

# Contesting the Western Canon: A Response to Adam Kotsko

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**T**HE VALUE AND PURPOSE OF A LITERARY-CULTURAL CANON CAN SEEM LIKE OLD questions in the ever more distant wake of the *fin de siècle* culture wars. But these questions remain open, not just because they negotiate the always-contemporary dialectic of stasis and change, but also because the twenty-first century's global sensibility and increased attention to Asia and the Middle East have compelled renewed scrutiny of the universalist assumptions underpinning Western Canon curricula. Adam Kotsko's title 'What is the Western Canon Good For?', a question that can be asked dismissively or in earnest, captures the uncertainties we continue to feel when devising curricula that claim to cover a shared cultural tradition.

My response to Kotsko's meditation is informed by my teaching of medieval literature, which occupies a paradoxical position in contemporary curricula. On the one hand, well-known texts such as Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* or Dante's *Divine Comedy* are frequently invoked as epitomising the Western canon in all its whiteness, masculinity, and Christian unanimity. On the other hand, modern literary curricula commonly situate medieval literature as anomalously extracanonial, pre-dating Shakespeare and post-dating those Classical texts which, read in translation, are regarded as 'timeless' or even, in the case of Greek philosophy, quasi-modern. This paradox is symptomatic of the contradictory maligning of the medieval period as the crucible of the West's most entrenched

cultural biases yet also the superseded Other of democratic, secular, and scientific modernity. Medieval literature is, then, notionally canonical but actually marginal.

This liminal status can work in medieval literature's favour when it comes to students. My own subjects, which have focused mostly on English, French, and Occitan texts in lyric, romance, and dream vision genres, have typically attracted strong enrolments on the basis that, according to students' surveyed responses, their content is appealingly alien and remote yet imparts to students (many of whom have been exposed extensively to modern literature) a broadly conceived sense of cultural competence: these are texts that many students feel they 'should know' but perceive to be generally unavailable for study. Pragmatically speaking, this perception of *all* medieval literature as important-yet-obscure could free subject coordinators to fall back on setting the received landmark texts of the period, even though these were almost uniformly produced by high-status white Christian males (Chaucer, Malory, Dante, Petrarch, et al.). But in the literature departments of contemporary Australia, and in comparably 'streamlined' departments throughout the Anglosphere, it more often means that those who teach their department's only medieval literature subject face an only slightly reduced version of the 'Plato to NATO' dilemma. Compelled to represent centuries of literary endeavour in just twelve weeks to a student cohort of diverse ethnicities, religions, genders, and sexualities, they are prompted to deliberate over period-specific questions of canonicity.

Medievalists have been energetic in building community to address this dilemma, and in sharing ideas in such online groups as The Lone Medievalist, Teaching the Middle Ages, Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship, Global Chaucers, and others. The curricula shared and workshopped among members reveal a range of approaches, often used in combination. These aren't necessarily exclusive to our field, but do reveal some forms of vigilance teachers of medieval literature exercise about the medieval canon.

Some colleagues use comparatist approaches that analyse received landmark texts alongside texts by authors other than European males. While significant content by female authors has been a feature for some time, the twenty-first-century 'global turn' in medieval literary studies, with its strong focus on cross-cultural and cross-linguistic exchange, is prompting the development of curricula that encourage students to compare the perspectives of Western authors with those of their contemporaries from Islamicate, African, and Asian cultures. This is part of the field's response to increasing calls to include the perspectives and interests of scholars and students of colour. While this approach is effective in shifting the centre of gravity for medieval literature away from the West, there is nevertheless some concern among medievalists that because it necessitates setting more texts in translation, it compromises the linguistic training that was

formerly central to medieval literary studies. Some have responded to this by developing interdepartmental subjects that retain teacher expertise (especially linguistic) while presenting intersecting and parallel literary traditions in their own cultural contexts rather than as 'exemplary products of human thought', to use Kotsko's words for the conventional approach.

Another approach to destabilising canonical texts' status as 'the voice of their age' is to highlight their emergence out of a climate of intellectual, theological, and social contestation. The bias to which Kotsko refers, that assumes blinkered unanimity within religious cultures, is a common misconception about the Middle Ages, expressed in the popular modern use of 'medieval' as a monolithic pejorative term. But this bias is readily displaced when medieval literature is taught in a way that emphasises its participation in often volatile contestation, its frequent recourse to debate genres (*débat*, *querelle*, *troubadour tenso* and *partimen*) in which disputation was a formal feature, and its practice of citing *auctoritates* not in a blindly reverential way but critically, even adversarially. This conveys to students that, like today's authors, medieval authors responded to the contingency and even volatility of their own 'now', rather than to the call of canonistic immortality.

Complementing this, even in subjects devoted to landmark medieval texts, it is common to teach them in a way that encourages students to identify the cultural assumptions and blindspots (misogyny, homophobia, antisemitism, ableism, and so on) underpinning many of them, which belies the universalism claimed for them under earlier constructions of 'the medieval canon'. This approach nevertheless also sets out to avoid the progressivist assumption—a potential danger also identified by Kotsko—that these texts reflect a benighted time from which we have now thankfully emerged. Western medieval authors could be as complex, ambivalent, and even inclusive on questions of ethnicity, gender, social status, and religion, as we flatter ourselves that we are today. Sometimes more so.

Finally, the field has produced some excellent work on the development of the idea of 'national literary traditions' in the eighteenth century and on the history of the discipline in the nineteenth. Setting this work as required secondary reading exposes students to the cultural, ideological, and scholarly conditions under which certain western medieval texts came to be valued over others, and what cultural and national values were reinforced (and individual interests served) in the development of literary studies as a university practice. Without having to deny canonical western medieval texts' aesthetic and technical virtues, students can nevertheless grasp how their 'proven track record of inspiring creative cultural development' (as Kotsko puts it, in a temporary lapse into institutional prose) is also an artefact of the discipline's professional institutional history.

For those who get only one shot at teaching medieval literature, a decentring, inclusive, contestatory, and reflexive approach might not give students the western cultural competencies they originally signed up for. But it will prompt them to reflect on why they sought those competencies in the first place, in the meantime offering a glimpse into a Middle Ages in which both men and women from different places and different faiths responded to their worlds, and happily left us the fascinating traces of their labour.

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