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## The Literary Profession and Civic Culture

By Paul A. Cantor

*This essay is the fourth in a series exploring the role of professions in a modern, liberal democratic society and their effect on the civic culture of the nation. For more information about AEI's Program on American Citizenship, visit [www.citizenship-aei.org](http://www.citizenship-aei.org).*

The humanities in general and literature departments in particular have reason to feel beleaguered in today's higher education environment. Their student enrollment numbers are declining in relative and even absolute terms, while departments and programs are accordingly being cut back, consolidated, and even eliminated entirely. It is difficult to measure such matters precisely, but it is safe to say that the prestige of literature departments at the moment is closer to an all-time low than an all-time high.

The well-oiled publicity machines of colleges and universities are quick to trumpet the triumphs of their faculty in the hard sciences. A professor who finds a new cure for a disease is headed straight for the cover of the campus alumni magazine, whereas a new interpretation of *Hamlet* is far less likely to be deemed front-page news in publications designed to impress wealthy donors.

Literature departments may have always felt like the Cinderellas of the academy, but these days they have virtually abandoned any hope that someday their prince will come. Right now they would be happy just to hang on to their old pair of shoes.

### The Humanities in a Democracy

The humanities have always been a tough sell in democratic—and therefore pragmatic—America. The study of literature, especially of classic works, has always smacked of elitism, a luxury to be indulged in by the privileged few, but of little value to society as a whole. The payoff for studying literature is difficult to quantify and even to specify in easily communicable terms.

As a literature professor myself—who recently saw his teaching assistant budget in comparative literature cut a whopping 100 percent—I sympathize with my colleagues when they lament the unwillingness of state legislators, college administrators, and even the general public to rally to the cause of the humanities. I regard many of the efforts to reduce funding for the humanities as ill-conceived, shortsighted, and counterproductive.

Nevertheless, at the risk of being labeled a traitor to my profession, I have to say that it bears some responsibility for its declining fortunes. Literature departments seem to lack a grasp of the importance of public relations in a democratic community. If the American public, with its characteristically democratic insouciance, were to ask the humanities in the academy: “What have you done for us lately?,” I wonder what my colleagues would answer. I am afraid that the obvious reply—“We have deconstructed the epistemological foundations of the hegemonic structures of a white, patriarchal society”—may not cut it in the chambers of state legislatures.

Literature professors assume that studying books is inherently and self-evidently worthwhile; after all, they have been committed to it most of their lives. At some point, they loved reading books, and even if they no longer do so, they still like talking and sometimes writing about them. By a process of self-selection in their classes, they tend to be surrounded by students who share their interest in literature.

As a result, literature professors have a hard time comprehending why anyone would insist that they justify what they are doing to a public skeptical of its value. Their attitude is “Literature has always been taught at

colleges and universities; why shouldn't that situation continue?" But the fact is that the development of literature departments as we know them is the product of the past two centuries and mainly occurred in the 20th. For most of the history of higher education, only literature in Latin was taught in colleges and universities.

The study of the various national literatures, including first British and then American, was only gradually accepted at the college level.<sup>1</sup> These new fields initially had to justify their academic worth. Literature professors today seem to have forgotten that this process was ever necessary. They apparently believe that literature departments can keep operating on intellectual capital they built up a century ago. What makes matters truly problematic for them is that the arguments originally made for the value of teaching literature may no longer be valid, given the way literature is now taught in colleges and universities.

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The cornerstone of the defense of studying literature used to lie in the idea of the Great Books. I am not speaking exclusively of the Great Books movement at Columbia University, the University of Chicago, or St. John's College, although these institutions were certainly important in the development of the concept. I am talking of the vaguer and more widespread notion that some books are great and undergraduates need to be exposed to them. The traditional defense of literature departments rested on the argument that the Great Books are a necessary component of a liberal education.<sup>2</sup> The Great Books move us, they inspire us, they puzzle us, they challenge us—in short, they educate us. Learning to read them, we develop a series of skills that are applicable in many areas of intellectual endeavor.

