

Message from the President

My friend and I met for lunch at a restaurant aptly named Cafe Word of Mouth. She was in the final throes of writing her doctoral dissertation on designing “gender-neutral” curricula for teaching literature in secondary schools. I asked if she had seen a National Alumni Forum survey revealing that two-thirds of the seventy top colleges and universities in the United States had dropped Shakespeare from their English major requirements. “Marketing Miss America” and “Gangster Films” have replaced the classics, according to the survey report, “The Shakespeare File: What English Majors are Really Studying.”

“The decision to study Shakespeare is purely political,” declared my friend, who also instructs aspiring teachers at a major university in New York. When she offered to “deconstruct” Shakespeare for me, I begged her not to.

And, yes, she did refer to him—with disdain—as a “dead white European male.”

My friend, who is not of African-American origin, believes that reading works by two living African-American women writers she named (*I have enjoyed books by both*) is just as valuable to an English major as reading Shakespeare. She could not think of anything important sacrificed by eliminating Shakespeare from the curriculum.

I murmured a few words about time-tested masterpieces, context, enrichment of the language and culture and the ability to recognize the source of a common reference such as “To be or not to be.” She jotted down a few notes. I cited, as well, JASNA’s vision and mission statements: “Because literature has the power to change and enrich our lives, we want to see more people reading the great authors, with special emphasis on Jane Austen. Our mission is to foster among the widest number of readers the study, appreciation and understanding of Jane Austen’s works, her life and her genius.”

My friend said: “An English major can have just as happy a life reading Toni Morrison or Zora Neale Thurston.”

I thought: “Just as happy a life?”

I said: “You’re writing your thesis. Okay, play the game, satisfy your professors. Someday, because you are an intelligent woman, I have to believe you’ll outgrow this.”

Having recently read *Literature Lost*, an analysis of the devastating impact of “political correctness” on the teaching of literature by John Ellis (Yale University Press, 1997), I am more doubtful. A professor-emeritus of German literature at the University of California at Santa Cruz, Ellis writes that “the question of oppression by virtue of race, gender and class” now reigns supreme in the college

classroom as "the primary issue in all literary texts." Some instructors go so far as to reject drawing any distinctions between literature and other kinds of writing because of their commitment to the centrality of politics. In class discussions, Ellis writes, a single issue, "power," has displaced and undermined all other motivations for human behavior, such as love, loyalty, fulfillment, ambition, achievement, friendship and intellectual curiosity.

A grim view of humanity indeed, and one contributing to a frighteningly coercive atmosphere: Literary scholars who deviate from the establishment line are derided as moral outcasts or unsophisticated simpletons with antediluvian political leanings. Ellis predicts a long, hard road back to a functioning literature program on the American college campus.

JASNA, on its own, cannot reverse this alarming abandonment of literary classics and distortion in teaching them; but our support of such projects as the Young Writers Workshop at the AGM; AGM registration scholarships for secondary school teachers; the Illinois/Indiana Region's upcoming guide for teaching Jane Austen, and the *Courage to Write* series for public radio represents advocacy and outreach consistent with our stated mission. It is in our power, as well, to offer platforms to embattled critics and scholars who refuse to be intimidated by the accusation of "elitism" when they teach appreciation of the great literary masterpieces of western civilization, such as Jane Austen's novels. We can contribute to the quality of reading and teaching in our communities by speaking and/or performing at public institutions, encouraging teachers and students who have been touched by the genius of our favorite author, and welcoming other serious readers to our ranks.

ELSA A. SOLENDER

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