

The Canonical Dialectic: Exploring a Possible Synthesis

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In literary criticism, a canon is a definitive body of texts or narratives which are considered to be the most important and fundamental in their respective fields, in contrast to the less important and more peripheral works. Canons can exist within many different contexts, such as the canon of the Bible, in which some texts were deemed the most central and important to the Christian message (i.e. the Gospels), and others, although authentic, have been left out of the canon (such as the Book of Enoch). In classical scholarship, debates surrounding which texts are canonical – and the exact criteria of canonicity – have existed since the time of the Ancient Athenians, who debated over precisely which texts were the most authentic and thus should be considered a part of Homer's canon. These debates, while they can often seem overly academic, are important because they help to inform other fundamental decisions – such as which books should be taught to children, and how certain periods of history should be perceived by future generations.

Today, certain scholars hold that the canon should be understood as a rigid and unchanging body of texts which have shaped subsequent literature based on their quality, originality, and endurance. Others believe that the canon must be regularly adapted to modern sensibilities and contexts. The former, I will designate the traditionalists, and the latter, the modernists. In light of this divide, my thesis is that there are two distinct canons of classical literature in academia today: the traditional, and the modern. Further, this paper intends to investigate the factors that govern each of these canons, and show how they will likely converge, in the mind of the layman, on a single synthesized canon in the coming years. I will demonstrate this by analysing how many of these factors definitively apply to *Catullus 51* and *Characters* by Theophrastus, and how this explains their past canonicity and future prospects of canonicity.

The traditionalist school posits a theory of canonicity whereby texts should be judged largely on their quality, literary influence, and historical standing, without regard to modern socio-political preferences. This is the literary equivalent of survival of the fittest. Harold Bloom, widely considered the standard-bearer of the traditionalists, argues in *The Western Canon* that

literature 'breaks into the canon only by aesthetic strength, which is constituted primarily of an amalgam; mastery of figurative language, originality, cognitive power, knowledge, exuberance of diction.'¹ Bloom's argument suggests that for traditionalists, a text's literary quality is the primary factor in determining canonicity.

This is not to say that traditionalists completely ignore extra-textual factors like intertextuality and historical reception.² They would argue that the highest quality texts and authors have, deservedly, been the most influential. In other words, textual quality is necessary for canonicity, but is not sufficient if not accompanied by well-deserved historical significance. This sentiment was summed up perfectly by Dr Jordan Peterson when he stated that 'the ultimate canonical book in the West is clearly the Biblical corpus,' because it is a high quality literary text and 'implicit in' the entire literary tradition of the West.³ To Peterson, the more the ideas, stories, philosophies, and phrases of a certain work are referenced in other works, the more central it is to the canon.

In contrast, the modernist school argues for a theory of canonicity in which socio-political imbalances of power must be redressed by 'opening up' the canon to modern revisions. In this sense, it defines itself in opposition to the historically-dominant literary culture and demographic, which it sees as an exclusionary system. John Guillory of New York University explains that the 'process of exclusion, by which socially defined minorities are excluded from the exercise of power or from political representation,' essentially arises from 'the selection, by which certain works are designated canonical, and others noncanonical.'⁴ Guillory suggests that this process always leads to 'the exclusion of female, black, ethnic, or working-class authors from the literary canon.'⁵

¹ Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: the Books and School of the Ages*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1994), p. 29.

² Intertextuality is when a certain text has its meaning influenced by its relationship to another text, such as references to other well-known texts that the author assumes the reader is aware of; historical reception is the analysis of how a text has been understood and engaged with throughout history in different times and contexts.

³ Ralston College, *Jordan Peterson and Stephen Blackwood: Our Cultural Inflection Point and Higher Education*, YouTube, 21 Feb 2019, <www.youtube.com/watch?v=m_Aiv6xJxkE&ab_channel=RalstonCollege> [accessed 19 May 2021] (timestamp 1:13:45).

⁴ John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 6.

⁵ Guillory, p. 7.

