

Literature and Liberty: Essays in Libertarian Literary Criticism
by Allen Mendenhall

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Allen Mendenhall, *Literature and Liberty: Essays in Libertarian Literary Criticism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014)

The anti-capitalist and pro-socialist biases of many literary critics today are well-documented, but there are signs that the study of literature may be opening up to libertarian approaches. Allen Mendenhall represents a new generation of scholars whose exposure to Austrian economics has given them the intellectual tools they need to challenge Marxist, neo-Marxist, and quasi-Marxist

analyses of literature. As both a student of literature and a practicing lawyer, Mendenhall brings genuine interdisciplinary training to the subjects he covers, several of which fall into the burgeoning field of law and literature. Eschewing the kind of jargon that infects many discussions of literature these days, Mendenhall writes clearly and effectively. Although this book has a polemical intent, and

Mendenhall does not shy away from attacking well-known contemporary literary critics, he is not hostile to his intellectual opponents and actually tries to build bridges to the people against whom he is arguing.

Literature and Liberty is wide-ranging in its subject matter, moving from an opening essay on Emerson and individualism to a concluding essay on “Literature, Transnational Law, and the Decline of the Nation-State.” Along the way Mendenhall deals with a number of issues, including contemporary efforts to clean up the racist language of Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and a topic I find particularly intriguing—Henry Hazlitt as literary critic. Hazlitt is of course best-known for his economic writings, such classics as *Economics in One Lesson*. But he was the great-great-grandnephew of the famous British literary figure William Hazlitt, and, true to the family heritage, in 1933 he published *The Anatomy of Criticism*, a dialogue on literary criticism. Hazlitt appended two essays in the book, “Literature and the ‘Class War’” and “Marxism or Tolstoyism?” As Mendenhall observes, Hazlitt turns out to have been prophetic in understanding the ways in which Marxist determinism and reductionism would come to distort the analysis of literature in the second half of the twentieth century.

The longest and perhaps the most impressive essay in Mendenhall’s book is entitled: “Law and Liberty in E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*.” Here Mendenhall demonstrates that libertarianism and Austrian economics can make a contribution to one of the favorite fields of the academic left, postcolonial studies. One of the primary charges literary critics make against capitalism is that it was complicit in the development of European imperialism. Noting the role of businesses such as the infamous East India Company in the British Raj, study after study

has presented colonialism as growing out of the free market ideology of nineteenth-century England. This argument fundamentally misreads the situation, mistaking what free market theories were fighting *against* for what they were fighting *for*. British colonialism was based on the economic doctrine known as mercantilism—exactly what Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* was written to refute. In fact, the greatest opponents of British imperialism in the nineteenth century were the so-called Manchester liberals, free trade advocates such as Richard Cobden and John Bright. They despised the East India Company and everything it stood for, specifically the granting of trading monopolies to individual businesses—the very opposite of the free trade policy Cobden and Bright championed.

Mendenhall reads Forster’s famous novel about colonial India as growing out of the classical liberal tradition in Britain and its staunch anti-imperialism. Mendenhall shows that Forster’s narrative develops a critique of the application of Benthamite utilitarianism to Indian society. Bentham is often mistaken for a free market theorist because of some of the economic policies he advocated, but in fact he is an example of the kind of social engineer mentality that Friedrich Hayek continually inveighed against. Followers of Bentham, who were in fact involved in the East India Company, viewed colonial India as a vast social laboratory, in which they could experiment with various Benthamite schemes for bringing civilization to oriental savages (as they viewed them). Among these schemes was the project of imposing the English legal system on Indian society—to which these laws were largely alien and in many respects unsuited. As Mendenhall analyzes *Passage to India*, Forster portrays the inevitable clash between the abstract, rigid, and would-be universal principles of English justice and a

diverse Indian social world that was much more fluid and adapted to local circumstances. In particular, Mendenhall shows how Hindu religious beliefs resisted the imposition of alien English principles on India: “Brahman served, on a rhetorical or metaphorical level, to challenge the Benthamite system that celebrated a different variety of inclusion: one with prerequisites for admission—adherence to British rules, submission to British centralized authority, and participation in British mercantilism.” It may come as a shock to leftwing literary critics, but in fact the spirit of imperialism is the antithesis of the spirit of free markets.

In short, Mendenhall makes it clear that classical liberalism and its libertarian offshoots are actually quite compatible with

the multicultural ideal that is promoted in postcolonial studies today (this is what I mean when I speak of his building bridges to his opponents). As so often happens, by mistaking crony capitalism for genuine capitalism, literary critics fail to understand the liberating power of a free market economy. In his essay on Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain*, Mendenhall again beats the academic left at its own game, by showing how the law can be appropriated as a tool of oppression by the state. In essay after essay, Mendenhall makes the case for using libertarian theory and Austrian economics to gain fresh perspectives on literature. One can only hope that his book will open the eyes of other young scholars to the rich potential of this new approach to literary studies.