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Why Won't Politically Correct Professors Teach English and American Literature?

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This talk is going to be about why English professors don't seem to want to teach English and American literature, and about why the consequences of that failure are more important than you might think.

I'm going to give you some arguments that it's crucial for our civilization that we don't lose touch with great English and American literature. But I'm also going to give you a tour of some examples of what we're missing if we neglect the classics. They themselves are the best argument for their importance.

We don't need to mine English literature for conservative lessons—we won't fix the leftist politicization of literary education by politicizing it in the other direction. It's not a question of conservatives' wresting control of the literature for our political ends. It's a question of freeing the literature up to speak for itself.

There's a lot of evidence that English professors would rather teach almost anything *but* what we tend to think of as the subject they are hired to teach—that is, the great literature written in the English language: what's sometimes called “the canon,” or sneered at as literature by “dead white males.”

First, there's the fact that so many English courses at our universities aren't about literature in English at all. I give some examples in *The Politically Incorrect Guide to English and American Literature*, and you can find more yourself just by looking at the course offerings in almost any university English department. English professors are teaching about a lot of things that aren't great literature, and a good many things that aren't even in English. Let me offer just a few examples; there

Talking Points

- Teaching as if English literature is all about race, class, and gender means teaching students to look at life as if there is nothing in human experience beyond one particular kind of injustice: certain groups of people maintaining their positions of privilege over other groups of people.
- The great authors of Western literature explored the “permanent things” that conservatives are supposed to be defending.
- If you've never read Shakespeare in your English class, you can always read him later. But if you've read English literature with a professor who sees Shakespeare's plays as proof of what's wrong with Western culture, then you've been vaccinated against ever learning anything from them in the future.
- You can't learn from our great literature to despise and fear Western civilization. If you could, then politically correct English professors wouldn't have quit teaching it.

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are more in the book: English professors are teaching about “gender theory,” “Latino/a popular culture,” comic books, Afro-Caribbean literature in French, the cinema of Weimar Germany, The Da Vinci Code, and the history of nineteenth-century ballet.

It’s not as if there’s just one eccentric professor doing an off-beat course in every department. These kinds of courses take up a substantial and increasing proportion of English curricula, and the professors who teach them have the support of their departments and their universities. As a Cornell professor of English said about his course in pornography, “the department paid for my copies of *Deep Throat*.”

It’s depressing to consider how many of the things taught in college English classes are the cast-offs and rejects of other disciplines—it makes English as a field look like a kind of last refuge of scoundrels. Mainstream psychotherapists don’t use Freudian analysis any more, but English professors do. Marx’s labor theory of value has been discredited in economics, and of course Marxism as a political ideology has failed spectacularly—starved people to death, inevitably resulted in a police state—wherever it’s been tried, but English professors are still recommending Marxism for its “liberatory perspective.” To give just one more example, *I, Rigoberta Menchu*, the supposed true story of a Guatemalan peasant woman’s life, was exposed as a fraud in 1999, but English professors were still teaching it six years later.

Of course, there are still classes in Shakespeare and Chaucer, Hawthorne and Faulkner. But what goes on in those classes can be even more self-defeating—if you’re thinking of English class as a place to learn English literature. At least if you’ve never read Shakespeare—if in your English class you learned about comic books instead—then you can always read him later. But if you’ve read English literature with a professor who sees Shakespeare’s plays as proof of what’s wrong with Western culture, then you’ve been vaccinated against ever learning anything from them in the future. If you’ve picked through *The Tempest* looking for imperialist, colonialist attitudes; read *Macbeth* to understand how Shakespeare contributed to “the domestication of women”; or learned about the instability of “early

capitalism” from *The Merchant of Venice*, then you’ve gotten an inoculation against Shakespeare, not an education in him. He’s reduced to being a source of evidence about our patriarchal, racist, capitalist, imperialist past; he represents what we need to break free from if we’re ever going to have a really just society.

Now, how many students get converted to Marxism or radical feminism in their English classes? A tiny minority, I hope and believe. I think the real shame—and the real danger—in what’s going on in our English departments isn’t that students are radicalized. The problem is not so much what they’re getting; it’s what they’re missing. English professors may not succeed in converting most of their students to their radical politics. But I’m afraid they are very effectively cutting a whole generation of young people off from their cultural heritage.

