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THE CLASSICS IN THE SLUMS

Jonathan E. Rose

In 1988, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, president of the Modern Language Association, authoritatively stated (as something too obvious to require any evidence) that classic literature was always irrelevant to underprivileged people who were not classically educated. It was, she asserted, an undeniable “fact that Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare do not figure significantly in the personal economies of these people, do not perform individual or social functions that gratify their interests, *do not have value for them*.”

One should not be too hard on Professor Smith. She was merely echoing what was, at the time, standard academic opinion: that the Western classics embody a worldview that somehow “marginalizes” the poor, the nonwhite, the female, the “other,” and justifies their subordination to white male “hegemony.” And like so many postmodern critics, Professor Smith could be naively confident that she was in full possession of the facts, even without the benefit of research.

But her theory had no visible means of support. Whenever it was tested, the results were diametrically opposed to what she predicted: in fact "the canon" enabled "the masses" to become thinking individuals. Until fairly recently, Britain had an amazingly vital autodidact culture, where a large minority of the working classes passionately pursued classic literature, philosophy, and music. They were denied the educational privileges that Professor Smith enjoyed, but they knew that the "great books" that she derided would emancipate the workers.

Will Crooks (b. 1852), a cooper living in extreme poverty in East London, once spent tuppence on a secondhand *Iliad*, and was dazzled: "What a revelation it was to me! Pictures of romance and beauty I had never dreamed of suddenly opened up before my eyes. I was transported from the East End to an enchanted land. It was a rare luxury for a working lad like me just home from work to find myself suddenly among the heroes and nymphs of ancient Greece." Nancy Sharman (b. 1925) recalled that her mother, a Southampton charwoman, had no time to read until her last illness, at age 54. Then she devoured the complete works of Shakespeare, and "mentioned pointedly to me that if anything should happen to her, she wished to donate the cornea of her eyes to enable some other unfortunate to read." Margaret Perry (b. 1922) wrote of her mother, a Nottingham dressmaker: "The public library was her salvation. She read four or five books a week all her life but had no one to discuss them with. She had read all the classics several times over in her youth and again in later years, and the library had a job to keep her supplied with current publications. Married to a different man, she could have been an intelligent and interesting woman."

In the nineteenth century, Shakespeare could still attract enthusiastic, rowdy working-class audiences, who commented loudly about the quality of the performances. Caravans of barnstorming actors brought the plays to isolated mining villages. In response to popular demand, Birmingham's Theatre Royal devoted 30 percent of its repertoire to the Bard and other classic dramatists. In 1862, a theater manager provoked a near-riot when he attempted to substitute a modern comedy for an announced production of *Othello*.

Shakespeare provided a political script for labor leaders like J. R. Clynes (b. 1869), who rose from the textile mills of Oldham to become deputy leader of the House of Commons. In his youth he drew inspiration from the "strange truth" he discovered in *Twelfth Night*: "Be not afraid of greatness." "What a creed!" he marveled. "How it would upset the world if men lived up to it." Later, read-

ing *Julius Caesar*, "the realisation came suddenly to me that it was a mighty political drama" about the class struggle, "not just an entertainment." Once he overawed a stubborn employer by reciting an entire scene from the play: Clynes, as a friend put it, was "the only man who ever settled a trade dispute by citing Shakespeare." Elected to Parliament in 1906, he read *A Midsummer Night's Dream* while awaiting the returns.

Working-class autodidacts read the classics in part because contemporary literature was too expensive. A 1940 survey found that while 55 percent of working-class adults read books, they rarely bought new books. An autodidact could build up an impressive library by haunting used-book stalls, scavenging castoffs, or buying cheap out-of-copyright reprints such as Everyman's Library, but these offered only yesterday's authors. Thus Welsh collier Joseph Keating (b. 1871) was able to immerse himself in Swift, Pope, Fielding, Richardson, Smollett, Goldsmith, Sheridan, Keats, Byron, Shelley, Dickens, Thackeray, and Greek philosophy. There was one common denominator among these authors: all were dead. "Volumes by living authors were too high-priced for me," Keating explained, but that did not bother him terribly. "Our school-books never mentioned living writers; and the impression in my mind was that an author, to be a living author, must be dead; and that his work was all the better if he died of neglect and starvation."

