



FOR ENGLISH DEPARTMENTS, A MAJOR CHANGE

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Column: JONATHAN YARDLEY

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The final piece of evidence that the lunatics are running the academic asylum is now firmly in place. It was put there a few days ago by the **National Alumni Forum**, which, in a devastating report titled "The Shakespeare File: What English Majors Are Really Studying," provided compelling proof that at most institutions that claim to set the standard for academic excellence, instruction in English literature that meets such a standard is difficult, albeit not quite impossible, to find. It's best to anticipate attacks on this critique at the outset. The Alumni Forum, which describes its mission as "academic freedom and excellence," has a right-of-center cast. Its chairman is Lynne Cheney, and among those on its board are Chester Finn and Irving Kristol. But it cannot be pigeonholed ideologically; its honorary chairman is David Riesman, its vice chairman is Richard Lamm, and the advisers to the Shakespeare report include such distinguished literary scholars as Anthony Hecht, John Hollander, Christopher Ricks and Roger Shattuck. Howls of campus protest to the contrary notwithstanding, this report deserves to be -- and must be -- taken seriously.

It was occasioned by the disclosure last spring that Georgetown University had eliminated the requirement that English majors study Shakespeare, Chaucer and Milton. Instead it now lets majors choose among three courses of study, "only one of which," the report points out, "stresses great works of literature." The two others emphasize "social contexts and cultural practices, value and institutions" and "the process and theory of writing." In a letter to alumni, Georgetown's dean made the astonishing claim that with this change, "nothing has been lost, nothing has been added."

The sending of Shakespeare to the guillotine at Georgetown led the Alumni Council to ask how he fares elsewhere these days. It requested English curricula from 70 "of the nation's top colleges and universities," among them "those listed in the U.S. News & World Report top 50 colleges and universities, the Ivy League, the Seven Sisters, campuses in the two largest public systems, California and New York, and several other universities added for regional balance."

What the council found would be hilarious were it not at once outrageous and heartbreaking: "Of the 70 universities, only 23 now require English majors to take a course in Shakespeare. And this result was reached using a very generous definition of a Shakespeare requirement: Colleges requiring students to read at least two of three authors -- one of which is Shakespeare -- are classified as requiring Shakespeare, whether or not the student in fact reads the Bard."

The problem isn't so much that Shakespeare has vanished from the English departments as that he has been marginalized. The greatest writer in the English language -- the writer from whose work our entire literary culture flows -- has become the equivalent of today's vogue authors. In some places that is literally true: At Dartmouth -- Dartmouth! -- "majors must choose one course dealing with a single author" and "may choose from among Shakespeare, Milton, Chaucer, Ben Jonson, Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, Twentieth Century Boxing Fiction and Film, and other choices."

The sheer vulgarity of that is beyond description: Shakespeare and Toni Morrison as equals! But vulgarity is everywhere in the English departments, which no longer require students to study works of literature chosen by scholars for their quality, importance and universality. Instead they let students pick and choose in an academic supermarket where "popular culture" and the Holy Trinity of "race, gender and class" are the dominant elements. This, too, is sometimes literally true. At Amherst -- Amherst! -- "English majors face absolutely no requirements." Apparently, the Alumni Council dryly observes, at what U.S. News calls "the number one liberal arts college in the nation" the English department "believes that students who have not yet read the Great Authors are better able to judge whether their works are worth studying than their professors who have."

Or have they? Reading through the lists of courses now offered by these academic warehouses, one searches long and hard to find evidence of literary knowledge, taste or intellectual rigor. The curricula of these departments are dominated by courses in literary theory -- the cardinal tenet of which these days is that the reader, or critic, matters more than the author -- as well as popular culture, hetero- and homosexuality and retrograde 1960s radical politics.

Critical theory: Washington and Lee requires English majors to take "Fundamentals of Literary and Scholarly Practice." Williams College: "Techniques of Reading." University of San Francisco: "How Literature Works," "Contexts and Uses of Literature," "Studies in Critical Approaches." State University of New York at Albany: "Introduction to Literary Study."

Sexuality: Amherst offers "Studies in the Literature of Sexuality," focusing on "Queer Fictions: Texts From the Turn of the Century." Wesleyan University: "Reading Bodily Fictions." Tufts University: "Queering/Reading."

Popular culture: Georgetown offers "Film Noir/Hard-Boiled Detective Fiction" and "Genre: The Gangster Film." Duke University: "Melodrama and Soap Opera." University of California, San Diego: "Popular Culture," which "examines popular cultural practices as sites of conflict and struggle."

Ideology: Georgetown offers "Detective Fiction as Social Critique," which, the catalogue proudly announces, focuses "on how these novels critique and offer alternatives to the nuclear family, traditional masculine values, and capitalist ideology." University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: "American Literature of Resistance and Protest." University of California, Santa Barbara: "Cultures of Business," material for which includes such virulently anti-business tracts as "Snapshots From

On and on it goes, a dreary parade of what in certain academic circles is chic, and what on all counts is easy. "Electives can be attractive," as the Alumni Council says, "but a person's entire life should not be determined by his or her preferences as a 19-year-old. Individuals will be exposed to popular culture their whole lives; college is the time for studying something deeper and more enduring." But everything tells us that the Lords and Ladies of the English departments no longer either know or care about what is "deeper and more enduring." They are in it for the quick fix and the thrill of blind ideological conformity. In the process they are throwing American literary scholarship onto the trash pile.

The **National Alumni Forum** is at 1625 K St. NW, Suite 310, Washington D.C. 20006-1604. Its telephone number is 202-467-6787. Its report is required reading.

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