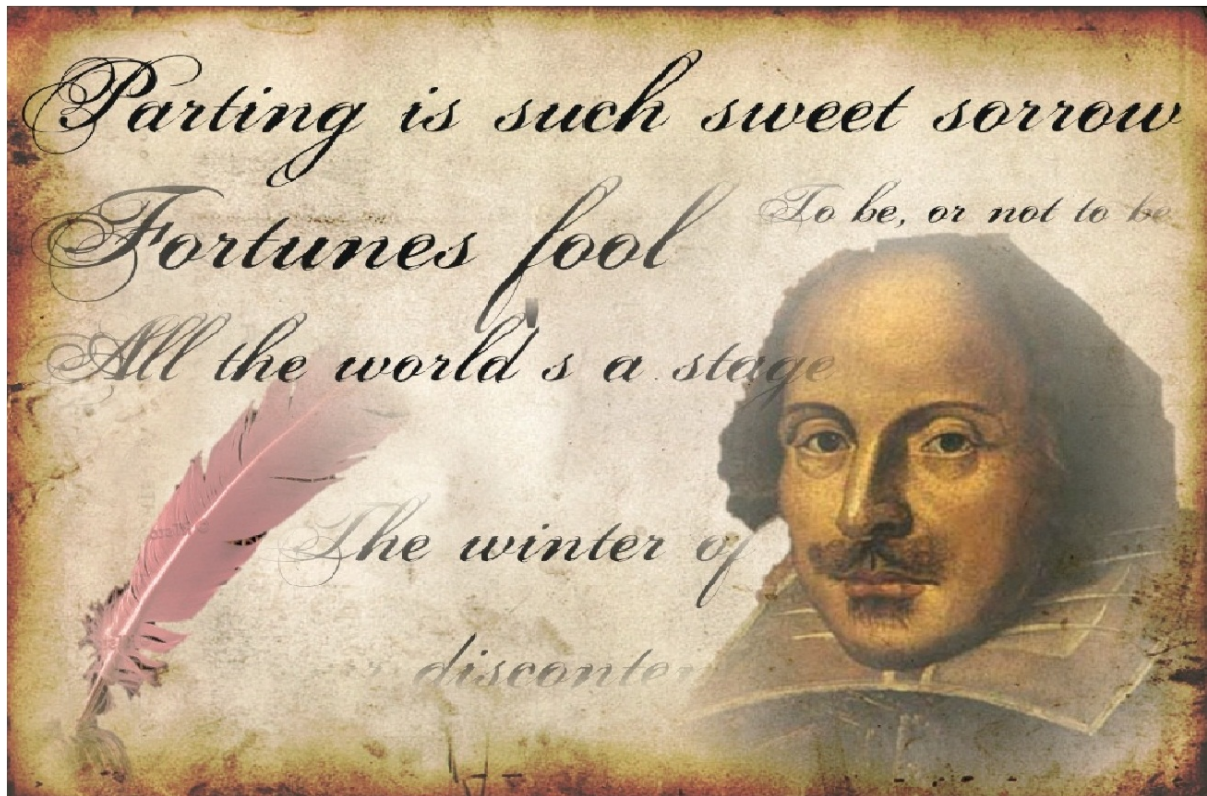


# The Canon Misfires at Cambridge University

by Michael Curtis



Shakespeare knew the realities of political life: Who loses and who wins, who's in, who's out. No one wants to be viewed by others as some untutored youth, unlearned in the world's false subtleties. Certainly this issue is apparent in the furor around a petition issued in October 2017 at Cambridge University, one of the world's great centers of learning. This petition is an open letter entitled "Decolonising the English Faculty" written by Lola Olufemi, the women's officer at the Cambridge University Student Union, signed by a group of 150 students, and circulated to the University. The letter asks for changes in how literature is taught to the elite youth at Cambridge.

The starting argument of Olufemi, Nigerian born and educated in England, is that the curriculum in English literature at

Cambridge is based on a “traditional” and “canonical” approach that elevates white authors who dominate it. She contends that the curriculum is shaped by colonial ideologies and, taken as a whole, perpetuates institutional racism. The curriculum, and all exam questions, should include post colonial and BME (black, and minority ethnic) and women authors.

The political factor meets the educational issue. Olufemi’s petition asks the University to decolonize the syllabus of English literature. She holds the English Department cannot claim to provide students with the foundation knowledge of the literature canon while it refuses to decolonize the curriculum. It must be expanded.

