastrophist*" (in *Contemporary Literature*) and "Zulfikar Ghose's *The Triple Mirror of the Self* and Cosmopolitan Authentication" (in *Modern Fiction Studies*).

Two further books by Literature faculty members are in production and on the verge of publication: Professor Jackson's *Science and Sensation in British Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge University Press) and Professor Brouillette's *Postcolonial Writers and the Global Literary Marketplace* (Palgrave).

In creative ventures, Professor David Thorburn has recently had poems published in *Slate* and *Atlantic Monthly*, and Professor Stephen Tapscott's influential translations of

Pablo Neruda have found new audiences, being set to music in three new song cycles, including Peter Lieberson's *Neruda Songs* (BSO).

Lectures and Appearances

Literature faculty members lectured around the world during 2006–2007, often as featured speakers. Professor Perry was plenary speaker at the David Nichol Smith symposium at Dunedin University in New Zealand and was Henrietta Harvey distinguished lecturer at Memorial University, Newfoundland. Professor Donaldson gave a plenary address, "To Be or Not to Be Electronic: Scholarship in the Age of Virtual Culture," at the JSTOR Publishers' Annual Meeting in New York, and gave workshops on his increasingly influential Cross-Media Annotation System (XMAS) project at Notre Dame; for the World Shakespeare Congress in Brisbane, Australia; and for faculty and educational technology groups from Monash University, Melbourne University, and the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. Professor Buzard's 2005 book *Disorienting Fiction* has begun to garner strong reviews and has led to numerous invited lectures (including talks at Harvard; Fatih University, Istanbul; the University of California, Santa Cruz; the University of California, Riverside; and the University of Wisconsin, Madison). He has also given panel lectures on his recent work in Genoa, Palermo, and Tunis.

Professor Raman has been an invited speaker at the World Shakespeare Congress in Brisbane, Australia, and at the Shakespeare Seminar, Harvard Humanities Center. He was also a panel lecturer at the Shakespeare Association of America conference in San Diego. Professor Jackson has lectured on his exciting new work in Romanticism at conferences in Grasmere and Bristol, England; at Harvard, Purdue, and Berkeley; and at the annual convention of the Modern Language Association in Philadelphia. Our newest faculty members, Professors Alexandre, Braithwaite, and Brouillette, have been active on the conference circuit, lecturing (among them) in Alberta, Canada; at Purdue; in Toronto; and in Westminster, England. Closer to home, Professor Brouillette addressed the International Cultural Capital Group (sponsored by Foreign Languages and Literatures) on her current work, and Professors Henderson and Donaldson (with Professor Fuller moderating) conducted a special session of the MIT Communications Forum on "Remixing Shakespeare."

Teaching

Literature faculty perform exceptionally well as classroom instructors, teaching more than 1,000 MIT undergraduates each year (in AY2006–2007, enrollment increased to more than 1,100). Professors Thorburn and Perry are MacVicar Faculty Fellows, and Professors Henderson and John Hildebidle were recently honored for their contributions to undergraduate education at MIT. In fall 2006 (the latest period for which data was available), our faculty and lecturers earned an average above 6.4 for Overall Rating of Teaching on the end-of-term subject evaluation report and above 6.2 for Overall Rating of the Subject. We effectively balance general education objectives with the aims of our majors and of those select few MIT students who decide to pursue postgraduate study in literature. This year one of our majors was accepted to the doctoral program in English at Berkeley, continuing a trend that has seen MIT literature majors gain acceptance, over the last few years, into such leading departments for postgraduate literary studies as Yale, Cambridge, the University of California Los Angeles, Rutgers, Chicago, and others.

Because of our deep commitment to MIT's general undergraduate education, Literature faculty members are centrally involved in new pedagogical initiatives and in rethinking the undergraduate experience at the Institute. This year we launched with considerable success two new d'Arbeloff-funded pilot classes designed for freshmen, both of which called for innovative collaborations among faculty members and students. In Professor Henderson's Learning from the Past: Drama, Science, Performance, cotaught with Professor Janet Sonenberg of Music and Theater Arts, students learned to live in the minds of 17th-century scientists, playwrights, and audiences, developing and performing their own plays, based on historical research, about the social contexts and constraints in which science and creativity take place. In The Art of the Probable, Professors Raman, Jackson, and Alvin Kibel collaborated in introducing MIT students to the frontier shared by literary texts and probability theorists from ancient to recent times. Both classes had very encouraging levels of enrollment and student engagement.

