

# Comparative Literature Newsletter

## Teaching World Literature

The World Literature survey is a standard course on many campuses. Works taught range from Homer to Hemingway, Greek tragedies to Romantic poetry, the Bible and the Koran to Shakespeare and Tolstoy. Highlights of the two courses, CMPL 266 and 267, are usually the great floods in *Gilgamesh* and Genesis, Dante's tour through Hell, the life of a nun in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Mexico, fox-women in China, and a traditional final day on funny Youtube videos of the classics (e.g., Homer Simpson on Hamlet).

It is hard to cover in a single survey what is going on contemporaneously in China, India, or America. Therefore each section chooses a theme to unify the course. I like to trace the way morality and mortality appear together in so many works: Adam and Eve learn about death after they eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil; Thucydides' *Peloponnesian Wars* starts with an account of a plague, but the moral seems to be the decline of political justice. Dante's Beatrice dies, and he realizes he has strayed from the right way. Boccaccio's *Decameron* begins with the story of the plague of 1348 in order to justify a new morality of sexual freedom for women. Chateaubriand's *René* watches his father die and cannot believe that horrible man created him; there must be a higher power. We see this pattern throughout World Literature, that death forces the recognition that there is a right and wrong.



Gollum twists a tree in Peter Jackson's film *The Lord of the Rings*, a slide from Professor Ross's talk "World Literature: Morality, Mortality, and Gollum," part of CMPL 266, and also a presentation given in Yangzhou, China, and elsewhere.

Another learning outcome is recognizing language diversity. Videos from the FirstLines collection (<http://web.ics.purdue.edu/~rosscs/First%20lines/First%20Lines.htm>) let students hear original languages like Greek, Hebrew, Latin, Chinese, and Russian. Classes are taught in small sections to allow discussion,

presentations, and personal attention from the instructor on writing assignments. As Professor Margaret Church, the founder of Purdue's Comparative Literature Program (in 1973) used to say, small classes are pedagogically superior to large ones. Small classes also allow instructors to develop individual approaches to World Literature.



Professor Ross's CMPL 266, last day of class, April 2012.

The teaching philosophy of TA Jason Lotz, for example, is that reading literature implicates us in the fabric of a shrinking world. Our interaction with the texts involves us in a community of readers and writers. We strive to become not only good readers, but good writers also, advocating a responsible participation in our global citizenry.



Jason Lotz's World Literature class, Spring 2012.

Through the semester interdisciplinary and multimedia research project, students explore their connections to the literary tapestry by interrogating older texts through the lens of more recent, more familiar "boxes". In one project, the song "Hustla" by The Roots in a box with Hamlet raises the question: is Hamlet a hustler or a customer? Is he the conniving heir to the throne, machinating revenge; or is he the victim and product of his neighborhood? In another project, the song "Coming Home" by Diddy frames a discussion of homecoming in Homer's *Odyssey*. Like Odysseus, the singer returns to take back his kingdom, but burdened by past ills and lost friends, he must earn his homecoming through forgiveness and redemption. Next to Diddy's autobiographical lyrics, Odysseus becomes more tangible, more human, more accessible.

(Continued on Page 9.)

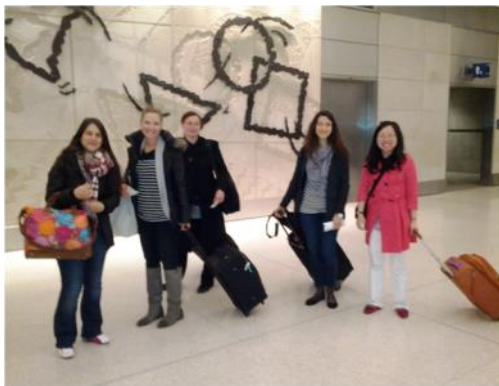
## 2012 American Comparative Literature Program

Purdue's Comparative Literature Program was well represented at the 2012 American Comparative Literature Program held at Brown University, Providence, RI, March 29 to April 1 (<http://acla.org/acla2012/>).

