

Issues

Paradigm Lost? The Fate of Literature in the Age of Theory

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WHAT FOLLOWS HERE ARE THE PAPERS from the special plenary session "Paradigm Lost?" at the annual meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America, in Washington, D.C., on 28 March 1997. The session was convened to consider the impact of theory on the teaching of Shakespeare and the extent to which the collective theoretical debates within the profession are redefining our role and responsibilities as educators and refashioning our identity as teachers of Shakespeare. In my role as convener, I hoped to steer the discussion away from the tug-of-war between the political Right and Left so that we could understand the changes brought about by the pursuit of theory and come to a consensus about the impact of these changes on the liberal-arts curriculum and the training that our students and future teachers are receiving in our undergraduate and graduate classrooms.

The idea for the session came to me at a meeting of my university's English department, where discussion veered from a specific English course to broad curriculum matters and thence to the place of Shakespeare in the university's undergraduate core curriculum. At Xavier, a Jesuit university, we have a rigorous core curriculum in such areas as philosophy, theology, English, and the sciences. This curriculum grows out of a philosophy of general education that stresses the development of critical and creative thinking and (to quote the Xavier University Core Curriculum Papers) explores "multiple avenues to truth that reflect the complexity of the human spirit" and that lead, finally, to "responsible moral action." The Ethics/Religion and Society focus endeavors "to make students sensitive to the ethical issues that can be raised in many disciplines" and seeks to offer an integrated study of ethical issues in a Jesuit context. Within this focus a course entitled "Literature and the Moral Imagination" studies "the representation of moral conflict and moral decision in a variety of important literary texts," emphasizing the analysis of, response to, and interpretation of such texts.

In practice, however, "Literature and the Moral Imagination" addresses widely divergent topics and themes and takes different shapes in a sort of free-for-all approach. The course sometimes includes texts that are not "literature," let alone "important literary texts." Some faculty argued that the course should, at least in part, deal with great books. A Victorian scholar offered what seemed to me a rather modest proposal. He suggested that the overall selection of texts for the course should remain open, except for one Shakespeare play, any play.¹ He apparently assumed, first, that no one would question Shakespeare's unassailable canonical position in English literature, and, second, that all undergraduate students should study at least one play by Shakespeare. To the amazement of many, a few members of the department argued from various intellectual, theoretical, and personal positions against the inclusion of a Shakespeare play in a course on literature and the moral imagination; nor did these members appear disturbed by the fact that the vast majority of undergraduate students at Xavier University can graduate without ever encountering a Shakespeare play. For the first time in my career, I entertained the thought that perhaps Ben Jonson was wrong when he wrote that Shakespeare "was not of an age, but for all time!"

¹ This would follow the model of the philosophy course in the Ethics/Religion and Society focus, in which all sections read Plato's *Republic*.

The rift within the English department mirrors a rift, on the one hand, between English departments and the rest of the university and, on the other, between academia and the culture at large. Our students seem to want more of the classics, not less. Our scientists, theologians, philosophers, and economists expect our graduates to be well read in such writers as Shakespeare, Dante, Milton, Austen, and Dickinson. The press castigates English departments for a neglect of the classics. Sensational newspaper headlines stare us in the face: "Vulgarity Run Amok in the Halls of Ivy: English Departments Have Marginalized the Greats in Favor of the Trendy."² Others blame multiculturalism for the woes of our higher-education system.³ Theorist Frank Lentricchia forsakes theory and announces to the world a contradiction between his public self (the disgruntled "'Dirty Harry of literary theory'") and his private self (the lovable, loving reader and teacher of literature).⁴

Two questions naturally come to mind: Could our theoretical debates be somehow responsible for this state of affairs? Is theory displacing literature in the classroom? Obviously, much of the criticism leveled at English departments reflects a backlash against what is perceived as the prevailing liberal political agenda of academic circles. Yet the criticism comes at a time when literary theory itself may be undergoing a profound transformation. I cannot remember the last time I heard the word *logocentrism* at an annual meeting of the Shakespeare Association. The *always-already*s of deconstruction date one's prose as surely as do the crudest forms of Freudianism or of the social history inspired by Lawrence Stone. We are clearly in a moment of transition. If the period from the early 1980s to mid-90s was the heyday of theory, we are now seeing what once seemed unshakable theories lose their vitality. Rather than expressions of textual, cultural, or philosophical verities, literary theory is increasingly being viewed as mere speculation. Within U.S. and British academic circles, however, theory has proven to be a cat with nine lives, merging and shifting to produce diverse theoretical clusters, such as cultural studies, new historicism, and various brands of gender criticism.

"Paradigm Lost?" did not seek to examine the role of theory in our lives or to analyze theory as an agent of social reformation or to question the legitimacy of theory as an intellectual pursuit. Although we tried not to frame the debate in terms of the primacy of literature over theory or vice versa, this issue inevitably emerged. As teachers of Shakespeare, we were primarily concerned with the classroom and practical pedagogical questions: First, is there a place for theory in the undergraduate Shakespeare survey? Second, is theory indeed displacing literature in the *literature* classroom?

