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Dealing with the Demands of an Expanding Literary Canon

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## Opinion

# Dealing with the Demands of an Expanding Literary Canon

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Until recently, some would have us believe, it was easy. A literary pantheon existed (in metaphorical stone), and worship of the enshrined was required of any critic or other student of literature seeking to earn his or her wings. Today, most of us know better—as most, I suspect, have known all along. To consider carefully the concept of an artistic canon is, necessarily, to eschew pat answers and address the troubling critical and curricular issues that surround the topic. Like artistic production, a concept which, until recently, tended more often to be discussed in mechanical or ethereal terms than in political ones, canon formation as a concept has lost whatever innocence it might ever in reality have possessed. In exploring issues related to canon formation in this essay, I have foremost in my mind the complex, highly politicized, and too often reflexive process used to determine those literary works that “deserve” to be taught.

Since the world’s literary corpus is far from static, the need for canon reformation should be self-evident. At the very least, provisions must be made for new works to enter into the canon. Americans have, perhaps, been particularly sensitive to this dynamic. Jefferson’s appeal that social renewal take place each generation implies that there be flexibility, and Emerson’s assertion that “each age . . . must write its own books[, for] . . . the books of an older period will not fit this” (49) demands it. Long the subject of scholarly debate, recently the subject of national political concern—most notably through the words of Reagan appointee William Bennett—the currently popular, always thorny issue of the literary canon regularly commands attention in the popular media and has become the subject of passionate scholarly interest. Recent evidence of this concern can be found in *Reconstructing American Literary History*, a 1986 anthology of essays edited by Sacvan Bercovitch and published by the Harvard University Press, and *Discharging the Canon: Cross-cultural Readings in Literature*, a

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gathering of essays edited by Peter Hyland which deals with works from both sides of the Atlantic. Moreover, the Modern Language Association is preparing to publish Jerry W. Ward and LaVonne Brown Ruoff's collection *The New American Literary History*, a book with greater implications for the works of minority and ethnic authors than the Bercovitch anthology; language and literature departments throughout the country are considering the subject of canonical works and authors as part of their ongoing curricular reviews; and new editions of established literary anthologies—their type begging for magnification, the width of their pages shrunk beyond gossamer thinness—keep getting fatter in an attempt to accommodate the perceived needs of those teaching survey courses.

### The High Costs of Privilege

When, in recent years, the issue of a literary canon has been overtly addressed as a political one—whether at the federal, state, university, or departmental level—, two conflicting poles of thought have tended to emerge. The 1960s, we're told, was either a decade of curricular madness or an era of curricular enlightenment. The opposing sides seem to agree on only one thing: that the implications of curricular changes begun during that turbulent time remain with us today. Some would have us believe that, during the sixties, literature departments dynamited the cornerstones of civilization as it was known until that time, whereas others are wont to argue that the dynamite remains to be detonated, that *radical* reform was and is needed but has yet to occur. One group is inclined to counsel that we return with renewed vigor to canonical texts and the value system that undergirds them, while the other would have us abandon the canon, as many have abandoned its associated value structure.

Scholars offering thoughts about canon formation in public forums, myself included, are politicking as well, although until recently most were disinclined to acknowledge the fact. It should come, then, as no surprise that their responses are often as Manichean as those of their overtly political counterparts. J. Hillis Miller, to offer one noteworthy example, frankly admitted what he called his "preservative and conservative instincts" in a 1979 address to the Association of Departments of English that bears the unmistakably Arnoldian title "The Function of Rhetorical Study at the Present Time." "I believe," said Miller, echoing the linguistic structure of the Apostle's Creed, "in the established canon of English and American literature and in the validity of the concept of *privileged texts*. I think it is more important to read Spenser, Shakespeare, or Milton than to read Borges in translation or even, to say the truth, to read Virginia Woolf" (12, emphasis added).<sup>1</sup> Counter-assertions may be found in the writings of militant black, feminist, gay, and Chicano scholars, to mention some of the more obvious possibilities.