Moreover, the Great Books were presented as repositories of wisdom, embodying the discoveries and insights painstakingly gained over the centuries by the best minds humanity has produced. The Great Books are precisely those that people keep coming back to over the centuries,

because they seem to have something to say across the centuries. If not exactly timeless, the Great Books are able to transcend the limits of the times in which they were written and remain permanently relevant to subsequent ages.

Thus, the Great Books were viewed as collectively supplying the foundations on which Western civilization rests. Not to study them would be to remain ignorant of the thoughts and beliefs that gave rise to our culture as we have inherited it, thus leaving us incapable of understanding that culture, participating in it, or carrying it further. That is why the Great Books were regarded as central to liberal education, and, as their chief custodians, literature departments earned a respected place in the academy.

## A Civics Lesson

The justification of the Great Books had a specifically civic component in the context of American higher education. They were regarded as especially important for education in a democracy. Democracy requires an informed electorate; that is one reason why public education has always been an important issue in American politics. Simple literacy is crucial to an informed electorate, and what is now called cultural literacy is important as well.

To be familiar with the Great Books is also to be familiar with the ideas and attitudes that created the United States in the first place and that have continued to guide and shape its development as a nation. It is no accident that the first burst of enthusiasm for the Great Books movement came during and right after World War I and the second came during and right after World War II. Both wars presented threats to American democracy from what were perceived to be alien and nondemocratic cultural traditions. The educational response was to stress the need to provide Americans with a firm grasp of the traditions that gave birth to their cherished democratic institutions. Studying ancient Greek books might at first seem like a frivolous exercise in antiquarianism, but the Greeks invented democracy and can still teach us something about the concept.

In 1945, Harvard University produced a report on how to reform secondary and higher education in America. Published just as World War II was ending, this widely read report was significantly entitled *General Education in a Free Society*. It called for the strengthening of the humanities component in American education at all levels.

In his preface to the report, Harvard President James Bryant Conant wrote: "Our purpose is to cultivate in the largest possible number of our future citizens an appreciation of both the responsibilities and the benefits which

come to them because they are Americans and are free.”<sup>3</sup> As this patriotic rhetoric indicates, in the aftermath of World War II the Great Books became standard issue in the arsenal of democracy. This kind of political argument for general education underwrote political support for the humanities.

Thus in the middle of the 20th century, literature departments did not have to commit themselves to the distinctive Great Books approach to bask in their reflected glory. As long as the study of literature was linked to the broader idea of the Great Books, English and other language departments could claim to be contributing to the cause of democracy in America. Paradoxical as it may at first sound, literature departments enjoyed their greatest prestige at the height of the Cold War. One might think that, faced with the menace of Soviet communism, the United States had more on its mind than the explication of literary texts. But the Cold War was in part a cultural conflict, and studying the Western literary tradition was presented as a kind of civic duty in the 1950s.

There was much that was intellectually questionable in the Great Books movement. I for one have always been skeptical about the famous claim that the Great Books teach themselves. I regard Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* as a Very Great Book, but although I did read it on my own, I did so only with the help of several commentaries (not to mention a translation).

Still, whatever the intellectual shortcomings of the Great Books movement may have been, it offered a wonderful sales pitch for the study of literature. It provided a readily comprehensible and persuasive justification of the role of literature departments in higher education. Public officials, college administrators, and above all parents can appreciate why students should study something called the Great Books. I have always been touched by the visible signs of pride I have seen in my students’ parents when they realize that their children are encountering the likes of Homer, Sophocles, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, Austen, and Dostoyevsky in their courses. I have often heard them say something along the lines of: “This is what I sent my child to college for.”