You’ve probably heard the story of the Stanford students who marched with Jesse Jackson in the eighties, chanting, “Hey hey, ho ho, Western Culture’s got to go.” Two decades later, what those protesters called for has pretty much happened on American college campuses.

What Are Students Losing?

The question is, why does it matter? If college students learn to pick through Shakespeare’s plays looking for “isms” and “phobias” to condemn, instead of seeing his beautiful poetry and unparalleled insights into human nature, that’s their loss. But what exactly are they losing, and does that loss really matter all that much—either to them or to the rest of us?

To answer that question, it makes sense to look at why literature has traditionally played a central part in the education of young people. Whatever that purpose was, it’s pretty clearly being frustrated today. But was it a purpose that mattered much to individual students, and to society at large?

And to answer that question in turn, we can go to a classic of English literature by one of those “dead white males.” Sir Philip Sidney, writing in the sixteenth century, called poets “the first bringers in of all civility.” Literature *civilizes* us. Sidney explained that the aim of “poesy”—by which he meant fiction, whether in verse or prose—was to teach and delight.

A philosopher can teach you abstract moral principles. But a poet gives you characters that embody those principles. You want to be a brave man like Hector, or a straight arrow like Aeneas. The poet shows you what's noble and what's base—so that you actually learn to love what's good and aspire to it and to despise what's not. Sidney's argument relies on what the ancient Greeks and Romans had to say about the role of literature in education. Poetry was already an essential part of what young people were supposed to learn in Aristotle's day, and Aristotle's argument is like Sidney's: He points out that youths have their own characters formed by learning to delight in good characters and noble acts.

Of course, your typical politically correct English professor will be a great skeptic about “good characters” and “noble acts.” There are plenty of English professors who won't even say the words “truth,” “beauty,” and “goodness” without making little quotation marks around them in the air with their fingers. That's one way—of many—in which they're alien to the very culture we've entrusted them to pass along to the next generation.

Culture is not genetic; it doesn't come to us in our DNA. Culture is learned. We learn civilization itself from other human beings. From our families, certainly. But also from what used to be called “higher culture.” Americans didn't use to consider themselves educated people unless they'd been formed by Shakespeare, at least—among the great classics in our language. If we allow ourselves to be cut off from those elements of our traditional culture, how do we know that we'll still be educated Americans, or citizens of the West?

Think about the wide range of concerns that occupied the “dead white males” who wrote the great literature in our language. Those concerns are entirely alien to the thought of today's politically correct English professors: truth, beauty, and goodness; sin and salvation; free will; individual genius; poetic creation; the powers of the human imagination. These are things too many English professors today see through, and almost literally can't see. (To give just one example, there's a professor of English at San Francisco State University who argues that Milton wrote great poetry “in spite of, not because of Christianity”—which is like saying that the Declaration of

Independence is a very impressive document, except for all that blather about inalienable rights.)

Teaching as if English literature is all about race, class, and gender means teaching students to look at life as if there is nothing there in human experience beyond one particular kind of injustice: certain groups of people maintaining their positions of privilege over other groups of people. The oppression comes in different flavors: To the “postcolonial theory” expert, it's all the about Western oppression of colonized peoples; to the feminist professor, it's all about the patriarchy. But no matter what stripe of PC professor you are—whether you're explaining everything in terms of patriarchal oppression or everything in terms of Marxist theory—you're explaining away the things that Chaucer and Shakespeare and Milton and Wordsworth were actually interested in.

Their interests were along the lines of the “permanent things” that conservatives are supposed to be defending. Some of those things—like the chivalrous attitude toward women that you find in Chaucer's poetry—are wonderful inventions for which we can thank Western civilization. Others are attitudes or principles necessary for the survival of any civilization—like the admiration for the warrior's courage and self-sacrifice that you find in *Beowulf*. And still others are simply fundamental truths about human nature—for example, Shakespeare's fascinating insights into the nature of erotic love and the fundamental differences between men and women. But what all these things have in common is that politically correct English professors either can't work up any interest in them, or else actively oppose them.