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1. It is Robert Hemenway who, with typical incisiveness, points out the parallel between Miller's literary faith statement and the "Credo" (27). How we are to understand the phrase "Borges in translation" is less clear, although Miller may be attempting to make a genuine distinction (in this regard, see his recent MLA "President's Column," in which he remarks "that there is *always* an essential loss in translation" [3]).

While I would be quick to counsel against operating from either extreme, I think it imperative to understand that our extant literary canon was formulated within a political context and that political actions are not known for producing results that serve the members of an entire populace equally well. Any reformation of the canon necessarily involves our implicating our political selves in the judgments that we make. Utter objectivity in these matters is not possible, and we should not delude ourselves into believing that it is.

To the extent that support for maintaining the established literary canon any longer exists, it tends to depend on the objective-sounding, but patently subjective, criterion of *literary merit*, a concept whose implementation, especially since the advent of modernism, has, intentionally or not, had the effect of burying many works of political, social, economic, and/or psychological importance that are understood to lack some essential, albeit largely undefinable, dose of linguistic sophistication. Hillis Miller, for example, in his 1979 ADE address, voiced the once-commonplace, but no longer wholly creditable, observation that “the study of literature should focus on an exploration of . . . [traditional humanistic] values. Moral, metaphysical, and religious questions remain the most important ones, in literature as in life, and one of the best places in which to gain an understanding of them is in the *masterworks* in one’s native tongue” (13, emphasis added). We can recognize these masterworks, says Miller, because they evidence “the best that has been thought and said in our language,”<sup>2</sup> and the way to approach them is through *rhetorical study*—that is, “the study of the function of tropes, the whole panoply of figures, not just metaphor, but metonymy, synecdoche, irony, metalepsis, prosopopoeia, catachresis—the works” (13).

While I do not doubt the basic sincerity of the majority of those who entertain such lofty-seeming curricular objectives, Miller’s humanism fails to provide him with acceptable criteria for determining those “masterworks” that he finds central to a good curriculum. Under the influence of modernism, and the style-centered interpretative schools that developed out of it, linguistically dense works assumed a central position in our literary canon. But these have no more *objective* claim to “privileged” status than do many less stylistically complex writings.

As Barbara Herrnstein Smith points out,

The privileging of a particular set of functions for artworks or works of literature may be (and often is) itself justified on the grounds that the performance of such functions serves some higher individual, social, or transcendent good, such as the psychic health of the reader, the brotherhood of mankind, the glorification of God, the project of human emancipation, or the survival of Western civilization. Any selection from among these alternate and to some extent mutually exclusive higher goods, however, would itself require justification in terms of some yet *higher* good, and there is no absolute stopping point for this theoretically infinite regressus of judgments and justifications. This is not to say that certain functions of artworks do not serve higher—or at least more general, comprehensive, or longer-range—goods

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2. Miller is, of course, here drawing on Matthew Arnold’s famous definition of criticism as “a disinterested endeavor to learn and propogate the best that is known and thought in the world” (371).

better than others. It is to say, however, that our selection among higher goods, like our selection among any array of goods, will always be contingent. (19)

Miller attempts to skirt this dilemma by noting, perhaps too pragmatically, that he does not believe that “an appeal for maintaining traditional humanistic values as a defense of the status quo in literature programs washes well these days, either with students or the holders of the purse strings, the deans and provosts” (“Function” 12). A distinguished professor of English at Yale when he addressed the ADE in 1979, Miller prefers, he says, to combine “the defense of literature on the basis of its affirmation of values . . . with the defense that says *one cannot write well, even write well a business letter or a scientific report, unless one can read well the best that has been thought and said in our language*” (13, emphasis added).

