Iannone, Carol: News Articles (1991): News Article 38

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The Best Way to Kill Our Literary Inheritance Is to Turn It Into a Decorous Celebration of the New World Order

By 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—1 suppose the brandishing of a list of the insidious fifth column's members is yet to come—but he does mention, as typical of William Strachey, secretary of the settlement at Jamestown, of a violent storm and shipwreck off the coast of Bermuda, are examples. (Is it too obvious to note the anagrammatic play on "cannibal"?)

"It is all but impossible to understand these plays without grappling with the dark energies upon which Shakespeare's art draws."

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 Euro-
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pean'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.

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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.

Stephen Greenblatt is a professor of English at the University of California at Berkeley and the author of Shakespearean Negotiations (University of California Press, 1988).