

All the President's Mien



by Theodore Dalrymple

The slow-motion implosion of Claudine Gay's presidency of Harvard has been a pleasure for many to watch, in the manner in which wanton boys, to use Shakespeare's designation of them, enjoy picking the legs and wings off flies. Her discomfiture was deserved, however; she seems to have made a career of surfing the great ocean of grievance, that great source of moral self-worth in an age otherwise given to moral relativism. Grievance is to complacency what the selfie is to vanity.

Her resignation statement eschewed self-examination altogether; it even managed to suggest that she was a victim. She said, for example, that she had received menacing or insulting messages, which, alas, is all too believable, since threat and insult these days seem to be the highest forms of argument employed by fools and ignoramuses of every extreme political stripe. Even now she did not understand that her commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (the Faith,

Hope, and Charity *de nos jours*) and to academic excellence were incompatible. To hire people because of their race and not their accomplishments is automatically to drive down standards.

Of her own accomplishments, I am not qualified to speak because I have not read her work, exiguous in extent though it be. (That it is exiguous is not necessarily to condemn it, for many an author has written only one thing in his life of great value, while many authors have written millions of words without ever having expressed an interesting, let alone a new, idea.) The titles of her publications, it is true, do not excite me: I had rather read papers on the taxonomy of beetles. Indeed, the taxonomy of insects can, in certain circumstances, be a matter of the utmost importance, and I have met in my time two or three taxonomists who have managed by their enthusiasm to convince me that their work is the most important in the world, although this effect has never lasted long.

As to the former president's habit of using other people's form of words without proper attribution, it does not strike me, from the examples I have seen, as having been terribly wicked; more inglorious than deeply dishonest. It is possible that worse instances than I have seen may exist, but there are some questions on which it is not worth expending much energy to find the answer, and this is one of them. Suffice it to say that an air of mediocrity hangs over what I have seen.

It was widely reported, including in the *Harvard Crimson*, that Claudine Gay was "proactively" requesting corrections to some of her articles, that is to say to insert attributions where they were missing; but the word "proactively" seemed to me to be misleading at best, since she was requesting it only because she had been found out. As for retroactively altering her thesis, I did not know such a thing was possible or permissible in an institution of higher learning. It put me in mind of the *Great Soviet Encyclopaedia*, when the publisher

sent a note to all who had bought it to tear out an old and insert a new article when the ideological wind had changed and a former prominent personage had not only ceased to exist, but had never existed.

Apparently, Claudine Gay was chosen from a list of 600 people considered for the position of president of Harvard. Surely the consideration of each person on such a list cannot have been very deep; having once been on a jury to select poems for a prize, I know how arduous and time-consuming it is to choose from a much smaller number. I cannot prove it, but I hope I shall not be accused of cynicism if I say that the choice seems to have been made on grounds other than pure, unadulterated merit.

Of course, it is possible that people of such pure, unadulterated merit would not really have wanted the job in the first place. Those who can, do; those who cannot, administer. This seems to be the rule in the modern world, and perhaps it is as well that it should be so. You don't want your cleverest people to be constantly attending meetings, developing policies, raising funds, attending to buildings, allocating offices, and so forth. The world needs mediocrities.

What the world does not need, and what it needs not to have, is *ambitious* or *evangelical* mediocrities. What political correctness and wokeness have done is to give such types their chance to accumulate power, position, influence, and wealth. Such people are inclined not merely to obstruct people more gifted than themselves, but to fear and hate them. Thus, they are ever on the lookout for pretexts to destroy them.

The imposition of ideological purity is a perfect weapon in these circumstances. The past of almost anyone can be trawled for evidence of wrongdoing (that is to say, wrong-saying) from the point of view of the present, but constantly shifting, ideology. Are there any of us who have never said something

that we would rather others did not know that we had said? This was so even before a single sentence could destroy a reputation or a career. Unless the power of the bureaucratic mediocrities of academe is broken, therefore, anyone who wants a career will be walking on eggshells forever, and totalitarianism of a new kind—that without a great leader—will have triumphed.

Claudine Gay's letter of resignation was morally incoherent. She admitted to having done nothing wrong, not even having copied other people's words (perhaps, let us be charitable, inadvertently). She believed herself to have worked successfully for both academic excellence and social justice, which she said, in the canting language of today, was part of "who she was." Why, then, should she resign? If she had said merely, "It is with sorrow that I step down as president of Harvard," she would have preserved some dignity, but to resign while claiming to have done no wrong is implicitly to claim victimhood and to demand condolence.

As for the Board's letter of response, all that would have been required for form's sake was an expression of thanks for past services, without elaboration. As it was, it gave the impression that clones of Uriah Heep or Mr Pecksniff had taken over the academy—as perhaps they have.

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