

The general phenomenon that I would like to address is canonicity—i.e., the role that Great Books courses play in creating and perpetuating a canon of texts that are widely read and studied. I would like to consider the processes that determine the inclusion—and exclusion—of certain kinds of texts in the canons that Great Books courses help generate, and the effects of these selections. My particular focus is the routine marginalization of comic texts in these courses.

Classicists are well positioned to appreciate the benefits and opportunities, and also the challenges and problems, that canons create. On one hand, a significant portion of the ancient texts we possess today have survived precisely because they were taught to generations of schoolboys, especially during the Roman Imperial period, in curricula that were, in many regards, the ancestors of modern Great Books courses. Conscious of our debts to these ancient curricula and the canons they generated, we classicists may look on today's Great Books courses as analogous "life-preservers" for the classical tradition, since these courses keep interest in our field alive by introducing ancient texts to new generations of students. On the other hand, classicists are also keenly aware of how many texts and traditions have been lost to us because they were not included in the canons developed in ancient curricula. As a consequence, we appreciate that, just like ancient curricula, Great Books courses can lead to the marginalization of texts associated with certain kinds of readers or authors, or certain types of discourse, because they are not considered suitable, or sufficiently important, for inclusion.

Much attention has been paid in the past few decades to the fact that, in Great Books courses, the voices that are heard are almost exclusively those of privileged, powerful individuals who possessed the resources to produce and disseminate texts. Less attention has been devoted to the marginalization in these courses of texts and genres—most notably comedy—that are deemed inappropriate, unseemly, and difficult to teach because of their content, style, and tone. Comic texts and other popular forms of expression, with token exceptions such as Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, are in general scantily represented on Great Books syllabi. In this tendency to undervalue comedy, today's Great Books courses match and even surpass the preference given in ancient curricula to works of philosophy, oratory, epic, and tragedy—a preference that doubtless contributed to the loss of major comic works such as the plays of Cratinus, Eupolis, Pherecrates, and Diphilus.

As I examine why comic texts tend to be sidelined in Great Books courses, I would like to explore some of the consequences of this marginalization. I also wish to suggest that there are excellent reasons for (and great rewards in) embracing the challenge of teaching comic works in these courses, particularly comic texts from antiquity. With their irreverence and playfulness, comic texts are indeed potential "loose cannons" on any Great Books syllabus. Comedy is difficult to teach not only on account of its ubiquitous topical references, but also because it so often ironically complicates its own authority, and thus possesses the potential for double-voicedness and for undermining confidence in what William of Baskervilles, the hero of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, would term "Truth." Yet this double-voicedness is also what makes comedy an ideal tool for getting students to think in sophisticated ways about meaning and interpretation, textual authority, and the rules of discourse as they are variably constructed from culture to culture. Moreover, important lessons about history and politics can be learned when we examine the circumstances in which comedy is granted license—or is curtailed. Now more than ever, in this era when we are so conscious of the diversity in our world and so aware of the competing multiplicity of "truths," it is perhaps time to loosen up the canon by granting a more central position in Great Books courses to comic works—especially ancient comedies such as Aristophanes' *Knights*, or Plautus' *Persa*, or Lucian's "Philosophies for Sale," or even the fragments of Archilochus and Hipponax. Comedy has a unique capacity to unfold diversities of perspectives, where all other traces of those diversities have vanished, and it can help us help our students appreciate that books can be "great" for a rich variety of reasons.