At the institutions I’ve been associated with, less prestigious ones than Yale to be sure, the “holders of the purse strings” would not be swayed by so specious an argument. All of us would be happy if technical writers possessed humanistic values. But it is unclear that writers of scientific reports would be more well-served by studying “the best that has been thought and said,” even if it could be determined, than they would by being afforded repeated exposure to well-drafted scientific reports. An individual’s ability to carry out close readings of the so-called masterpieces of literature is an odd, if not perverse, criterion for determining a person’s competence as a technical writer. I suspect that Miller is here being somewhat disingenuous, shifting vernaculars (“wash,” “holders of the purse strings”) in an attempt to mask his illogic with pseudo-folksy charm.

Apparently the passing of seven years, the last as President of the Modern Language Association, produced some modifications in Miller’s views. While his 1986 “Presidential Address” betrays some vestiges of the “preservative and conservative instincts” he confessed to in 1979 (e.g., “our common culture, however much we might wish it were not so, is less and less a book culture”), the MLA address also finds Miller alluding uncritically to the development of “an array of overlapping and much more fluid canons, often determined by cross-disciplinary orientations and including various kinds of ‘nonliterary’ works side by side with traditional literary ones” (285). And whereas in 1979 he felt that literary study should be driven by rhetorical analysis of literary “masterworks,” in a 1986 “President’s Column” Miller opposed attempts to reestablish “the old fixed canon . . . by fiat,” remarking that such efforts “tend to sidestep our real obligation, which is to teach good reading, critical thinking, and the good writing that is only possible for those who can read and think” (4). The last clause contains a distant echo of Miller’s 1979 address, but his attack on “the old fixed canon” marks a mediation of his former, quite extreme position.

A second line of defense for the canon is that it contains works that have “withstood the test of time.” But this “test,” as Herrnstein Smith points out, has been rigged: It “is not, as the figure implies, an impersonal and impartial mechanism” (29), since culturally dominant persons—those Richard Ohmann refers to throughout his article on canon formation as “gatekeeper intellectuals”—are the ones who create, administer, proctor, take, and grade the exam. Moreover, because canonical works are privileged, they are unlikely to be tested

in the same way that noncanonical works are; their status has the potential of shielding them from close scrutiny. Works long entrenched in the canon become particularly well-insulated from attack if they have spawned kindred works, in the process helping to secure uncritical acceptance of the originals. One well-founded, or perhaps ill-founded, complaint about a noncanonical work may doom it, whereas critics are likely to defend canonical works that contain incidents or sentiments of brutality, of bigotry, of racial, sexual, or national chauvinism. It is especially common for critics to repress or rationalize a text's undesirable characteristics by focusing on the work's "more formal or structural features and/or allegorizing its potentially alienating ideology to some more general ('universal') level where it becomes more tolerable and also more readily interpretable in terms of contemporary ideology. Thus," Herrnstein Smith quips, "we make texts timeless by suppressing their temporality" (28). Although she does not single out a work, Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* would be an obvious candidate, and although lofty ideals abound in *Paradise Lost*, Milton's misogyny is not one of them.

Perhaps the canon's greatest claim to legitimacy rests on its having achieved some sort of consensus. But that consensus, or what passes for it, is weaker now than it was two decades ago, or even one. Moreover, while not damning in and of itself, the recognition that the vast majority of the writers canonized in this country are white males of European descent, coupled with the fact that consensus has traditionally been provided by a group comprised largely of European-descended white males, should lead us at least to *question* the meaning and value of any extant consensus. I am not the first person to wonder aloud why Americans tend to regard the experiences of straight white males as "universal," whereas the experiences of females, gay men, and males of color are more often thought of as "different" or "other." While it is true that American society has become somewhat more tolerant of "difference" in the last several decades, racism, sexism, classism, traditionalism, and elitism—often in their vestigial forms—affect us *all*.<sup>3</sup> Until we sincerely acknowledge this fact, and understand its implications, meaningful reform of the canon cannot occur. Only when we become aware of the high costs of literary privilege and attuned to our personal biases, can we begin to bring about effective change.

