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## **Turning Literature Into a Celebration of New World Order**

Stephen Greenblatt

The columnist George F. Will recently declared that Lynne V. Cheney, the chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, is "secretary of domestic defense."

"The foreign adversaries her husband, Dick, must keep at bay," Mr. Will wrote, "are less dangerous, in the long run, than the domestic forces with which she must deal." Who are these homegrown enemies, more dangerous even than Saddam Hussein with his arsenal of chemical weapons? The answer: professors of literature. You know, the kind of people who belong to that noted terrorist organization, the Modern Language Association.

Mr. Will, who made these allegations in *Newsweek* (April 22), doesn't name names -- I suppose the brandishing of a list of the insidious fifth column's members is yet to come -- but he does mention, as typical of the disease afflicting Western civilization, the professor who suggests that Shakespeare's *Tempest* is somehow about imperialism.

This is a curious example -- since it is very difficult to argue that *The Tempest* is not about imperialism. (It is, of course, about many other things, as well, including the magical power of the theater.) The play -- set on a mysterious island over whose inhabitants a European prince has assumed absolute control -- is full of conspicuous allusions to contemporary debates over the project of colonization: The Virginia Company's official report on the state of its New World colony and the account by William Strachey, secretary of the settlement at Jamestown, of a violent storm and shipwreck off the coast of Bermuda, are examples.

Colonialism was not simply a given of the period. The great Spanish Dominican, Bartolome de Las Casas, argued that his countrymen should leave the New World, since they were bringing only exploitation and violence. Spanish jurists like Francisco de Vitoria presented cases against the enslavement of the Indians and against the claim to imperial possession of the Americas. The most searing attack on colonialism in the 16th century was written by the French essayist Montaigne, who in "Of Cannibals" wrote admiringly of the Indians and in "Of Coaches" lamented the whole European enterprise: "So many cities razed, so many nations exterminated, so many millions of people put to the sword, and the richest and most beautiful part of the world turned upside down, for the traffic in pearls and pepper!" We know that Shakespeare read Montaigne; one of the characters in *The Tempest* quotes from "Of Cannibals."

Shakespeare's imagination was clearly gripped by the conflict between the prince and the "savage" Caliban (is it too obvious to note the anagrammatic play on "cannibal"?). Caliban, enslaved by Prospero, bitterly challenges the European's right to sovereignty. The island was his birthright, he claims, and was unjustly taken from him.

Caliban's claim is not upheld in *The Tempest*, but neither is it simply dismissed, and at the enigmatic close of the play all of the Europeans -- every one of them -- leave the island.

These are among the issues that literary scholars investigate and encourage their students to consider, and I would think that the columnists who currently profess an ardent interest in our cultural heritage would approve.

But for some of them such an investigation is an instance of what is intolerable -- a wicked plot by renegade professors bent on sabotaging Western civilization by delegitimizing its founding texts and ideas. Such critics want a tame and orderly canon. The painful, messy struggles over rights and values, the political and sexual and ethical dilemmas that great art has taken upon itself to articulate and to grapple with, have no place in their curriculum. For them, what is at stake is the staunch reaffirmation of a shared and stable culture that is, as Mr. Will puts it, "the nation's social cement." Also at stake is the transmission of that culture to passive students.

But art, the art that matters, is not cement. It is mobile, complex, elusive, disturbing. A love of literature may help to forge community, but it is a community founded on imaginative freedom, the play of language, and scholarly honesty, not on flag waving, boosterism, and conformity.

The best way to kill our literary inheritance is to turn it into a decorous liturgical celebration of the new world order. Poets cannot soar when their feet are stuck in social cement.

The student of Shakespeare who asks about racism, misogyny, or anti-Semitism is not on the slippery slope toward what George Will calls "collective amnesia and deculturation." He or she is on the way to understanding something about *Othello*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *The Merchant of Venice*. It is, I believe, all but impossible to understand these plays without grappling with the dark energies upon which Shakespeare's art so powerfully draws.

And it is similarly difficult to come to terms with what *The Tempest* has to teach us about forgiveness, wisdom, and social atonement if we do not also come to terms with its relations to colonialism.

If we allow ourselves to think about the extent to which our magnificent cultural tradition -- like that of every civilization we know of -- is intertwined with cruelty, injustice, and pain, do we not, in fact, run the risk of "deculturation"? Not if our culture includes a regard for truth. Does this truth mean that we should despise or abandon great art?

Of course not.

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Like most teachers, I am deeply committed to passing on the precious heritage of our language, and I take seriously the risk of collective amnesia. Yet there seems to me a far greater risk if professors of literature, frightened by intemperate attacks upon them in the press, refuse to ask the most difficult questions about the past -- the risk that we might turn our artistic inheritance into a simple, reassuring, soporific lie.

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