I wrote *The Politically Incorrect Guide to English and American Literature* to help put people in touch with the great literature in English, and particularly with those aspects of it that you won't learn about from PC English professors. I want to use the rest of my time here to talk about just a few examples. I hope you'll be able to see that each of these lessons is something that is not only to the pleasure and profit of the individual who encounters it, but also of great value to our civilization—something we shouldn't lose.

Heroism Is Glorious

Take, for example, the attitude toward military courage that you find in *Beowulf* and the other Old English poetry of the heroic age. It's really a terrible pity that our universities aren't taking thousands of *Lord of the Rings* fans and turning them into readers of Old English literature. After all, J. R. R. Tolkien was a scholar who studied that literature and drew on it for his own prose epic (now three hit movies).

But it's hard to imagine anything more alien to the postmodernist atmosphere on our campuses than the heroic-age attitude toward the warrior. Our intellectuals tend to see soldiers as bloodthirsty killers or deluded dupes. One professor has complained that *Beowulf* is "too masculine and too death-haunted"; another explained that *Beowulf* was irrelevant to modern people because, in his words, "The epic poem, as Marx once observed, requires historical conditions that the steam-engine and the telegraph put paid to. . . . In any case," he wrote, "we no longer believe in heroism."

That was Marxist professor Terry Eagleton, writing just a couple of years before September 11. Heroism has seemed less irrelevant since then, and it may be easier for us to enter into the spirit of the great Old English epic than it was for Professor Eagleton in 1999. *Beowulf* takes place in a world that's full of dangers—dangers from lake-dwelling monsters and dragons, but also from men. The poem is set in a time when peace was fragile—when, in a very immediate sense, the only way to be sure of freedom, prosperity, and self-respect was to determine to die rather than yield. But in *Beowulf* courage is not something that's just necessary for safety, like burglar alarms or paying your income tax. Heroism is glorious, it's good in itself, it deserves praise. It's self-evidently valuable—it shines like gold, which is its natural reward.

Seeing Human Nature Through Shakespeare

Or, skipping ahead a few centuries, consider Shakespeare. For hundreds of years, Shakespeare's works were valued for their insights into human nature. Critics from Ben Jonson through Pope and Dr. Johnson to Coleridge and Keats to twentieth-century American professors said pretty much the

same thing about Shakespeare, all in their different critical vocabularies: His works have universal appeal because they reflect—or even simply express—human nature in a way that no other literature does.

And then along came the postmodernists, who don't believe in human nature. In fact, they've invented whole schools of "literary theory" ("gender studies," "queer theory," and so forth) specifically to deny that nature defines human experience at all. They've even got a term of abuse—"essentialism"—a word more or less on the same model as racism, colonialism, and so forth—for anyone who believes that there are, for example, natural differences between men and women. Any difference that looks natural must be "a social construct."

So when Shakespeare shows us in *Macbeth* how unbridled ambition tends to work differently on men and women, then the play must be contributing to "the domestication of women." If the plot of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* turns on the fact that sex outside marriage is riskier for women than for men, then Shakespeare himself must be responsible for establishing "gender roles that subordinate women." And when he shows us, in *The Taming of the Shrew*, how men and women want some very different kinds of things from marriage (not that they don't also want some of the same things, of course), then he's simply created a monument to misogyny—the play is just a lasting record of the structures of patriarchal oppression.

In the politically correct view, Shakespeare isn't for all time. He's very much of his age. And that age—like the whole past of Western culture—is chiefly an example of what we need to be liberated from, not a source of wisdom. Either Shakespeare was carried along by impersonal historical forces—"the patriarchy," "early capitalism," and so forth—or else he himself helped put in place the "social constructs" that are responsible for the oppression of women and non-Westerners.

But as a matter of fact, Shakespeare didn't have an ideological bone in his body. Nor was he the helpless puppet of impersonal forces. He was a genius with a profound, open-minded, and fertile interest in every aspect of human experience. Whether it's death (in *Hamlet*), or kingship (in

Henry V), or money (in *The Merchant of Venice*)—Shakespeare looks at every feature of human life from every possible angle, and turns up truth after glittering truth about what is.

In the *Sonnets*, he does the same thing with erotic love—picking it up, turning it upside down, squeezing and shaking it. Even the sonnet form that Shakespeare gave his name to has a shape that matches his poetic technique. The three separate quatrains, with no rhymes shared among them, give the poet three separate goes at the material of each individual poem. He takes a stab at what he means. And then he takes a step back, and tries for it again. And then again.