Professor Charles Ross traveled via Indianapolis with graduate students Buffy Turner, Tulin Tosun, Yuhan Huang, Natalia Oliveira, Christina Weiller, and were met in Providence by Jason Lotz, who drove through New York, and Steve Gooch, who traveled from New Jersey.

Several attended an open forum on structuring Comparative Literature course, and as a result will work to retitle CMPL 230 from Introduction to Comparative Literature to "Literature Across Borders."

Paper topics may be viewed at the ACLA website (<http://acla.org/acla2012/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/ACLA-2012-Book.pdf>). This was a successful conference; several students were asked to contribute papers to journals.



*Natalia Oliveira, Buffy Turner, Christina Weiller, Tulin Tosun, and Yuhan Huang at the Indianapolis Airport.*



*Lunch with Professor Ross the first day.*



*Final banquet, ACLA 2012, Providence, RI: Yuhan Huang (China), Tulin Tosun (Turkey), Natalia Oliveira (Brazil), Buffy Turner (Minnesota!), and Christina Weiller (Germany) - all Purdue Comparative Literature graduate students,*



*Skyview of the Purdue table..*

## Comparative Literature and Music

The fall 2011 Comparative Literature seminar approached three Shakespeare plays through music. The seminar worked through the text of *Musicking Shakespeare* by Daniel Albright to study the brilliant if controversial musical interpretations of *Romeo and Juliet* by Hector Berlioz, *Macbeth* in the version of Verdi's opera, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Benjamin Britten's twentieth-century adaptation.

For Berlioz and Verdi the class collaborated on producing video versions of the complete scores with the original texts, translations, and commentary from Albright's text and the students' own comments. These can be found online and have already been adapted by classes at Harvard University.

The students in the seminar, conducted by Professor Ross, were Bing Yan (who had the original idea to study Albright's book), Case Tompkins, Park Parkinson, Keturah Nix, Meng Wang, Joanna Benskin, Christine Yao, Rama Alhajian, Michael Smith, and Dallas Woodburn.



Sample of the video by the Comparative Literature seminar for Berlioz' *Roméo et Juliette*.

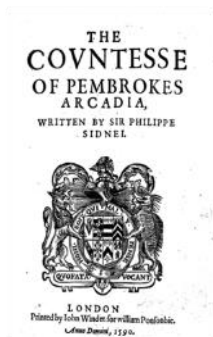
## Comparative Literature in China, Part 1

From May 20-June 1, 2011, Professor Charles Ross and his family were guests of Professor Qin Xu at Yangzhou University in Yangzhou, China. Professor Ross delivered two addresses. The first was titled *Teaching World Literature: Morality, Mortality, and Gollum* (世界文学教学: 道德准则, 生离死别, 和咕嚕). The second was on a more specialized topic, "Shakespeare and Sidney's *Arcadia*: A Global Edition?"

In 2008 Professor Qin Xu was a guest at Purdue University while researching work by the literary theorist J. Hillis Miller. He organized Professor Ross's tour in order to consult on MA programs for Chinese students of English.



A welcoming luncheon arranged by Purdue Comparative Literature MA student Yuhan Huang and her parents, in Nanjing, China.



The title page of the most popular work of English fiction through the 18th century. Shakespeare knew it thoroughly (it was a source of the Gloucester plot of *King Lear*.) Can it be read globally?

## 2012 Interdisciplinary Graduate Program Reception

Each spring semester, the Office of Interdisciplinary Graduate Programs (OIGP) hosts a reception in celebration of interdisciplinary graduate student research. At the reception, a diverse array of student research posters and multimedia presentations are featured from across Purdue's 15 interdisciplinary graduate programs. This year for the first time four graduate students in Comparative Literature presented posters: Natalia Oliviera, Buffy Turner, Jason Lotz, and Christina Weiller. Among the dozens of presenters, mainly in the physical sciences, the OIGP judges singled out Christina Weiller for special commentary and an award, for her project "A Knight at the Movies," a cultural analysis of a film starring Heath Ledger. Congratulations, Christina!