For Guillory, the primary way to combat this exclusionary force is to 'open the canon to noncanonical authors,' thereby '[submitting] the syllabus to a kind of demographic oversight.'⁶ The modernist school explicitly finds its foundation in a political struggle for equality of representation and Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital: the knowledge, assets, and way of being, of a particular social class which promote upwards social mobility.⁷ Therefore if the canon, which could be considered a pivotal element of high culture, is not representative of societal pluralism, then it necessarily leads to a reduction in the cultural capital of underrepresented groups, furthering a cycle of oppression.⁸ Notably, the modernist school puts less emphasis on the quality of the text itself, or is at least suspicious that ostensibly objective quality judgements are actually part of the 'cultural apparatus' of 'rejection of subject cultures,' even if unconsciously.⁹

These two schools stand in such opposition, that it is unlikely they will accept one unified, revised canon. It is more likely that each school will propose its own canon based on their opposing principles. I am arguing, however, that regardless of whether these two academic schools unify, the layman's understanding of the canon will converge on a synthesis of the two. In other words, both schools will continue to exercise influence, but they will be like the two counterbalances of a new central canon that emerges. This new canonicity will be a hybrid of the two sets of factors that each school promotes. The battle between these two schools has led Dr. David Damrosch and Dr. Simone Winko to each suggest that separate canons have emerged from this debate.¹⁰ While there are subtle differences in their accounts, they generally agree that three distinct canons are emerging. The first is what Damrosch calls the *hypercanon*, which is essentially the canon of the traditionalist school.¹¹ The second is called the *countercanon*, which is essentially the canon of the modernist school.¹² The third is the *shadow canon*, made up of the authors and works that once comprised the more marginal texts of the traditionalist canon, but which are losing their relevance.¹³

⁶ Ibid., p. 7.

⁷ Ibid., p. 6.

⁸ Here, 'societal pluralism' means the full range of diverse voices in society, especially those that have been historically marginalised.

⁹ Jan Gorak, *The Making of the Modern Canon: Genesis and Crisis of a Literary Idea*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 186-87.

¹⁰ Hans-Joachim Backe, 'The Literary Canon in the Age of New Media', *Poetics Today*, 36 (2015), 1-31 <<https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2879757>> [accessed 15 May 2021] (p. 10).

¹¹ Ibid., p. 10.

¹² Ibid., p. 10.

¹³ Ibid., p. 10.

Because this debate happens largely within the university, the average student today is likely to encounter a mix of traditional and modern texts. Since a 'text's transmission through various education systems has proved to be ... the most salient characteristic of foundational texts' in a canon, it is therefore likely that a new synthesis will emerge from this dialectic whereby the traditionalist and modernist schools will contribute texts to this new canon as understood by the average university student, as it emerges by way of university education.¹⁴

In the case of classical texts, the pool of texts and authors that survive is, for the most part, closed.¹⁵ In other words, the texts that are taught and interacted with are limited to the relatively small number of classical texts that survive today. However, this does not prevent a modernist or new reading of these extant texts. Because of the finite number of classical texts, I argue that many of them will retain a level of canonicity, especially those that lend themselves to a 'modernist' reading. As Susanna Morton Braund writes, 'new developments in criticism can have an impact on the canon, by awakening interest in texts which had previously been neglected or marginalized.'¹⁶ An example of the contribution of new lenses, or new ways of looking at a text, is Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian literary theorist, whose ideas of dialogics and the carnivalesque, when popularised in the West, caused re-evaluation of texts in the 1990s.¹⁷ These new lenses allow for a significant shift in canonical status among the classical texts: 'where the canon previously consisted of the "higher" genres such as epic, it now also accommodates texts whose richness is best appreciated through a Bakhtinian lens.'¹⁸

The preceding account has attempted to situate the factors that affect modern evaluations of a text's place in the canon of classical writing; I have especially considered the

¹⁴ Margalit Finkelberg and Guy G. Stroumsa, *Homer, the Bible, and beyond: Literary and Religious Canons in the Ancient World* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), p. 8.

¹⁵ The pool of classical texts is not *fully* closed however. Archaeologists often discover new text fragments in places such as Oxyrhynchus, in Egypt. Occasionally, entire poems are discovered, such as in 2004 with the Tithonus poem of Sappho. There is also a large number of charred scrolls comprising a considerable percentage of a complete library of a Roman aristocrat, which were found at the Villa of the Papyri in 1750, covered during the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD. Modern advances in imaging technology have made significant steps forward, but the technology is still not advanced enough to allow reading of the charred scrolls.

¹⁶ Susanna Morton Braund, *Understanding Latin Literature* (Oxford: Taylor & Francis, 2017), p. 44.