## Expanding the Canon

It thus did not bode well for the public profile of literature departments when in the late 1960s they began to define themselves in terms of an attack on the Great Books. This transformation in the profession initially focused on the so-called Canon Wars, an assault on the lists of Great Books that had for several decades been the centerpiece of

college education in the humanities. On campus after campus, both faculty and students began to challenge the domination of Dead White European Males on the reading lists of literature courses. Appealing to notions of social justice and capitalizing on a wave of radicalism that swept American campuses in conjunction with opposition to the Vietnam War, agitators succeeded in opening up the canon of works studied in literature classes.

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Of course, the traditional canon had never been as narrow or restricted as its critics claimed. Still, the changes that began in the late 1960s were substantial. Works by women were added to syllabi, and also works by hitherto unrepresented or underrepresented minorities, such as African Americans and Mexican Americans. Literature departments broke with their traditional focus on European and American authors and began to embrace works from all around the world, especially from former colonial areas that had freed themselves from European control in the 20th century.

The Canon Wars quickly resulted in major and lasting changes in the institutional framework of literary study in the United States. The development of new fields such as Women’s Studies, African American Studies, and Postcolonial Studies altered the landscape of higher education, resulting in the creation of new programs and whole new departments, substantial personnel shifts in existing departments, and a rewriting of syllabi and curricula throughout the profession.

Many traditionalists lamented and criticized this trend, but it had legitimate intellectual justifications. The idea of bringing a wider range of literature under analysis in itself sounds reasonable, and in many ways it enriched and enlivened literary studies. I confess to having participated in the process myself. I am considered an expert on Mary Shelley and have also published on major postcolonial authors such as Chinua Achebe, J. M. Coetzee, and Salman Rushdie. I was one of the first to teach courses on postcolonial literature at the University of Virginia and helped create the first required undergraduate survey

course in the field in my department. Thus I hope that I will not be dismissed as an unthinking reactionary when I argue that, for all the genuine intellectual benefits that accrued from broadening the canon, the result was to create a public relations problem for literature departments.

To understand that problem, one need only look back at the arguments originally made on behalf of the Great Books, arguments that helped propel the humanities to a central place in American liberal education in the mid-20th century. Consider this passage from the Harvard general education report:

The root argument for using, wherever possible, great works in literature courses is briefly this: ours is at present a centrifugal culture in extreme need of unifying forces. We are in real danger . . . of losing touch with the human past and therefore with one another. . . . It is through the poetry, the imaginative understanding of things in common, that minds most deeply and essentially meet. Therefore the books . . . which have been the great meeting points and have most influenced the men who in turn have influenced others are those we can least afford to neglect. . . . It is a safe assumption that a work which has delighted and instructed many generations of ordinary readers and been to them a common possession . . . is to be preferred to a product which is on its way to limbo and will not link together even two school generations.<sup>4</sup>

The centrifugal impulse of opening up the canon runs directly contrary to this vision of the Great Books and literary study as a centripetal force in American education. What attracted the public to the Harvard general education plan, and made it so influential, was precisely the hope it offered of providing some common cultural ground in academic life. The Great Books approach made sure that students had a body of material in common that they could discuss and argue about both in and out of class. Moreover, with these works focused on the Western tradition, literature departments gained respect as the conservators and custodians of the cultural inheritance of democracy.

It is easy to spot unargued assumptions in this passage from the Harvard report, and several of its claims could reasonably be disputed. For one thing, defenders of the established canon tended to exaggerate the unity of the Western tradition, forgetting that the West has been divided by bitter intellectual, cultural, political, and religious controversies over the centuries and that at its core stands the irreconcilable opposition between Jerusalem and Athens.

But, whatever its intellectual limitations, this passage certainly makes for good public relations for literary study

in America. Indeed, the report suggested that, if literary study were not strengthened, American democracy might be imperiled. To be sure, defenders of today's broadened canon are not lacking in ringing political rhetoric of their own. Invoking the value of diversity, they argue that the old canon was monocultural, whereas our new multicultural world demands a new multicultural canon. The broadening of the canon has with some justice been presented as an act of democratization itself, the cultural equivalent of the political enfranchisement of women, minorities, and other once underrepresented portions of the population. That is why, cast as in effect a civil rights issue, the expansion of the literary canon generally gained support from college administrators, state legislators, and other elements of the public.

