

Terms for Our Times: Glossing Our Shiny New Academy

L'hypocrisie est un vice à la mode, et tous les vices à la mode passent pour vertus.
—Molière, *Dom Juan, ou le Festin de pierre* (1665)

Might we be approaching a defining moment, a tipping point when liberal arts education in America relinquishes any serious claims for beneficial utility or vatic clout in the wider society and ceases to matter outside of a few ivy-walled redoubts? A number of critics across the political and cultural spectra have recently suggested as much. If they are basically correct, it might then be worth pausing a moment to consider precisely what the defining terms for this unhappy occasion might be. From the vantage point of one who studies and teaches humanism in the Renaissance—a time of vertiginous, nearly apocalyptic changes and an intense interest in reviving the Republic of Letters—I would like to put forth my nominations.

Without belaboring the point, an early modern perspective on how post-humanist neoliberal higher ed tends to operate may be illuminating. Back then, printing revolutionized communication, as digital media are doing now. At the same time, rulers, intellectuals, and subjects confronted thorny real-world issues concerning legitimate authority and its limits. Simultaneously, epistemological debates about the very nature of Truth itself became highly contentious, with the New Learning and global exploration challenging or overturning comfortable, established paradigms. Along with all that, Reformation and Counter-Reformation dialectics turned brethren into implacable, demonized foes. Universities themselves were caught up in these culture wars, becoming breeding grounds for factional rivalries, schisms, and antagonistic diatribes. Meanwhile, and just as contentiously, *la querelle des femmes*, “the Woman Question,” was threatening to boil over, presaging contemporary feminist agitation and the #MeToo movement.

So with those rough parallels in mind, let me pose the question: what rhetorical devices best delineate the ethos of typical Humanities professors nowadays? The terms

hyperbole and *irony* would surely have their champions. With exaggeration running rampant across campus, hyperbole would be an awesomely *extra* answer. From the inflated grades handed out like Halloween candy to the ways that crowing faculty boast about their impotent, inconsequential copycat works, puffery aboundeth. The kudos drift down like glittering snowflakes in a romanticized snow-globe college wonderland, but the quality of instruction and research has declined. It is like an ideal gas law for the liberal arts: as the positive epideixis escalates, the actual value drops in inverse proportion. Ergo, while students may walk away after graduation with shiny, gilded transcripts, they remain academically adrift: unlettered, unskilled, clueless. These infantilized millennials, coddled with trigger warnings and safe spaces, and taught to privilege feelings over facts, are decidedly unwoke in many ways (Twenge, 2018). And as for the so-called original scholarship of their teachers, what they boldly proffer as new and true contributions to human knowledge is actually tepid, unadventurous pabulum. Such publications function primarily as résumé-fillers and loyalty oaths of ideological soundness—virtue-signalling pointed at PRT committees more than anything anyone will actually read and learn from. For instance, one frequently encounters Ivory Tower poseurs marketing their buzz-worthy novelties in Digital Humanities like this: “drawing on crowd-sourced analytics, my current intervention seeks not only to map out how trend X has gone viral online, but also to help curate the vital project of a neoteric poetics of X in the public sphere of cyberspace.” Such extravagant embellishments, however, induce massive amounts of irony: the hype is increasingly hollow.

While either of those words would fit well enough, I would hereby like to propose their kissing cousin *paradiastole* as the trope du jour. Paradiastole is a concept from classical oratory, revived by rhetoricians in the age of print, that means the redescribing of vices as virtues. For instance, Greek dudes today might dub their drunken, homophobic, misogynistically toxic fraternity “a brotherhood of good fellowship,” while on the distaff side, young women might deem their catty, party-girl frenemies “beloved sorority sisters.” Early Modernist Quentin Skinner (2007) has traced out this figure’s ancient inception and sixteenth-century reappearance in an erudite article in the essay collection *Renaissance Figures of Speech*. He shows that this exculpatory maneuver, even more than most persuasive tricks, had somewhat sketchy, slimy connotations. It

