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“Once More into the Breach” of Western Literature Courses

Carolyn Ruth Swift

At Rhode Island College, we have been engaged in a debate over the inclusion of literature by white women and people of color in a required two-semester Western Literature course based on the two-volume Norton Anthology of World Literature. Feminists have been supported by the dean and the president, who threatened to veto the course altogether if it did not include some literature by women in its core of required readings. Under protest, the English department voted to add Emily Dickinson to its list. The Norton Anthology includes only one Black writer, Richard Wright, and before the end of the academic year 1981-82, he too will probably be added to the core list. That part of the debate is as yet not completed.

In the two-year history of this conflict, I first protested to my chairperson that the Norton Anthology itself is biased because of its limited offerings by white women and minority writers. Since the professors already teaching the elective pilot course, however, were totally satisfied with Norton’s snippets of “great literature,” I lost that round. As women and men in various departments cried out that the new course was a return to the dark ages of tradition in which white women and minority groups were invisible, the English department made one capitulation: faculty in the program could require their students to read two extra books, if the elective works in the anthology seemed insufficient.

From a feminist perspective, the course is a disaster, but I am hopeful of future changes as the faculty find their students reading mainly outlines of “great literature” rather than the literature itself. I am also hopeful that some of the people teaching the course will find ways of enriching the curriculum to include books by white women and people of color. In the meantime, I offer some of the arguments that I encountered from my opponents, along with those I developed in defense of my position; perhaps others entering the breach will find them useful.

Censorship

When the administration urged the English department to enlarge the canon, some professors raised the question of censorship. Surprisingly, the administration’s request that we add literature by women to the course seemed to these professors similar to being handed a list of acceptable readings. Alone in my department in vocal support of the administration, I argued that there is no similarity between censorship and a request to enlarge the curriculum. Censorship involves the removal of books that some people find objectionable, not the addition of literature to the curriculum. I also added in a letter to my colleagues: “Some might argue that the only censors in this dispute are those who would urge that literary merit can be found only in a narrow curriculum that concentrates on the writings of white, male Europeans, but that type of limited curriculum is in fact not censorship either unless minority books were forbidden.”

Academic Freedom

Some members of my department also thought that academic freedom was violated by the administration’s interference in the English department program. To this, I responded that a college administration has the right to request a department to serve its needs or those of the community (which in the case of Rhode Island College is a student population composed primarily of urban, commuting women). A department or individual can refuse for scholarly or pedagogical reasons to meet these needs, and academic freedom would be violated only if that individual or department were punished. If it were true that requests from a college administration were in themselves violations of academic freedom, then English professors could protest teaching composition on those grounds. Although some of us question the effectiveness of teaching composition in required courses, we do not claim that our freedom has been violated by being asked to teach it. Similarly, our freedom is not violated by requests from students, colleagues, and the administration that we teach literature by white women and minorities. If freedom were violated by being required to teach Emily Dickinson, then probably logic would force us to argue that being required to teach a core curriculum is a violation.

Literary Politics

The primary argument against including literature by white women and people of color in the Western Literature course was that such choices are politically motivated. Department members insisted that books should be taught that are themselves “great,” since the purpose of literature courses, they said, is not to raise consciousness or to satisfy the demands of pressure groups, but to expand literacy and clarity of thought.

Obviously, those who deny the political nature of their teaching cannot be persuaded to teach women writers by being urged that the identity needs of all students require that they see their own image in the readings. I therefore stressed that a curriculum that concentrates on the writings of white, male Europeans has its own political and ideological concerns; the pseudoscientific, political, and ideological beliefs of dead men of the past determined what our generation was educated to regard as great literature. While I knew my colleagues might not be willing to recognize the influence of sexual, racial, and political ideologies on the selection of works that we inherited from our predecessors, they should as critics and scholars be willing to examine afresh the merits of all literature by accepted standards of style and structure. In doing so, they might have to acknowledge the obvious greatness of the works of Emily Dickinson, Jane Austen, George Elliot, and others.