### Trying to Reform

Underlying my observations to this point is a deeper issue I would like to examine briefly before directly considering the implications of canon reformation. It is a tough issue, one that critics are more inclined to dance around than to address meaningfully. Robert von Hallberg puts the matter baldly in his introduction to the series of essays on canon formation that appeared in *Critical Inquiry* in 1983 and 1984: If we accept the fact that the authority for an established canon will

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3. John Guillory, whose essay "The Ideology of Canon-Formation" I discuss in a subsequent section of this paper, argues that, as canonical orthodoxy erodes, a heterodoxy which to some degree privileges "difference" will assume orthodoxy's place.

not hold up under close critical scrutiny, the truly salient question to be addressed is “whether new canons, expressing as yet unestablished interests, ought now to be formed” (iv). In other words, should we be engaged in the process of canon reformation, or should we abandon the idea of a canon altogether?

John Guillory would seem to favor the latter course. He argues that, as the authority of orthodoxy and traditions erodes, “the permanent difficulty of forming a canon acceptable to a consensus of the literary culture” becomes manifest (195). The result he envisions is the empowering of “heterodoxy, where the *doxa* [‘glory’] of literature is not a paralyzed allusion to a hidden god but a teaching that will enact discursively the struggle of difference” (195-96). *Difference*, a designation to be avoided under orthodoxy, becomes, in a heterodox context, a sign of possibility and ingenuousness.

Heterodoxy clearly offers *critics* an attractive prospect. It allows them, as Guillory suggests, the opportunity to erect their own structures, free from the demands of a canon that they are almost certain to be bothered by, at least in some of its particulars. But as von Hallberg glumly observes, “The prospect of teaching art without canons . . . is not altogether encouraging” (iv). Literary anthologies, whatever their limitations, whatever the compromises that gave them life, provide the cores around which many undergraduate courses are built, and anthologies depend heavily on a canon. In theory, instructors could obtain the rights to reprint precisely the poems, stories, plays, and so forth they intend to use in a particular course, but most would find the costs, measured in time and dollars, too steep. English departments, moreover, including those whose members might find the idea of an established canon odious, know that the canon helps them to maintain continuity among their courses and programs of study. For these entirely practical—if intellectually questionable—reasons, the canon, in one shape or another, is likely to remain with us.

If then we must, or choose to, deal with a literary canon, and if we understand that it is less sacred than previous generations were wont to admit, what are we to do with it? Never mind that ours is a period of “cultural heterogeneity, political struggle and academic dissensus” (West 7); “the canon,” as Elaine Showalter so eloquently puts it, “does not *want* to be revitalized; it only wants to endure” (19). An antiquated, but apparently benign, humanism is on its side, as is the accumulated weight of centuries of sexism, racism, classism, and elitism; and, perhaps most importantly, so is lethargy. It is not accidental that the canon’s reformation is being carried out most vigorously, in criticism and in the classroom, by those *committed* to change—the young, the traditionally disenfranchised (women, males of color, gays), and members of the political left.

Let me elaborate on a number of related issues, the first of which is that canon reformation need not be—indeed, *should not be*—the prerogative of a small group. Such “reformation” would, in essence, involve our replacing one elitist structure with another. Certain political goals might be well-served by the undertaking, but the needs of students would not. Meaningful reformation of the canon needs to evolve from frank, ongoing discussion among the mass of those involved in the profession of humane letters. Through journals, conferences, and the like, the profession regularly provides forums for canonical debate, but

canon-related issues also need routinely *and passionately* to be discussed by departments and institutions. The perfect complement to a faculty member's being free to explore controversial academic issues is his or her willingness to insist that such issues be explored at all levels of the academy.

In making these observations, I do not mean to suggest that every work in the established canon has been badly chosen or is in some way tainted. Rather, as von Hallberg suggests, we must investigate how fully works' political functions "account for their origins and limit their utility" (iv-v). Reforming the canon means, among other things, attempting to negate the positive presumptions attendant on a work's having been canonized, prior to re-viewing it closely with an eye to continued inclusion or excision. Reformation should not be enacted for its own sake. If it is to be meaningful, reformation must reflect a studied response to the extant canon.

