# What is the canon?

Have you ever wondered how texts are chosen for your A-level course? **Ed Sugden** investigates the fluid, dynamic process of literary canon-formation

When you hear the phrase 'literary canon', you might think of a rather imposing wooden bookcase full of huge dusty tomes with yellowing pages, bound in leather, which were written hundreds of years ago. Perhaps every now and then a misty-eyed academic approaches one of the shelves and carefully pulls a book down before retiring into a quiet recess of a cavernous library to spend the rest of the day alternating between reading and dozing. In other words, you might believe that the canon is simply an unchanging, static entity, governed by obscure rules and obscurer thinkers that, as every year goes by, passes further into irrelevance.

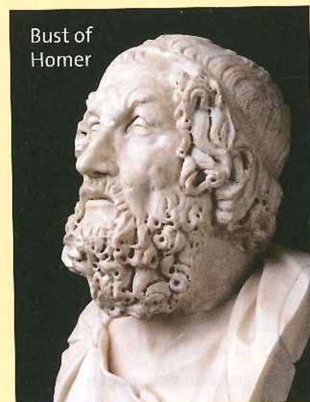
However, nothing could be further from the truth. The canon and the processes that form it are fluid and dynamic. Books are added to it and removed from it constantly, and debates about what a canonical book ought to be are almost continuous. Far from being irrelevant, these debates help decide not only the books that are placed on the syllabus that you are now undertaking but also how these same books are taught.

## A classical hierarchy

So the question remains — what is the canon? Historically, its two main purposes have been to educate and to differentiate. In classical Greece, Homer's *Iliad* was at the centre of the educational system, and the *agon* (or literary contests between tragedians) sought to establish a hierarchy of great (and contemporary) writers. This sense of the classical canon was picked up in English literature's first major articulation of it in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* where he urges his 'litel bok' to 'kis the steppes where as thow seest pace / Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan, and Stace'.

The idea of participating in and adding to an educational and immensely literary tradition was at the core of Renaissance ideas too — Milton's *Paradise Lost* can be seen to be a compendium of classical and biblical learning, and to make a case for the continuing practical application of it.

These are the roots of the word as we see it defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which calls the canon 'a list of literary works considered to be permanently established as being of the highest quality'. It could be seen to be a very simple concept, then. However, read the definition again: a work of *the highest quality* that is *permanently established*. There is a strange definitiveness and finality to the phrase, a strangeness emphasised all the more by the fact that this notion of 'quality' has been at the centre of critical debates about what we should read and why over the past 50 years or so.

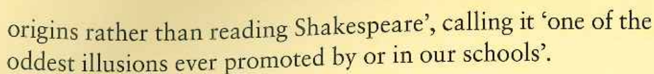

Bust of Homer

Corbis

## Aesthetic value?

These debates came to something of a head during the middle of the 1990s when American critic Harold Bloom published his book *The Western Canon*. Bloom used the book to delineate what he felt were the key writings in Western literary history — the book culminated in a list of thousands of texts that he felt possessed 'aesthetic value'. He argued that this idea of 'aesthetic value' was at the heart of what constituted literary quality. For Bloom, 'aesthetic value' means that a book can be said to *objectively* possess quality as a result of its own internally generated categories.

The tone in *The Western Canon* is frequently polemical. Bloom hits out at what he terms 'the School of Resentment' or those academics and teachers who believe in 'the idea that you benefit the insulted and injured by reading someone of their own



origins rather than reading Shakespeare', calling it 'one of the oddest illusions ever promoted by or in our schools'.

## Forgotten and repressed texts

What then is he referring to? The answer could fill up hundreds of pages, perhaps even hundreds of books, but he is essentially taking aim at many of the revisionary readings of the canon that occurred in the second half of the twentieth century. To summarise, and to generalise greatly, literary criticism has increasingly become a politicised vehicle. For instance, feminist critics of the 1960s and 1970s sought to recover lost women writers who they felt were of high quality, who were passed over as a result of cultural and societal forces — writers like Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Aphra Behn and Margaret Cavendish. Similarly, they sought to show how established authors like Mary Shelley and Jane Austen had been affected by the same forces of repression, a defining book being Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman In The Attic*.

A concurrent movement emerged in the USA which sought to recover African-American writers for similar reasons. This meant the addition of early abolitionist writers like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, both of whom were escaped slaves, to the canon, as well as works on the importance of gospel and blues on the formation of American culture.

Books that are now regularly taught like Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* can be seen to quite clearly emerge from this sort of cultural ferment, and indeed to give their own renderings of it, with their emphasis on forgotten and oppressed traditions.

These revisions of the canon introduced an acknowledged politicised bent to the construction of the canon — 'quality' increasingly became an issue of cultural as well as aesthetic merit. Yet, this is not to say that more traditional aesthetic approaches were abandoned or forgotten. Much feminist criticism, for instance, is concerned with emphasising the precise opposite, arguing that these recovered women writers were of high aesthetic value, and themselves victims of a casually politicised and 'patriarchal' canon creation.

It should also be noted that the incorporation of more women and African-American writers is not at the *expense* of more traditional canonical figures like Shakespeare, Milton, Pope or Wordsworth, though they might offer alternate ways of figuring these writers within the canon. It is also worth pausing for a second to bear in mind Bloom's point: can a writer be said to possess 'quality' or value for only political and cultural reasons? Should we only evaluate writers to the extent that they fulfil a didactic (or moralising) purpose?

## A world without Shakespeare

But a broader question hovers over all this: why does any of this matter? I will attempt to answer this by inviting you to imagine an alternate world — one where William Shakespeare is barely known, and if he is it is for a lost (and therefore presumably worthless) tragedy called *Hamlet*. How would this world differ from ours?

For a start we would talk differently — Shakespeare is the source of the first printed usage of numerous words in the English language. Second, our cultural landscape would be absolutely different — count the number of references you hear in a week to *Romeo and Juliet* to describe love, or to *King Lear* to describe madness. Our method of giving meaning to the world would be indescribably different. Perhaps third, we would even think differently. It could be said that Hamlet was the first character to give voice to a peculiar yet recognisably modern sensibility. And the reason that we do not read him in this imagined world? The process of canonisation was different — Shakespeare was not deemed to possess 'quality'.

This is why it is of vital importance that both as students and as teachers of literature, we continuously and self-consciously interrogate what it is for a text to possess 'quality'. Whether you think that a book's prime importance is cultural or aesthetic or somewhere between the two is deeply important, as it is these positions that will shape what the next generation reads.

## Further reading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