Some opponents of revision attacked me and other proponents as dogmatic and doctrinaire, concerned only with political change. (At one meeting, we were compared to “Marxist revisionists.”) In my letter urging revision, I denied the charge of dogmatism at the same time that I also expressly refused to label my opponents “reactionary elitists.” I urged that we all recognize that both positions in this dispute are held legitimately by people of good will whose critical tastes differ as their training and scholarship have differed.

I pointed out that our clash in fact has long literary and political roots. It descends from the arguments between “the ancients” and “the moderns” which can still be read in sixteenth-century texts that justify...
or deny the merit of reading Chaucer on the grounds that the vernacular
is or is not a literary language. The ideological clash echoes the
nineteenth-century argument over whether Keats was a poet of merit or
simply a "cocksney rhymer." A more recent version appears in Arthur
Miller's defense of "the tragedy of the common man" against those
who argue that tragedy must have proportions larger than daily life. In
all these disputes, those who argue to conserve the literary standards of
the past do so on the grounds of literary purity, while their opponents
argue that new literary standards of style and theme have developed
new forms of literacy. In recalling this long critical battle between
ancients and moderns, I expressed regret that the literary academic is
usually on the conservative side of the dispute.

**Literary and Pedagogical Standards**

When my opponents urged that literature must be free of politics, they
also insisted that standards of "pedagogical legitimacy" and "intellectu­
al consistency" be maintained, although they did not define either of
these goals. Agreeing that pedagogy and consistency are important, I
then pointed out my brand of literary consistency.

I argued that a Western Literature curriculum demonstrates the
varied concerns of imaginative literature throughout Western history.
For example, as Plato's myth of the cave affected the imagery of
Romantic poets, "chain" imagery dominates a Dickinson poem, and
details of prison life appear in the works of Richard Wright. "Shades of
the prison house" have had varied meanings to varied audiences; works
by authors of different historical periods or economic classes, and both
genders, use the prison metaphor to express different types of constrict­
ion. In addition, the public literature of philosophy or drama may use
metaphor differently from the private literature of the lyric. If we are
teaching "private" literature at all, as we are when we teach the
Romantic lyric, we ought to examine the private modes of thought of
people of different backgrounds and both genders. Ideally, a Western
Literature course should explore many varied uses of literary conven­
tions. While some may argue that tracing the varied uses of similar
imagery does not belong in a Western Literature course, they cannot
find such teaching purely "political."

My critical argument was based on Aristotle, who believed that
literature imitates nature by revealing its essence in imaginative lan­
guage. Successful literature is effective because its beauty is awesome,
but views of nature change from period to period, and therefore the
imagery used in literature that is awesome will also change, as do
standards of verisimilitude.

Confronting the charge of politicizing the curriculum, I added that
although I am an Aristotelian critic, democratic politics affect my view
of literature just as aristocratic politics influenced Aristotle's view of
the tragic hero. A modern view of the possible nobility of all human
beings requires me to include in my syllabi, wherever possible, some
books whose standards of verisimilitude and whose vision of reality
include ordinary people. In a Western Literature course this choice
would include books by such major authors as Jane Austen or George
Eliot and Richard Wright or Ralph Ellison, whose characters are based
on first-person empirical observation.

Flaubert, Ibsen, Shakespeare, or Pope—who, my colleagues said,
raise "women's issues"—cannot substitute. At best, they draw their
women characters or their people of color from sympathetic observa­
tion and, at worst, from stereotypes. Although white male writers have
been at the foundation of Western literature, a curriculum that includes
imitations of the nature of white women or people of color without
including their first-person thought processes can only present them as
"outsiders" or as "objects of observation." A curriculum that is limited
to that type of verisimilitude has a severely narrow perspective. It may
even be said to resemble a course that concentrates on fantasy since
white men can only imagine—they cannot know—the interior monolog­
uide of other groups. It distorts Western culture which has its roots
also in the minds of white women and people of color. Thus, it cheats
students of full knowledge of their culture.

