

Yesteryear's Canon, Today's Standards: We can do both

“A whole culture – not a single ‘Homer’ – wrote *Iliad* and *Odyssey*,” says Adam Nicolson, historian, and award-winning author. This very culture – a culture cherished by Greeks and philhellenes alike – sheds light on history’s timeless teachings through classical literature. While classical literature has seen centuries of empires, revolutions, and liberations, it is now jeopardized by the emerging, albeit well-intentioned movement called #DisruptTexts. The campaign has inspired several high school teachers to curtail, and in some cases, completely abolish traditional canon from school curricula. The reasoning: these pieces fall short of today’s standards of inclusivity and representation – specifically those which include elements of racism, sexism, ableism, and other forms of hate.

While leaders of the #DisruptTexts movement state that they “do not believe in censorship” and “have never supported banning books,” some of the campaign’s followers are reacting otherwise. Just recently, Homer’s distinguished classic, *The Odyssey*, was banned in Lawrence, Massachusetts’ public school districts. Ninth-grade English teacher Heather Levine rejoiced in the text’s removal via Twitter, referring to the Epic as “trash.” Similarly, as recently reported in the *Wall Street Journal*, Meghan Cox Gurdon writes: “Seattle English teacher Evin Shinn tweeted in 2018 that he’d ‘rather die’ than teach “The Scarlet Letter,” unless Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel is used to ‘fight against misogyny and slut-shaming.’” The campaign’s objectives seem to require further clarification: should classical pieces be altogether replaced, or rather offered in conjunction to the voices of historically marginalized authors?

Certainly, the campaign has sparked an important conversation about traditional canon’s role in modern academia. Such movements can be beneficial to educational systems, as they incorporate the diverse perspectives of traditionally underrepresented authors. By the same token, they can be damaging if traditional texts are taken out of curricula altogether, thereby denying students an opportunity to learn from and critically analyze such texts.

It is important to note that the value of classical literature cannot be limited to then-normalized themes of biases, alone. As iHomeschool Network founder, Jimmie Quick states, “classical literature sheds

light on common human problems throughout history.” Homer’s Epics, for example, provide a looking glass into history while offering countless moral lessons. *The Iliad* embraces core values of heroism, nobility, and “the good life,” which ancient Greeks embraced. His archetype of the “hero,” a character that represents both individualistic poise and collectivist morale, enshrines honor towards others. At a fundamental age, it forces students to question their legacies: how would they like to be remembered?

Moreover, several activists of historically persecuted groups have turned to classical literature for inspiration in their own political work. Williams Wells Brown (1814–84), the first published African-American playwright, frequently quoted from Shakespeare in both his play, *The Escape*, and several chapters of his novels. Frederick Douglas (1818–95), the most influential African-American reformist of the nineteenth century, when requested to name his favorite authors, recited Shakespeare first. Such references do not prove that Shakespeare was not racist; nor do they demonstrate his work was written without prejudice in mind. Nonetheless, they demonstrate that exceptional members of all communities - marginalized and not - have long found classical literature valuable in their own creative and political work. By dismissing century-withstanding literature altogether, the campaign fosters a pedagogic deprivation of the very literary masterpieces that inspired some of history’s most prominent activists.

While the voices of marginalized communities should be incorporated more prominently in today’s curriculum, alongside them should remain the voices of the classics, as such pieces continue to inspire even contemporary authors. We ask the #DisruptTexts campaign, and its supporters, to see the opportunity in juxtaposing traditional texts with contemporary authors to explore diachronic and universal dilemmas, rather than eliminate traditional texts altogether.

Sincerely,

Irene Coritsidis, Alexander Thomopoulos, Fotis Karantonis, Konstantine Ouranitsas & Endy Zemenides on behalf of the National Hellenic Student Association (NHSA) of North America, Inc. Executive Board.