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Enlightenment Impartiality in the Age of Trump

One of my regular teaching responsibilities at the University of Alabama in Huntsville (UAH) is a sophomore-level, general-education introduction to literary studies called “Readings in Literature and Culture II.” It is an open-topic course, capped at 35, whose main curricular requirement is that we teach works representing multiple national origins that come from “after the age of discovery” (i.e., European settlements in the New World). To pitch to my interests as an eighteenth-centuryist, I have since my first year at UAH taught this course as “Enlightenment and Its Legacies”—a loose survey, heavily-reliant on small-group discussion, that takes students through big hits and themes of the European Enlightenment (first half) before turning to a more global consideration of later Enlightenment legacies and non-Western conceptions of enlightenment. Over the six+ semesters that I have taught the course since then, I have gradually tweaked the syllabus, the pacing and of classroom instruction, and our small-group routines to meet the needs of a STEM school and a diverse student body that has sometimes been uncomfortable with the kinds of student-directed discussion that I hope to generate. The course innovation that I propose to present at ASECS—“Enlightenment Impartiality in the Age of Trump”—is my most recent course modification along these lines. Inspired by the 2016 election, particularly the debates about “fake news” and media bias that it prompted, I developed a small instructional unit and paper on Enlightenment impartiality. It has become a surprisingly effective touchstone in a course framed by recurrent discussions of “metacognition.” It gives each student an opportunity to reflect
in writing on the thought patterns evident in an Enlightenment text of his or her choosing; and it gives the class as a whole an occasion and a point of reference for discussing germane contemporary topics such as the goals of undergraduate education, the truth-seeking obligations of the modern academy, and the challenges of evaluating partisan media sources.

The heart of the unit consists of a single class in which I introduce the concept of impartiality in a brief lecture and then set the students to work on a small-group assignment. I begin by soliciting ideas about what “impartiality” means (a question that usually prompts discussion of the prospect of rising above “partial” or “partisan” views of a subject). In the past two semesters (i.e., since the assignment began), I raised the interesting case of the controversy over crowd size at President Trump’s inauguration. Sketches on the board illustrated perspectival differences in play (Trump’s view of a sea of people, the Women’s March protester’s perspective, photos of the crowd from the Washington Monument, comparison photos with Obama’s inauguration); and we discussed the processes by which the press and the parties involved tried to come to a more “impartial” view of the conflict, including the introduction of subway statistics and the consultation of third-party experts on crowd size. This piece of the discussion must be handled delicately—among other reasons because I teach a very diverse student body in Alabama—but it makes the basic point I want to make, which is that there are intellectual processes, procedures, institutional forms of recordkeeping, and means of calling on disinterested third parties that can at least theoretically help an observer move from a partial to a more “impartial” view of a controversial subject. We then turn to Samuel Johnson’s definition, including his perhaps unexpected suggestion that being “impartial” might involve being “equal in distribution of justice; just” and speculate about possible rationales for that inclusion (qtd. on attached paper assignment). The *Encyclopédie* entry on “philosophe” gives additional fuel to the idea that “impartiality” as it is
seen by these thinkers might involve, not merely cold detachment, but complex forms of empathy or identification with “[c]ivil society” as “a divinity…on earth” (see assignment sheet).

Then I set students to work in small groups on two of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s *Turkish Letters* (1717), one on her visit to the Turkish baths, and the other on her witnessing of smallpox inoculation. I point out that it was significant, first of all, that she was so learned, curious, and committed to philosophical inquiry—since such ambitions and privileges were then typically gendered male—and that she arguably works hard in these letters to show herself to be “impartial” in her observations. Students are asked to find signifiers of her impartiality. They often seize on a range of forms of evidence. Students often note her clinical descriptions of the procedures of inoculation and their symptoms, the precision with which she accounts for the results, her willingness to inoculate her own son, and her refusal to countenance ineffective “Grecian” superstitions about the placement of incisions like a Christian cross. A lively conversation inevitably surrounds the lengths to which Lady Mary goes in her descriptions of the Turkish baths not to sound ethnocentric and biased toward English mores. To this end, I make a point of mentioning (with maps on the overhead projector) the location of her travels in what would then have been seen as a gateway to the “Orient”—a detail that, when unpacked, inevitably opens up comparisons to modern-day U.S. rivalries with the Middle East.