One of my colleagues insisted that we must recognize that some
great writers happen to be also racist or sexist. Whether or not feminists
grant that, we can still argue that it is equally true that some great
literary works demonstrate human equality. Most people would be
reluctant to argue that literature that demonstrates equality is necessar­
ily inferior. I pointed out that to argue that we teach Plato, who
believed in slavery, because his logic is demonstrably skillful, does not
require that we overlook the lyricism of Sappho, whose poetic lan­
guage was said by the Greeks to rival any lyric ever written. When the
poet Adrienne Rich suggests that Frederick Douglass's prose is purer
than Milton's, scholars who have only read Milton should hesitate
before they judge whether she is in error. Traditionalists at Rhode
Island College continually urged that our only standards of excellence
should be "what oft is thought but ne'er so well expressed." I responded
that Pope's standard applies to the whole canon; the process has
occurred and is still occurring in literature by white women and by
people of color. Indeed, some thoughts occur and are expressed only in
literature by white women and people of color.

**The Concerns of English Departments**

Some of my colleagues argued that they were trained only to teach the
literature that they in fact want to teach; they protested that they are not
sociologists. I of course responded that teaching literature by white
women and by people of color is as much the concern of English
departments as teaching Irish literature is, that they use sociological
concepts such as "alienation" continually when discussing modern
A Small Survey of Introductory Courses in American Literature

In order to get some sense of the extent to which changes in introductory American literature courses had begun to take place, I conducted a small survey. I collected syllabi from fifty courses in twenty-five representative colleges and universities across the country. These included one- and two-term survey courses, as well as somewhat more specialized introductory courses. Some of the courses used anthologies; others, individual paperbacks. The institutions included major private universities and colleges, like Brown, Williams, the University of Southern California, and Duke; state universities, like Rutgers and New Mexico; and women's colleges, like Barnard and Mount Holyoke. A number of additional responses arrived after I had compiled the results; they simply confirmed what I had found.

I could obviously determine from syllabi only what was being taught, not how the material was being approached—though in some instances the combination of works chosen and their sequence suggested a certain view about them. Still, I was mostly limited to counting the number of times a given American author appeared in the course outlines and the approximate amount of time devoted to that author. The results of these counts are outlined on the chart. In sum, one finds among the first twenty writers one white woman, Emily Dickinson. Among the next ten writers, there are two additional white women, Edith Wharton and Kate Chopin, and one Black man, Ralph Ellison, number thirty. The first fifty writers include six white and no Black women (in addition to the three named: Sarah Orne Jewett, Anne Bradstreet, and Flannery O'Connor), and two Black men (Richard Wright in addition to Ellison).

The influence and limits of anthologies on course content are illustrated by the following facts. Bradstreet and Jewett, as well as writers like Charles Chesnutt (who appears in four courses) and Mary Wilkins Freeman (who appears in three) are present exclusively by virtue of their inclusion in anthologies. Thus, a generation of students will be familiar with one, and probably only one, story by Chesnutt or Freeman, and four or five particular poems by Bradstreet. On the other hand, even though Frederick Douglass's Narrative of his life, one of the most significant and accessible of American autobiographies, appears in its entirety in the most popular anthology, it is used in but one of the courses I surveyed (by contrast, Benjamin Franklin's autobiography appears in eleven courses).

Such facts reflect, in my view, that the racist and sexist assumptions about literary values which helped shape the canon continue to influence curricula, even in courses conducted by otherwise informed and progressive teachers. It sometimes seems more difficult for people to question their graduate training and their cultural presuppositions than old political and social outlooks. In any case, change in the canon and in course work lags many years behind change in the intellectual and political assumptions widely shared in the American academy. The project on "mainstreaming" work in women's studies and minority studies in American literature courses can, in this light, be seen as an effort to bring our curricula up to date with our heterogeneous society and student body.