Posters and presenters from Comparative Literature at the OIGP poster session, April 4, 2012.

Here is a summary of Christina's project:

My research project conducts the so-far neglected interdisciplinary analysis of Brian Helgeland's *A Knight's Tale* (2001) and its intertextual discourse. Helgeland's film creates a new type of knight movie by blending Hollywood conventions and elements of modern culture with medieval literature and history. I argue that the complexity and quality of *A Knight's Tale* has been widely underestimated since its deliberate intertextual references can only be fully revealed, understood and acknowledged through a close comparative reading of the movie and its English, German, and French medieval reference texts. It is surprising that a comprehensive interdisciplinary analysis of the movie's intertextuality has not been conducted yet when taking into account that Helgeland himself has repeatedly pointed to his extensive research for the movie. Only a closer look at the numerous references to medieval history and literature enables the viewer to look behind the easily accessible surface of a Hollywood love story, and makes it possible for the recipient to appreciate Helgeland's postmodern film on a deeper, new level. Creating awareness for the intertextual discourse of this very successful and popular blockbuster brings Medieval Studies closer to a mass-audience. Thus, my project is a valuable contribution to the field of interdisciplinary research; it does not only create a better understanding of the movie itself, but it also helps keeping the memory of important historical figures and literary texts alive.

Although the Middle Ages are situated in a far away past and thus not only temporally but also culturally distanced from our present, this period has a strong fascination for many people. The number of people who read medieval texts in the original for fun is very limited nowadays, but nevertheless knights are an inherent part of popular culture. Knights in movies are an anachronistic blend since they are modern representations of the medieval; they reflect the culture of the past as well as contemporary tastes and attitudes. Thus, the analysis of knight movies offers the wonderful opportunity to study both the past and the present. The hero of *A Knight's Tale*, William Thatcher, is not a perfect knight but a man with human flaws that make it easier for the audience to like him and identify with him. Further, his wish to become a knight is the American Dream of social mobility – not from rags to riches, but from peasant to knight. By blending elements of modern pop culture into his knight movie, Helgeland makes the time period more emotionally accessible for his audience, and he facilitates identification with the characters.



Christina Weiller with her project.

My research project is interdisciplinary since it is based on the comparative analysis of a contemporary Hollywood field, i.e. an audio-visual text of post-modern pop culture, and its intertextual references to both history and literature of the Middle Ages. *A Knight's Tale* blends Hollywood and modern culture with medieval texts, namely documents about the historical Ulrich von Liechtenstein, Edward the Black Prince, and Geoffrey Chaucer as well as with literary texts such as Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and Chretien de Troyes' *Lancelot*. If the recipient watches the movie with these concepts in mind, s/he will find that there is evidence of a fascinating, deeper intertextual discourse than is salient prima facie.

In addition, my project makes broader connections in the world by revealing the links between postmodern filmic pop art made for mass-audiences and medieval cultural products that are nowadays only received in the original language and medium by very few people. I have decided to show the connections between a contemporary Hollywood movie and ancient texts to create awareness for the validity of both pop culture and Medieval Studies, and to reveal how blending tradition with contemporary culture can revive almost forgotten works in a fascinating and entertaining way. As my research project shows, it is important and very beneficial to bridge the gap between the seemingly incompatible categories of Hollywood and medieval texts.

## The Purdue Renaissance Comparative Prose Conference



Professor Angelica Duran welcomes attendees at the Purdue Comparative Prose Conference.

