

“It is an affront to treat falsehood with complacence.” Thomas Paine

CAMPUS REPORT

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REVISIONIST LITERATURE @ THE MLA

By Malcolm A. Kline & Spencer Irvine

You won't recognize your favorite authors when the Modern Language Association gets through with them.

When the Modern Language Association (MLA) deconstructs classic literature, they do a makeover that Madonna would envy. At this year's MLA convention in Philadelphia, attended by thousands of English professors from around the world, we got to hear dissertations on Jane Austen, Herman Melville and Shakespeare. Only the Bard survived intact.

JANE AUSTEN AT 200: SHE GAVE “COMFORT TO WHITENESS”

Several college professors picked apart Jane Austen, who would have turned 200 years old this year. In a packed room full of female attendees at the MLA, the professors criticized Jane Austen's “whiteness” in her writing claiming that post-Trump, people can turn to Austen's readings to escape from reality.

Mary Favret, an English professor at Johns Hopkins University, directed her remarks at four main points:

1-When and how Jane Austen comforted whiteness?

2-Is Jane Austen taught in HBCUs?

3-Was she an influence on black writers?

4-Can we read Jane Austen alongside authors of color?

She analyzed Jane Austen's “whiteness” and alleged that this “romance of the Anglo-Saxon-ness” pervaded white culture from the United Kingdom to the American colonies. Favret called it, “hashtag #AustenSoWhite,” a reference to the social media boycott of the annual Academy Awards “Oscars” for not including minorities. She asked, “When and how does Austen give comfort to whiteness?” Her main point of criticism centered around how black history was not addressed in Austen's literature. She said that Austen created “a world where blackness and whiteness are never interrogated...no Ku Klux Klan, no gender and class... [but] heterosexual laws and conjugance, yes.”

Favret turned to historical black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and asked if Austen's literature was taught to black students. She admitted that she had not found much of anything on whether HBCUs teach Jane Austen as a part

continued on page 3

Director's Corner

By Malcolm A. Kline, Executive Director of AIA



Voodoo Anyone?

How to Understand Economics Without Really Trying



by

Christopher T. Warden

Forewords by M. Stanton Evans & Malcolm A. Kline



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March 2017

Dear Reader,

Returning from the Modern Language Association's annual convention, I wonder if one can actually become more educated by avoiding college, if one really wants to be exposed to history and literature. Throughout the year, we post stories on how academics mangle the former. At least once a year, we get an immersion in how they distort the latter.

For one thing, if you elect to study history and literature on your own, the books will be cheaper than any course you take. Yet and still, where once professors acted as "guides on the side" walking you through unfamiliar territory, now, they more frequently act as barriers to knowledge, especially when they overlay their latest theories upon the Great Books.

Additionally, you can still take the Great Courses online, which have been around for a quarter century. As well, Hillsdale offers some reputable online courses in Western Civilization.

We've even tried to make our own modest contribution to the sum of human knowledge with our online courses, which are offered free, on women's studies and free market economics. Speaking of contributions, we can't thank you enough for ours, without which we cannot function.

All the best,

Mal Kline,
Executive Director

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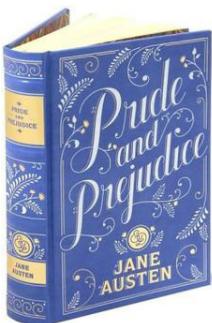
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of their department coursework, outside of Washington D.C.'s Howard University and Baltimore's Goucher College. At Howard, "Mr. Darcy has zero appeal" to their students. For those students, "class trumps gender."

She pointed out, "I know Cornel West is a big fan" of Jane Austen's work and said that this could help start the "reconsideration of Austen's legacy among black writers." Favret then asked, "Does *Pride and Prejudice* signal 'whiteness'?" She discovered that Frederick Douglass's North Star newspaper cited Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* at least eight times, and Douglass referred to it three times in the publication "Christian Recorder."

Claudia Johnson, an English literature professor at Princeton, insinuated that the past Election Day led to people reading more books to escape the election of then-President-elect Donald Trump. She called this escape from reality "transgressive." She added, "This respite is intensely permeable" and "it really cannot be separated." Johnson lamented, "We need a respect for facts and fact checking and the disappearance of this in our current political discourse."

Johnson criticized the 1940 adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* by Aldous Huxley and said that "despite its ludicrous costumes, and despite Mr. Collins's metamorphosis into a librarian," the movie "afforded the viewer... a deal of pleasure" to forget the war-ridden world around them. This was "the grateful escape" of the movie and film industry, and it "gave them [the audience] this manageable elsewhere." To her, "the viewers forgot the war [World War II] for two whole hours" while watching the movie.



She said that this escape from reality is the "interpenetration of the two worlds that make the Austen's vulnerable." In her mind, this leads to a state of being "blissfully remote, yet how very real...very much to be desired." Johnson felt that the "stupidity" of *Pride and Prejudice*, referring to some of the characters

such as Mr. Collins, fascinated her. However, this also "has a certain moral gravity for her and the 18th century writers." She added, "The dangers posed by stupidity rampant" cannot be controlled without "a community of intelligent" people. Her lone exception from this "stupidity:" The novel *Mansfield Park*. Johnson said that the novel is "very destitute of characters in the novel who discern it" and unfortunately, "this failure of shared authoritative lucidity that seems worth longing for."

