

# Hold your Fire: Utility, Play, and the Western Canon—A Response to Adam Kotsko

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**T**HE OPERATIVE CONCEPT IN ADAM KOTSKO'S ESSAY 'WHAT IS THE WESTERN CANON Good For?' is use. In his thought-provoking piece, it is axiomatic that an evaluation of the 'Western Canon' should scrutinise the purposes, particularly educational purposes, to which it is put. This points to the fact that a canon exists as an application of a diverse set of texts toward a particular, usually educational, end; an end which the texts' authors have rarely envisaged. While *King Lear* or *To the Lighthouse* can appear free of their histories of application, a canon cannot because grouping texts instantiates a discourse of use. Selection, involves criteria. Every curriculum is a canon. Every reading list is a canon. As such, canons stimulate conversation differently to how an individual text can because they make us read texts, yes, critically, and in relation to each other. The scale of the canon and diversity of its uses over time will be echoed in the scope of the discussion it can stimulate. In my response I will focus on a particular textual form that underscores this discourse of use because it anticipates use in a very deliberate way: the dramatic text. This will point to the hospitable space of play which the existence of a canon—particularly a canon *used* to make meaning over a long period of time and across a wide range of contexts—can generate.

My area of expertise is drama, specifically early modern drama. I love teaching dramatic texts because they lay open the reading process; they make urgent the task of interpretation while they make obvious the plurality of interpretative

possibilities. They do this because they are written to be used for making plays. The performer must choose how to speak his or her lines. If 'What a piece of work is a man?' is directed to the sky, it means something different to when Hamlet asks it, with a wry smile, of a woman in the front row. And yet the canon of documents recognised as *Hamlet* makes available both of these and many more interpretative uses. Then, if we zoom out on uses of the Hamlet canon itself, we are immediately engaged in a lively and complex discourse of uses. Productions of *Hamlet* have valorised the protagonist's misogynistic sentiments, others have underscored Ophelia's intelligence and mistreatment; some have made it into a domestic tragedy, others have exploited its scope as a political drama. Readings of *Hamlet* incubated psychoanalytic theory and were later used to critique it. That there is a Hamlet canon is given. The question of what legitimately belongs to it has been the stimulant for a four-hundred-year-long conversation that spans peoples, disciplines, and media. I want in.

Adam makes the point that a possible detraction of the 'Western Canon' for pedagogical purposes is the history of its *use* to legitimate patriarchy, racism and imperialism. But, for me, this is precisely why canonical texts should be prescribed for study by those whose experiences have not been understood as represented by them. How can reductionistic applications of these complex texts be challenged except by highly skilled readers whose values and life experience offer resistance to them? In this sense, recognised canonical texts are a large, ready-made stage. A danger more dire than expecting students to learn to read them is precluding students from the playing space through a scholarly culture in which reading is about having your local experiences, preferences, and prejudices affirmed.

I, like Adam, come from a working class family and a conservative Christian upbringing. Both my father and I were out at work by the age of thirteen; the major differences being that I was not driven by hunger and could continue at school. One day my English teacher introduced the names 'Austen' and 'Bronte' with a brief précis of their contributions to literature. I decided that, after my shift that evening, I would take my wage to the bookshop. The monotonous hours were varied by the task of deciding which one to buy: the one called *Pride and Prejudice* (I had it written on my hand) or the one called *Jane Eyre*? What joy to discover that I could easily afford both! Thank you 'Signet Classics'. The joy of affording to own these books was amplified by the joy of reading them. They were strange and difficult. They revealed experiences that were nothing like my own in sentences that I had to read several times. But they let me read them anyway. They didn't ask what my parents did, what suburb I came from or what my religious beliefs were. The answers to all of these questions, as I later discovered, had potential to disqualify me from the official conversation about literature. The day may still come when they do. But that day, for \$3, I was in the door of the playhouse. I couldn't believe my luck.

The leap from the personal anecdote to the theatre is deliberate. Access is my central motif and within it is a paradox. In the performance space for which Shakespeare wrote most of his plays, the cheapest tickets got you closest to the stage. The more expensive gallery tickets bought you the privilege of being seen to be there. While we are all alive to the critique of Western Canon for having been used to propagate systematic oppressions, do we ever stop to consider the millions of maverick learners for whom it has provided the only available entry point into a discourse bigger and more varied than their own experience? In the prison cell? In the hospital? At home caring for children? This kind of use is difficult to quantify. In it, however, the very ubiquity of what we call 'canonical' texts *is* their utility for democratising access to diverse legacies of cultural understanding. I have often observed that the most aggressive advocates for scrapping canonical texts from school and university curricula are those for whom introduction to the canon has been an automatic rite of passage; second, third, or fourth-generation university graduates. For the rest of us, arriving at university to be informed that we came in by the wrong door can be a deeply disheartening experience. Now, as a tertiary educator myself, I want all of my students to recognise the continuities between what they have already loved and learnt about literature and the advanced skills and knowledge that a university training can impart.

For undergraduate studies in English I have always advocated a compulsory component which includes authors that any popular consensus of Anglophone literary greatness would generate. I advocate this not because I own this 'canon' but because I can't. It is a given cultural entity bigger than my best judgment about what is 'important' for people to read. If diversity is a criterion let it be said that the Western Canon does contain heterogenous viewpoints. How 'white' was Homer? Was Shakespeare 'straight'? Was George Eliot 'male'? We have to exert anachronistic categories to construe as homogenous the complexity of lived experience represented in this dynamic grouping of texts. It would be a retrograde step, having had access to the huge thought-domain (playhouse?) that the canon-concept demarcates, to decide that new entrants don't require it. Systematic erasure of the big names from an English literary studies curriculum implies a proprietorship to which I do not feel entitled. Even more sinister, however, is a repopulation of the curriculum with texts that 'better reflect *our* students' experiences'. What are my students' experiences? I don't presume to know. At the Australian National University we educate students from a wide array of racial, religious and socio-economic backgrounds. It would be deeply misguided and condescending to attempt build a curriculum (read 'canon') around texts that give expression to their life experiences. The space in which I prefer to meet them is one both neutralised and enlivened by a legacy of radically divergent uses and for which I invite my students to find new ones. Adam describes the Christian bible as a textual canon which operates 'not as a repository of final answers but as a

reference point that gives even the most marginal position an entry point into the conversation and provisional legitimacy'. I agree, offering the slight modification that both the biblical and all literary canons are more than reference points; they are capacious spaces of play if only inhabited by a diverse spectrum of readers.

My argument for a canon is not that the texts within it are intrinsically great (although, as Adam points out, many are) but that canons, in their durability, express something of what human beings have found *useful* in literature across time and space. Canons evolve through application not through collusion. Ultimately I don't think it is for the academy to form or reinforce a canon but, rather, to encourage readers from the widest possible range of backgrounds to read canonical works with close attention to the history of their uses. Canons are living organisms, permeable to their readerships. The discipline of English, by inducting a diverse array of skilled readers onto the canon stage, promotes its usefulness for articulating and exploring the most pressing ethical conundrums of human existence for generations to come.

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