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Nevertheless, it has proved difficult to sell the notion of an expanded canon to the general public on purely pedagogical grounds. At a certain point of expansion, a broadened canon ceases to be a canon in any meaningful sense. In its biblical origins, the term "canon" implies that certain books are included and all the others are excluded. A fully open-ended canon is a contradiction in terms. And it does not work in practice if the function of a literary canon is to provide common cultural ground for students.

The negative pedagogical results of expanding the canon are readily apparent today. I recently had dinner with a group of bright, intellectually lively English majors from my department. They clearly loved talking about literature—the problem was that none of them had read the same books. One was excited to tell the others about the discoveries she had made in a course on 18th-century women authors; another was speaking enthusiastically about the books he had been reading in a course on African fiction; a third had just taken a course in Ireland on Irish authors and wanted to discourse on postcolonialism in Irish literature.

It was gratifying to see these students excited about literature, but it was discouraging that they were talking

past each other and could not get much beyond the stage of saying: “You should read X” or “You have to get to know Y.” To be honest, their common cultural ground turned out to be several television shows they were all watching, and we ended up discussing them more meaningfully than we did any works of literature.

Thus, whatever may be said in favor of the multiculturalism of contemporary literature departments, it is not providing an answer to the problems that the program of general education and the Great Books originally addressed. Over the past few decades, literature departments have become more divided than ever into specialized fields, and the sense that they are engaged in any kind of common enterprise has been increasingly diluted. This situation creates problems for literature professors in the most professional aspects of their work.

When reviewing colleagues’ writings for purposes such as promotion, or even supervising doctoral dissertations, members of literature departments are constantly finding themselves at the limits of their expertise and are frequently forced to pass judgment on a person writing about a work of literature they themselves have never read. Again, one may applaud the broadening of the range of literary study while still admitting that it has had some unanticipated and unfortunate consequences in pedagogical terms. Above all, what might be described as the balkanization of literature departments—their splitting into ever-smaller ethnic or cultural units—makes it increasingly difficult to find professors who are willing—or even able—to teach the kind of basic survey courses that students need to introduce them to literary study.

### **From Cultural Monuments to Historical Artifacts**

Literature departments would have less of a public relations problem today if they had merely disputed which works should be on the list of Great Books and not the very notion of Great Books itself. Literature professors might have confined themselves to the claim: “We have some new masterpieces we would like to add to the list of Great Books.” I would happily include J. M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* or Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* in any list of Great Books.

Perhaps the most famous of all works of postcolonial fiction, Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, can easily be brought into a meaningful relation with the Western tradition. It takes its title from a canonical poem by William Butler Yeats (“The Second Coming”) and its treatment of oracles, curses, and flawed heroism resonates with one of

the fountainheads of Western literature, Greek tragedy. Literature departments could have found ways of expanding the canon that would have maintained the notion that the new books included are of broad and lasting interest and can be linked to the great works of the past, thus still serving the traditional function of general education.

But literature professors instead chose to attack canonical lists in a way that undermined the very notion of Great Books. They stressed the historicity and arbitrariness of all canons. They denied that the traditional Great Books had any intrinsic merits that entitled them to their place on the list. They argued that the canon was purely the creation of literature professors themselves, who had imposed it on generation after generation of captive students. The list of Great Books was said to reflect the biases of the literary professoriate; a body of white, European males produced a canon consisting largely of white, European males (with some Americans thrown in).