Of course, a century ago elementary schools for the British working classes were in many ways grossly inadequate. Classrooms were crowded and under-equipped, discipline was enforced by the cane, and lessons emphasized rote memorization. But the schools taught at least one subject remarkably well. "Thinking back, I am amazed at the amount of English literature we absorbed in those four years," recalled Ethel Clark (b. 1909), a Gloucestershire railway worker's daughter, "and I pay tribute to the man [her teacher] who made it possible. . . . Scott, Thackeray, Shakespeare, Longfellow, Dickens, Matthew Arnold, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Rudyard Kipling were but a few authors we had at our finger-tips. How he made the people live again for us!"

Lancashire weaver Elizabeth Blackburn (b. 1902) conceded that "our horizons were very limited and our education, linked up as it was to our economic conditions, provided little room for the cultivation of leisure pursuits. But I left school at thirteen with a sound grounding in the basic arts of communication, reading and writing. . . . I had gained some knowledge of the Bible, a lively interest in literature and, most important, some impetus to learn." If the objective of public education is to create citizens who never stop

learning, then Elizabeth Blackburn's school succeeded brilliantly. When she went to work in the mills she memorized, by the rhythm of the looms, Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," Milton's "Lycidas," and Gray's *Elegy*.

Oral-history interviews reveal that, among British working people born between 1870 and 1908, two-thirds had unambiguously positive memories of school. And that fact inevitably raises a disturbing question: whether children today in America's inner cities would give their schools such high marks—and if not, why not?

Even more impressive is a 1940 survey of reading among pupils at nonacademic high schools, where education terminated at age 14. This sample represented something less than the working-class norm: the best students had already been skimmed off and sent to academic secondary schools on scholarship. Those who remained behind were asked which books they had read over the past month, excluding required texts. Even in this below-average group, 62 percent of boys and 84 percent of girls had read some poetry: their favorites included Kipling, Longfellow, Masefield, Blake, Browning, Tennyson, and Wordsworth. Sixty-seven percent of girls and 31 percent of boys had read plays, often something by Shakespeare. All told, these students averaged six or seven books per month. Compare that with the recent NEA study *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America*, which found that in 2002, 43.4 percent of American adults had not read any books at all, other than those required for work or school. Only 12.1 percent had read any poetry, and only 3.6 percent any plays.

In the mining towns of South Wales, colliers had pennies deducted from their wages to support their own libraries, more than 100 of them by 1934. The miners themselves determined which books to buy. One such library, the Tredegar Workmen's Institute, devoted 20 percent of its acquisitions budget to philosophy. Another spent 45 pounds on the *Oxford English Dictionary*. (In the best of times, a miner could not earn much more than a pound a day.) There were sophisticated literary debates down in the pits, where one collier heard high praise for George Meredith. That evening, he tried to borrow Meredith's *Love in the Valley* from the local miners' library, only to find 12 names on the waiting list for a single copy. "Every miner has a hobby," explained one Welsh collier. "It may be a reaction from physical strain. The miner works in a dark, strange world. He comes up into light. It is a new world. It is stimulating. He wants to do something. . . . Think what reading

means to an active mind that is locked away in the dark for hours every day!"

On company time, and a half-mile below the surface, Nottinghamshire collier G. A. W. Tomlinson (b. 1872) read *The Canterbury Tales*, Lamb's *Essays*, *The Origin of Species*, and Oscar Wilde's *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. Admittedly, that could be an occupational hazard: once, when he should have been minding a set of rail switches, he was so absorbed in Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village* that he allowed tubs full of coal to crash into empties. The foreman (quite rightly) clouted him and snatched the volume away. He returned it at the end of the shift and offered a few poetry books of his own—"BUT IF THA BRINGS 'EM DARN T'PIT I'LL KNOCK THI BLOCK OFF." Tomlinson tried to write his own verses and concealed them from his workmates, until one of them picked up a page he had dropped and read it: "No good, lad. Tha wants ter read Shelley's stuff. That's *poetry*!"

While studying Greek philosophy at night, Joseph Keating performed one of the toughest and worst-paid jobs in the mine: shoveling out tons of refuse. One day, he was stunned to hear a coworker sigh, "Heaven from all creatures hides the book of fate." "You are quoting Pope," Keating exclaimed. "Ayh," replied his companion, "me and Pope do agree very well." Keating had himself been reading Pope, Fielding, Smollett, Goldsmith, and Richardson in poorly printed paperbacks. Later he acquired a violin for 18 shillings, took lessons, and formed a chamber-music quartet, playing Mozart, Corelli, Beethoven, and Schubert—not an uncommon hobby in the coalfields. And he never forgot the electric thrill of pursuing books and music: "Reading of all sorts—philosophy, history, politics, poetry, and novels—was mixed up with my music and other amusements. I was tremendously alive at this period. Everything interested me. Every hour, every minute was crammed with my activities in one direction or another. New, mysterious emotions and passions seemed to be breaking out like little flames from all parts of my body. As soon as the morning sunlight touched my bedroom window, I woke. I did not rise. I leaped up. I flung the bedclothes away from me. They seemed to be burning my flesh. A glorious feeling within me, as I got out of bed, made me sing. My singing was never in tune, but my impulse of joy had to express itself."