This argument has long been familiar in the United States, going back at least fifty years to criticism of the dominance of “dead white males.” But it is surprising that an institution which is number two in the World Ranking of Universities, 2017-18 including in areas of languages, literature and linguistics, and has had 92 Nobel Prize winners associated with it, should only now be asked to address this issue. About 4,000 of its 18,000 students are international and come from 120 countries. Cambridge is not a hub of isolationism, in people or in thought.

Indeed, the Cambridge Faculty of English is already distinguished by the presence of Priyamvada Gopal, Dean of Churchill College, a person of Indian origin and education whose primary academic interests are in colonial and post colonial literature and theory. She has warned of a “gregarious tolerance” for the way things are. For her, the greatest danger to our exercise of freedom is lapsing into habits of thought where we acquiesce in thinking of the way things are rather than the way things ought to be. Beware, she says, of wielding cultural certainties against apparently lesser cultures rather than speaking truth about and against power.

Of course no reasonable academic would object to broadening the syllabus. It is appropriate that authors from minority groups and the global south be part of a good English literature curriculum. In the U.S. works like those of Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, and James Baldwin, and possibly Gabriel Marquez and Chinua Achebe and other authors of color or from countries other than Western Europe are already part of the canon. At Cambridge an introductory course in English is already being considered to provide a perspective on the global contexts and history of English literature, on the belief that students should engage with empire, race, and identity .

The danger is to assume that post-colonial and BME texts provide the starting point for the critical and historical discourse on English literature is. These texts may add to the understanding of this body of literature but they must be considered within a broader context. Certainly it is debatable, that "empire" and "colonialism" are central to the understanding of books and contexts,

Most teachers would now agree that works of gifted authors, whose origin is outside Britain, should be taught. but this is different from altering the curriculum to fit the personal interests of students or the political imperatives of those advocating change. Moreover, introduction and addition of different writers and texts and the widening of horizons is supposed not to eliminate any of those already in the canon but educational time is short .

The issue is far more complex than simply addressing changes in the curriculum. Realistically, the introduction and addition of different authors and texts, and the widening of horizons might require lengthening of degree programs if some of those presently in the canon are not removed.

Underlying the present controversy are several factors: a question of power, refusal to be ignored or neglected in

society; and the rise and assertion of identity politics. The problem goes further. Some advocating change hold that attempts by whites to participate in the life and traditions of non-whites is akin to theft. For white men to use cultural manifestations of other groups is seen as cultural appropriation.

In practical terms there is a different if related issue. Both Oxford and Cambridge are criticised for the low levels of admittance of students from ethnic minorities. One third of Oxford colleges did not admit a single black A level student last year. Six Cambridge colleges did not admit one in 2015. Between 2010 and 2015 only 1% of offers of admission were made to blacks.

An interesting contrast is provided in a recently published a brilliant massive book the *House of Government* by Yuri Slezkine, dealing with the history of an apartment building which housed elite Bolsheviks and their children in the 1930s. He reports that youngsters instead of concentrating on the required canonical texts of Marx and Engels preferred non and pre-revolutionary works by famous 19th century Russian and especially European writers of fiction. Their personal canon included Shakespeare, Hugo, Goethe, Kipling and above all, Dickens, everyone's favorite writer, while Marxist texts were ignored.

Slezkine indicts that the Bolshevik children did not read the supposed vital texts, Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin at home but rather Pushkin, Gogol, and Tolstoy in school. He concludes that, partly as a result of that reading, the children of the Soviet elite "grew up resigned to the messiness of human existence, something their parents had rebelled against."

It appears that the Bolshevik children had much greater respect for the Western literary tradition and culture than some students at the most prestigious British universities, Oxford and Cambridge. It is reasonable to argue for a cultural

shift, expanding criteria of good literature, and widening the cultural horizons, but it wise to consider the political connection. It is probably true that few students today can read *Othello* or *The Tempest* without considering the postcolonial context. It is appropriate that students should be able to discuss race, colonial history, post colonial thought, or texts that are not considered part of the usual canon. But more important, it is dangerous to patrol the curriculum to see if it accords with particular political views.

Finally, some remarks by Lola Olufemi reveal a political context for her educational proposals. She has said that students are doing nothing to help Africa by visiting the continent as tourists. In addition, what drives middle class white people to travel abroad is an inherent selfishness. She believes that Cambridge can learn from Oxford's "Rhodes must Fall Campaign" with calls for removal of the statue of Cecil Rhodes because he was an imperialist. She may be right that questions of race, empire, identity, should be more central than they are in both texts and contexts. But it is wrong to accept that whatever Lola wants Lola should get.