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Literary Politics



'The Tempest'?
It's 'really' about
imperialism.
Emily Dickinson's
poetry?
Masturbation.

The Modern Language Association's opposition to the nomination of Carol Iannone to the National Council on the Humanities is not quite sufficient reason for supporting her. But MLA hostility is nearly necessary for creating confidence in anyone proposed for a position of cultural importance. The president nominated Iannone at the behest of the chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Lynne Cheney, to whom the council tenders advice. The MLA, composed mostly of professors of literature and languages, is shocked—shocked!—that people suspect it of political motives. Oh? The MLA is saturated with the ideology that politics permeates everything. The unvarnished truth is that the MLA's sniffy complaint amounts to this: Iannone is not "one of us." Her writings confirm that virtue.

She teaches at NYU and is vice president of the National Association of Scholars, a burgeoning organization resisting the politicization of higher education. She is a trenchant critic of the watery Marxism that has gone to earth in the MLA and elsewhere on campuses. Academic Marxists deny the autonomy of culture, explaining it as a "reflection" of other forces, thereby draining culture of its dignity. The reduction of the study of literature to sociology, and of sociology to mere ideological assertion, has a central tenet: All literature is, whether writers are conscious of it or not, political.

Writers, say the academics Iannone refutes, are captives of the conditioning of their class, sex, race. All literature on which canonical status is conferred represents the disguised or unexamined assumptions and interests of the dominant class, sex, race. Hence culture is oppressive and a literary canon is an instrument of domination. This ideology radically devalues authors and elevates the ideologists—the critics—as indispensable decoders of literature, all of which is, by definition, irreducibly political.

Shakespeare's "Tempest" reflects the imperialist rape of the Third World. Emily Dickinson's poetic references to peas and flower buds are encoded messages of feminist rage, exulting clitoral masturbation to protest the prison of patriarchal sex roles. Jane Austen's supposed serenity masks boiling fury about male domination, expressed in the nastiness of minor characters who are "really" not minor. In "Wuthering Heights," Emily Brontë, a subtle subversive, has Catherine bitten by a *male* bulldog. Melville's white whale? Probably a penis. Grab a harpoon!

The supplanting of esthetic by political responses to literature makes literature primarily interesting as a

mere index of who had power and whom the powerful victimized. For example, feminist literary criticism is presented as a political act, liberating women writers from the oppression of "patriarchal literary standards." Thus does criticism dovetail with the political agenda of victimology. The agenda is the proliferation of groups nursing grievances and demanding entitlements. The multiplication of grievances is (if radicals will pardon the expression) the core curriculum of universities that are transformed into political instruments. That curriculum aims at delegitimizing Western civilization by discrediting the books and ideas that gave birth to it.

Iannone tartly criticizes the "eruption of group politics in literature," noting that many scholarly activities, from the shaping of curriculums to the bestowing of academic awards, have become instruments of racial, ethnic and sexual reparations for Western civilization's sins. The left's agenda does liberate, in this perverse way: it emancipates literature from the burden of esthetic standards. All such standards are defined as merely sublimated assertions of power by society's dominant group. So all critics and authors from particular victim groups should be held only to the political standards of their group. Administration of these, and of the resulting racial and sexual spoils system in the academy, "requires" group politics: Under the spreading chestnut tree, I tenure you and you tenure me.

As esthetic judgments are politicized, political judgments are estheticized: the striking of poses and the enjoyment of catharsis are central in the theater of victimization in academic life. All this, although infantile, is not trivial. By "deconstructing," or politically decoding, or otherwise attacking the meaning of literary works, critics strip literature of its authority. Criticism displaces literature and critics displace authors as bestowers of meaning.

It might seem odd, even quixotic, that today's tenured radicals have congregated in literature departments, where the practical consequences of theory are obscure. Obscure, but not negligible. As James Atlas writes, the transmission of the culture that unites, even defines America—transmission through knowledge of literature and history—is faltering. The result is collective amnesia and deculturation. That prefigures social disintegration, which is the political goal of the victim revolution that is sweeping campuses.

High-intensity war: The fight over Iannone's nomination is particularly important precisely because you have not hitherto heard of it or her. The fight is paradigmatic of the many small skirmishes that rarely rise to public attention but cumulatively condition the nation's cultural, and then political, life. In this low-visibility, high-intensity war, Lynne Cheney is secretary of domestic defense. The foreign adversaries her husband, Dick, must keep at bay are less dangerous, in the long run, than the domestic forces with which she must deal. Those forces are fighting against the conservation of the common culture that is the nation's social cement. She, even more than a Supreme Court justice, deals with constitutional things. The real Constitution, which truly constitutes America, is the national mind as shaped by the intellectual legacy that gave rise to the Constitution and all the habits, mores, customs and ideas that sustain it.

There has been a historic reversal: Many of the most enlightened defenders of our cultural patrimony are now out in the "practical" world, including government, and many philistines are in the academies shaping tomorrow's elites, and hence tomorrow's governance. That is why Lynne Cheney and Carol Iannone matter more than do most of the things that get the public's attention.