Shakespeare's poetry is so full of reality that it's got something for everyone. Or that's what you could have said until postmodern times. Our post-modernist professors' attitude toward Shakespeare reminds me of what Dr. Johnson said, "When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life." It takes readers who are alienated from human nature—even from reality itself—to be unimpressed by Shakespeare.

Milton and Freedom of the Press

Moving right along to John Milton—he was what we'd call a fundamentalist Christian. And reading his works is an education in everything our intellectual class despises. Except, once you read Milton, it's a lot harder to despise fundamentalist Christians.

To take just one instance of something surprising you might learn from Milton, look at his *Areopagitica*. It's an early argument for freedom of the press, and it turns all our assumptions about religion and civil liberties on their heads. We think of freedom of speech and the press as coming out of the anti-religious elements in the Enlightenment—Voltaire & Co. Or else we believe that freedom of speech and religion were unintended consequences of the Wars of Religion: People decided to tolerate different religious opinions because they'd figured out that religious truth was impossible to establish, or not worth all the bloodshed.

But Milton was arguing for a free press when his Puritans were on the ascendant. He didn't think religious truth was unimportant; his argument is just the opposite. He believed the search for religious truth was so important that we couldn't afford not

to allow even bad books to be printed—we might learn some bit of that truth from them.

Conservative Insights in Dickens

Skipping ahead another couple of centuries, to the nineteenth-century novel, you run into some pieces of the wisdom of Western culture that are particularly dear to the hearts of conservatives—the significance of unintended consequences, the terrible destruction that always and necessarily follows in the wake of revolutionary expedience, and the fact that real charity begins at home. Where do you find these conservative insights? In the novels of Charles Dickens, who—as we all know—was a crusading liberal social reformer. But he was also a keen observer of human nature. And he was steeped in traditional Western morality, based on the idea of absolute right and wrong.

A moral philosopher will tell you that the end doesn't justify the means—at least an old-fashioned moral philosopher will. But generations of Americans who grew up reading Dickens were learning to feel in their bones that there's no point in doing evil that good may come of it. As Dickens shows in dozens of fascinating plot twists, you can do the evil for some purpose that seems good to you, but you don't know that that good will come of it. You never know what results will follow your actions. Each of your choices sets in motion a complex chain of events that you can't hope to foresee, much less control. Good and evil deeds have long shadows: The ultimate effects of your actions are determined more by the intrinsic character of the acts themselves than by your motivation at the time. Deeds of cruelty or greed or revenge have their own internal logic.

Which is not something you're going to learn from an English professor who thinks that Marxism provides a "liberatory perspective."

Looking at the Real Problems Between Men and Women

Because I'm speaking to conservative women, I've saved my two favorite examples for last. They both have to do with feminism and the relations between men and women.

Another nineteenth-century novelist, Jane Austen, is full of insights into the real perennial prob-

lems between men and women, which are very different from the problems feminists typically see. Jane Austen, we're all supposed to believe now, was "really a very subversive woman." Somehow, underneath the smooth surface of the novels, she was raging against "the patriarchy."

Well, actually Jane Austen was a conservative Christian who was quite comfortable with traditional gender roles. She took her religion very seriously indeed; and it taught her that human misery is not caused by traditional social structures—patriarchal or otherwise. She believed human misery is caused by sin, and that every member of the human race, male and female, is capable of vice and folly and has a duty to struggle against them. This struggle provides the drama in Jane Austen's novels—not the war between the sexes or a campaign of subversive resistance to the patriarchy.

Jane Austen is not subversive. Jane Austen is funny. She happily pokes fun at every kind of superficiality and pretense—male selfishness, female hypocrisy, it was all fair game to her. And her diagnosis of what tends to go wrong between men and women is just about the opposite of what the radical feminists say. Jane Austen's novels show that the failure of female self-control and the male abdication of responsibility are among the chief causes of women's unhappiness.

There aren't a lot of repressive patriarchs in Jane Austen's novels. What there are a lot of, are men who aren't patriarchal enough.