The theme of this year's The Purdue Renaissance Comparative Prose Conference, co-sponsored by Comparative Literature, Religious Studies, and MARS, was "The King James Bible: Across Borders, Across Centuries." Organized this year by Professor Angelica Duran, with the assistance of Charles Ross, the event took place in Stewart Center, September 22 - 24, 2011, in commemoration of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of the King James version of the Bible in 1611.

Featured keynote speakers were Professor Ron Corthell, Dean of Liberal Arts at Purdue Calumet, who spoke on "The King's Prose," and Scott Stevens, researcher at The Newberry Library in Chicago, who spoke on "A Voice Crying in the Wilderness: The KJV and Native America," in addition to eight panels (see <http://www.cla.purdue.edu/complit/documents/RCPC2011ProgramFinal.pdf>.)

Over fifty people participated in the entire conference and the conference banquet, which took place at the Lafayette Country club on September 22. Several hundred attended the keynote lectures.

A highlight of the conference was a staged reading of The Book of Mark, organized by Professor Duran and featuring actors from the Purdue Visual and Performing Arts Department under the direction of Rachel Lambert.

Selected papers have been reworked as articles for a special issue of the journal *Prose Studies*, including articles by Boilermakers Joanna Benskin (who was also the student representative for the conference), Angelica Duran, Sandy Goodhart, Crystal Kirgiss, and Rachel Lambert.



Audience at Scott Stevens' keynote lecture on the text of the Bible among native Americans in the first years of the United States.

## Comparative Literature in China, Part 2

### Graduates August 2011 - August 2012

Roberto Ferreira, Ph.D.

Yuhan Huang, M.A.

Jinhua Li, Ph.D.

Bing Yan, M.A.

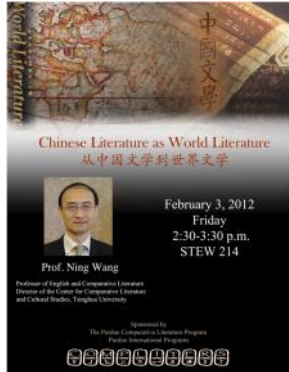
The Comparative Literature Program continues its association with the journal *Forum for World Literature Studies*, which has now published the first issue of volume 4. Previous issues have featured articles by Purdue Professors Shaun Hughes, Patrice Rankine, Beate Allert, Charles Ross, and Margie Berns. See the issues online at <http://www.fwls.org/>.



## Sixth Annual Sino-American Comparative Literature Conference

On February 3, 2012, the Purdue Comparative Literature Program in conjunction with Purdue International Programs sponsored Professor Wang Ning, of Beijing Tsinghua University, to speak on the topic, "Chinese Literature as World Literature."

Arranged by Professor Angelica Duran, Professor Ning's visit also served as a prelude to the future, and he has agreed to bring ten Chinese scholars to Purdue University in May, 2013, for the Sixth Annual Sino-American Comparative Literature Conference. Last held at Duke University, and before that at Princeton and Harvard, this conference allows leading scholars to discuss the theory of comparative literature. The session at Purdue will focus on the theory of literature and the sociology of religion.



Angelica Duran, Wang Ning, and Charles Ross, who worked together for the 6th Annual Sino-American Comparative Literature Conference.

Yuhan Huang, who has just completed her MA in Comparative Literature, served as the graduate assistant for the conference.

## Visiting Speaker Kevin Tsai

On March 23, 2012, the Asian Studies Program, the Comparative Literature Program, and the Confucius Institute co-sponsored a talk by Professor Kevin Tsai, Indiana University, titled "The Cold War and Theorizing Classical Chinese Poetry."