reeked of the rationalizing of misdeeds, back-scratching, shystering, and the exoneration of faults. In *The Garden of Eloquence* (1577), Henry Peacham called it an “instrument of excuse serving to self-love, partial favor, blind affection, and a shameless person,” used mainly for “the better maintenance of wickedness” (as cited in Skinner, p. 161). Then as now, satirists condemned notorious deployers of paradiastole, mocking those sell-outs who weaponized alternative facts to move ahead in the rat race. Henrician courtier Sir Thomas Wyatt, for instance, presented a scathing indictment of such fashionable spin-doctoring in his Horatian satire “Myne Owne John Poyntz.”¹ Unlike his dissembling, dishonest peers at the Henrician court, Sir Thomas cannot “say that Pan / Passethe Apollo in music manifold; / Praise Sir Thopas for a noble tale, / And scorn the story that the Knight told” (as cited in Sylvester, 1984, lines 48-51). He is simply unable to lie—neither about the aesthetic quality of the two divergent *Canterbury Tales* to which he alludes, nor about more substantive matters of state. As he declares: “My Poyntz, I cannot frame my tune to feign, / To cloak the truth for praise without dessert, / Of them that list all vice for to retain” (lines 19-21). He means he cannot commend the immoral and iniquitous with false flattery. For this policy of candor, unsurprisingly, he faced heavy corporal punishment and was rusticated, time-honored outcomes for speakers of truth to power (see lines 77-103). Paradiastole, though, does not always have to be so negative: Brutus justifies the assassination of Julius Caesar in Shakespeare’s tragedy (1599/1974) as the purging of a tyrant infecting the body politic, not a straight-out murder. This remains a debatable issue in those unfortunate places where democratic processes have broken down and prescribed legal mechanisms for removing entrenched autocrats are ineffectual—another illustration of the timelessness of our endangered humanities.

Paradiastole often occurs with its converse *meiosis*, which means a spiteful attack or malicious attempt to diminish something or someone that is actually noteworthy.² Cultural theorists shackled in Plato’s Cave who impugn, belittle, or slam consilient, biocultural New Humanist interpretations, which are drawing from cognitive neuroscience and Darwin’s enlightening discoveries to enrich our understanding of the arts, as “reductive,” “essentialist,” “determinist,” or “imperialist scientism,” exemplify this related practice (Carroll, 2011; Pinker, 2013). This is part of a broader War on

Science, an assault on reason in which universities have been complicit, with all that entails.

When a close observer considers the state of the liberal arts at most campuses right now, the burnished paradiastole seems well-nigh blinding. (And don't even get me started on Education programs!) Pedagogical and scholarly shortcomings have become not embarrassing liabilities to hide, but rather strengths to humblebrag about. The ways that derivative, trivial publications, embedded with clunky jargon and based on dubious post-structuralist theories and fatuous identity politics—aka grievance studies—are extolled as unprecedented, provocative, stylish contributions to knowledge, and therefore cause for preferment, sound more like something penned by satirists such as David Lodge or Jonathan Swift than like careful, rational appraisal.

More significantly, teaching has come to epitomize this reversal in meaning. Humanities classes generally do not challenge pupils to think critically, read closely, demonstrate mastery of course content, or otherwise foster intellectual growth (Arum & Roksa, 2011). Nor are sharp, logical, in-depth written arguments, nor what was once upon a time referred to as “the ol’ college try,” expected. Instead, most courses offer feel-good politically-correct lite edutainment. However, those attributes make them fun, popular, positive learning experiences as registered in student evaluation surveys, the all-important customer review of the satisfied consumer. A compelling body of both quantitative and qualitative studies, however, has proven that such evaluations are fundamentally worse than worthless; according to education expert Kevin Carey’s summation (2013), they “provide little useful information other than an inverse correlation to academic rigor” (see also Flinn & Crumbley, 2009; Johnson, 2003). In short, sophistry, mediocrity, an absence of standards, and the adoption of faddish technogadgetry, rather than deep learning or contemplation, have become the cardinal virtues of the twenty-first-century corporate university (Berlinerblau, 2017; Deresiewicz, 2014; Donoghue, 2008). In Alexander Pope’s terms from *An Essay on Criticism* (1711/1969), “stale nonsense” has triumphed over “substance” (lines 411, 467). Lest we forget, the pitiful thrivers exalting these traits are the ones serving as advisors, mentors, and role models to undergraduates. But, by wholeheartedly embracing these new, improved,

sparkly values, utterly compromised teachers signal their “professionalism” and good institutional fit, and thereby keep the enterprise running smoothly.

The long-gone taxonomists of *elocutio* were, by and large, committed to encouraging informed debate in the agora or lecture hall for the benefit of the commonweal. The Renaissance and Enlightenment philosophers they trained accepted as axiomatic that reason and logic would lead to truth. Of course, as savvy as they were at parsing verbal ornaments in Latin or Greek, or mooted utopian ideals, their lives were spent ages before the development of modern data science or evolutionary biology, and the concomitant transformation in our understanding of human nature they have led to. According to the latest work in behavioral science, one take-away of this revolutionary New Learning is that even very well educated people do not especially privilege veracity or reality or some sort of absolute Goodness; generally even they are happier preferring to believe what is most comforting or self-serving, howsoever mendacious or casuistical the underlying reasoning (Kahneman, 2013). We can now see, then, paradiastole’s deep roots in the psyche. Its epidemic manifestation amongst the literati should not really surprise those aware that the default ground state of institutions is one where currying favor, nepotism, dirty tricks, unprincipled careerism, callous office politics, dishonesty, spineless conformity, and other habits conducive to a discourse of paradiastole flourish.³

