

Macalester International

Volume 3 *Literature, the Creative Imagination, and Globalization*

Article 13

Spring 5-31-1996

Response to Gamel

Emily Eagen
Macalester College

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/macintl>

Recommended Citation

Eagen, Emily (1996) "Response to Gamel," *Macalester International*: Vol. 3, Article 13.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/macintl/vol3/iss1/13>

This Response is brought to you for free and open access by the Institute for Global Citizenship at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Macalester International by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.

Response

Emily Eagen

I. Introduction

First, I would like to thank Professor Gamel for participating in the Macalester International Roundtable. She has presented us with an engaging perspective on the current state of the Western literary canon, and I have found her ideas to be both insightful and thought-provoking. My remarks will incorporate what I find to be both the strengths and limitations of her paper, interwoven with my own perspective on the literary canon. The experience that I bring to this forum is the experience of being a high-school and, now, college student in the midst of what has been called “the canon wars.” To extend Harold Bloom’s religious metaphor, I spent four high-school years in devotion to the Western canon, and two years since then recovering in the postcanonical wilderness of Macalester College’s English Department. As a student, my education thus far has led me, much like Professor Gamel, to try to make sense of literary maps and to see their relationships to a global one.

II. Agreement

I should start by saying that I found Professor Gamel’s paper to be highly accessible, open to a multiplicity of readings. This style of writing is fitting with one of the overall themes of her paper: a call to abandon the hierarchical relationships between writer and reader. Her approach has allowed me to respond as a critic without feeling it necessary to create a closed debate. Professor Gamel’s comments are an excellent beginning for dialogue.

Professor Gamel exhibits the literary canon debate at a crucial turning point, in the nebulous area where the traditional canon is no longer a mystified body of sainted writers, yet hasn’t given way to a new form. For critics, this is a crossroads. The questions are: What to do with the inherited past? And where to go from here? Professor Gamel’s remarks highlight these tensions

between past and present, old and new. Her comments promise a forward look, toward a completely restructured “map” of literary territory. However, I find that an equally strong, perhaps prevailing sentiment in her comments is that of retrospection — not nostalgia, in the melancholy sense of Harold Bloom, but a strong emphasis on the “classics” that have served as the foundations of Western literary study. Professor Gamel situates herself at this crossroads, wondering how much canonical luggage — Homer, Petronius, Shakespeare — she can bring along to the new territory of discourse that she is eager to enter.

Professor Gamel emphasizes the need to preserve and reinterpret older texts, making an argument that, perhaps inadvertently, seems to compromise her goal of abandoning the canon. Much of her enthusiasm for change seems to rest on the faith that the old ways will be preserved. It is as though Professor Gamel holds her world vision up to Bloom as a consolation, saying, “Don’t worry — the new map will actually be familiar — the Western canon will live on strongly.” Although her goal is to dismantle the Western canon, I find that in three ways — metaphors of expansion, choice of texts, and modes of analysis — Professor Gamel works toward a contrary goal.

III. Contention

Images of expansion (underlying the excitement) prevail in Professor Gamel’s paper. She calls for giant celebrations, multiple readings of texts, a global “carnival” that links present, past, and future. Literature will benefit from moving beyond boundaries, she says. This is imagery that, in its size and tempo, alludes to that of territorial exploration, forging the frontiers of unknown lands. To this end, the body of Western texts is ever adaptable, capable of being expanded, reinterpreted, and completely transferable to a larger, worldwide culture. Professor Gamel shows how ancient texts fit modern concerns. Petronius speaks on class oppression, Caliban on colonization. She worries about the “preservation” of these texts, as though they may not survive in uncharted lands. To ease the fear of loss, Professor Gamel suggests that we can “use” the literary works we find, as resources found on new land. The new terrain is *valuable*. How? Either as archaeological “sites for future . . . investigation,”¹ where older

texts are preserved, or consumer atmospheres like the carnival or zoo. I am not suggesting that Professor Gamel intends these images to imply colonization. However, I am left uneasy by the opportunistic connotations that these images imply.

Another way in which Western centrality is supported is by Professor Gamel's choice of texts. Her overriding enthusiasm is for literature that is already incorporated into the mainstream of the Western canon. No examples are given of literature that does not rely on Western texts; in fact, many of her examples come from Harold Bloom's canonical list. Professor Gamel states that "what matters is not particular texts but methods of reading."² But how can we *begin* to understand what "global cultures" mean if we look only at Western works? To use an analogy, how well can you understand a foreign country if you stay in an American hotel? This is not to dismiss the texts she chooses. But I think Professor Gamel's comments would be strengthened by a look at non-Western works that render the canon not only peripheral, but irrelevant.