Professor Tsai argued that in the 1970s and 1980s, scholars of China turned their attention to formulating "indigenous" theories of Chinese literature that could offer culturally informed interpretive frameworks, partly as an antidote for the excesses of "Western" literary theory that had come to the forefront in the humanities at the time. What followed were some of the most influential views of classical Chinese poetry today. By examining the key concepts of fictional-



Professor Kevin Tsai at Purdue..

ity and creativity (the latter in relation to the history of cognitive science), he argued that this enterprise unwittingly reinscribed a certain Platonist mode of thinking and unconsciously perpetuated the cultural politics of the Cold War, especially the view of the other. There is a conundrum here: honoring the ethical imperative to give voice to the "natives," to theorize based on cultural identity, has paradoxically resulted in their further subjugation. Professor Tsai concluded by questioning the continuing reliance on identity as an epistemological foundation in current research trends.



A welcome for Professor Tsai, including Comparative Literature steering committee members Professor Beate Allert (left), and on the right, Professor Daniel Hsieh (who arranged the talk), and Professor Charles Ross (Director of Comparative Literature).

## Lecture by Steven Totosy



Steven Totosy, with Professor Elena Coda, moderator.

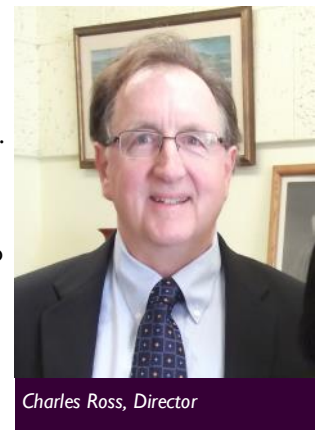
The Comparative Literature Program sponsored a lecture by Steven Totosy, editor of the journal *Comparative Literature and Culture*, on January 25, 201, while he was in town to consult with Charles Watkinson, the Director of the Press. The talk was titled "About the Social Relevance of Comparative Literature and Culture."

Charles Ross, the Director of Comparative Literature, also met with Steven Totosy and Charles Watkinson in Providence during the American Comparative Literature Association meeting in March. In the spring Joann Miller, dean of IDIS, approved Steven Totosy as a visiting researcher at Purdue, giving him on-line access to the Purdue library system.

## From the Director

Disinterested inquiry always seemed to me a worthy goal. Find truth. Leave yourself out of it. That was my motto. But it's not the way the world works. The famed neurologist, it turns out, studies the brain because of an episode of suicidal depression. Women promote women's issues. Muslims study Islam. Advances in gay rights, no surprise, start with gay people. It's not that we can't get out of our own skin. I'm not sure there's a trauma behind every professor of technology. One would expect that good teachers play a role. But it's harder than you think to be a top Italianist if you are not Italian.

With that preliminary, I offer a recent article that took about three years, but also a lifetime, to write as exhibit A in answer to queries from my the Indiana citizens I golf with, about what will happen to literature studies when the new Purdue president cleans house. After initial rejection and massive rewriting, "C. S. Lewis, Augustine, and the Rhythm of the Trinity" appeared in *The Journal of Inkling Studies* 2 (2012). The journal is edited by a professor of theology at Oxford University and published there. Take my word for it, everything in the article was learned from the ground up.



Charles Ross, Director

As this publication suggests, it is impossible, really, to teach World Literature without a healthy quota of disinterested study. For ways some have found to overcome this handicap, see this issue's lead story. While we're on this theme, there is an anecdote, probably apocryphal, of a wise Provost at Purdue who, after seeing the construction of a teetering tower of books a candidate had read, instantly approved the promotion to full professor. "A Daniel come to judgment, yea, a Daniel!" (that's a reference, in Shakespeare, to the guy in the Bible—not what you may be thinking).

It has been a long, dry summer, but a good year. Congratulations to Bing Yan and Yuhan Huang for completing their MA theses, and to Christiane Alcantara, Meng Wang, Luyang Wang, and Kate Koppy for passing their prelims, and thanks to the professors who worked with them, for the most part unpaid, in the heat: Shaun Hughes, Al Lopez, Aparajita Sagar, Jeffrey Turco, Angelica Duran, Lance Duerfahrd, and Daniel Hsieh.