My attempt here has been to explicitly describe academic fashion à la mode—this season’s unveiling of the Emperor’s New Clothes. Somehow, it seems to me, humanist higher education has become another bureaucratic entity largely defined by its deficiencies. If one peers into its very core, one finds corruption and bad faith, worms consuming the apple (on institutional corruption, see Lessig, 2018; Thompson, 2018; Washburn, 2005). Those actually promoting “traditional” humanism, in contrast, are barely subsisting in the inhospitable hinterlands, fighting a losing, asymmetrical guerrilla war against the brute imperium of market forces. At this moment, meanwhile, those calling themselves liberal humanists have come to uncomfortably resemble many of the tainted apparatchiks within organizations they ostensibly oppose and critique, like the scandal-plagued, destructive “amateur” college sports industry, or the inherently sinful Catholic Church, or the post-truth, illiberal conservative political party in America. Within the hallowed halls of academe, the problems have become structural, ingrained in

the very fabric of the enterprise: not bugs but features. There is an almost Orwellian doublethink at play here, a stiff-necked, neo-puritanical eagerness to point fingers while burying all consciousness of one's own fallibility or shortcomings. This precarious, uncomfortable situation is not though really all that unusual: civilizations rise and fall, authority erodes, societies disintegrate internally, things fall apart, the center does not hold. Why should higher education be immune to such profligate decadence?

Sir Walter Raleigh, another Renaissance English polymath a bit later than Wyatt, composed a timeless satirical poem about this state of affairs entitled "The Lie." (Like Wyatt, Raleigh was imprisoned in the Tower at His Majesty's pleasure; unlike Wyatt he was executed there.) In "The Lie," the speaker's soul is sent on a "thankless errand": telling the smug and powerful that they are hypocrites (as cited in Sylvester, 1984). He commences by taking on the bedrock foundations of early modern society: the royal court, which was the seat of government and earthly authority, and the Church, responsible for the spiritual welfare of the realm:⁴

Go soul, the body's guest,
 Upon a thankless arrant, [errand]
 Fear not to touch the best,
 The truth shall be thy warrant:
 Go, since I needs must die,
 And give the world the lie.

Say to the Court it glows,
 And shines like rotten wood,
 Say to the Church it shows
 What's good, and doth no good.
 If Church and Court reply,
 Then give them both the lie. (lines 1-12)

The expression "to give the lie (to someone)" means to accuse someone directly and openly of being untruthful. Raleigh does not exempt educators from his charges: "wit" excessively "wrangles / In tickle-points of niceness," while "schools ... want profoundness / And stand too much on seeming" (lines 43-44 and 63-64; "want" means "lack"). Given both how much more is empirically known and potentially available in our age, and how essential an informed citizenry be for a healthy democracy to function, this systemic failure, this contemporary *trahison des clercs*, seems, if possible, even more perilous now than four centuries ago.

This status quo can hardly be sustained indefinitely. Perhaps it is not too soon for aficionados of classical genres to dig out their reed pipes in anticipation of the next big thing: viz., pastoral elegy. Since like a train-wreck celebrity addicted to adrenaline, danger, and drugs, the Humanities seem intent on willful self-destruction, it would only be fitting, in the spirit of paradiastole, to chant a requiem of lamentation recounting how they passed mildly away at a ripe old age.

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Notes

*Excerpted from a longer essay entitled “The New Trans-Mediocrity in Literary Studies; or, The Sovereignty of Salierization.”

¹ Wyatt was a courtier under King Henry VIII, a friend to Anne Boleyn, the first sonneteer in English, and a genuine Renaissance man. N.b. spelling from quotations of sixteenth-century English verse in this essay has been modernized by the author.

² The best example I’ve ever encountered occurs in the black comedy *Pretty Persuasion* (Siega & Halim, 2005). In one scene in this darkly satirical film set in Los Angeles, two rich American girls passive-aggressively shame their new immigrant friend for hoping to become a medical doctor helping patients in the Global South, rather than doing something worthy, such as becoming a famous actress, model, or celebrity.

³ For striking anthropological critiques of institutional culture, highly relevant to understanding our craptastic twenty-first-century corporate university, see Graeber, 2016; Schmidt, 2000; Strathern, 2000; Veblen, 1918. N.b. Simpkin’s Law states that the key attributes of successful new workers are abject groveling, pandering, and flattery to veterans; merit per se is relatively insignificant if not detrimental.

⁴ More recently, see the classic *Calvin and Hobbes* cartoon in which Calvin observes that the utter breakdown of authority is “like a six-year-old’s dream come true” (Watterson, 1995). Cf. Ulysses’ speech on “degree” in Shakespeare’s problem play *Troilus and Cressida* (1601-2/1974) in Act I, scene 3, lines 75-137. He bemoans the topsy-turvy, dysfunctional situation in which disorder, insubordination, raw power, and appetite have overturned law, rules, propriety, and civility.