¹⁷ Dialogics is "an emphasis on the interactive nature of language and of texts," see Braund 2017, p.45 for more; Carnavalesque is a literary mode "which denotes the inversion of social and intellectual norms as represented in texts, with a particular focus upon the body and bodily functions." For more, see Braund, p.45; Braund, p. 44-45.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

two competing approaches to canonicity (which I have called the traditionalists and the modernists). These two schools, both of which are active and relevant in current scholarship, affect modern evaluations of the canon because they propose two sets of criteria for identifying canonicity, which I argue are complementary. They are complementary because they both operate in academia and thus both influence students today. Since education is one of the primary tools of propagating canonicity, the result will likely be a new synthesis in the minds of the university-educated.

Perhaps an illustrative analogy will help to elucidate this. The sharp divide between Anglo-Saxons and Normans in the years following 1066 was so politically precarious that rebellions and uprisings occurred often. In these years, this divide manifested itself both linguistically and culturally, as two opposed peoples struggled to live together on an almost war-like footing. However, within a couple hundred years, Englishness was now a new synthesis of Anglo-Norman language and culture, such that the divide was effectively eliminated. In the same way, the two canonical schools fighting fiercely today will likely lead to a new synthesis in the coming years, even if diehards remain on both sides.

This theory that the new synthesis will have elements of both traditions is independently supported by the analysis of the scholar James I. Porter, in his work 'What Is "Classical" about Classical Antiquity? Eight Propositions', in which he explores what exactly it means for anything, including a text, to be truly classical. He says that something that is classical must be 'full of grandeur and shapeliness, and wearing all the signs of the culture of contest that produced them... they are as though alive, animated by their own canonical qualities.'¹⁹ It is also said that a text must be both 'archaic and blooming.'²⁰ In other words, a canonical text must have both the inherent venerability, historic standing, and quality which are advocated for by the traditionalist school, while also allowing for new interpretations and truths to be drawn from the text, as the modernist school suggests. And while in the study of classical literature it is difficult to have historically marginalised voices represented to the extent that the modernists wish (due to the nature of the writings that have survived), new lenses, such as the aforementioned Bakhtinian lens, allow for a newly informed modernist approach to older texts. Therefore, a text

¹⁹ James I. Porter, 'What Is "Classical" about Classical Antiquity? Eight Propositions', *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 13 (2005), 27–62 <<https://www.bu.edu/arion/files/2010/03/Porter-Classical-Antiquity.pdf>> [accessed 22 May 2021] (p. 54).

²⁰ Porter, p. 54.

must be worthy of canonicity by the judgement of the traditionalists and the modernists alike, and it is precisely this that means a text is compatible with a synthesised canonicity.

I will now show that by applying this framework to two classical texts, it will demonstrate that if a text fulfils enough factors of both sides, then the text will likely be canonical today. This is due to a combination of traditionalist and modernist factors, and it will therefore remain canonical in the new synthesized canon.

The first is *Catullus 51*, a poem written by Gaius Valerius Catullus, an influential Latin poet from the first century BC. This poem is a Latin translation of a Greek poem by Sappho, but Catullus adds a new 4th stanza and changes various details throughout the poem.²¹ Bloom has suggested that 'aesthetic strength,' defined in part by 'originality' (among other factors) is required for canonicity, and this poem in particular is known for its creative and original engagement with an older poem.²² For example, while translating the first three stanzas of *Sappho 31*, Catullus 'adds, omits, and modifies details at his pleasure,' however it is still largely a translation, albeit a creative one.²³ But in the fourth stanza, instead of being faithful to the emotional outburst in the original poem, he opts for a sharply-contrasted rational counsel against his own idleness. Here, Catullus is engaging in the wider canon tradition, demonstrating intertextuality by using Sappho's poem (canonical in Catullus' time) as inspiration, while also taking artistic liberty and making an original composition of his own. This balance between engaging with the past while also writing an original work is certainly a part of the appeal of *Catullus 51*. Traditionalists also value the historical standing of a work, and despite Catullus being despised by many in his own time for perceived immorality, in recent centuries his work has been redeemed, being taught in schools around the western world as a model of Latin poetry.²⁴

While Catullus is often admired by traditionalists for his beautiful poetry and holding a place in the canon for centuries, the modernists have enjoyed his work as well, by reading it through new lenses. For example, J. K. Newman, a British classical scholar of the 20th century,

²¹ E. T. Merrill, *Catullus* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1893), p. 85-86.

²² Bloom, p. 29.

²³ Merrill, p. 85.