We should mention the innovative thinking and cooperative spirit of Professors Fuller, Braithwaite, and Brouillette, who joined together to reconceive and give new impetus to our introductory (HASS-D and CI-H) subject World Literatures. As English becomes ever more definitively the lingua franca of the global economy, it makes increasing sense to move beyond traditional national frameworks and to reimagine our field as the study of "world literature in English." These three Literature colleagues are designing a class addressing this contemporary development in a sensitive and historically conscious way; their efforts have been supported by a 2007 MIT Alumni Class Funds grant.

MIT Literature faculty also play an important role in sustaining the offerings of the Women's and Gender Studies and CMS programs. Professors Henderson, Kelley, Braithwaite, and Brouillette have been especially active in these relationships. Professor Donaldson continues his pioneering work on the use of digital technology for humanities scholarship and teaching: his XMAS system is now being used in several MIT classes as well as at collaborating institutions in the United States and abroad.

Finally, the teaching successes of MIT Literature faculty members are recognized beyond MIT's borders. This year Professor Thorburn received the rare distinction of being selected to present a course on Masterworks of Early 20th-Century Literature (24 lectures) by the Teaching Company of Chantilly, VA; these lectures were published on DVD in June 2007. And Professor Buzard has continued a long-standing relationship with the Dickens Project at the University of California, Santa Cruz, where he teaches an intensive weeklong graduate seminar on a Charles Dickens novel each summer.

Institute and Departmental Service

In addition to their research and teaching, our faculty members help to govern and shape their profession and the Institute in a wide variety of service roles. Most notable is the tireless Professor Henderson, outgoing secretary of the faculty and currently dean for curriculum and faculty support in the Office of the Dean for Undergraduate Education. This year, Professor Fuller chaired the HASS Overview Committee and the Committee for Faculty Affairs and served on both the CI-M Working Group and the d'Arbeloff Award Committee. Professor Raman directed the Kelly-Douglas Funds Committee, served on the Foreign Fellowships Committee, and for the past several years has chaired our own Curriculum Committee with exemplary efficiency and drive.

Professor Alexandre was a member of the Corporation Joint Advisory Committee on Institute-wide Affairs, and she delivered the keynote address for MIT's Black Women's Alliance Annual Banquet. Professor Thorburn continued to direct MIT's Communications Forum and the Literature faculty's popular annual Independent Activities Period event Pleasures of Poetry, a monthlong series of informal discussions open to Institute faculty, students, and staff. Professor Hildebidle is our excellent undergraduate officer, and he and several others also serve as freshman advisors. Beyond MIT, Professor Buzard is currently a delegate to the Modern Language Association Assembly and cochair of the ongoing Victorian Literature and Culture seminar at the Harvard Humanities Center.

Awards and Honors

The contributions of MIT Literature faculty members were acknowledged during the past year by numerous awards and grants. Professor Perry spent the year researching and writing her study of ballads and ballad collection in the 18th century, supported by a senior research grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Professor Thorburn held a senior Fulbright lectureship at the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands for spring 2007. Professor Donaldson received a grant from a private donor to expand his electronic Shakespeare archive. Professor Brouillette is currently at the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage on a 2007 Rockefeller Humanities Fellowship in support of her work on Northern Ireland's culture industry.

Senior lecturer Kelley has begun to participate in CMS's New Media Literacies project (supported by the John T. and Catherine D. MacArthur Foundation), working with scholars, museum officials, and theater artists on an exciting new collaboration that brings Melville and *Moby-Dick* (and, more generally, the study of literature) to the broader public. Professor Raman was the corecipient of a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for his participation in *Making Publics*, an interdisciplinary research project investigating the formation of audiences for culture and science in 16th- and 17th-century Europe. Professor Jackson is currently at Oxford University as a participant in the MIT–Balliol College exchange scheme. And Professor Alexandre has been awarded one of MIT's career development chairs for 2007–2009.

Conclusion

This account of our activities is inevitably incomplete and emphasizes individual accomplishments. As a collective, our group is energized and cohesive as never before, and we look forward to making significant contributions at MIT and in our profession.

James Buzard
Section Head
Professor of Literature

More information about the Literature Section can be found at <http://lit.mit.edu/>.