At the end of the class meeting, I distribute and discuss with them an Enlightenment Impartiality Essay assignment (see attached) that asks them in a 2- to 3-page paper to apply these analytical techniques to another text that we have read together—fictional or nonfictional—and to conclude by reflecting on where, if at all, they have seen “impartial” intellectual procedures utilized in modern Alabama (a designation that I let them apply liberally to modern life in general). Some of the least daring students pick a text discussed in a neighboring class on “Method” (Bacon,
Descartes). Both Bacon’s notions of empiricist rigor and “induction” and Descartes’ notion of a four-part procedure for tackling the production of new knowledge bear a resemblance to the kinds of intellectual processes that we discuss under the rubric of “impartiality.” But some students make more daring, creative claims about, say, how Candide’s conversation with Martin about a sinking ship in Voltaire’s Candide sets Martin’s “Manichean” pessimism impartially against Candide’s provisional optimism; or how Jonathan Swift’s A Modest Proposal, in its satirical undercutting of the projector’s savage hypocrisy toward the poor, might be construed as an “impartial” view. The point of the assignment is not for students to arrive at any one answer that I have predetermined, but to get them thinking about what makes one person or procedure more “impartial” than another, and at the same time to give them practice producing a disciplinarily “literary” paper, in which they analyze thought processes suggested or delineated in a text; grapple with the peculiarities of a distinctive genre (satire, the novel, the verse essay); and explore a key Enlightenment ideal.

This assignment is informed in part by my scholarly interests. I happened to be working through Jeffrey Smitten’s terrific article on “Impartiality in Robertson’s History of America” (ECS 19.1 (1985): 56-77) at the time when a curricular need presented itself: I felt a duty to address the politicization of academia and the proliferation of “fake news,” and I had never really loved my previous paper assignment for that slot, so the “impartiality” assignment was born. But it took shape as part of a growing effort in my UAH teaching to cultivate in my students what I call “metacognitive” awareness. My students come from a range of backgrounds—some of them ill preparation for the discussion-centered humanities curriculum that I prefer on principle. I have therefore begun passing out anonymous “Informal Reflections” at the beginning, middle, and end of the semester (credit / fail upon completion) to help prompt the students to chart an intellectual course for themselves, review their strengths and weaknesses, determine how they best become
“enlightened,” and generally take responsibility for their own learning. These low-stakes assignments have dramatically affected student perceptions of contentment and learning in my non-honors classes. No longer do students request in their final course evaluations that I lecture more. And, to my mild surprise, the concept of “metacognition”—in the impartiality assignment and elsewhere—has become inseparable, for most students, from the content of the course. The students now perceive, more astutely than I ever could have anticipated, forms of metacognition at work in texts as diverse as Rousseau’s *Confessions*, Coleridge’s *Kubla Khan*, and Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler*. By no means do they perceive that Enlightenment philosophers were masters of impartiality—indeed, a few have asked me whether my writing assignment is a “trick,” since all of the writers seem “partial” in one way or another—but, through the combination of their self-reflection and analytical work, the group as a whole is more capable of finding its way through, say, David Hume and James Beattie’s debate about how race predicts or reflects “National Character.” Whereas former iterations of this course might have inspired some students merely to hate Hume because of his racism, these more recent iterations, with the foray into “impartiality,” have students asking more specifically about the intellectual procedures deployed by each of these writers to come to their respective conclusions. Students are now inclined to note, without prompting, that Hume’s footnote proceeds from ostentatious and virtually unevidenced speculation, whereas Beattie’s defense of civilizations of people of color proceeds from careful reading. This is an outcome very much in keeping with my hopes for the impartiality unit: to teach students the value of judicious meditation, intellectual discipline, and research in arriving at scholarly conclusions.
Readings in Literature and Culture II:
Enlightenment and Its Legacies

Who first proposed that we conduct scientific experiments with a “method”? What cultural and intellectual changes laid the groundwork for the American Revolution? We will examine consequential texts from the European Enlightenment and consider its lasting, global impact. Authors may include Bacon, Voltaire, Jefferson, Ibsen, Conrad, and Woolf.