The argument about the canon shifted the focus of the debate from the question of literary merit to the issue of democratic representation. Given how well-written *Midnight’s Children* is, it would have been natural to argue, “This book is as worthy of study as *David Copperfield*.” To some extent, this claim has in fact been made, but it quickly became mixed up with a different kind of argument: “As an author from the postcolonial world, Salman Rushdie deserves to have his voice heard in the canon.” According to the first argument, candidates for inclusion in the canon need to meet well-developed criteria of literary merit, demonstrating, for example, the formal skills usually associated with artistic genius. But in the last decades of the 20th century, authors came to be valued for something new—the way they represent what is called a “subject position,” how they give voice to their race, class, or gender.<sup>5</sup>

The new focus on subject position in literary studies meant that the traditional canonical authors came under suspicion and were scrutinized for the ways in which they were bound by their race, class, and gender. That involved reinserting them in the particular historical moments in which they wrote and analyzing how their books embody the particular prejudices of their ages. Gone was the idea that the Great Books are in any way timeless; far from transcending the limits of their particular historical moments, all authors are now viewed as deeply embedded in the very specific circumstances in which they lived.

The premise of the Great Books idea is that we can learn from the past. Having stood the test of time, these books open up a broader perspective on our particular historical moment, calling our attention, for example, to

the arguments that once had to be made for the democratic institutions that we now take for granted. The revolution in literary studies reversed this position and now claims that in effect the past can learn from us.

Coming later in history, we have supposedly advanced beyond the limited horizons of authors such as Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare and are in a position to judge where they went wrong. More enlightened about issues of race, class, and gender, we can expose the biases that inevitably compromised the books of earlier ages. It is indeed our duty to do so. This is how contemporary literature professors managed to turn the Great Books from cultural monuments into historical artifacts.

### No More Masterpieces

The historicism of contemporary literature departments is by no means unprecedented. Venerable 19th-century thinkers such as G. W. F. Hegel and Hippolyte Taine treated authors as the products of specific historical moments, and much of literary scholarship over the years has been historical in nature. And in some cases, it seems reasonable to pride ourselves on the superiority of our historical perspective. The Homeric epics are premised on the idea that slavery is natural; surely it marks an advance that we now believe that “all men are created equal.”

But when applied relentlessly, this historicism seriously weakens the case for the value of studying the literature of the past. Classic works no longer seem to have anything to teach us; at most, we can analyze their limited horizons and demonstrate how we have advanced beyond them. The history of literature becomes like the history of science. It is of some antiquarian interest to read the works of Ptolemy and learn what astronomy was like when people believed that the sun moved around the earth. But nobody today expects to learn any genuine astronomy from Ptolemy. Has Homer become the Ptolemy of literature?

This approach threatens even to weaken the appeal of the new additions to the canon. Literature professors frequently argue that the classic works of European literature, produced as they were at the metropolitan centers of European empire, are both colonialist and racist in ideology. Achebe’s famous essay on Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* is a classic expression of this view.<sup>6</sup> We are supposed to add works by writers such as Achebe and Rushdie to the curriculum to compensate for European biases.

But do these works finally tell the truth about the world, or are they themselves the product of new kinds of biases? Are we merely replacing colonialist prejudice with

postcolonialist prejudice? I suspect that most literature professors would like to think that the new works they champion are giving us a true picture of the world, but they do not give reasons why contemporary authors should be free of the kind of limited horizons that supposedly have imprisoned all previous authors.

Is it just that we live at a privileged moment of history when the real truth has finally been revealed? But have not all ages believed that they lived at such a privileged moment? Will literature professors centuries from now look back on our day and be struck by the quaint, old-fashioned prejudices that shaped our conception of the canon?

Literature departments have called into question the very idea of a literary masterpiece. There are no Great Books anymore—just books.

Once professors deny any timeless dimension in literature, it becomes difficult for them to make a case for the lasting value of studying any work of literature. Have we realized the fears of the Harvard report and ended up studying works that will be outdated in a single generation? We are now told that the list of works included in the canon at any given moment simply reflects the prejudices of that moment. There seems to be no rational principle on which one could justify preferring the study of one work to that of another. In such circumstances, it is no wonder that the public is losing its faith that the study of literature is essential to a liberal education.