There are contemptible uxorious husbands who do mean and petty things under the influence of their awful wives. In *Emma*, Mr. Elton publicly humiliates Harriet Smith to please his vulgar bride. John Dashwood lets his selfish wife persuade him to break the promise he gave to his dying father, to take care of his sisters. Underlining his self-imposed impotence, this sorry excuse for a man explains—to the sister whose life he could transform at very little cost to himself, if he weren't a doormat for his selfish wife—"people have little, have very little in their power."

And then there are the men who fail to be effective fathers. They let headstrong female relatives come between themselves and their duty to their

children. There's Mr. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*: He retreats into his library (and his sardonic sense of humor) to escape his ridiculous wife and the daughters she lets run wild. There's Mr. Woodhouse, Emma's father: He never thinks he ought to supervise his daughter—he lets *her* take care of *him*. And there's Sir Thomas Bertram in *Mansfield Park*. At first he looks like a real patriarch. But actually, he's not patriarchal enough. His mistake is not to interfere. He delegates his daughters' upbringing to their morally tone-deaf interfering busybody aunt, Mrs. Norris. And the worst thing he does—when he allow his daughter Maria to marry a worthless man she doesn't love—happens because he's reluctant to scrutinize her motives too closely. Sir Thomas lets himself believe what's most convenient for him to believe about her temperament.

The tendency not to take responsibility—to keep their options open, not to get involved—is what makes young men in Jane Austen's novels so dangerous. The villains in Jane Austen are not rapists, wife-beaters, or even jealous husbands. They're men who don't stick around. It's not men's violent, "controlling" urges that make it necessary for parents to look out for their daughters; it's men's tendency to avoid commitment—or to weasel out of it. In each of the six great Austen novels there's at least one man who pays a woman the kind of attention he knows he shouldn't pay her unless his intentions are serious—and they're not. If you know even one of her novels, you'll be able to pick out the villain or almost-villain I mean.

Now think about our feminist English professors. Surely, in reality, they must know more men who are, as they say, "afraid of commitment" than men who are jealous, abusive control freaks. But the feminist professors won't take off their patriarchy-colored glasses. They can't see that Jane Austen gives us situations between the sexes that are truer to life than feminism is. And not just truer to life in general; they're even truer to the real problems between men and women.

Courtesy Between the Sexes

I've got one final example of the wisdom of Western culture, from Chaucer. But before I plunge into it, I'd just like to ask you to keep in mind that what

we find in this literature is in real danger of being forgotten, if we let the feminists, the Marxists, and the postcolonial theoreticians come between us and our great literature. That's particularly important in this instance. Because Chaucer's poetry gives us a window on the beginnings of the typically Western courtesy between the sexes.

Feminists, of course, pretend that putting women on a pedestal somehow demeans them—helps keep them subordinate to men. But it's hard to explain the extraordinary respect and dignity that women enjoy in the Western world according to this feminist criticism. For some centuries in the West, a man has been seen as a real man only insofar as he's gentle toward women. If special courtesy between the sexes helps enslave women, we ought to be less, not more, free where it prevails. But we're not.

And one reason we're not is something you can actually see emerging in the Middle Ages. Courtly love was originally almost a hobby—a kind of literary fad for the leisured upper class. The courtly lover wasn't interested in marriage; he was aiming for an adulterous liaison with a woman almost beyond his reach. He was his lady's abject slave. The lover was mortally injured by the sight of his lady's beauty, and only her favor could save him.

In *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer shows us courtly love, but not in its original form. He shows us courtly love trickling down into the rest of society, and especially into the institution of marriage.

Now once the humble service of the courtly lover was invented in the first place, it's easy to see why it would be something that a medieval wife might like to see in her husband. And that's what Chaucer shows us in his *Tales*: women who see courtesy as a great improvement over the traditional arrangements between men and women.

If you read *The Canterbury Tales* with a feminist professor, then you read "The Wife of Bath's Tale." It's a wonderful tale, and everybody should read it. But it's not the whole story. The Wife of Bath's "Prologue" and "Tale" do explode the myth that women in traditional Western society were downtrodden and silenced, as the feminists like to say. Here, and in several of the other tales, Chaucer gives us a picture of a fierce battle between the sexes. Men have

superior physical strength, ownership of the marital property, and the position as head of the household. But all of this—not to mention religious backing for the principle that wives should obey their husbands—barely makes them even matches for the women, who have extraordinary psychological and verbal advantages.

