Hispania Guest Editorial:
What’s in Your Canon?

Joan L. Brown

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Even though we often talk about “the canon,” the literary canon is a myth. No single collection of greatest works exists now, nor has there ever been one. Instead, multiple canons exist simultaneously—from each person’s internal canon of preferred works and authors to the contents of literary histories, anthologies, and textbooks; to every type of required reading list from AP through PhD. These canons perform an indispensable sorting function. They organize an unmanageable amount of information (in this case, literature) and distinguish “the best” from the rest. Through their selections, canons define what we value in our profession and, most crucially, what we transmit to the next generation.

Despite their importance, we are not paying attention to our canons. According to the MLA Bibliographies, research on the subject has declined over the past decade. Urgent practical issues, notably those involving external oversight of instruction and diminishing resources in education, have relegated canon questions to the waiting room of ideas. If we talk about what is in our canons, we do so casually, for our own amusement.

The question of canon contents is more urgent than we realize, since it determines what our students learn. The issue is one of control: who gets to decide what we teach? At a time when instructors at every level are being asked to cede authority to external agencies—from accrediting bodies to textbook publishers—not having a working canon makes us vulnerable. As one participant in an MLA convention session on the foreign language major lamented, “If there is no core, there is no standard, so when budget cuts hit, there go centuries of literature” (Jaschik). While this may sound drastic, the threat is real (“When Budget Cuts Loom”).

Canon construction should be the province of the men and women who are best qualified to decide what students learn: their teachers. Although a comprehensive disciplinary canon may be possible only at the graduate level, local canons can and should be devised (and continually revised) by educators at all levels. How can this be done? The tool for canon composition is the same one that teachers use for any curricular decision-making: meetings to reach consensus.

I propose that faculty meet to decide which aspects of literature (including film) are most important for their learners, and then select works that fulfill these criteria. In my view, factors that build value or canonicity are both extrinsic and intrinsic to a text. Extrinsic factors include tradition and inertia, recognition, importance for groups and individuals, and availability. Intrinsic factors encompass a work’s informative content in the areas of culture, history, the human experience, politics, ethics, and marginalized groups or minorities; its place in literary history; its aesthetic superiority; and its ability to entertain or move the reader (Brown). Faculties must first consider these factors, adding or deleting as each unit sees fit, and then associate specific works with the ones they select. This will yield a useful pedagogical canon. Courses would then include some of the designated works, enacting the consensus canon of its creators.

“What’s in your canon?” may sound like a casual question. But in today’s academic environment, it is both serious and urgent. Our canon is our curriculum, and it is up to us to make sure that we are the ones in charge of its contents.

Joan L. Brown
Elias Ahuja Professor of Spanish
University of Delaware
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