

Culture Wars: Early Modern French Theater and Contemporary American Culture in the General Education Classroom

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Introduction

THOSE of us who love to learn about the early modern period want to share our enthusiasm with our students. Yet, today's technologically-minded hyper-linked twenty-year-olds often resist learning about anything beyond their cultural frame of reference — which often does not extend even as far back as the 1980s. For this reason, in response to a new core curriculum rubric at our university called “Connections,” I seized upon an opportunity to make early modern France both accessible and appealing to a wide range of students.¹

Through the lens of the theater, this course draws students into discussions of contemporary culture wars in American society and makes connections between our experiences and the controversies that shaped French culture in the early modern period. I base the comparison evident in the course title, *Early Modern French Theatre and Contemporary American Culture*, on an observation made by Joan DeJean in *Ancients Against Moderns: Culture Wars and the Making of a Fin de Siècle* (1997): the United States is at a pinnacle of power and cultural relevance much as France was during the reign of Louis XIV. Most students already know that the French Revolution was one result of Louis XIV's authoritarian rule. DeJean's implication of impending catastrophe naturally causes them to question her assertions as well as their own understanding of contemporary American culture. Framing the semester with DeJean's cultural comparison on day one elucidates the course objectives: to make relevant to students early modern texts and contexts, and to engage them in critical evaluation of society's value systems as well as their own.

DeJean finds that twentieth-century culture wars were started by “ancients” who question unbridled progress and underscore the theme of moral responsibility, citing as examples the prolific writers Lynne Cheney, William Bennett, and Allan Bloom (124–50). Conversely, the early modern Quarrel was begun by “moderns” who embraced cultural change. The early modern debate was not limited to erudites of the Académie Française; the public, too, became engaged. DeJean determines that the early modern Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns led to the emergence of terms such as “public,” “culture” and “civilization” within the context of intellectual and literary life. Today, popular media and technology determine and often help define these terms, and, as DeJean underscores, universities frequently provide fertile ground for the intersection of technological novelties and cultural life.²

Internet, Twitter, Facebook, email, texting, streaming videos and television programs: today’s media outlets have a global influence. In early modern France, the theater had an analogous role as one of the principal purveyors of culture. If today the theater has less cultural relevance than it did two hundred years ago, it nonetheless remains an important and rich cultural vehicle. This course is comprised of two units, both of which emphasize theater and its commodification of culture. The first unit, on contemporary American culture, sets the stage for an analysis of contemporary culture before moving to an in-depth study of Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*. In the second unit, students read six French plays as well as other primary and secondary sources and use them to construct knowledge about the early modern period in France. Debate topics run parallel in both units: religion, education, classism, prejudice, hypocrisy, women’s role in society, family dynamics, morality, and politics.

Unit 1: Contemporary American Culture

At the beginning of the semester, students become particularly engaged in critical approaches to aspects of American culture with which they identify — technology, education reform, community, capitalism, multiculturalism, politics, values and morality — and often speak from their own experience. Newsworthy events, new books, and Internet articles on culture wars and critiques of American culture appear frequently, so the materials for this section of the course evolve continually and take many directions. Working backward from the most recent publications, I like to begin with a discussion of the role of technology in students’ lives,³ using, for example, Nicholas Carr’s article “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” Other topics include the emergence of the Tea Party, which complicates James Davidson Hunter’s notion of political categories, and the effect of globalization on community, which leads to interesting student input on Morris Berman’s concept of “liquid modernity.” Susan Jacoby’s commentary on George W. Bush’s use of the word “folks” and what it implies about attitudes toward education transitions nicely to the reading assigned at

the end of this section: excerpts from Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987). Having taught this course twice thus far, I have been surprised by students' reactions to Bloom's conservative opinions about the education system that has shaped them from their earliest school days in the 1990s (in most cases).⁴ Student engagement in this section of the course is high, in part because they feel they have a great deal to contribute to the discussion. The ownership that students take over contemporary culture wars is particularly critical since it allows them to better grasp the cultural climate of the period in which Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* is set.