²⁴ Ronnie Ancona, 'Teaching Sexually-Explicit Catullus', *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* 30 (2013), 8-11 <[http://www.arlt.co.uk/latintest/JCT/30/Ancona,%20R.%20\(2014\).%20Teaching%20Sexually%20Explict%20catullus.%20JCT%2030,%208-13.pdf](http://www.arlt.co.uk/latintest/JCT/30/Ancona,%20R.%20(2014).%20Teaching%20Sexually%20Explict%20catullus.%20JCT%2030,%208-13.pdf)> [accessed 13 May 2021] (p. 8).

wrote *Roman Catullus and the Modification of the Alexandrian Sensibility*, in part utilizing Bakhtin's aforementioned theory of the carnivalesque, a relatively recent lens through which to appreciate texts in a new light.²⁵ Damien Nelis, a reviewer of the work, suggests that Newman's attempt to reinterpret Catullus as being a satirist instead of a love poet is likely to be attacked, although it is proof of the innovative power of new literary lenses.²⁶ *Catullus 51* is also compatible with the view of modernists as this poem is a 'rewriting' or 'reimagining' of a much earlier Greek poem by Sappho. This rewriting of highly respected classics is something which some writers, such as Ezra Pound, have explored as a means to reinvigorate older texts.²⁷ Thus, *Catullus 51* could be admired both by traditionalists who respect his aesthetic quality and important role in the canon of the last few centuries, and modernists who are able to view his work through new lenses, or view him as a one who has reimagined the tradition which came before him. It is for this reason that *Catullus 51*, who has already been canonical in the recent past, is likely to remain canonical in the synthesised canon, due to being important to both schools of canonicity.

The second text is *Characters* by Theophrastus. Theophrastus describes various personality types, categorizing people by actions and habits. While *Characters* is important as being the first extant attempt at such a treatise, it has not had the same aesthetic impact or force of beauty that transcends centuries, which Peterson suggests is an important factor of canonicity.²⁸ It is highly fragmentary work, with sections appearing to be missing from the manuscripts, and it is also not a narrative work which attempted to strive for beauty, but rather for typological and philosophical interest.²⁹ The text is focused on the time in which it was written, describing specific habits of certain people which, outside of the Ancient Greek context, have less meaning to modern people. For example, when describing penurious (poor) men, Theophrastus writes that they 'anoint themselves with very small oil-flasks; that they have their hair cut close; that they take off their shoes in the middle of the day; and that they are urgent

²⁵ Braund, p. 45.

²⁶ Damien Nelis, 'Catullus Carnivalised', Review of *Roman Catullus and the Modification of the Alexandrian Sensibility*, by John Kevin Newman, *The Classical Review* 42 (1992), 40-41 <<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/85215339.pdf>> [accessed 15 May 2021] (p. 40).

²⁷ J. P. Sullivan, 'Ezra Pound on Classics and Classicists', *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 3 (1964), 9-22 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20162886>> [accessed 21 May 2021] (p. 9-10).

²⁸ Ralston College, 1:15:30.

²⁹ J. M. Edmonds, *The Characters of Theophrastus; newly edited and translated* (London: William Heinemann, 1929), pp. 11-12.

with the fuller to let their cloak have plenty of earth, in order that it may not soon be soiled.³⁰ While there is no doubt that this sort of hyper-specific description is useful to historians, it fails to break out of its own time and relate to humans of any era, a key component in the criteria of the traditionalist. *Characters* also lacks intertextuality by not commonly referring to other texts, or having been referred to by many subsequent texts. While the text was used by a few authors during the 17th century as a model of character studies, it has never had the privilege of being found in curricula across the western world.³¹ *Characters* may provide an interesting glimpse into classical history and historical conceptions of personality types, but it does not sufficiently satisfy any of the factors of the traditionalist school (i.e. quality and cultural transcendence), which explains why it has never been centrally canonical. Because *Characters* is not a canonical text to the traditionalists, it cannot meet the criteria of being accepted by both the traditionalists and the modernists, thus, I propose it will not be central to the future synthesized canon either.

Thus, this paper has attempted to outline the two competing schools of canonicity, and the factors that they value. Further, it has traced the means by which this opposition may result in a fruitful synthesis; namely, through university education and new literary lenses. The two classical texts of Catullus and Theophrastus have been examined in light of this framework, and have each produced a differing prediction as to their future canonicity. Only time will tell whether these predictions are accurate, but if they are, it will demonstrate that canonicity is neither a blank slate, nor set in stone, but a dynamic dialogue between generations.

³⁰ Richard Claverhouse Jebb, *The Characters of Theophrastus* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1870), p. 149.

³¹ Emmanuel Wheeler, 'Theophrastus', *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 11th ed., 26, (1911), 787 (p. 787).

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