

As a black woman who is also a literature student I am replying to Cindy Frazier's open letter to the drama division, not because I expect to be able to penetrate the veil of myopia in which Ms. Frazier's vision seems to be shrouded, but because her letter raises issues about which I consider it regrettable that, in 1973, a purportedly intellectual community must still argue. But, in fact, Ms. Frazier has demonstrated that in 1973, at Bennington College, it is still necessary to debate such matters as the relationship of art to society, and the relationship of black Americans, male and female, to white Americans, male and female.

As a woman in 1973, I too am able to identify sexual biases in the writing of William Shakespeare, a 16th century male. And I think it is important to identify biases of any sort wherever they occur. But, unless we are willing to condone the sort of "editing" of history books and suppression of "reactionary" works of art, such as Boris Pasternak's and Alexander Solzhenitsyn's, for which the Soviet Union is condemned, and of which I am aware the United States is not totally innocent, then we would be extremely naive to suggest that any of the plays of Shakespeare (whose artistic genius is at least as obvious as Pasternak's or Solzhenitsyn's) should not be performed at a predominantly women's college.

Ms. Frazier speaks of a "turning-around of history" in Amiri Baraka's play, The Dutchman, but it seems to me that Ms. Frazier is unable to disentangle her own ideas. First, she says that "white women did not enslave black people," then she says "obviously white women have been as racist as white men, but we've never had the power in this world." Eldridge Cleaver has said that "if you're not part of the solution then you're part of the problem." On this point my argument on the subject of the enslavement of black people rests.

Ms. Frazier calls The Dutchman a "drama-with-incentive-to-rape." It is true that The Dutchman is a violent play, but I have never heard, since the play's debut in 1964, of any black males rushing out of theaters in New York, Berlin, Paris, Spoleto, or Vermont to rape the nearest available white female. But, perhaps Ms. Frazier objects fundamentally to the presentation of works of art with violent overtones. I have previously referred to Eldridge Cleaver in order to illuminate a point, but he is a previously convicted rapist, so for the sake of the likes of Ms. Frazier I guess I should try referring to someone else. Let's see... On the subject of violence there is Sigmund Freud:

"If, however, a culture has not got beyond a point at which the satisfaction of one portion of its participants depends upon the suppression of another... it is understandable that the suppressed people should develop an intense hostility towards a culture whose existence they make possible by their work, but in whose wealth they have too small a share."

--The Future of an Illusion

--Oops, but Sigmund Freud is the renowned theorist of penis envy; of course, we can't consider anything he says...

Well, let's look at what Amiri Baraka himself has said about his play:

"Any artist has a lot of energy that won't respond to anything else. The reason I'm not a violent man --that's what I'm trying to say in Dutchman -- is that art is the most beautiful resolution of energies that in another context might be violent to myself or anyone else..."

[1973]

In conclusion, I do not think that this college or any other institution can afford to suppress works of art, which have demonstrable artistic or intellectual merit, but are open to identification or misinterpretation as somehow-or-other biased. If I can read Uncle Tom's Cabin or watch King Kong for their artistic, historical, or sociological interest, then I think Cindy Fraziers can or should be able to watch Measure for Measure or The Dutchman.

--Judith Wilson.