Course Catalog Description: Critical analysis of texts from the Age of Discovery through the present. The course introduces students to the methods of literary study through an examination of works in their social, historical, and philosophical contexts. Prerequisites: Open to students who have completed 6 hours of freshman composition, with exceptions as indicated. (Credit hours: 3.0. Grading system: A, B, C, D, F.)
Course Objectives

By the end of this course, you should be able to:

- Devise ways of talking and writing about world literature and cultural difference
- List defining characteristics of the European Enlightenment and non-Western concepts of enlightenment
- Discern these intellectual traditions in their literary products, and reflect upon the role of literature in sustaining, refining, and subverting these traditions
- Discuss the Enlightenment’s development and ongoing influence
- Identify texts, authors, and themes treated in the course
- Deploy relevant literary terms and generic labels (e.g., couplet, comedy, satire)
- Develop strategies for grappling with difficult texts
- Continue the practice of clear and effective writing

Course Requirements

- Weekly readings (variable in length: typically 30-50 pages per class)
- Regular reading quizzes
- Punctual attendance and active participation in class activities
- One formal paper (2-3 pages)
- Three informal reflections
- Midterm and final exams
- Optional creative assignment

Required Texts


Assignments and all other readings (marked with * on schedule below) can be accessed through our class Canvas site:

- Canvas Learning Management System (canvas.uah.edu)

NB: When you come to class, please see to it that you have at your disposal a printed copy of all of the texts that we are scheduled to discuss that day.

Course Schedule  (as of mid August 2017 – details may change depending on class needs)

Thurs., Aug. 17 – General Introduction
Tues., Aug. 22 – **Introduction to the European Enlightenment**

[First reflection due.]

Thurs., Aug. 24 – **Patriarchs and Subjects**
Molière, *Tartuffe* (1664), 141-97

Tues., Aug. 29 – **Tartuffe**, ctd.

Thurs., Sept. 1 – **Philosophical Impartiality**
*Encyclopédie* definition of “philosophe” (1765)*; Mary Wortley Montagu, selections from the *Turkish Embassy Letters* (1717)*

Tues., Sept. 5 – **Scientific Methods**
Francis Bacon, from *Novum Organum* (1620)*; René Descartes, from *The Discourse on Method* (1637), 110-13; Alexander Pope, from *An Essay on Man* (1733-34), 321-25, 344-51

Thurs., Sept. 7 – **The Prospect of Social Progress**
Suor Juana Inés de la Cruz, from *The Poet’s Answer to the Most Illustrious Sor Filotea de la Cruz* (1691), 246-62; Benjamin Franklin, letter to Joseph Priestley (1780), 128


Thurs., Sept. 14 – **Enlightened Entertainment**
Voltaire, *Candide* (1759), 352-73 (end of Ch. 12)

Tues., Sept. 19 – *Candide*, 373-91 (end of Ch. 21)

Tues., Sept. 21 – *Candide*, 391-413

---- ENLIGHTENMENT PAPER DUE Friday, Sept. 22 by 5 p.m. ----

Tues., Sept. 26 – **The Individual**

Thurs., Sept. 28 – **Revolutionary Contexts**
“An Age of Revolutions in Europe and the Americas,” 3-15, and most of the brief selections that follow: Thomas Jefferson, *The Declaration of Independence* (1776), 18-19; French National Assembly, *Declaration of the
Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789), 21-23; Olympe de Gouges, The Rights of Woman (1791), 23-28; Edmund Burke, from Reflections on the Revolution in France (1789), 29-35; Jean-Jacques Dessalines, “Liberty or Death” (1791), 36-39; William Wordsworth, from The Prelude (1799-1850) and “To Toussaint L’Ouverture” (1802), 40-43; Simón Bolívar, “Reply of a South American to a Gentleman of the Island” (1815), 44-49. [Make a list or map of the contents of these items for the purpose of processing all of the information, and bring it with you to class.]