—Paul Lauter

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<td>Eugene O'Neill</td>
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*Black male writer **White female writer

The numbers show in how many of the fifty courses surveyed each author appears. When authors appear in the same number of courses, they are listed in sequence according to the number of hours within the courses devoted to each.
“Being in a CR Group for One”: A Man’s Experience at the 1981 NWSA Convention at Storrs

John Schilb

You stumble into the preregistration line, knowing you’re the only human being in the lobby with a beard, hoping no one will pay attention to your suddenly unique gender. Your mind flashes back to the Hartford airport a few hours ago: masses of tired businessmen being catered to in the cocktail lounge by “girls” wedged into tight white blouses and even tighter black hot pants and even tighter black high heels. As you sipped your Bloody Mary, you wondered if Susan Griffin had seen the place. But the present snaps you forward with the moment you’ve been nervously anticipating: a woman, in this instance one directly behind you, asks in a tone of forceful curiosity, “Do you teach women’s studies?” Gulp. Now you’re not just sweating from the heat or the crowd or the weight of the suitcases. You take a deep breath, slowly turn, and croak, “Yes.” Then, in a burst of compulsion, a desperate move to gain legitimacy, you whip out your credentials: courses taught, papers given, friendships achieved. Only after several minutes do you realize that she has pretty much accepted your right to be there, that she has replaced her furrowed brow with a smile—that, in fact, you’re being slightly ridiculous. She interrupts to let you know that she is a friend of your college’s president. Would you give him her regards?

The incident foreshadowed the rest of the Convention. As I went from auditorium to dining hall to classroom to book exhibit, acute self-consciousness went along with me, only to experience close encounters of the feminist kind. These exchanges of spirit and insight could never bestow calm upon me, but they enabled me to remember, when I was in danger of forgetting, the worth of a trek to Connecticut in the first place.

Being a man at the NWSA Convention does mean being in a CR group of one. Does mean feeling an obligation to steer clear of particular sessions, like the one on vaginal health—even if the diagram advertising it confronts you every time you line up at the door to the cafeteria. Does mean getting overlooked by certain women handing out leaflets. Does mean being cloistered on the top floor of a dormitory due to its annual meeting as points toward which to travel. We may not like spending valuable time helping them on their way; still, let’s not forget their existence.

John Schilb teaches English and women’s studies at Denison University, where he has recently become Director of the Writing Lab.

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John Schilb

develop their own literary talent. Acquaintance with varied forms of rhyme and imagery, including those used by white women and by people of color, can only increase the literary talents of our students. I wondered aloud whether English scholars should really want to grant sociologists the exclusive right to teach the poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks or the novels of Zora Neale Hurston. Surely as teachers of literature, we should be committed to using literature that will expand the imagination and the cultural understanding of our students by exposing them to new perspectives.

Some Observations on the Value of Obstinacy

In reviewing this conflict, I hope that feminists will obstinately continue to speak out. It is vital that we oppose our colleagues’ obeisance to the sacred bull that literary purity and excellence belong to a few great books taught frequently in the past. Silence allows conservatives to proceed too easily to rob us of our female heritage. Even one voice will encourage others to speak.

Placing Emily Dickinson in the core curriculum of Rhode Island College’s Western Literature course is a small—and almost absurd—victory. Who would imagine in this day and age that it would require a fight? But that course would now be composed entirely of white, male, European writers had scattered voices throughout the college been silent—rather than insistent that the works of their foremothers deserve to be read.

Although we were also vocal about literature by people of color, we have not as yet won that battle, perhaps because the few Black colleagues that we have did not join the argument. Now that Emily Dickinson is on our reading list, more people are suggesting that a Black writer be added also. We will continue to remind our primarily white, male colleagues that in ignoring white women and people of color they cheat themselves and their students as much as the Elizabethans were cheated when they ignored Chaucer.

Carolyn Ruth Swift is Professor of English and teaches women’s studies at Rhode Island College.