Comment on the Papers of Nicole Mansfield Wright and Kristin Franseen

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I'd like to start with a couple of Jefferson quotes, who came up in our discussion of rights and dignity, and again in George's introduction and Christopher's paper on Bathos and formal subsumption this morning.
Firstly:

> "When government fears the people, there is liberty. When the people fear the government, there is tyranny."

But alas, this Jefferson quote derives from a series of debates published in 1914, written by noted anti-socialist John Basil Barnhill. Let me try again:

> "The first duty of government is the protection of life, not its destruction. Abandon that, and you have abandoned all."

No, again that isn't him. That is evangelical writer and noted Christian reconstructionist George Grant, in 1989. Indeed, while Jefferson's words (or what are said to be his words) circulate broadly and across the political spectrum, ideas are so frequently misattributed to him that Monticello maintains a database of spurious quotations that have been popularized. It has 71 entries.[1] I've begun here because our discussion this morning will be shaped by questions of counterfactual, ideologically inflected, and conspiratorially constructed afterlives, in representations of the lives of Salieri and Mozart, with Kristin's paper, and in processes of editing and curating teaching materials –whether popular or scholastic– with Nicole's.

First, a brief introduction of our two panelists. Nicole Mansfield Wright, associate professor of English at UC Boulder, is the author of *Defending Privilege Rights, Status, and Legal Peril in the British Novel* (Hopkins, 2020). Her research focus extends from shifting conceptions of justice in British literature and culture of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to their reverberations in today's fragmented social and political world. Kristin Franseen, Postdoctoral Associate at University of Western Ontario (London, Ontario), is the author of *Imagining Musical Pasts: The Queer Literary Musicology of Vernon Lee, Rosa Newmarch, and Edward Prime-Stevenson* (Clemson University Press, 2023). The paper that she brought to the workshop is a sneak preview of her current book project, tentatively titled "The Intriguing Afterlives of Antonio Salieri: Gossip, Fiction, and the Post-Truth in Musical Biography," which explores the interactions between fact, fiction, and semi-fictions in Antonio Salieri's popular reception from his widely reported (and misreported) hospitalization in 1823 through the 200th anniversary of his death, earlier this month on May 7th.

Before I get into some summary of these two lovely papers, there are two points of resonance that I would like to signal. First, they share a focus on Writing around history and evidence, whether that is an intentional and constructed selectivity, or mixing evidentiary authority with ideological fictions. Secondly, both offer entry points to questions of audience that seem very fruitful: we're digging into echoes and ghosts and afterlives; now we get to think with some of the ways that those afterlives not only resonate in our time, but how they influence specific populations, intentionally or not.

[1] https://www.monticello.org/research-education/thomas-jefferson-encyclopedia/category/spurious-quotations/

Nicole's paper, "Yearning for Restriction in the Romantic Novel: Propagating Conservative Legal Norms in Right-Wing Literary Podcasts and Religion-Centered Editions of Works by Jane Austen and Mary Shelley" inveighs upon scholars of the eighteenth century to pay more attention to the "walled garden" of conservative, often religious, alternatives to conventional academic venues" (85), which "enlist literary classics in the battle to advance conservative legal principles" (87).[2] The two venues that are the specific focus of this paper are Ignatius Critical Editions and the *National Review*'s Great Books podcast. Through analysis of these entities, she argues that these types of venues serve to set up literary work as reifying the "exceptional cultural achievements of the West" (86) (dogwhistle to white supremacy intended). These materials also echo conservative theological writings that, taking up centuries-old debates, posit a distinction between "fundamental rights" (foremost those pertaining to property) and the "political and social concoctions of men" (including reproductive rights). Abiding by restrictions on choice –especially for members of subordinate groups – is extolled, paradoxically, as conducive to contentment and true freedom (87).

In discussing the Ignatius Critical Editions**,** she shows us three types of autonomy that are intentionally restricted: "socially subordinate groups' legal and political autonomy; women's sexual and bodily autonomy; and readers' interpretive autonomy" (89). These editions manage to leverage *Pride and Prejudice* as a model for tradwife marriage, and set up Mary Shelley as "a wayward child brought low by sexual excess" and *Frankenstein* as "a veiled autobiography and "a lament for lost innocence" (96). As in the Ignatius Critical Editions, most of the discussions of eighteenth-century literature on the *National Review*'s "Great Books" podcast contrast true freedom, which is said to involve obeisance to tradition, with illusory freedom, which entails prioritizing personal autonomy (102).

