Call for Papers

Within the institutional context of a “crisis in the humanities” now stretching into its fifth decade, and within the historical context of a “curse of modernity” that, according to Michael McKeon’s *Origins of the English Novel*, achieved critical mass in the seventeenth century, what, we might ask, is the status of literature—as a field of study, as a creative enterprise, as a professional vocation, as a tool of socialization?

Contemporary theoretical discussions of status may suggest responses grounded in the work of early twentieth-century sociologist Max Weber and late-twentieth-century cultural theorist Pierre Bourdieu. In *Economy and Society* (1922) and *Distinction* (1979), respectively, Weber and Bourdieu identify a range of individual and collective practices designed to assert social dominance on the basis of status defined by “style of life” or “habitus.” Traditionally, literary expertise has served as a primary indicator of the possession of individual status, and hence the study of literature has carried with it what Weber would label as “occupational prestige” and Bourdieu would denominate “cultural capital.”
Of course, further, historically-situated explanations emerge from the kaleidoscopic variety of McKeon’s “novelistic usage”—whether in actual novels, or in poems, plays, and literary essays—produced over the past four hundred years throughout the English-speaking world. Individual writers have long been interrogating their own status as literary producers and interpreters, whether indirectly through the travails of their characters or more overtly through their responses to others’ texts. To cite only one palimpsestic example, Anglo-Indian writer William Makepeace Thackeray fictionalized his own experience as a rusticated university student turned lawyer turned novelist in *Pendennis* (1848-50), whose uncompromising portrait of London’s publishing industry incited a periodical debate over “the dignity of literature” at precisely the same time that literature in English was gaining institutional respectability at Thackeray’s alma mater, Cambridge, and that literary expertise was becoming a central qualification for civil service positions in the colonies, most significantly in India.

This symposium asks participants to consider the productive problematic of literature and status from a variety of historical, national, and theoretical perspectives. Papers are invited from established and emerging experts in seventeenth-century, eighteenth-century, nineteenth-century, twentieth-century, and contemporary literatures throughout the global Anglophone community, as well as from disciplinary historians and critics concerned with the changing status of English within the complex landscape of international higher education. Topics might range from, but are certainly not limited to,

- the representation of status hierarchies and/or incongruities in individual literary works;
- the status accrued, or not, from the production and/or consumption of literary texts in discrete historical periods and national traditions;
- status, authorship, and the problem of international copyright
- the comparative status of literary modes or genres at particular moments and places in the past four hundred years of English-language literary history;
- definitions and/or theories of a specifically literary form of status;
• the status of literature in higher education, whether historical or contemporary;
• the role of English-language literary texts in the attribution of status in colonial or post-colonial settings.

Please submit a 300-500-word proposal and a one-page CV by Monday, November 17, 2014 to Professor Albert Pionke at uasymposium2015@ua.edu.