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"Exploring the Boundaries of Academic Freedom"

Jayme Stayer

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Abstract: Responds to the article written by Mary R. Lefkowitz in the Spring 1995 issue of 'National Forum' periodical on the issue of academic freedom. Features of the question session after a lecture by Lefkowitz; Issue of whether Aristotle stole his ideas from the library at Alexandria in Egypt.

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Section: Reader Responses

EXPLORING THE BOUNDARIES OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM

In her article "Exploring the Boundaries of Academic Freedom (Spring 1995), Mary R. Lefkowitz decries how politically motivated intellectuals have created a climate in which it is taboo to question their assumptions. Lefkowitz uses a telling example to illustrate her point about this growing trend of intolerance. During the question session after a lecture, Lefkowitz had asked the speaker why he had said "that Aristotle stole his philosophy from the library at Alexandria in Egypt." Lefkowitz pointed out to him that the library "only came into existence after Aristotle's death." Unfortunately for Lefkowitz, this was no ordinary lecture, open to academic discussion; it was, she claims, "more like a cult meeting, open to

and intended for initiates only."The hostility with which her question was greeted was a function, Lefkowitz argues, of this political climate.

I am not an Egyptologist, or a classicist, which in Lefkowitz's view means that I am not "competent" to participate in such an argument. But in spite of these shortcomings, I am a student of rhetoric. Even if I accept as an incontrovertible fact that the library at Alexandria came into existence only after Aristotle's death, there are still several ways I might have intervened into such a "cult" discussion. I might have acknowledged that stealing ideas, or philosophies, has had varying cultural connotations in Western thought. For example, Baroque composers liberally stole -- without footnotes -- the melodies of other composers; it was considered a tribute to use a source from the public domain. And more recently, Modernists such as TS. Eliot and Igor Stravinsky built their aesthetics on the principle of stealing (again, often without footnotes). Lefkowitz might thus have diffused the polemic of the speaker by aligning herself with his implicit premise that cultures interact with one another, while distancing herself from his politically coded terminology.

Likewise, a "cult" member might have queried the rhetoric of historical accuracy that Lefkowitz invoked by pointing out that, surely, books existed before libraries were created to house them; and surely ideas, culture, and intellectual commerce existed before books recorded or responded to them. And that therefore, while Greece may have a particularly privileged place in the history of Western thought, it is perhaps not the origin of all truth and light as was assumed for centuries. This "cult" might also have redirected the issue of verifiability by pointing out that "classicists" (who study Greco-Roman culture) teach "history," while "Egyptologists" teach the history of Egypt. Thus, Lefkowitz's classicist rhetoric will not acknowledge that "history" is just another name for a dominant cult.

This is only the outline of a conversation that might have taken place if both sides had decided to tailor their rhetoric to one another. But for Lefkowitz, there is no middle ground: "Once we accept the idea that instead of truth, there are many truths, or different ethnic truths, we cannot hope to have an intellectual community." As a classicist, Lefkowitz clearly has a professional stake in her version of the truth, and it is therefore in her best interest to appropriate and maintain the rhetoric of her antagonists. Because to defuse that rhetoric takes the wind out of both their sails, and the hard work of finding common ground remains, in spite of what we assert to be historically accurate. When we commit ourselves to dialogic principles, we lose that sense of authoritative one-upmanship that informs most academic conversations. What we gain is a conversation in which each speaker explores what's at stake in the debate. And happily, our search for truth can coincide with such a dialogic commitment.

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By Jayme Stayer

Toledo, Ohio

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