The issue of "displacement" often comes up in the discussion of the fate of literature in the age of theory. The argument can be summarized as follows: Theory has precipitated a crisis of identity for English departments. English as a discipline has lost its sense of mission and purpose. Through deconstruction, new historicism, cultural studies, and gender studies, we have seen the wholesale importation of methodologies and interests of such disciplines as history, anthropology, and philosophy. These other disciplines shape and determine the questions and issues raised in the literature classroom. Literature may thus become an interest secondary to these other disciplines. Having assumed a predominantly anthropological and historical focus, literary studies and scholarship are neglecting or abandoning the literary imagination as their unique and legitimate object of enquiry. Works of the human imagination are becoming footnotes in larger historical, cultural pursuits.

² Jonathan Yardley, "Vulgarity Run Amok in the Halls of Ivy: English Departments Have Marginalized the Greats in Favor of the Trendy," *The Kansas City Star*, 5 January 1997, p. B2.

³ See, for example, William H. Honan, "Curriculum and Culture: New Round Is Opened In a Scholarly Fistfight," *The New York Times*, 21 August 1996, p. A14.

⁴ Frank Lentricchia, "Last Will and Testament of an Ex-Literary Critic," *Lingua Franca* Sept./Oct. (1996): 59-67, esp. 59-60. He writes: "In private, I was tranquility personified; in public, an actor in the endless strife and divisiveness of argument, the 'Dirty Harry of literary theory,' as one reviewer put it. My secret life eventually was to be shared with students in my undergraduate classroom, while my public life as literary intellectual continued to be played out in the graduate classroom. Two types of classroom: two selves unhappy with one another" (59-60).

The essays from the "Paradigm Lost?" session explore in different ways the fate of literature in the age of theory, raising divergent theoretical, practical, and pedagogical questions. The presentations range from theory as a pedagogical technique or tool to be deployed or avoided in the literature classroom to the inseparability of literature and theory to the inevitability of theory. None of the speakers, however, questions the validity of theory as a legitimate area of academic pursuit, and some offer moving testimonials about how theory challenges them and their students and revitalizes their classrooms.

Obviously, Shakespeare does not face any immediate danger of being displaced by theory. Notwithstanding the disagreement in my own department, I think that an overwhelming consensus prevails in the profession and in the culture that Shakespeare has a place in the curriculum and an importance as both a literary genius and a cultural phenomenon. Yet in our postmodern taste for ideological confrontation and the oppositional, we as Shakespearians may in fact be forgetting the art of diplomacy and the virtues of compromise. We may be allowing ourselves to be redefined and refashioned by our theoretical debates, and in the process, we may be recreating the world in our own image.

We may have only begun to assess the overall impact of our theoretical pursuits on university curricula, on the everyday life of our English departments, and on the image that we project of ourselves. But theory or no theory, we have failed if we teach our students to hate what we love or if we are unable to educate our administrators, legislators, and our culture at large about the importance and excitement of what we do.

In her 1980 inaugural address as president of the Modern Language Association, Helen Vendler invoked Wordsworth's vow at the end of *The Prelude*: "What we have loved, / Others will love, and we will teach them how." She added: "If we succeed at all in teaching others, from freshmen to graduate students, to love what we have loved, we hope that some of them will become the teachers who will replace us—and that they will teach out of love, and write out of love, when they do write."⁵ I would go farther: our primary challenge is to encourage a love for Shakespeare and the arts not only in potential teachers but also in a future generation of scientists, legislators, attorneys, and accountants. If theory helps us to achieve this end, so much the better. If it does not, we must reassess the place of theory in the classroom.

Teaching the Resonances

BRUCE R. SMITH

HAVING SENT SHAKESPEARE A FAN LETTER IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY (the forger William Henry Ireland acted as amanuensis), Queen Elizabeth I was only too happy to come to his aid in April 1996. The occasion was not a royal progress but a teach-in at Georgetown University. She had been invited by the organizers of the event, the National Alumni Forum. When informed—incorrectly—that Shakespeare was being dropped from the English Department's program of studies, the queen replied, "Excise Shakespeare from the curriculum? Stuff and nonsense." Turning to the students, she cried, "Stand up for Master Shakespeare!"¹ The queen was in good company. Saul Bellow had sent a letter of support. William Peter Blatty, author of *The Exorcist*, had issued an impassioned statement. Since Georgetown was dropping Shakespeare from its curriculum, Blatty was dropping Georgetown from his will:

⁵ Helen Vendler, "What We Have Loved, Others Will Love" in *Falling into Theory: Conflicting Views on Reading Literature*, David H. Richter, ed. (Boston and New York: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1994), 27–36, esp. 30.

¹ The Associated Press news report that served as the source for this quotation was distributed electronically, without title or attribution, on 30 April 1996. See also Carol Innerst, "Teach-in' goes all out in hailing Shakespeare: Shunned bard has support on U.S. campuses," *The Washington Times*, 1 May 1996, p. A2.