Tues., Oct. 3 – MIDTERM (in class)

Thurs., Oct. 5 – Fall Break (no class)

Tues., Oct. 10 – Enlightenment: Cross-Cultural Comparisons
   The Song of Ch’un-hyang (comp. 1754), Vol. D, 74-89
   [Midterm reflection due.]

Thurs., Oct. 12 – Ihara Saikaku, Life of a Sensuous Woman (1686), 585-611

Tues., Oct. 17 – Enlightenment Legacies of Race and Resistance

Thurs., Oct. 19 – The Legacy of Character

Tues., Oct. 24 – Pushing the Envelope or Improving the Reader?

Thurs., Oct. 26 – Realism

Tues., Oct. 31 – Hedda Gabler, III-IV, 817-838

Thurs., Nov. 2 – T.B.A.

---- OPTIONAL CREATIVE ASSIGNMENT DUE Friday, Nov. 3 by 5 p.m. ----

Tues., Nov. 7 – Colonial Legacies
Thurs., Nov. 9 – *Heart of Darkness*, 47-78; Derek Walcott, “Elegy” (1968), “The Sea is History” (1979), 939-42, 950-54

Tues., Nov. 14 – **Gender Equity**

Thurs., Nov. 16 – **Modernisms and Beyond**


Thurs., Nov. 23 – Thanksgiving Break (no class)

Tues., Nov. 28 – **Conclusions and Review**  [*Final reflection due.*]

        ---- FINAL EXAM Thursday, Nov. 30, 11:30 a.m.-2:00 p.m. ----

**Course Policies**

**Preparation:** To prepare for class, read the assigned materials at least once before the class meeting; take notes in the margins if it helps you to focus or to locate key passages swiftly; and look up any words or usages that you don’t know. Come to class ready to contribute your thoughts and ideas, share your written work, ask appropriate questions, and respond thoughtfully to your classmates. Bring hard copies of all assigned readings to class. If you think that you may have difficulty purchasing the required books for the course, please see me so we can work together toward a practical solution.

**Comportment:** Please treat others with civility and respect. Turn off cellphones; close your computers. Speak and listen respectfully. Conduct yourself during class and on Angel discussion boards in a manner that does not unreasonably interfere with the opportunity of other students to learn. Failure to comply with this requirement may result in points being deducted from a student’s final numerical average.

**Attendance:** You show courtesy to our classroom community when you attend class faithfully, and prompt and regular attendance is crucial to your success in this course, which has at its center class discussions and collaborations. Your prompt and regular attendance will be directly reflected in your participation grade (see below). Arriving late for class or leaving early will also affect your grade, as will chronic failure to bring the appropriate texts to class. Students who anticipate being absent from class for religious holidays or University-sanctioned events should discuss these plans with me by the third class of the semester. In these and other cases, students are responsible for obtaining notes from classmates and making arrangements to complete missed work.
NB: Students with excessive absences (i.e., more than six, excused or unexcused – in other words, the equivalent of three or more weeks) will automatically fail the course. Note also that class non-attendance does not constitute withdrawal; nor does notifying the instructor of intended withdrawal. Any student failing to follow the established UAH procedure for withdrawal will continue to be enrolled in the class and may receive a failing grade for the course.

**Reading Quizzes:** Be prepared for impromptu reading quizzes on the assigned reading materials. These will not be long (5 questions), and they will be largely fact-based.

**Assignment guidelines:** Formal assignments should follow MLA format guidelines. For instance, compositions should be double-spaced throughout and printed with one-inch margins; include page numbers, the date, your name and mine, and a title that is neither underlined nor highlighted by boldface type. Please use 12-point Times or Times New Roman font. Include a bibliography.

**Late work:** Late papers will incur penalties of one letter grade (e.g., B → C) for each full day of delayed submission.

**Evaluation:** Your final grade will be calculated as follows:

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**Grading Scale:**

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**Plagiarism:** Your written assignments and examinations must be your own work. Academic misconduct will not be tolerated. To ensure that you are aware of what is considered academic misconduct, you should review carefully the definition and examples provided in Article III, Code of Student Conduct, Student Handbook, p. 93. If you have any questions in this regard, please contact me right away.