Among the same audience, classical music was as popular as classic literature. A century ago one might hear, over the roar of machinery, ironworkers chanting the Pilgrims' Chorus from *Tannhäuser*, or weavers rehearsing *Messiah* or *Elijah*. A 1938 BBC

survey found that orchestral music was as popular as cricket broadcasts, attracting half of all working-class listeners. Another 15 percent enjoyed grand opera and piano recitals.

The Workers' Educational Association, founded in 1903 (and still a going concern today), brought university-level adult courses in literature, history, science, and economics to the mill towns. The students were intensely dedicated: they had to be, given the realities of their lives. One pottery engineer recorded that, over a 26-week period, he worked an average of 74.5 hours per week, then wrote 14 essays for his WEA course, and also delivered a total of 25 lectures to various other classes.

The WEA offered no grades, no degrees, and no vocational courses. The only motive for study was the disinterested pursuit of learning, and the students vehemently rejected any kind of occupational training. "Knowledge for its own sake is a better principle," said one. "Adult education is often a way of escape from the tedious monotony of working life. Give as wide a range of subjects as possible and let the student follow his bent." "We want freedom of mind, power and expression," wrote another, "and for that reason wish to dissociate work and study."

Because the WEA brought to the masses the kind of liberal education that Matthew Arnold had championed, some doctrinaire Marxists denounced it. Proletarian novelist Ethel Carnie warned that the pursuit of literature and art would simply "chloroform" the workers, who should focus instead "on the narrow, rigid, and distinctly not impartial facts deduced from the experience of our own exploited class." But WEA students found these assaults offensively condescending. "Will Miss Carnie be good enough to show where the chloroforming process comes in?" shot back garment worker Lavena Saltonstall. "Greek art will never keep the workers from claiming their world; in fact, it will help them to realise what a stunted life they have hitherto led. Nothing that is beautiful will harm the workers," who were perfectly able "to hear a lecture on industrial history, or economics, or Robert Browning, and remain quite sane. As a Socialist, as a trade unionist, as a suffragist . . . I resent Miss Carnie's suggestion that the WEA educational policy can ever make me forget the painful history of Labour, or chloroform my senses to the miseries that I see around me." And (Miss Saltonstall wound up) if anyone thinks "that a working man or woman is liable to be side-tracked or made neutral or impartial because they look at all sides of a question in order to understand it fully, then they are libeling the intelligence of the working classes."

In fact, a 1936 survey found that the WEA had created an articulate and obstreperous working-class intelligentsia. The typical alumnus was active in local politics and trade unions, someone who "tackles the town Library Committee for banning Shaw's *Black Girl*; challenges the local clergy to show more social zeal; tells the mill-owners what is wrong with their policy; ventilates the local lack of facilities for cultural education; indicts the municipal fathers for their failure to provide a park or an adequate tram-service." In this vein, the same NEA survey that reported that book reading was declining among all classes of Americans also found a very strong correlation between literary pursuits and community service. In 2002, half of all American adults who read 12 or more books a year also performed volunteer or charity work, compared with only one in six of those who read no books. In *Culture and Anarchy*, Matthew Arnold insists that if we pursue culture, "the best that is known and thought in the world," we will also work to create a better world. A growing body of sociological and historical evidence supports that conclusion.