An overview of the history of the 1980s and 1990s in the United States complements our study of culture wars and also helps prepare us for our analysis of Kushner's monolithic play, which is the focus of several weeks of class work. This two-part play's complexly woven thematic richness allows students to delve into questions of gender and sexual identity that inform the primary plot lines, and also into many other political, cultural and moral questions that find resonance with the early modern plays that will be discussed in the second half of the course. Just prior to our reading of the first part of *Angels in America*, "Millennium Approaches," we read Susan Sontag's short story "The Way We Live Now," which sets the scene for discussions of the AIDS crisis of the 1980s. The class reads "Millennium Approaches" and watches the second play, "Perestroika," using HBO's miniseries streamed to a password-protected web page so students can watch it outside of class. Kushner's play serves as a point of critical inquiry into how American culture has arrived at a state of crisis. Rife with complex cultural references, the play's intricacies enable students to elucidate points of controversy in American society as far back as the 1950s. Students make short presentations on cultural intertexts (the discovery of the AIDS virus, Roy Cohn, the Apocalypse, Reaganomics, etc) that give depth to the play's development and our knowledge of American cultural history.⁵ In so doing, we find that the play, but even more significantly the film, is rich in Ancient-Modern references. Expanding upon DeJean's reference to the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns, we debate the virtues of progress. Students can participate in and better understand the angels' debate on the notion of progress at the end of "Perestroika" through Paul Klee's 1910 painting *Angelus Novus* and a short quotation from Walter Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History*.⁶ Past and present concerns about progress and its relation to culture wars provide a natural springboard to the second half of the course.

Unit 2: Early Modern French Theater

The second unit explores the development of early modern French culture wars from the mid-seventeenth century through the heights of absolutist power under Louis XIV to the depths of the Revolution. Rather than take the approach of the first unit, evaluating culture wars by scrutinizing one play, we read many early modern French

plays to help students construct an understanding of pre-revolutionary France and its warring factions. Examples from various fields such as art, architecture, philosophy, theater, fiction, treatises and history give depth of knowledge to students for whom early modern France is a doubly foreign culture.⁷ Each play that we read⁸ underscores cultural polemics, which we compare to the material in the first half of the course to determine to what extent the students can support DeJean's original thesis. After an historical overview of the Ancient Regime, including the backdrop of humanist philosophy, the Wars of Religion, the roots of absolutism, and baroque art, we read Corneille's *The Cid* and learn about the polarizing Quarrel of the *Cid* as part of our introduction to Louis XIV and classicism. Racine's *Phaedra* leads to a discussion of the public rivalry between Racine and Corneille and the role that Jansenism played in the debates about religion. Molière's *Tartuffe* and *Intellectual Ladies* give a broader scope to religious tensions and social criticisms, including the Quarrel over Women. A brief study of rococo art and the Regency of the Duke d'Orleans as well as Marivaux' *Game of Love and Chance* reveal the *joie de vivre* that characterizes the period after the death of Louis XIV.

As we move into the eighteenth century and the beginnings of the Enlightenment, we examine cultural evidence of the business of the theater, including Christa Williford's mock-ups and images of theater houses,⁹ the role of government censorship, and the star quality of actresses. Graffigny's *drame bourgeois*, entitled *Cenia*, allows room for discussion of the rise of the bourgeoisie; paintings by Greuze bring to life the *tableaux* in Graffigny's play.¹⁰ Kant's essay "What is Enlightenment" and student-generated research in Diderot's *Encyclopedia*, much of which is available online in English at the *Encyclopedia Collaborative Translation Project*,¹¹ help students realize the great transformation society experienced during the Enlightenment. The tensions generated by such rapid change opened up previously unimaginable possibilities, much as the advent of the Internet and Google have suddenly made available vast amounts of knowledge today. Cultural artifacts of such tensions include D'Alembert's article "Geneva" in the *Encyclopedia* and Rousseau's response in "Letter to d'Alembert on the Theater,"¹² two texts that offer conflicting views on the value of public performances, as well as the prefaces to Rousseau's *Julie* and Laclos' *Dangerous Liaisons*, in which the authors offer opposing viewpoints about the value of reading "immoral" content. These same questions about morality and the media arise in current debates over sex and violence in film and on television and are also figured in Tipper Gore's founding of the Parents' Music Resource Center in the 1980s.

We end this unit with a reading of two plays from the late eighteenth century: Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais' *Barber of Seville* and Olympe de Gouges' *Black Slavery, or the Happy Shipwreck*. Beaumarchais' overt criticism of classist society and strictures on man's natural rights also opens up discussion about the Société des Auteurs Dramatiques, the group that fought for authors' rights over their own

intellectual work and helped to push for the first meaningful laws about copyright in French history.¹³ De Gouges' play, first performed in 1789, offers historical contextualization on race, such as the Code Noir. De Gouges' political stances and opinions on natural rights, including her "Declaration of the Rights of Women," help underscore the complex irony in the fact that de Gouges was guillotined during the Terror.¹⁴ A royalist, she had nonetheless many affinities with the philosophical underpinnings of the republicans.

DeJean points out that "the outcome of the first Culture Wars serves to alert us in particular to the risk inherent to any form of conflict in which political activity is consistently intermingled with literary and cultural affairs" (xi). Universities provide a place for a discussion of this risk, and this course's structure and early modern content provide students with an opportunity to contextualize the culture wars in which they themselves are participating. The idea that culture wars can lead to real ones leaves us to posit what may come nationally and globally in future years and what form it may take.

