

DISPUTATION CLXXX

February 22, 2018

Dear Peucinians:

Consensus seems to hold that last week's Peucinian Forum on non-monogamy, led by the esteemed Mikhail Bulgakov, was a smashing success. This week we return to a classic disputation. Sappho's been waiting to go to the mat on this one for a while; she is fortunate to have found such a sharp opponent in Shelley.

RESOLVED: THE WESTERN CANON SHOULD BE FUNDAMENTAL TO A LIBERAL EDUCATION

Affirmative: Σαπφώ '19

Negative: Mary Shelley '19

“The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.”

—Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, 1929

The classical understanding of the liberal arts education was perhaps first articulated by Seneca the Younger in the 88th of his “Moral letters to Lucilius” around 65 AD. He writes:

...Hence you see why “liberal studies” are so called; it is because they are studies worthy of a free-born gentleman. But there is only one really liberal study, –that which gives a man his liberty. It is the study of wisdom, and that is lofty, brave, and great-souled. (<https://goo.gl/59e9u5>)

We understand that the “liberal” in liberal arts refers not only to our unrestricted studies but also the type of people it is designed for—free *men*—and its lofty goals: wisdom, great-souls, virtue. The liberal arts conceived of by Seneca is not foreign to us; we recognize his rejection of moneymaking, apprenticeship, and close-mindedness. Of course, the *content* of studies is different now than from Seneca's time, but the *spirit* is likely similar.

What is the content—what are the works—that will free students to consider fundamental human questions, contemplate virtue, and achieve wisdom? That is the question we seek to answer. For centuries, institutions of the liberal arts have granted primacy to the Western Canon, the supposed “footnotes to Plato”: a series of treatises of philosophy and works of literature, art, and music, arguably beginning with the pre-Socratics, produced by the cultures and peoples of the West. Some claim that the study of these works is necessary to “know the best that is known and thought in the world” because these Great Books—e.g., the writings of Shakespeare and Kant—are of such intellectual or artistic value or influence that they merit universal attention.

Many institutions of the liberal arts hold this view. “Great Books” programs abound, and the Core Curricula at Columbia and Chicago, the Directed Studies program at Yale, the Structured Liberal Education program at Stanford, and the political theory major at Bowdoin all subscribe to a common understanding of liberal education properly conceived: great books, great thinkers, a focus on primary texts, and a fascination with the development of intellectual thought within, and only within, the Western tradition. Despite radical change at universities in the 1960s, and the turmoil of the so-called “Canon Wars” of the 1990s, these programs remain intact.

The complaint is made that the list of “great thinkers” in the Western Canon is a long list of dead white men, to the exclusion of people of color and women, among other groups. Professor Franco acknowledged this issue at the beginning of “Liberalism and Its Critics” last semester, noting that these dead white men nonetheless represent diverse views. But many feel that an intellectual tradition so exclusive cannot possibly be called “liberal,” and the postmodern, feminist, critical theorist critique of the Western Canon was not abandoned in the ‘90s.

Indeed, students at Reed College, our peer institution, have just this year renewed their effort to reform their mandatory first-year class on the Western Canon, Hum 110. (See <https://www.reedquest.org/2017/09/08/students-banned-as-tensions-rise/>; <http://reediesagainstracism.tumblr.com/demands>). At Yale, students continue to challenge the ideology at the base of the Directed Studies program (<http://downat Yale.com/abolish-directed-studies/>). Critics of the Western Canon’s exalted status point to its perpetuation of the oppression of women and people of color, and its exclusion of the intellectual output of Africa, South America, and the East, as reasons for its demise.

I’ve already written a great deal, and yet I’ve barely scratched the surface of what the Western Canon even is, let alone the essential debates surrounding its primacy. We ought to be asking: do Great Books exist, and how do we know what they are? What is a liberal education? Whom is the liberal education designed for? What should we be studying at Bowdoin? Is the liberal education producing liberal—free, open, unencumbered—minds, or is it reproducing fettering structures of oppression and close-mindedness?

I hope to see you soon for thoughtful debate on these questions and others.

Thursday, February 22, 7:45 p.m.
Third Floor of Massachusetts Hall
Semi-formal attire

PLSH,
Jean-Jacques Rousseau

P.S. Monique Wittig will be filling in for Mikhail Bulgakov as Provost.

P.P.S. Please see Bulgakov and other women who have been working so hard in **RISE Thur-Sat**; tickets are on sale at Smith Union.

P.P.P.S. In a nod to Maimonides, I’ve attached the Paul Franco article he included the last time Peucinian debated this topic—it is completely optional and in my opinion pertains only indirectly (it is more of a reflection on the state of the liberal arts, more generally, in 2004). (This is my second presidential reference, since this email is something Meno would write—although he would do it far more eloquently and succinctly.) There is also plenty more reading out there that may prove interesting; I would start by Googling “canon wars.”

P.P.P.S. What are the Great Works? Someone’s opinion: <https://www.sjc.edu/academic-programs/undergraduate/seminar/annapolis-undergraduate-readings>.

Paul Franco article: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20711189>