In the examples she gives, Professor Gamel focuses on the Western works that shaped the non-Western, giving little attention to the non-Western artistic features. In her example of *The Bacchae*, she downplays the political significance of Soyinka's alterations to Euripides' text, instead focusing on his artistic faithfulness to Euripides. She relates Soyinka primarily to Euripides himself, as though the symbiotic relationship between the two artists is the most relevant to our understanding of today's "global culture." In actuality, it seems more relevant to the practice of literary criticism, which gives precedence to these relationships. The "global" use of literary criticism is limited at best, as Gregory Jusdanis exemplifies in *Belated Modernity and Aesthetic Culture*. He claims that while a European or North American theory can be used to derive an interpretation of a text, it is "inapplicable in other cultural situations...as a mode of explanation seeking to understand cultural settings with foreign conceptual tools."³ In Gamel's analysis of *The Bacchae*, a mention of "African elements" is the extent to which a Nigerian cultural setting is noted. Through an omission of further elaboration, the texts appear as the dominant sources of creativity and legitimation, ironically following the pattern of the "center/periphery" model that Professor Gamel seeks to replace.

These are the ways I find Professor Gamel's new map to fall short of being transformative. Unless we are truly capable of ceding the center to the periphery, to use Professor Gamel's metaphor, we will maintain a vision of global literary consumption that functions much like the canon.

In order to find a conception of "global culture" that does not imitate hegemony, it is critical to ask ourselves what "global" really means. Professor Gamel uses the terms "global" and "globalization" with certainty, as though they are not as equally metaphorical as the "canon." What are "the events now taking place"⁴ that she refers to? What is the meaning of "global culture," as distinguished from "globalization"? It is hard, with only an ambiguous notion of these transformations, to come to an understanding of how literature operates in the wake. This is the challenge that the essay has critically demonstrated, and it is a difficulty that most critics find in conceptualizing literature without the "canon." One way to negotiate this difficulty is to start by breaking down the canon itself, as Professor Gamel has begun to do. It is certainly valuable to criticize texts, proffer alternate methods of reading, and suggest new connections, as Professor Gamel has shown. All this was achieved by acknowledging the fictional properties of the canon. By seeing it as a metaphor, we notice creative ways to work around it.

But the canon is also an institution that has an actual function. As Professor Gamel indicates, literature cannot be separated from ideology. She notes its use in schools, where, as John Guillory has said, literature helps to maintain the privileged position of the bourgeois literate class by operating as one of its "strategies of identification."⁵ Any of us — critics, writers, students — are caught up in this as we try to work around the "canon" and, simultaneously, work through the canon. Therefore, if we really want to get away from the restrictions of canonical thinking, it is necessary to look toward educational institutions themselves, where "literature" is defined and employed.

I look to my own experience to understand this — my pre-college education. There, the canon was very real. Actually, I never heard the word "canon" at all, except in orchestra class. Neither did I use the term, as there were no "world" history or literature classes to give the word a meaning. Europe and America were the world. Similarly, the distinction between "canoni-

cal" and "noncanonical" was irrelevant. There was something called "literature" — *that* you read for school — and something called "fiction" that you chose yourself. The dichotomies were so fixed as to be invisible.

Elitism played a large role in the identity of my public high school. All students had taken a test to enter. The result was a racially diverse group that equally represented the city's racial makeup, but was labeled "smarter." Divisions of elitism were further drawn by the elaborate institution of honors classes. While the school itself may have been diverse, the honors and Advanced Placement classes were almost exclusively white and middle to upper-middle class. Therefore, the myth of equal access was preserved, but the reality was an extreme division. It was an atmosphere charged with racial and class tension, strained by this intellectual hierarchy.

Fascinatingly, the honors classes went on as though intellectualism were their business, and nothing else. Any negative relation to the school's ideology was unvoiced. It was as though the elitist rhetoric of the school had little effect on the vision of history or literature that was being taught. It was as though the content of the courses and the teaching methods could have little influence, positive or negative, on the social atmosphere of the school.

The classroom, in this way, is mystified, much like the canon itself. Yet I argue that the classroom is never divorced from the issues in the school at large. More crucially, neither is the curriculum. The very way that information is taught reinforces and reflects the institution that contains it. Specific to the study of literature, we can see that the canon serves this purpose. How is this achieved? I'll give you some of my own examples.