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NOTES

¹ Connections courses are meant to "to develop an understanding of the interrelationship of fields of knowledge" and are "to be taken after completion of all other university core requirements, in the junior or senior year." See <http://www.pugetsound.edu/academics/core-curriculum/connections/>.

² For example, DeJean writes, "No sooner are they created than our latest 'popular' trends are brought into the university by our neo-Moderns" (29).

³ For other recent publications on the role of technology in American culture, see Carr, *The Shallows*, Bauerlein, Brockman, Powers, and Vaidhyanathan.

⁴ A useful work to provide a counterpoint to Bloom's claims is Lawrence W. Levine's "Through the Looking Glass" in *The Opening of the American Mind*, particularly pages 3–15 and 31–33.

⁵ By "intertext," I mean the cultural, historical, and literary references within a primary text that connote additional meanings and enrich the value of the plot. Intertexts for *Angels in America* that I ask students to research include the following: the discovery of HIV, Roy Cohn, Revelation (Bible), *Sunset Boulevard* (1950 film), Reaganomics, Mormonism, Ethel Rosenberg, Millennium and/or Apocalypse (Bible), Lazarus (Bible), the score to the HBO Film, Tiresias, Bolsheviks, Ravens (as symbol), John Brown, Perestroika, Joseph McCarthy, Lillian Hellman, Jacob (Bible), Jonah (Bible), Anomie, Dybbuk / Kaddish,

Sheba / *Come back, Little Sheba*, Bethesda, Walter Benjamin, Jean Cocteau and his film *Beauty and the Beast* (on this last intertext, compare Act I scene 7 in “Millennium Approaches” [in Part 1 Chapter 1 of the film] to this scene in Cocteau’s film: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQtmFgIneko>). The assignment prompt for the short student presentation is located at: <http://english.illinoisstate.edu/digitaldefoe/teaching/kelleyassignments.pdf>.

⁶ See <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/bernstein/shadowtime/wb-thesis.html>.

⁷ In addition to images of paintings, architecture and interior design, secondary sources include Apostolidès, Bénichou, Murray, Greenburg, Berlanstein, and Mittman.

⁸ We read the five plays from Fowlie’s collection, *Five Classic French Plays*, which includes *The Cid*, *Phaedra*, *The Intellectual Ladies*, *The Game of Love and Chance*, and *The Barber of Seville* as well as Graffigny’s *Cenia* and Olympe de Gouge’s *Black Slavery, or the Happy Shipwreck*.

⁹ This website by Christa Williford, entitled “Playhouses of Seventeenth-Century Paris” includes excellent historical information as well as three-dimensional mock-ups of the primary seventeenth-century Parisian playhouses. See <http://people.brynmawr.edu/cwillifo/pscp/project.htm>.

¹⁰ See Greuze paintings such as “Betrothal in the Village” and “The Punished Son” at www.artstor.org.

¹¹ See <http://www.english.upenn.edu/~mgamer/Etexts/kant.html> for the text of Kant’s essay. If technology continues to inform class conversations, a visit to the library to examine the *planches* that illustrate the *Encyclopedia* can inform a discussion of science and technological advances. See <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/did/index.html>.

¹² The relevant section begins, “No theater is permitted in Geneva.” Rousseau’s response is available in a translation by none other than Allan Bloom, entitled *Politics and the Arts: Letter to M. d’Alembert on the Theater. By Jean-Jacques Rousseau*. This book also contains relevant excerpts from the “Geneva” article as an appendix. See <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/did/did2222.0000.150?rgn=main;view=fulltext;q1=geneva>.

¹³ A good e-reference is Gregory S. Brown’s *Field of Honor: Writers, Court Culture and Public Theater in French Literary Life from Racine to the Revolution*. See <http://www.gutenberg-e.org/brg01/frames/authorframe.html>.

¹⁴ See <http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/americanstudies/lavender/decwom2.html>.

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A culture war is a cultural conflict between social groups and the struggle for dominance of their values, beliefs, and practices. It commonly refers to hot-button topics on which there is general societal disagreement and polarization in societal values is seen. The term is commonly used to describe contemporary politics in the United States, with issues such as abortion, homosexuality, pornography, multiculturalism, and other cultural conflicts based on values, morality, and lifestyle being Perhaps this modern characteristics has its roots in the days of the absolute monarchs when intellectuals and bourgeoisie had no status, and in response to their demands, the monarchs gave them the right to discuss abstractions freely. Distrust of government and politics The modern tendency to distrust government probably has its roots in the French Revolution and the resulting conflicts between monarchists and republicans.Â Conflictual political culture A very strong characteristic of the French political culture is the agreement to disagree. The division in political opinions into "left" and "right" goes back to the French Revolution, and remains an important force today.