But there's more in *The Canterbury Tales*, and even in "The Wife of Bath's Tale," than the battle of the sexes. The old woman in "The Wife of Bath's Tale" has an interesting answer to the age-old riddle of *what women really want*. Her answer is that they want to have the same kind of sovereignty over their husbands as they have over their lovers.

And in "The Franklin's Tale," Chaucer gives us just that kind of arrangement. The marriage between Dorigen and Arveragus is a kind of hybrid between a traditional marriage and the chivalrous relationship between a lover and his lady. This hybrid is what we might call the courteous marriage, or the chivalrous marriage.

In the ideally chivalrous marriage in "The Franklin's Tale" Arveragus has won Dorigen's love, and her hand in marriage, by just the kind of feelings and behavior that a lover owed his unattainable lady in the courtly love tradition. As Chaucer's Franklin explains, Arveragus "did his pain / To serve a lady in his best wise / And many a labor, many a great emprise / He for his lady wrought, ere she were won." Finally, she had pity on him. And then the two of them came to a private agreement. Dorigen agreed to take Arveragus as her husband and her lord. And he agreed that he would never exercise his right as her husband to command her against her will. He would obey her in everything, as any lover would his lady. Except that he would keep up the outward appearance of mastery, as the husband. Arveragus's generosity as a lover inspires Dorigen to promise to be a meek wife: "Sir," she says, "I will be your humble true wife." Thus, the Franklin tells us, "Been they both in quiet and in rest."

The courteous marriage in "The Franklin's Tale" is very different from traditional marriage. But from our point of view, what's really interesting is how different this chivalrous kind of marriage is from the feminist ideal: the marriage of equal—and sepa-

rate—individuals. The modern ideal for marriage, sold to us by the feminists, is that no one should have to obey anyone in a marriage. Power and hierarchy, they pretend, can be escaped altogether. Everything about sex is infinitely negotiable, at the whims of the participants. There are no fixed roles for men or women. The terms of the relationship can be reworked as necessary, to suit both parties' changing feelings. The relationship itself should last only as long as both people feel that it fulfills their individual needs.

There are some obvious disadvantages to the modern-style sexual relationship. It doesn't keep up connections between people as well as traditional marriage—either between men and women or between fathers and children. Also, it has become painfully clear that women are at something of a disadvantage competing for what we want out of love and sex on an absolutely equal playing field. Apart from anything else, we're sexually attractive and fertile for a shorter time.

The one unanswerable selling point for the modern equality-based, individualistic marriage model is that there's no acceptable alternative. The feminists are always asking, do we really want to go back to the bad old days when men had all the power and women were their slaves?

But *The Canterbury Tales* reveals that there once was another alternative. There's a model for marriage based on mutual service, obedience, and obligation. Modern feminism tries to reform marriage by taking obedience out of the equation. Courteous or chivalrous marriage reformed marriage by add-

ing more obedience, more respect, more service (and more love) into marriage. Something very much like this scheme was the prevailing idea for marriage in the West until—well, until the feminists attacked courtesy between the sexes in the twentieth century. Up until only a few decades ago, a woman was supposed to respect her husband as the head of the household, and the husband was supposed to treat his wife with the courtesy and respect due a lady. But why would the feminists want us to know anything more about that arrangement?

Well, these are just a few examples of what students might be finding in English and American literature, if their professors were teaching it. There's an almost infinite variety of wonderful literature in our language—and of lessons you can learn from it. The one lesson you can't learn from English and American literature is the politically correct point of view. That's the idea that Western culture is nothing but a source of injustice. That human experience is reducible to race class, and gender. That only perpetual vigilance against "ism"s and "phobia"s can protect us against Western civilization, with all its oppression and misery. You can't learn from our great literature to despise and fear Western civilization. If you could, then politically correct English professors wouldn't have quit teaching it.

—Elizabeth Kantor is the editor of the *Conservative Book Club* and author of *The Politically Incorrect Guide to English and American Literature*. She spoke to a meeting of the *Conservative Women's Network*, sponsored by *The Heritage Foundation* and the *Clare Boothe Luce Policy Institute*.