The public used to be given reasons to believe that literature departments teach the genuine masterpieces that constitute the core of our cultural heritage; that is what the Harvard report on general education assured them. But now literature departments have called into question the very idea of a literary masterpiece. There are no Great Books anymore—just books. Literature professors now believe that the claim that some books are greater than others was merely the product of prejudice on behalf of Dead White European Males.

Today all books are created equal; the idea of democracy has spread to culture. Literature professors in fact prefer to speak of texts, rather than books. And just about anything can be a text—a film, a television show, a photograph, an advertisement, a blog. Literature departments

now preside over a vast universe of texts, none of which are supposed to be ranked above the others or given any privileged status. After all, in terms of sheer representative value, each expresses a distinctive subject position.

Take the case of *King Lear*, arguably Shakespeare's greatest play and thus arguably the greatest of all Great Books. Surely, one would think, *King Lear* has retained its status as a masterpiece even in today's critical climate. Yet in a volume in a series called *Writers and Their Works*, designed to introduce general readers to literary classics, a well-respected contemporary critic named Terence Hawkes has this to say about *King Lear*:

Most Shakespeare critics would rank *King Lear* among Shakespeare's masterpieces. Its assured position in the canon is reflected in the ease with which it finds its way on to most "English" syllabuses throughout the world. It seems, more perhaps than any other of the Bard's works, to focus on the eternal verities, to express them with consummate skill, and in the process to communicate enduring truths about the unchanging human condition.

Yet no historicist view of the play can countenance such "universalist" attributions of permanence, or such "essentialist" claims to the transcendence of time, location, and way of life. It is surely questionable whether any human enterprise can operate beyond the limitations of culture and history, factors which shape all human activity. . . .

Any consideration of *King Lear*'s stage history before the twentieth century will immediately cast doubt on the assumption that the play is clearly and transcendently recognizable as a "masterpiece." . . .

In other words, *King Lear* turns out to be a text whose history, in terms of stage performance, critical response, and its own material existence, quite clearly lacks the sort of continuing identity and coherence that we expect great works of art to have.<sup>7</sup>

I quote this passage at length to demonstrate that I am not caricaturing contemporary criticism (this passage is fully representative of its tendencies). Contemporary critics have the nerve to question whether even *King Lear* is a masterpiece. Hawkes can barely contain his contempt for the old-fashioned notion that a work of literature might have some kind of timeless or universal meaning and value.

I will not waste time refuting Hawkes's claims because they are not what is at issue here.<sup>8</sup> I wish only to emphasize the consequences for the public status of literary studies if Hawkes turned out to be right. If *King Lear* is not a masterpiece, then no work is. And that would significantly diminish the worth of literature departments

in the public's eye. Indeed, why should the public bother reading Hawkes's book if *King Lear* is as flawed and time-bound as he says it is?

One senses a bit of a panic on the part of Hawkes's publisher, Northcote House, when one finds on the back cover of the book: "*King Lear* is generally thought to be Shakespeare's masterpiece." Truth in advertising would have required this sentence to be completed: "but in this groundbreaking book Terence Hawkes shows that *King Lear* is no masterpiece." In withholding this fact, the publicity department at Northcote House knew exactly what it was doing. It wanted people to buy the book, and was well aware that the general public is interested in masterpieces, not historical curiosities.

## The Public Be Damned

The split between Hawkes and his publisher's publicity department is emblematic of the larger split between literature professors and the general public today. The literary profession is collectively shooting itself in the foot. For good or ill, the public wants masterpieces; it craves Great Books. If it is going to shell out money to buy books of literary criticism or to support literary study in higher education, it understandably expects works of literature to be of lasting meaning and value. For a long time, the defenders of literary study offered just that rationale for a humanistic education (as witness the Harvard report).

Now literature professors are trying to coast on a reputation they earned a few generations ago in pursuit of a kind of literary study they no longer uphold (and in many cases openly scorn). I do not question their right to chart their own course of literary study. But they ought to be willing to face the public relations consequences of their decisions. They should not pretend that, in the past 50 years or so, nothing has been altered in the academy and that the public will continue supporting humanities departments as if they had not fundamentally changed course.