This fall we welcome new Comparative Literature students from such exotic climes as China, Egypt, Spain, and Idaho (tah tum) . . . I thought that was a better punchline line than Indiana, but we have some from here too.

Charles Ross

## Teaching World Literature (continued from Page 1)



Buffy Turner, Comparative Literature Ph.D. Candidate

Russell Keck, another TA, likes to put students into the role of author, narrator, or *dramatis personae*. On a regular basis, he asks students to read or perform texts in front of their classmates or as an entire group. The result of this juxtaposition of performer and audience was that student(s) who took on the former had to place themselves in the proverbial shoes of the writer or speaker, effectively becoming a kind of expert, while the latter had to become critics. Both became close readers, responsible for asking questions and contributing comments. This dynamic relationship enabled the class to grasp firsthand the suspense of Achilles's actions and the gluttonous pride of Agamemnon, the rich imagery of the mythological world of Ovid, and the symbolic importance of movement in Kalidasa's *Sakuntala*, for example.

Buffy Turner, in her section of CMPL267, likes to find the cultural contexts for works of literature. A favorite text of her students last semester was Flaubert's "A Simple Heart," in part, perhaps, because it shifted the class from the literary movement of Romanticism to that of realism—or from Wordsworth's exalted birds and gamboling lambs to a stuffed and battered, but equally revered, parrot. While discussing "A Simple Heart," the class considered the wave of realism, namely its preoccupation with providing "truthful" representations of reality. They looked at René Magritte's famous painting of the pipe ("Ceci n'est pas une pipe"), and asked what it was, if not a pipe. What point was the artist making? How might it apply to writers aiming to provide accurate, direct depictions of reality? What problems inevitably arise? What decisions is the artist compelled to make? Is there any evidence of Flaubert himself struggling with these strictures within "A Simple Heart"?

As an interlude to discussion, we looked for passages that might nod to the project of realism itself, reading aloud, for example, a passage in which the otherwise "objective" narrator momentarily collapses into the perspective of a character, raising to an exclamatory pitch as a bull rushes at Mme. Aubain. Why this sudden exuberance in the narration? What's going on? Did Flaubert inadvertently get carried away in the moment? What might an instance like this suggest?

The class spent considerable time, of course, discussing the heroine of the story as well as the parrot. How does Félicite's capacity to imagine function amidst the surrounding realism? I asked. Is Félicite really "a simple heart"? If so, how are we defining "simple"? A favorite image from the story was that of the tattered, stuffed Loulou, carefully shrouded beneath extravagant vases and other novel relics upon the Church's shrine. The Church in the story, we noticed, appears conspicuously at odds with the objectives of the realist, whereas Félicite's consciousness, though inseparable from concrete realities, seems to have fully digested the Christian message. How, then, do we read Flaubert's final image in which Félicite, dying, glimpses a parrot in the opening heavens? we considered. Is this vision blasphemous? Why, or why not?

Finally, Kate Koppy considers the problem of reading world literature in translation. Although great translations can certainly be works of literature in their own right, on some level to translate is always to betray. The downside of an otherwise amazing course like this one is that the breadth we attempt to cover necessitates reading all the texts in translation.

Yet literature as a medium also has consistent functions across cultures and through time. It serves as a mirror in which we see ourselves. It serves as a discursive space for the exploration of social problems and the proposition of solutions. It serves as a means of protest and also as a means of control. The characters, settings, and events of the texts we read reflect the specific contexts of their original authors and audiences, offering us a window into another time and place.

In an increasingly globalized world, it is critical for every citizen to be aware of the history, values, and traditions of other cultures. "In my World Literature course, says Kate, " my students and I meet the world through its stories as the characters, settings, and events of the texts we read reflect the specific contexts of their original authors and audiences, offering us windows into other times and places.



Program in Comparative Literature  
Beering Hall of Liberal Arts and Education, Room 1289  
100 North University Street  
West Lafayette, IN 47907-2098