Yet many contemporary academic critics (following in the tradition of the WEA's Marxist adversaries) are more concerned to scrutinize literary texts for signs of political deviation, sniffing out hints of imperialist, misogynist, or bourgeois ideology. This approach to literature is not only formulaic, one-dimensional, and dull; it also fails to consider the experiences of actual readers, who often found "reactionary" authors radically emancipating. No doubt Thomas Carlyle was a cranky male supremacist, but for Elizabeth Bryson (b. 1880), the daughter of an impoverished Dundee bookkeeper, he offered "the exciting experience of being kindled to the point of explosion by the fire of words." Carlyle's "gospel of work" so inspired her that she was driven to win a university degree and become a distinguished New Zealand physician. When Catherine McMullen (b. 1906), a workhouse laundress, came across a reference to the *Letters Written by Lord Chesterfield to His Son*, she visited a public library for the first time in her life and borrowed it. "And here began my education. With Lord Chesterfield I read my first mythology. I learned my first real history and geography. With Lord Chesterfield I went travelling the world. I would fall asleep reading the letters and awake around three o'clock in the morning my mind deep in the fascination of this new world, where people conversed, not just talked. Where the brilliance of words made your heart beat faster."

Chesterfield launched Catherine McMullen into a lifetime course of reading, beginning with Chaucer in Middle English, moving on

to Erasmus, Donne, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and even *Finnegans Wake*. Ultimately, as Catherine Cookson, she became one of the best-selling authors of all time, producing more than 90 novels with total sales of more than 100 million copies, at one point responsible for one-third of all the books loaned by Britain's public libraries. "Dear, dear Lord Chesterfield," she sighed. "Snob or not I owe him so much."

Just as Edmund Burke offered a literary model to young Irving Howe, Sir Walter Scott was profoundly inspirational to T. A. Jackson (b. 1879), the most brilliant (and scruffiest) proletarian intellectual to come out of the British Communist Party. Jackson admitted that Scott "was a shocking old Tory, and a reactionary," but he insisted that one could read *Ivanhoe* as a critique of capitalism: "The gallantry and efficiency of Robin Hood, and his outlaws, the sturdy courage of the Saxons, and jolly Friar Tuck, the intrepid valour, strength and chivalry of Coeur de Lion, [represented] all that was English and opposite to money-greedy meanness."

Jackson's syllabus for self-education was the "Hundred Best Books," a list published by social reformer Sir John Lubbock in 1886. Like Mortimer Adler's Great Books Course (which it resembled and anticipated), it was widely derided as an anachronistic compendium of prepackaged literature. But for Jackson it was profoundly liberating, a vehicle for redistributing cultural wealth to the masses. "Expensively educated comrades" laughed at him for saying so, but the act of reading through nearly all of those 100 books set in motion an intellectual odyssey that eventually brought Jackson to Marxism, though Marx was certainly not on the list:

It drove me into reading translations of the Greek and Roman authors I would never have faced otherwise. It started me off upon an intensive study of English poetry and, thereafter upon a similar study of Romance and Saga literature. It taught me that there were other branches of literature than prose fiction, and other dramatic writers than Shakespeare. It taught me Shakespeare was something much more than an old bore invented to plague the lives of schoolboys. It drove me back upon a wider grasp of history—since I found in practice that there were other literatures than English—literatures of at least equal merit. I found too that all could be understood only in their historical sequence. In the end it led me to philosophy and Marxism and thereby to the revolutionising of my whole life. . . . Whether he desired it or not, [Lubbock] gave me the urge which sent me adventuring with courage and confidence until I had found them all for myself.

With that powerful streak of intellectual independence, Jackson inevitably ran afoul of the Communist Party hierarchy. "The party line," he once sighed, "is always moving in a circle." Early British Marxists tended to dismiss as "bourgeois" the same classic literature that autodidacts found so liberating, a fact that goes a long way toward explaining why Marxism failed to gain a following among British workers. As the manifesto of the Communist-affiliated Workers' Theatre Movement proclaimed, "It rejects decisively the role of raising the cultural levels of the workers through contact with great dramatic art." That ruled out Shakespeare and just about every other important playwright: even Sean O'Casey was considered ideologically unsafe. Ewan MacColl was a Communist and the son of a Communist iron-founder, but he had been raised on Gogol, Dostoevsky, Balzac, and Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, and he found the party's agitprop drama an insult to his intelligence. "We had a strong feeling that we were being written down to," he remembered. "I've noticed frequently that among middle-class party people that I've worked with, over the years, that there's an idea that workers will accept anything, providing the message is OK. The quality doesn't matter, the form doesn't matter. All that matters is that we agree on the correct slogans."

The proletarian intellectual often met with suspicion from his employers as well as his workmates, who doubted (as Barbara Herrnstein Smith doubted) that literature could have any value for the working classes. Housemaid Margaret Powell (b. 1907) read *Remembrance of Things Past* three times over, but her allusions to Dickens and Conrad were likely to scare away boys. She worked for an aristocratic lady in Chelsea, who, considerate and liberal-minded in every other respect, was thoroughly nonplussed when her servant asked to borrow a book from her library. "Yes, of course, certainly you can, Margaret—but I didn't know you read."