Finally, when I cite lethargy as a major inhibiting factor in the process of canon reformation, I do not mean to imply that English professors are wont to be lazy. The fact is that most have been trained to teach traditional literary figures within traditional subject areas and that, when they teach literature courses, they are inclined to put that training to use. For these persons, the decision to broaden course curricula may mandate their familiarizing themselves not just with a few new works but with an entirely new field—becoming informed, for example, about the many women writers and the substantial body of important feminist criticism that their undergraduate and graduate schools ignored. A definition: Neglecting to read a novel that is on everyone's lips may be an act of laziness. Lethargy is being overwhelmed by the thought of having to read dozens, or even hundreds, of novels, and the criticism on them, in order to offer students a more rounded classroom experience.

In her essay "When Eve Reads Milton," Christine Froula presents a useful critical and pedagogical strategy for those disinclined to alter the canon radically but aware of its shortcomings, as well as for canonical revisionists who continue to teach some troubling canonical works. Froula would have us explore such works in the classroom "not as the mystifying (and self-limiting) 'best' that has been thought and said in the world but as a *visible* past against which we can teach our students to imagine a different future" (343). By underscoring what we understand to be the ideological and figurational shortcomings of canonical texts, rather than attempting to explain such lapses away, we can help our students to become more discerning readers and thinkers. Students do not benefit from teachers' ignoring Milton's or Chaucer's sexism, Twain's apparent (if unintended) racism, Hemingway's homophobia, and the like. And students certainly need to be exposed to the more subtle slights that occur in text after canonical text, such as the figuration of members of racial minorities and women as completely or relatively absent.

For reasons that I have begun to suggest, adding noncanonical authors and works to a course is a more difficult matter than developing strategies for dealing effectively with canonical works. Nina Baym, one of the compilers of the new *Norton Anthology of American Literature* (1985), has spoken of "Ideal Canons and Real Anthologies," a pairing which implies that sacrifice and compromise



are a painful part of the anthologizing process. Those engaged in curricular development are no less intimate with sacrifice and compromise. When one is, for instance, preparing to teach a survey of American literature that meets the demands of both canonical and traditionally noncanonical works, that fifteen-week semester which may have felt short before begins to feel miniscule. The new *Norton Anthology* has more than 5,000 pages in it; I have fewer than half that many classroom minutes with my students each term.

We sometimes get so caught up in deciding which works to teach from among the many that an anthology provides that we lose sight of what and who the compilers have sacrificed. A person leafing through the new *Norton Anthology*, while contemplating how to balance the competing demands of the established canon and the literature of noncanonical women authors, blacks, Hispanics, Asian- and native Americans, will discover, happily, that, of the groups historically excluded from the canon, women and blacks are more or less adequately represented. But native Americans, including Scott Momaday and Leslie Silko; Chicanos, including Tomas Rivera and Rudolfo Anaya; and Asian-Americans, including Frank Chin, are notably absent. That women and blacks have obtained some empowerment in the political sphere has dictated, apparently, that they receive recognition in the new *Norton Anthology*; the politically weak are less fortunate. The anthology's "high-culture" biases are also clear: Oral literatures receive no attention whatsoever.

