
Review: Canons, Class, and the Crisis of the Humanities

Author(s): Charlotte Templin

Source: *College Literature*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (Jun., 1995), pp. 151-156

Published by: [College Literature](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25112194>

Accessed: 07/12/2010 08:05

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=collit>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



College Literature is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *College Literature*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Canons, Class, and the Crisis of the Humanities

John Guillory. *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993. \$35 hc; xv + 392 pp.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman. *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Ed. Thomas L. Erskine and Connie L. Richards. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1993. \$30 hc, \$10 sc; ix + 280 pp.

Flannery O'Connor. *A Good Man is Hard to Find*. Ed. Frederick Asals. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1993. \$30 hc, \$8 sc; vi + 180 pp.

Katherine Anne Porter. *Flowering Judas*. Ed. Virginia Spencer Carr. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1993. \$30 hc, \$8 sc; ix + 216 pp.

Gertrude Stein. *Geography and Plays*. Ed. Cyrena N. Pondrom. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1993. \$40 hc, \$14.95 sc; lix + 447 pp.

Henry David Thoreau. *Cape Cod*. Ed. Joseph J. Moldenhauer. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993. \$45 hc, \$9.95 sc; 235 pp.

C H A R L O T T E T E M P L I N

Few questions have provoked more interest in the academy in recent years than the matter of what books are read and why—or, in other words, how literary canons are formed. While many have focussed on the books themselves, and/or their authors, others, such as John Guillory, have called our attention to the institutional practices that underlie canons. And while we can learn much from Guillory's brilliant commentary, an examination of a sampling of the plethora of reprints, critical editions, and

*Templin is professor of English and Chair of the English Department at the University of Indianapolis. She is the author of **Feminism and the Politics of Literary Reputation: The Example of Erica Jong** (Kansas 1995).*

sourcebooks designed for consumption at various levels of the academy can also be instructive. The five reprints I deal with here of works by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Flannery O'Connor, Katherine Anne Porter, Gertrude Stein, and Henry David Thoreau bear out Guillory's contention that canons are about institutional imperatives while also highlighting some of the complexities, duly noted by Guillory, involved in canon formation.

Not merely an intelligent voice in the canon debate, Guillory is among a short list of authors (others are Richard Ohmann and Andrew Ross) who have provided the signal service of helping us in the academy to understand in a profound way the function in society as a whole of the institution we serve. In his masterful *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, Guillory, Professor of English at the Johns Hopkins University, places the canon wars in the context of the social changes that, he argues, have produced the current crisis of the humanities. According to Guillory, the struggle over the canon is directly related to the fact that literary study has largely ceased to be a main avenue to success in modern society: "The professional managerial class has made the correct assessment that, so far as its future profit is concerned, the reading of great works is not worth the investment of very much time or money. The perceived devaluation of the humanities curriculum is in reality a decline in its *market* value" (46). Technical and professional knowledge have replaced the literary curriculum that formerly supplied the cultural capital that underwrote the rise of the bourgeoisie. Literary culture became "culturally marginal to the social formation of modernity" (139). Guillory invites us to reflect on the "historical category of literature" (265) and its complicated relation to the literary curriculum and hence the "canon."

To review some of the history that Guillory analyzes, we need to go back to the eighteenth century when the study of literature in the vernacular provided the linguistic capital necessary to rise socially and was also instrumental in the unification of the ruling class. (Guillory refers to the "immense social significance of polite letters as a transformative cultural force" [118].) Linguistic differentiation was always the point of a literary canon, says Guillory, with the schools functioning to reproduce social arrangements by distributing cultural capital unequally. The original rationale of a literary curriculum—used to justify its mission of producing a standard vernacular—was the claim that it served as the repository of universal truth. However, "this project was always belied by the actual structure of the educational system" (263), which had two functions: to promote the politico-administrative necessity of linguistic homogeneity and to preserve class distinctions. With a technical/professional New Class replacing a culturally homogeneous bourgeoisie, the literary curriculum lost its purpose. And with the integration of the New Class into mass culture, a distinctive literary language is no longer needed. Guillory explains that the contradiction embodied in the dual pur-

poses of the school is worked out in the interrelationships of public and private schools and the levels of the education system.