Two key elements that come to the fore in Nicole's analysis are redemption arcs and questions of manipulated expertise: both in service of leveraging expertise. The former comes clear in the discussion of Amy Sturgis's interview on the "Great Books" podcast, where she characterizes Mary Shelley—a firebrand who famously invented science fiction and (likely) lost her virginity before marriage on her own mother's grave—as a fallen woman, misled daughter and teenage bride, who endangered her own children but later "questioned her wanton ways" (103-4). By this framing, Sturgis slots Shelley into the cultural script of repentance that legitimizes formerly-radical voices in the discourse of the Christian right, casting her "sexually autonomous past as a cautionary tale with a redemption arc" (104). Through these and other elements, Nicole's paper demonstrates the contradictions inherent to reducing literary classics to didactic vehicles, while still promoting the view—shared by scholars across the political spectrum—that literature *matters*, that it is not "merely a leisure pursuit or status item of cultural capital, but rather a battleground on which fundamental values are contested" (105). Amidst the ongoing death of expertise in public discourse, the marriage of the cultural cachet of authors like Jane Austen and Mary Shelley with a rejection of extant scholarship and expertise is hugely fruitful.

Kristin's paper, "I will tell you of Salieri's cabals': Conspiratorial Thought and the Intriguing Afterlives of Antonio Salieri" walks us through a series of fictional (with an asterisk) representations of the end of Mozart's life and his relationship to Salieri, examining the "political and fictional meanings that became attached to Salieri's […] reception" in the 20th century, and exploring the network of conspiracism that bridges them. These representations offer the writing and rewriting of nationalistic discourses, transitions and frictions between totalitarianism and

[2] All page numbers are drawn from the Workshop Reader.

democracy, and questions of historical evidence. An analysis of Weiss's extensive research notes and reading lists associated with his 1970 novel Assassination *of Mozart* (1970) reveals not just which historical sources he was reading (including biographies by Davenport and Einstein), but also how he "wrote around" the accepted historical evidence to work out his conspiratorial narrative and its imagined cover-up (122).

The conspiracy plot is something of a constant, whether the cabal or conspiracy is a full-blown murder plot, as in *The Assassination of Mozart* (political thriller novel) or conniving attempts to discredit Mozart through requesting an opera with only 8 days to turn it around, as in *The Mozart Story* (film). Finally, *Amadeus*, and its early iterations "grounded in the realm of Mozart conspiracy theories from the start" (127), figuring the diachronic development of Mozart conspiracies as variations on a theme, following the "'polymorphic' nature of historical mythmaking, repeating some pre-existing myths while themselves contributing to the mythmaking" (131-132). In sum, and in the context of an international media climate fueled by viral fake stories and twisted uses of history, statistics, and personal experience, the argument that Kristin teases out in these readings is useful not only for a deeper understanding of the evolution in the reputations of Mozart and Salieri, but also as a practical allegory for philosophical and nationalistic disputes, and the way that sensationalism and speculation shape reputation and methods for understanding the evolution of artistic the establishment.

Both of these papers open questions of audience. How much in these cultural productions if driven by the emotional and ideological needs of the intended audiences. Relatedly, how can we understand or mark out for whom these kids of conspiracies may be compelling? What is the relationship between the push-pull of appeals to and denigration of authority on the one hand, and "the needs of a previously unmobilized audience" (101) on the other?

The final question that I am left with on reading these two papers is that of the grift. So much of contemporary political conspiracy is grounded in the grift – conspiratorial thinking and playing into the affective "battleground on which fundamental values are contested" (Nicole) are marshalled to sell supplements, to fund speaking circuits, and to impact regulation and legislation. That economic aspect peeks out of both of your projects, whether in the motives ascribed to Salieri (Kristin), or in the production and dissemination of these editions and podcasts (Nicole, you reference a paywall, for instance). Could you speak more to that?