> They knew that you breathed and you slept and you worked, but they didn't know that you read. Such a thing was beyond comprehension. They thought that in your spare time you sat and gazed into space. . . . You could almost see them reporting you to their friends. "Margaret's a good cook, but unfortunately she reads. Books, you know."

For all his gentle liberalism, even E. M. Forster shared that class prejudice. In his 1910 novel *Howards End*, the pathetic clerk Leonard Bast tries to acquire a veneer of culture, but his efforts are hopeless. He plays the piano "badly and vulgarly," and what is worse, he plays Grieg. In literary conversations, he is only capable of repeating cant phrases and dropping names. Aping his betters,

he struggles to understand John Ruskin, simply because he has been told that Ruskin is "the greatest master of English prose." In the end, Bast is literally crushed and killed by books. He would have been better off as a mindless peasant: that is Forster's unmistakable message.

The reality was profoundly different. The founders of Britain's Labour Party identified Ruskin, more than anyone else, as the author who had electrified their minds and inspired a vision of social justice. At the time, the brightest working-class boys often entered clerkdom, one of the few professions then open to them, and they often brought to their office an incandescent intellectual passion. Neville Cardus (b. 1889) was an insurance clerk, like Leonard Bast, but he burned with a hard, gemlike flame when he argued with his Manchester friends over

> Elgar, Shaw, Wells, Ibsen, Nietzsche, Strauss, Debussy, the French Impressionists; our first tastes of Stendahl, the de Goncourts, J-K Huysmans . . . ; then, before our sight had become accustomed to the fresh vista, the Russians swept down on us—Dostoevsky, Turgenev, Tchekov, Moussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and the ballet. . . . There were not enough hours to the day for a young man. We never went straight home after a new play by Shaw, after Gerontius, after the A flat symphony, after Kreisler had played the Elgar violin concerto for the first time, after Tristan, after Strauss's Salome. . . . We walked the city streets, we talked and talked . . . not to air our economic grievances, not to 'spout' politics and discontent, but to relieve the ferment of our minds or emotions after the impact of *Man and Superman*, *Elektra*, *Riders to the Sea*, *Pélleas et Mélisande*, *Shéhérazade*, *Prince Igor*.

None of this interested Forster or, for that matter, most literary scholars of the past 25 years. Some of the latter did investigate the responses of readers, but not "common" readers. The audience that mattered, wrote Cornell University deconstructionist Jonathan Culler, consisted of "oneself, one's students, colleagues, and other critics"—all members of the academic club. The notion "that one should rush out armed with questionnaires to interview the reader in the street" he found disturbingly democratic. As a result, academic literary criticism became ever more ingrown, disengaged from the general public, and fractured into several mutually unintelligible theoretical sects. The problem, as Modern Language Association president Stephen Greenblatt recently put it, is not that literature professors are only writing for other literature professors.

In fact, these professors are no longer buying and reading one another's books. University presses, consequently, often cannot sell the few hundred copies needed to break even on a scholarly monograph.

Professor Greenblatt is at a loss for a solution, except to suggest that no one leave the MLA convention without buying a book from the publishers' exhibits. Assuming that every other MLA member has published a book, this would increase the average sales of each by two copies. Clearly, something more radical needs to be done. Literary studies, I suggest, could be revitalized, and could once again engage the general public, by turning its attention to the ordinary reader in history.

Some groundbreaking scholars have done precisely that. In *The Cheese and the Worms* (1980), Carlo Ginzburg recovered the story of Menocchio, a miller in sixteenth-century Italy who acquired and read (with a highly independent mind) a vernacular Bible, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, travel books, perhaps even the Qur'an. In *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life: Material and Cultural Life in Rural New England, 1780-1835* (1989), William Gilmore found Vermont farmers stocking their home libraries with Homer, Virgil, Cicero, Dr. Johnson, Walter Scott, Oliver Goldsmith, Laurence Sterne, and John Locke. In *Readers and Society in Nineteenth-Century France: Workers, Women, Peasants* (2001), Martyn Lyons discovered workingmen who haunted second-hand bookstalls along the Seine, devouring Châteaubriand, Alexandre Dumas, Goethe, Shakespeare, and the philosophies of the Enlightenment. Elizabeth McHenry's prizewinning *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African-American Literary Societies* (2002) unearthed a tradition we scarcely knew existed: black Americans discussing Milton, Spenser, Homer, Aeschylus, Longfellow, Dryden, Pope, Browning, Pindar, and Sappho, as well as Paul Lawrence Dunbar. Impressive networks of workers' libraries were set up not just by Welsh colliers, but also by Colorado miners, the Social Democratic Party in imperial Germany, trade unions in interwar Poland, study circles in Sweden, the Histadrut labor federation in mandatory Palestine, and anarchists in pre-Franco Spain. And in Nilo Cruz's Pulitzer Prize-winning drama, *Anna in the Tropics*, cigar makers listen to the classics read aloud while they work—a Cuban tradition, but also practiced in many other parts of the world. Everywhere we look, in a diversity of cultures and historical periods, we find "common" readers tackling remarkably challenging literature.