In my tenth-grade honors literature course, I was taught reverence for literature. The mood was worshipful, the authority of the text was assumed. It was the true beginning of cultural acquisition, where I learned what "good" literature was, and how to read it. With the great joy of learning to love these texts came a proud sense of intellectual success.

Eleventh-grade English was American Literature. From a unified critical method, we analyzed themes and symbols of standard American classics. For the one assignment to read a book by a "minority or woman writer," the purpose was to apply the

same critical techniques, transforming the book into familiar territory. This was a glimpse at how the canon is ever expanding, subsuming anything in its path.

Twelfth grade was the year of the Advanced Placement exam. This exam had a rigid structure, and we learned to adhere to its demands. Writing was done in third-person only, as to assume an objective voice about a text. Consumption was an important focus as well: the more canonical texts we had read, the more “capital” there was at our command. We were already in an elite place as A.P. students; now the goal was to refine and advance this position.

This occurred with varying degrees of subtlety—and perhaps says as much about me as it does about my school. In any case, the political and social functions of learning literature became abundantly clear. First, the advanced students of literature were divided from the rest of the student body on sharp racial and class lines. Then, this position of privilege was greatly enhanced by the teaching of literature. By learning “good” literature, we learned our privileged place. By learning how to assimilate texts, we learned ways to prevent any unsettling of our place. And by working toward an exam, we learned the role of education in achieving an even higher place.

You can hear, I hope, the rhetoric of elitist ideology in these descriptions. You can also see, perhaps, that simply expanding the body of texts, as many have attempted in “pluralizing” the canon, would not effectively dismantle the ideology in place. Furthermore, any attempt to grasp “global” issues or global concerns in this setting would be colored by the social atmosphere of the school and the classroom instruction that reflected it. I use the example of my education not to attack the existence of ideology in an institution that, if reformed, could rid itself of this politicization; rather, my intent is to indicate that *any* such institution has this rhetoric inherent in the structure, and it is the mystification of this structure that prevents understanding, and promotes a false sense of “absolute truth,” which, like Bloom’s religious canon, fuels a system of power and subservience.

IV. Concluding Thoughts

For those of us who, like Professor Gamel, seek to promote global communication outside of an abstruse system of power, it is absolutely *essential* to trace the prevailing attitudes to their roots. With regard to literature, we have to look to where elitist and Eurocentric models of literature originate. Surely, many of them are in place long before high school, but I think that high school is the turning point where much of the privileging is articulated and solidified. It is rare, I have found in my reading, to come across an academic analysis of the canon that takes into account the role of secondary education. Furthermore, among scholars of comparative literature there seems to be little acknowledgment of the need to teach at the *high-school* level alternate ways of reading and thinking that are usually reserved for the college level. I have found one example, described by Ed Ahearn and Arnold Weinstein in "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," of a program coordinated between Brown University and local secondary schools. This program exposes high-school students to an interdisciplinary, critical approach to noncanonical literature, leading them to question the existence of a monolithic body of literature and thought.⁶

I cannot conceive of a way to establish good global relations that does not demand this fundamental restructuring of institutions. I would claim that the United States is fundamentally incompatible with a global society, but that is perhaps more pessimism than I want to express in my closing remarks. Rather, I will conclude with the reminder that there is a great deal of work to be done. At this point, I think it would be impossible to jump in and harmonize all global cultures, even at the level of one nation to another. On the other hand, I have no doubt that individuals can establish such positive connections with other individuals in this world. Essentially, I am affirming Professor Gamel's conclusion — that what people "make out of this mish-mash is up to them/her/me/us."⁷ Certainly we are all linked to institutions. But the basis for world understanding can begin when we *try* to put institutions of dominance aside, and give ourselves the authority to *perceive*. This, and only this, is what I would call "the creative imagination."

Notes

1. Mary-Kay Gamel, "Genuine Corinthian Bronze: The 'Western Canon' in the Age of Global Culture," *Macalester International* 3 (Spring 1996): 104.
2. *Ibid.*, 108.
3. Gregory Jusdanis, *Belated Modernity and Aesthetic Culture: Inventing National Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991): 9.
4. Mary-Kay Gamel, "Genuine Corinthian Bronze": 88.
5. John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Foundation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993): 117.
6. Ed Ahearn and Arnold Weinstein, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, ed. Charles Bernheimer (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995): 82–83.
7. Mary-Kay Gamel, "Genuine Corinthian Bronze": 111.