By investing their passions and hopes in the canon itself, those who wish to transform society are misdirecting their efforts, Guillory asserts. Attention should be focussed on the school—which does have agency—not on the canon, which in itself is merely functional in the reproduction of society. Fighting over what proportion of minorities and women are taught in our courses involves a fundamental misrecognition: the real problem is not the content of the syllabus but rather the matter of who fills the seats in the classroom. Class is a paramount issue for Guillory, and he addresses the matter of

why a culturalist politics, though it glances worriedly at the phenomenon of class, has in practice never devised a politics that would arise from a class “identity.” For while it is easy enough to conceive of a self-affirmative racial or sexual identity, it makes very little sense to posit an affirmative lower-class identity, as such an identity would have to be grounded in the experience of deprivation *per se*. Acknowledging the existence of admirable and even heroic elements of working-class culture, the *affirmation* of lower-class identity is hardly compatible with a program for the abolition of want. (13)

In this book we are invited to be very clear-headed about class (Guillory acknowledges a debt to Pierre Bourdieu). These are indeed thought-provoking comments, especially for those of us who teach freshman composition in a comprehensive institution. Those among my students who fail this crucial course may be derailed from the cultural-capital track of university education. I don’t think the answer is to give all A’s (nor does Guillory, I am sure) as some politically-engaged university instructors did in the 1960s. Guillory challenges progressive-minded faculty to recognize their role and the role of the university in upholding class hierarchies, and to use what agency they have in the university in the interests of change.

Guillory explains that the marginalized position of literature can be read in developments in the undergraduate and graduate curricula. For the task of producing basic linguistic competency, the literary curriculum has been displaced by composition—which has developed its own nonfiction prose syllabus. At the graduate level the appearance of “theory” (read deconstruction)—again with its own required list of readings—represents yet another (perhaps terminal) crisis in the role of literary study. In a very arresting chapter on the relation of Paul de Man and his school to the crisis of the literary curriculum, Guillory views deManian theory as merely “an interim, imaginary solution to the new conditions of intellectual labor” (181), an attempt to shore up the position of literature in the curriculum without the requisite rethinking of what professors of literature do as teachers and scholars. Meanwhile, literature in the undergraduate curriculum, as one specialization among many, is left “without a rationale specific to its syllabus” (264).

Guillory is at his most convincing on the matter (central to his thesis) of defining how a canon relates to the institutional needs of a school. “Where

is the canon?" he asks. Not in the classroom, where *the canon itself* is not the object of study: "the canon is never other than an imaginary list; it never appears as a complete and uncontested list in any time and place" (30). Furthermore, the category noncanonical is really not useful since it is not possible to posit a binary division of literature into those works that are "great" and those that have no value at all. Guillory shifts emphasis from the canon to the syllabus, its institutional manifestation. We cannot overthrow the "canon," because in the act of drawing up a new syllabus we reinstate the idea of a canon: "so far from being the case that the canon determines the syllabus in the simple sense that the syllabus is constrained to select only from canonical works, it is much more accurate to say that the syllabus posits the existence of the canon as an imaginary totality" (31). Judgments that construct canons are made by faculty members in literature departments. The canon exists only in relation to the institutional adoption and use of selected works. That selections of works are shaped by institutional agendas is astutely illustrated in Guillory's chapter on the New Critics.

Guillory's analysis of the canon will be at odds with the views of many who are participants in the current debates since he sees both the defenders and the critics of the traditional canon as misguided. Invoking a Marxist perspective, he begins by equating the theoretical assumptions of the canon debate to liberal pluralism, having to do with competing groups and mechanisms of balance. The shifting of the debate about representation to the university must be seen as a consequence of the failure of the political culture of liberalism in the larger society: "it was only in the wake of liberalism's apparent defeat in American political culture that such agendas as 'representation in the canon' could come to occupy so central a place within the liberal academy" (5). Guillory denies that groups in society can be represented in a canon, as they are represented in a legislative body, for example. The politics of the canon is a mere "imaginary politics" or a "politics of the image." Guillory sees little relation between representation in the canon and the hope for a liberalized political domain. He finds no conspiracy in canon formation—that is, the canon was not deliberately constructed by white males to represent their ideas and interests. Hegemonic values are not the point of a canon, the point or purpose of which lies in its institutional function. Guillory asserts, for example, that the reason that women authors were routinely excluded from the university curriculum had much more to do with the fact that women were excluded from literacy before the eighteenth century than with any failure on their part to represent hegemonic values. In contrast, women authors are highly valued today simply because they are useful in the institutional context of the research programs that are the product of feminist criticism.