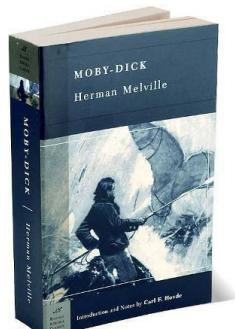


Sarah Raff, an associate professor of English at Pomona College, criticized Austen's relationship with men. She said, "Austen's relations with straight men have never been smooth" and in her mind, "Austen is a gay icon." She said, "Remember a time, which did exist...when fiction-reading Americans, irrespective of gender." She claimed that there are differences between men and women in pop culture, lamenting, "boys get 'Star Wars.'" On the other hand, "nobody cracks those novels" by Herman Melville, and she made a veiled reference to the popular young adult literature such as *The Hunger Games*, or in her words, "crypto-YA (i.e. young adult)" that Jane Austen started. She blasted YA novels because they are "error-ridden and always written in the present." She joked, "We're also in the age of adult coloring books...which apparently moves the market" of book-selling. She said, "Children no longer find it [offensive] to be called babies."

She concluded, "Austen is doing just fine without the straight, gentleman reader" and too often, straight white men "exert pressure on educated women readers."

MUGGING MELVILLE

Herman Melville, of course, is the author of *Moby Dick*. Many will probably recognize this as the one about a one-legged sea captain pursuing a great big whale. Yet and still, just about every year, MLA members want to read so much more into the saga.



At this year's gathering, Paul B. Downes of the University of Toronto analogized "Ahab's revulsion towards his ivory leg to capitalism's revulsion at the source of its wealth."

In this "dialectical or deconstructionist approach,"

continued from page 3

Downes avers, one can conclude that “Capitalism bites its own leg off.” Michael Jonik of the University of Sussex also made note of the “multifarious political ontology in Melville’s work.”

For her part, Branka Arsić of Columbia University made note of “current ecological and epistemological preoccupations” in introducing the panel.



Another panel of college professors claimed that Herman Melville’s books can be applied to today’s issues of Black Lives Matter, America’s capitalist society and the presidency of Donald Trump. The panel discussion was held at the MLA’s annual convention in Philadelphia earlier this year.

Gary Vaughn Rasberry, an assistant professor of English at Stanford University, claimed that Melville’s books could be seen in the prism of “anti-colonialism Cold War politics.” He cited the likes of W.E.B. DuBois and others for their noted third-world perspectives and how it applied to today. For example, they would agree with him in that “Starbucks represents liberalism.” Melville’s character in “Moby Dick,” Captain Ahab, “personifies the fascist” future of the world. He continued, “The paralysis of liberalism [i.e. Starbucks]” faces off against the face of fascism [i.e. Ahab]. He claimed, “These maritime proletarians [the captain’s crewmen] didn’t revolt” because “their stillborn revolt would have little meaning beyond their own self preservation” in the book. Yet, Rasberry claimed, “It doesn’t undermine the [meaning] of the novel” because it highlighted “latent totalitarianism” and other similar totalitarian impulses.

Christine Ann Wooley, an associate English professor at St. Mary’s College of Maryland, praised Black Lives Matter in her remarks. She said, “In the days of the election of Donald Trump, Black Lives Matter issued a statement... we fight for our collective liberation...until black people are free, no one is free.” She continued to quote their statement, where the group said, “We do not and will not negotiate with fascists and racists” because “these words still fortify us, those reeling from the election.”

Furthermore, the group claimed, “Far too many white folks feel free” and “economic justice [should be] fully

legible to an audience.” To her, this “dramatizes the uncertainty of identification” and yet, “Melville’s works teem with examples” that Black Lives Matter highlighted. Referring to the group’s symbol of wearing safety pins, Wooley wondered, “We may debate whether to wear safety pins after the election.”

HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT: GENUINE SCHOLARSHIP AT THE MLA

When we saw that the MLA was presenting a panel entitled, “Shakespeare’s Climatology,” we went expecting to hear yet more diatribes about global warming. Instead, we were pleasantly surprised to find ourselves actually attending a series of lectures about Shakespeare.

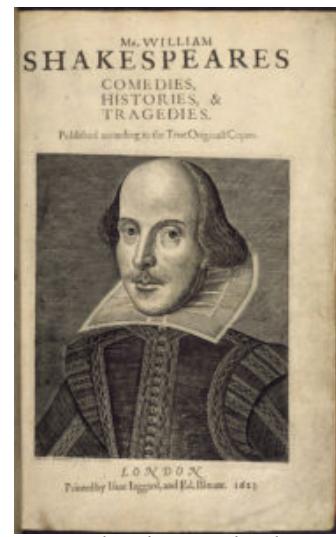


image by The British Library

The “climatology” examined referred to Shakespeare’s use of weather as a dramatic device. For instance, there is “a sea of unpredictability that unfurls offstage” in Hamlet, Jane Hwang Degenhardt of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst pointed out. Similarly, “In Richard III, weather serves as a political metaphor,” Piers Brown of Kenyon College pointed out.

We also learned that when Henry VI was first performed, real swords and shields were used. “Early theater was shaped by debates over how audiences should hear the play,” Allison Deutermann of Baruch College at the City University of New York, said.

Unfortunately, when the panelists opened up the panel to questions and answers, we were reminded that we were at the MLA. The first question out of the box was, “What about gender?” We didn’t stay for the answer.

Malcolm A. Kline is the Executive Director of Accuracy in Academia. If you would like to comment on this article, e-mail mal.kline@academia.org

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