I make these observations not to vilify the *Norton Anthology*, which offers choices superior to those in many like tomes, but to make clear that difficult, and often conflicting, demands are at work here, as they are for those planning course curricula. Moreover, if teachers do not *use* and demand more of the non-canonical of selections that are included in anthologies, blame for noncanonical underrepresentation cannot be placed solely on compilers and publishers. The economic livelihood of most large commercial publishers depends on their being able to anticipate and meet the needs of teachers and textbook committees. Thus, to adopt a particular anthology and allow its shortcomings to go uncriticized is to sanction a publisher's apparent acumen. Anthologies will continue to support the established canon only as long as we reward their doing so.<sup>4</sup>

### Revisionist Approaches to Curriculum

Many have concluded that a thoroughgoing multi-ethnic approach to American literature is not only necessary, but possible. Among the most active is Paul Lauter, whose 1983 book *Reconstructing American Literature* offers practical information on course design. In a recent essay on "The Literature of America," Lauter urges teachers to undertake a *comparative* study of American literature, in which students "reexamine traditionally-established works from fresh

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4. As Nina Baym points out, publishers have no clear vested interest in the established canon. Indeed, their financial interests would be well-served by the canon's being radically altered every few years, since that would boost new book sales by making old editions worthless. We need to appreciate more fully that we are the ones largely responsible for the canon's stasis.

perspectives provided by minority and white female texts.” As a “favorite example,” he alludes to “the impact [that] reading Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative* and Linda Brent’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* has for students on their reading of Melville, as well as of Emerson and Thoreau” (3). Lauter’s implied one-way emphasis—that examining a noncanonical work may provide a “fresh perspective” on a canonical one—concerns me, but the idea of yoking canonical and noncanonical works for the purpose of *mutual* illumination would seem to hold promise. Studying Langston Hughes’ or Claude McKay’s poetic portraits of New York alongside Hart Crane’s, for example, might prove enriching at a variety of levels, and examining the rituals of Hemingway’s bullring in conjunction with the rituals dramatized in Scott Momaday’s or Leslie Silko’s fiction would provide students with a challenging perspective on literature.

Harold Kolb has a different idea. He suggests “that we think of the literary canon not as a single authoritarian list and not as a pluralistic cacaphony [sic] of numberless voices but as a tiered set of options, relatively stable at one end, relatively open at the other, and joined by the possibility of change” (12). Within the American literary canon, Hawthorne, Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, Whitman, Dickinson, Twain, James, Eliot, Wright, and Faulkner comprise Kolb’s relatively stable group. His second tier includes twenty-one authors beginning with Benjamin Franklin and ending with Scott Momaday. His third tier is densely populated. One surveying American literature would, after establishing his or her own ranked lists, represent all of the writers on the top tier, a substantial number of those on the second, and a smattering of the writers deemed less important. Writers’ positions on each tier would be subject to regular review.

My own attempt in general literature classes is to blend canonical and non-canonical works in similar proportions. I want to familiarize students with influential literature from the received canon, but because virtually all of these works are authored by white males and because many works of similar strength have been composed by persons traditionally barred from the canon, I try to make certain that women and males of color receive ample exposure as well. My goal is not to achieve representative statistical parity for the various groups. Rather, I endeavor to acknowledge in the classroom a basic fact I acknowledge out of it: that people come in at least two sexes, and a variety of colors. To guard against students’ regarding this pluralistic gathering of literary voices as cacophonous, I tend to arrange works into identifiable groupings, often based on gender or race. This practice derives from the premise that a work of high quality that has been excluded from the canon is often rooted in at least two traditions, that of the author’s national literature and that of the literature produced by the author’s racial, ethnic, gender, geographic, or other subgroup. Studying such works as a unit allows students more clearly to discern the context(s) in which the literature operates. Of course, there exist circumstances—and individual works—that demand different treatment. Because the decision to compare, intermix, or group always evolves in a specific context, a predetermined pedagogical strategy is less likely to be successful than one that accounts for both the particular works being

taught and the backgrounds and abilities of the students who are to read these works. Teaching methods need to be at least as flexible as the canon.

As we continue to navigate the turbulent curricular waters of the 1980s, we will be given direction by reader-response theory, reception aesthetics, speech-act and feminist theory, and the like, as an earlier generation was differently guided by the tenets of the then-New Criticism. Some of our voyages will be joyous, others frustrating. But active involvement in the process of canon reformation should lead us, if only fleetingly, to glimpse the shores we seek.

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