Stephen Greenblatt actually writes quite eloquently about the magic of reading—that "silent moment, constantly renewed, in which we feel that someone—often someone long vanished into dust, someone who could not conceivably have known our names or conjured up our existence or spoken our language—is sending us a message." That is an insight so perfectly framed that I can add nothing to it—except to suggest that we look for that magic in an unfamiliar place.

After all, for years English professors have argued back and forth whether (for example) Thomas Hardy oppresses or empowers women, without resolving the issue. I propose we seek a third opinion—perhaps the only opinion that really counts here. Edith Hall was an overworked housemaid who discovered Hardy in a WEA class in the 1920s. Back then, she recalled,

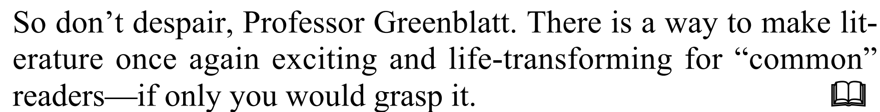
> *Punch* and other publications of that kind showed cartoons depicting the servant class as stupid and "thick" and therefore fit subjects for their jokes. The skivvy [low-level female domestic servant] particularly was revealed as a brainless menial. Many of the working-class were considered thus and Thomas Hardy wrote in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* that "Labouring farm folk were personified in the newspaper-press by the pitiable dummy known as Hodge. . . . " and it was in this book that Hardy told the story of Tess, a poor working girl with an interesting character, thoughts and personality. This was the first serious novel I had read up to this time in which the heroine had not been of "gentle birth" and the labouring classes as brainless automatons. This book made me feel human and even when my employers talked at me as though I wasn't there, I felt that I could take it; I knew that I could be a person in my own right.

Today, in America's inner cities, there may be more Edith Halls than you dare to hope. Kurt Wootton taught English at a Providence high school where the students were almost all black and half of them dropped out before graduation. He assigned them Richard Wright's *Black Boy* and jazz by John Coltrane, which they found hopelessly irrelevant. Then he organized ArtsLit, a summer program that brings students from Rhode Island's worst high schools to the Brown University campus to study and perform *Othello*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan*, García Lorca's *Blood Wedding*, Sophocles' *Antigone*, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. And these long-dead authors clearly sent the kids a message, as high school teacher Richard Kinslow found when he had his ESL class prepare a production of *Macbeth*. One of his

students was the type who got suspended about once a week, but he would sneak into school for the daily rehearsals. His motivation was precisely the same as Edith Hall's. "These kids had never been actively involved in any part of school except gym and art," explained Kinslow. "Doing Shakespeare honored them. If you want to talk about self-respect and pride, it made a big difference."

At Chicago's Wilbur Wright College, where the majority of students are immigrants, nonwhite, or both, Professor Bruce Gans runs a successful Great Books Curriculum, with an enrollment of about 900. Students in this program, compared with their schoolmates, greatly improve their writing skills, have far higher graduation rates, and are better prepared to transfer to four-year colleges. Meanwhile, Earl Shorris has developed the Clemente Course, a classical curriculum aimed specifically at people living in poverty. His first syllabus ranged from Plato's *Republic*, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, and Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War* to William Blake and D. H. Lawrence. And yes, Plato is intensely relevant to former drug addicts. "Those of us in the grip of addiction use this process to rethink our lives," one student explains. "Socrates makes clear that you have to have the courage to examine yourself and to stand up for something. A lot of us have justified our weaknesses for too long a time."

So don't despair, Professor Greenblatt. There is a way to make literature once again exciting and life-transforming for "common" readers—if only you would grasp it.



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