Certainly the reprints of works by women authors under consideration here appear to be designed to satisfy the demands of current research pro-

grams. The Rutgers volumes are part of the "Women Writers: Texts and Contexts" series. Marketed as casebooks, they are, according to the editors, suitable for undergraduate as well as graduate use. The Gilman volume features essays that could be said to constitute a "canon" of criticism of this author—from the "classic" essays by such critics as Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Annette Kolodny, and Judith Fetterley to more recent efforts. But while Gilman gained canonical status through the efforts of feminists, the stature of the other women—especially Flannery O'Connor and Gertrude Stein—owes less to feminist criticism. Frederick Asals asserts in his introduction that Flannery O'Connor has not been a strong favorite of feminists. Her reputation was launched by the New Critics, who included "A Good Man Is Hard To Find" in *The House of Fiction*, while Stein gained repute as an exemplar of modernism. These facts support Guillory's analysis: the determinants of canonicity for any given author may be complex but the needs of the school are always paramount.

But feminist critics may object to the assertion that women were not excluded from the traditional canon on the basis of gender. If gender was not a crucial category, why, for example, was a writer such as the currently admired Anne Finch excluded from the neoclassical canon, or why was a writer such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning relegated to a minor role as the author of love poems? Certainly the foregrounding of the categories of race and gender in contemporary criticism explains why women and minorities are the subjects of attention today, but it is hardly the case that gender had nothing to do with the fact, for example, that so few women authors were found worthy by the New Critics. The proportion of women authors in the influential anthologies created by the New Critics was positively minuscule (O'Connor being one of the fortunate few), and the patriarchal—even sexist—attitudes of the New Critics have often been noted.

Some readers will take exception also to Guillory's insistence that it makes no difference what authors are studied—that the fact of the cultural capital supplied by a canon is all-important. Granting the importance of the claim that the school determines the class of its graduates, it can still be argued that a curriculum that includes women and minorities empowers female and minority graduates in a way that a mainstream canon does not, and makes it possible, one hopes, for citizens so empowered to be agents of progressive change. And a diverse canon can illustrate to all students something about the capabilities and worth of diverse peoples.

As for those on the right who argue for a traditional canon, Guillory spends less time on them, presumably because his real mission is to convert the left. He makes it clear however, that he views the Bennett "legacy of ownership" as an attempt on the part of a powerful caste to secure the advantages of a cultural capital defined by them, one that will "identify them as (justly) privileged" (47). The reprints of canonical works by Thoreau—and

perhaps also O'Connor—would no doubt be welcomed by the conservative voices in the canon debates.

The university and professional support for the Thoreau volume is instructive in the light of Guillory's arguments about school and canon. *Cape Cod* was edited by Joseph J. Moldenhauer for the Textual Center for the Writings of Henry D. Thoreau at the University of California, Santa Barbara. The volume under discussion here was published without the scholarly apparatus by Princeton University Press. The volume has the imprimatur of the Committee on Scholarly Editions of the Modern Language Association. The National Endowment for the Humanities provided support for editorial work as did the Center for Editions of American Authors of the Modern Language Association. Truly an elaborate scaffolding of support has been erected to prop up this canonical author. One may well conclude, as Guillory does, that the institutional need for a canon is the most fundamental precondition for its existence.

In a final chapter on the discourse of value, Guillory deplores the refusal of the aesthetic that, he says, is paradigmatic for the contemporary liberal discourse on value. He rejects the dominant notion of the relativity of value and the positioning of the aesthetic and the political in an antithetical relationship. He suggests that Marx's acceptance of a notion of aesthetic value, far from being retrograde, is preferable to the current liberal consensus, which has discredited the concept of the aesthetic. The approach of the liberal consensus is flawed because it fails to see the relation of aesthetic value to conflicts in society and to the relations of the dominant and the dominated.

Guillory's own prescription is for the democratization of access to cultural products. In a "thought experiment" that he models after a similar one in Marx's *German Ideology*, he imagines a society in which there is universalization of access to cultural goods. With the end to a class-based distinction, a much broader basis for contestations over the aesthetic—a much more open and free exercise of judgment—will be possible. But it is difficult to imagine what the aesthetic can be under these circumstances. What will the aesthetic be when it is cut off from past history and questions of power? A game of distinction based on style? It seems we are back to asking fundamental questions about what the aesthetic is. Guillory indicates that we must reclaim a notion of the aesthetic but he offers little illumination on precisely how this can be done.

Difficult in both style and vocabulary, Guillory's book makes challenging reading. The effort the reader must expend is, however, amply rewarded by the rich and provocative analysis. Guillory has greatly increased our understanding not only of the canon debates but also of the social function of the school and the character of historical and contemporary literary study. His book will be essential reading for anyone who undertakes to address these important topics in the future.