In sum, the traditional defense of studying literature in higher education focused on the cultural importance of literary masterpieces, which transcend the horizons of the ages in which they were written and still speak to us across the centuries. Together they constitute an invaluable part of our cultural heritage and thus stand at the core of a liberal education. Defenders of a Great Books general education, such as the Harvard report, did not hesitate to inject a civic component into their argument.<sup>9</sup> They unabashedly insisted that a humanities education builds good citizens and is therefore good for American democracy.

Today's literature professors would not be caught dead saying anything as crassly patriotic as that. They deny that there is anything timeless in literature and even question whether such a thing as a literary masterpiece is possible. They are embarrassed to speak on behalf of Western civilization and its values.

On the contrary, they are far more likely to dwell on the evils of Western civilization and to champion the alternatives, calling, for example, for a non-Western civilization requirement in curricula. Although they do all this in the name of democratic principles, they would hesitate to identify America with the cause of democracy. They generally adopt an oppositional stance with regard to America and its institutions (especially its capitalism) and devote their literary studies to exposing everything that is wrong with American society.

Literature professors believe that on educational issues—and, incidentally, many unrelated matters—they know better than the American people what is good for them. Thus they expect the public to give them a blank check to fund their activities, no matter what directions they pursue. Literature professors should face up to the fact that they have broken the tacit agreement they once had with the American public about the relation of the humanities to a broader American civic culture. Much of what they do has genuine intellectual merit, but they need to demonstrate that fact in terms the public can understand. And they need to consider how they might reconnect with older traditions of general education and the Great Books.

Fortunately, almost no one is calling for the abolition of literary study in higher education. Shakespeare still has a lot of friends in high places and in the general population. But if literature professors would like to see public support for the humanities return to earlier levels of enthusiasm, they cannot continue operating their programs as their own private intellectual preserves. They must open up literary study to the broader, and in many respects more fundamental, educational concerns of the American people. If, however, literature professors persist in adopting an oppositional stance in America, they should not be surprised if in return they encounter increasingly strong opposition from the American public.

### Author Biography

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### Notes

1. For the development of modern language departments, see Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). This book is perhaps the best overview of the development of literary studies in American higher education and is useful for understanding many of the subjects I discuss, including general education and the Great Books movement.

2. Probably the most famous defense of the Great Books idea is to be found in Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987). For discussion of the Great Books idea from professors who participated in its development at Columbia, see Jacques Barzun, "The Classics off the Shelf," *Teacher in America* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1954), 132–46, and Lionel Trilling, "The Uncertain Future of the Humanistic Educational Ideal," *The Last Decade: Essays and Reviews, 1965–75* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 160–76.

3. Harvard Committee, *General Education in a Free Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1945), xv.

4. *Ibid.*, 108–09.

5. For further discussion of this development, see my essay "When Is Diversity Not Diversity: A Brief History of the English Department," in Robert Maranto, Richard E. Redding, and Frederick M. Hess, eds., *The Politically Correct University: Problems, Scope, and Reforms* (Washington, DC: AEI, 2009), 159–74.

6. Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 1–20.

7. Terence Hawkes, *William Shakespeare: King Lear* (Plymouth, UK: Northcote House, 1995), 58, 60.

8. I reviewed the Hawkes book in "Instead of a Masterpiece," *In-Between: Essays & Studies in Literary Criticism*, 5 (1996): 187–93.

9. Trilling speaks nostalgically of this moment in the past: "It is not my intention to review in anything like full detail the career of the ideal of general education in this country over the last half-century, an ideal which . . . was consciously humanistic in its emphasis and which insisted in the traditional humanistic way that the best citizen is the person who has learned from the great minds and souls of the past how beautiful reason and virtue are and how difficult to attain. The purpose of my historical reference has been only to put us in mind of how recently it could be conceived that a traditionally humanistic education had a bearing upon contemporary American life and deserved to be given an honored place in it" (*The Last Decade*, 165).

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