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Fruitful Disputes: Controversy and Its Consequences in the (More or Less Recent) History of Classical Studies*

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The goal of consensus exerts a powerful pull. The longing for agreement is surely a strong human urge in itself—at least as strong as its opposite—and for that we can be thankful. The longing is perhaps especially strong in an academic field like our own, which professes to use a more or less rational discourse persuasively, to achieve a shared and more or less stable conception of what is true and what is not.

Where such consensus is the goal, countless personal and institutional pressures combine to create and preserve what might be called "normal classics": the set of practices that are taken to define what "doing classics" is all about, including (for example) the importance of knowing the ancient languages, what it means to know those languages, what kinds of questions knowing the languages enables us to ask, what counts as evidence in answering those questions, and what constitutes a satisfying answer. The tendency to remain content with the practices one first learns, the tendency to teach and hire people whose practices resemble one's own, the tendency to construct curricula around these comfortable practices and people—all such tendencies obviously reinforce received ideas of normality.

Although these pressures affect all academic disciplines, in the case of classics we observe, in addition, what seems to me a special uneasiness with

**Editor's Note*: The following set of essays originated as contributions to the Presidential Forum organized by APA President Robert A. Kaster and presented on December 28, 1996, at the one hundred and twenty-eighth annual meeting of the Association. In the belief that these papers address issues of concern to all members of the profession, I have invited the participants to publish them here.

controversy as such, and an especially hardy form of conservatism. We are not typically what the computer industry calls "early adapters." For example, I vividly recall learning as an undergraduate that the New Criticism was still highly controversial, a suspect innovation in our field, a full thirty years after it was truly new. In general there seems to be at least a ten-year lag between the emergence of some discursive or analytical mode in a neighboring field and its appearance in our own; as has been observed more than once, much time has passed since the reverse has been true. We instead often act as though our excellence lies elsewhere, with (in fact) the idea of the classic—an "exemplary vision [that we invoke] to make authoritative sense of the world, sorting our experience of the particular and the momentary into categories and hierarchies of value...[which are] assumed to be permanent and universal."[1]

However that might be, our Association—for that matter, our profession more generally—does seem to have been the site of special anxiety in the last fifteen to twenty years, as the idea and the practice of "normal classics" have increasingly been contested. That anxiety was played out, for example, in an event many will recall from the last time that we met in New York: a discussion session quickly arranged after the editor of a prominent journal published a policy statement declaring, in effect, an interest in publishing only examples of "normal classics." The discussion was conducted honorably by the people speaking for both sides, and it had the useful social purpose of defusing some of the anxiety and assuaging some of the injured feelings that the editorial had caused. The unfortunate thing, I thought, was that the discussion seemed at the time to have *only* that anxious purpose—to lay controversy to rest, as though it were *per se* a bad thing.[2]

From this kind of anxiety the idea for the Presidential Forum emerged. It was intended as a reminder that disputes in our field are not new, that consensus has always been a dream—and that these are not bad or regrettable things. In the essays that follow, Glenn Most, Glen Bowersock, and Christopher Stray consider some of the constitutive controversies and methodological disputes that have served, over the last 175 years, to define importantly and fruitfully the things we do in the name of classical studies; Natalie Kampen, by contrast, considers the consequences that result when controversy is muted and premises left unexamined.

[1]C. A. Stray and R. A. Kaster, "Reinterpreting the Classics," *Annals of Scholarship* 10.1 (1993) 1.

[2]The Editor rightly points out that the same session had the important effect of highlighting the responsibilities of a journal to its professional readers: in that respect, the controversy bore some fruit.

By emphasizing fruitful controversies of the past, I do not mean to pronounce past processes good simply because they have led to the τέλος of today. I do wish to suggest that considering present controversies with some of the detachment we bring to the past can lead to greater understanding of what we are about now, to a better view of what is at stake, and perhaps even to greater equanimity. To help us in that direction I have asked Gerald Graff to serve as our respondent: deeply familiar with academic controversies, yet bringing to classics the detachment of an outside observer, he perhaps can help us, his native informants, understand what kind of sense our folkways make to eyes more disinterested than our own.