**Accommodation for Disabilities:** The University of Alabama in Huntsville will make reasonable accommodations for students with documented disabilities. If you need support or assistance because of a disability, you may be eligible for academic accommodations. Students should identify themselves to me and to the Disability Support Services Office (256-824-1997 or Madison Hall, Room 131) as soon as possible to coordinate accommodations.
Impartiality was a prominent philosophical ideal in European Enlightenment writings. To be “impartial,” according to Samuel Johnson’s Dictionary (London, 1755), was to be “Equitable; free from regard to party; indifferent; disinterested; equal in distribution of justice; just.” We have now examined several different versions of this ideal of impartiality. We discussed the Encyclopédie’s definition of the “philosophe” as a thinker peculiarly capable of reserving judgment and remaining humanely committed to “[c]ivil society” as “a divinity…on earth” (Dumarsais 22). We also discussed Mary Wortley Montagu’s Turkish Letters as an example of an effort to convey to other Britons an impartial view of a foreign culture.

In this formal paper assignment, your job is to look back through the readings covered in the course so far and find an example of a writer who makes a discernable effort to achieve impartiality in his or her description of a subject. As you select the text, ask yourself how the text attempts impartiality. Does the author chart a path between two opposing, partisan views of a subject? Does s/he adopt a perspective on the subject that asserts the author’s lack of personal investment in any relevant controversies (“disinterestedness,” to borrow Johnson’s term), or that suggests a “just” stance? How do the author’s appeals to empirical facts—things that might be touched or measured—contribute to the pose of impartiality? Although you may decide in the end that the author doesn’t achieve a truly impartial stance, your investigation should highlight structures of thought and expression that contribute to the impression of an ambition to rise above partisan disagreement and view human affairs from a just, equitable perspective.

Adopt a straightforward essay structure. Begin with a short introduction that defines “impartiality” as you understand it and ends with a clear thesis about the text that you’ve chosen. Your thesis should make a claim about the fact or degree of the writer’s impartiality. The body of your paper should then support your claim with specific textual examples. Once you have made a good case in 3-5 paragraphs, write a brief conclusion in which you meditate upon whether and where you have seen the intellectual trait or procedure described in your essay exhibited in modern Alabama.

A Reminder about Working Independently and Citing Your Sources:

The aim of this assignment is to give you a chance to showcase the skills that you have been working on all semester. As has been the case throughout the course, the first step in this assignment is simply to understand the text as best you can: to read both the text and its accompanying biography, look up words you don’t know, make notes in the margins, experience its plot, piece together its arguments as best you can, and evaluate the presence (or absence) of impartiality. You are not expected to read secondary scholarly sources to educate yourself about the text. Rely on your experience and your own good sense!
To offer you further encouragement in this vein, the essay drop box is equipped with “Turnitin.com” technology—that is, software and a database that check the contents of your paper against existing essays, available on the internet and elsewhere. In short, please do not plagiarize any portion of your essay, and do not hesitate to let me know if you have any questions about how to quote and cite your sources correctly. (It can be tricky.) NB: The terms that apply to the University's use of the Turnitin.com service, as well as additional information about the company, are described at http://www.uah.edu/library/services/turnitin. Assignments submitted to Turnitin.com will be included as source documents in Turnitin.com's restricted access database. This is done solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism in such documents. If you do not wish for your essay to be retained in the database after our course, please let me know and I will ask to have it removed.

Checklist:

• Include a TITLE that gives your reader a sense of the argument that you will be making.
• Include identifying information in the top left corner (name, date, course, etc.) in accordance with MLA format.
• Include a Works Cited. All quotations and citations should follow the MLA format. Consult the Purdue Owl for help (https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/02/).
• Submit your essay by Friday, Sept. 22nd by 5 p.m. in the digital drop box on Canvas.
• Please submit your essay as a double-spaced Word document in 12-point Times or Times New Roman with ordinary (1-inch) margins.