

# The 'A' Level Canon

*Sally Minogue*

[This is a slightly revised version of a paper delivered at the Conference for Higher Education Teachers of English at the University of Kent, Easter 1987.]

I want to begin by saying something about the institutionalisation of English in education, and we don't need to look far for images of this institutionalisation. This is a conference for teachers of English in *Higher Education*; a quick glance through the list of participants reveals a miniscule number of teachers of English from other sectors of education (we're both here on the platform); and what are we talking about? about *pre*-HE English. The conference is taking place in a university, one of the many to which the percentage of working class entrants has actually declined in real terms over the last twenty to thirty years; and in a geographical area where the eleven-plus still exists, so that selection ensures an initial educational failure, often on the basis of factors of class and culture, which may often be difficult, indeed impossible, to recover from. Recent research showing that having a graduate parent is a more important factor than schooling in determining whether a child goes on to higher education may make left-wing university teachers squirm a little, and will be of absolutely no comfort to working-class parents.

Within the schools, teacher morale is at an all-time low; curriculum and public examination changes have been thrust at teachers with the minimum of preparation time or resource support. In Further Education teachers have adapted to a bewildering number of curriculum and funding changes which have had a direct effect on their teaching practices. Resources are in desperate decline. In my own college, in Thanet, where there is 25% male unemployment, we scarcely replace our video machines before they get stolen again—you have to show videos between thefts. (They'd have been a bit disappointed if they'd got the last video I recorded—Terry Eagleton talking about Literature and History. Not a big market for that in Thanet.) And in between teaching *Othello* at 'A' level and poetry at 'O' you're advising students about Aids (or they're advising you). GCSE planning takes place in the tea breaks (and that's not a joke). Of course, teachers give of their own time as well for this work, because they know how important it is for the kids they teach—and because they know they are going to carry the can. It took three relatively intelligent and experienced teachers of English two hours to work out exactly what the examining board's requirements were as far as assessment was concerned for our GCSE Literature syllabus, before we could even begin to construct a response to those requirements. This was partly because the grammar of the document was vague. Was it deliberately vague? That's something

that will worry me until my assessments are safely accepted next year.

The lack of time matters. GCSE is forming notions of English at this moment which will be influential for many years; that formative work either comes from above (in the form of, for example, reading lists and assessment methods) or it's done by teachers in snatched time. For the teacher, the GCSE debate inevitably and inexorably centres on assessment. For the demoralised members of school teachers' unions, pay still lies at the centre of this debate, because the Government has refused to acknowledge how much greater will be the demands on teacher time, effort and experience in GCSE assessment. Many secondary schools, relying on models of CSE, have chosen to go for a 100% coursework version of GCSE. Yet no-one I have met is *fully* clear about what criteria will determine the various grade levels in English. The result will inevitably be that teachers will tighten their own systems, to ensure fairness to their students (i.e. to avoid the possibility of a moderator stepping in at the last moment and marking down all the teacher assessments). A model which ideally should have freed us into a more egalitarian structure is already becoming prescriptive and divisive. Meanwhile Kenneth Baker is proposing benchmark reading: *Animal Farm* will be read by the age of 13 (so you'd better get reading); and he's set up a Commission on English headed by a mathematician.

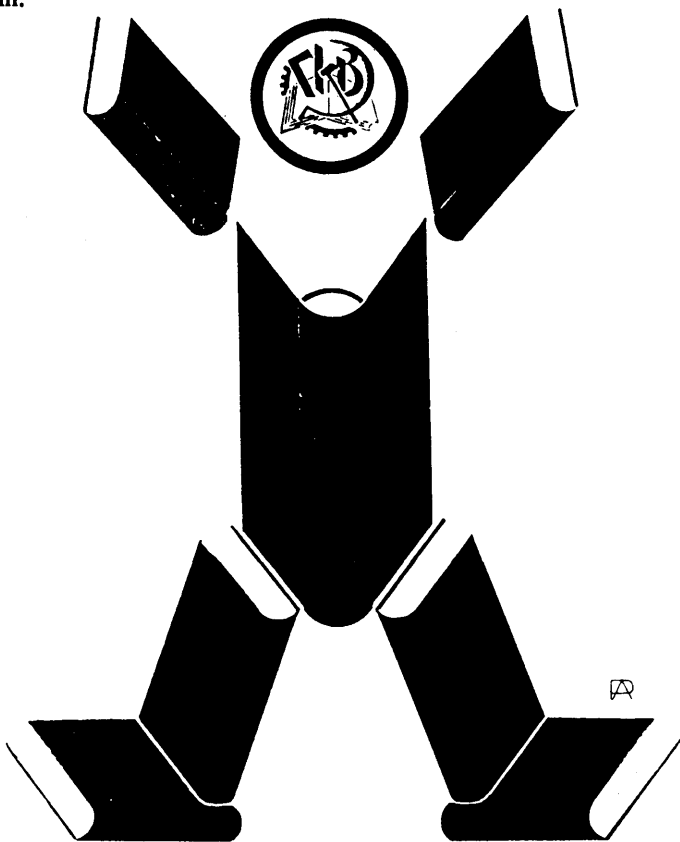
For those of who teach English on the margins—rather than teaching the theory of marginalisation—as I see myself doing in a technical college which acts as an escape route away from the desperate unemployment of a less affluent corner of the South-East, this conference has raised a lot of contradictions. Indeed teaching English in the pre-HE sector in itself raises contradictions. Our context is set by the examining boards and the economic climate; our physical and resource situation is determined by rate-capping; and in the midst of this we have a lot of sparky students, and the subject of English to be re-interpreted.

There is room on the periphery for instituting change. Mode 3 'A' level has been mentioned, as have new subjects such as Communications Studies and Theatre Studies, developing in parallel with English, and taught by English teachers. Access courses have also been important agents of educational change and development, questioning and negotiating as they teach, interdisciplinary, and taking a multiplicity of approaches to literature.

But as a teacher of English perhaps my most heavily felt responsibility is the teaching of 'A' level. This morning before I set off for the conference I went into college to leave a mock exam for students who have this year applied to institutions

largely represented here. Signifiers did not figure in the questions. My task as a teacher of English is primarily to enable these particular students to attain 'A' level grades. On the way I hope to do a number of things. But the priorities are clear.

And what of the poor student? 'A' level to one section of the student population means an entry card to Higher Education; to another section it means an extra few quivers in the bow in the quest for the Holy Grail, i.e. a job. 'A' level is tied up with the arcane complexities of the UCCA form. 'A' levels equal points scores for admission (which, as the experience of Aston University has shown, also equal funding: the higher the points score for students admitted, the higher the standard the university is considered to have achieved, the higher the UGC funding.) 'A' levels equal a step up the ladder then for both student and HE institution. And what of the place of English as a subject? For the student who wants to go on to study English at HE, English means that it's going to be more difficult to get in.



What I am talking about here are power structures. This morning Catherine Belsey berated the old English tradition for appropriating literature into the academic institution. What I want to ask is: what's new? Over the last couple of days I've heard a number of propositions discussed, or asserted: (1) how important it is to appreciate that the 'great texts' of the old canon, now derided, were part of and underpinned an elitist culture; (2) how, nonetheless, we must still 'keep hold' of these texts and appropriate them as our own; (3) how, at the same time, we should recover lost voices from the past, those which that same elitist culture sought to suppress; (4) how the study of literature is, unguisably, ideological in nature.

Yet to me, a sort of outsider, it is clear that those who voice these views are themselves embedded in and underpin one of the primary elitist institutions of our current history—the academy. In its various institutional forms the academy is being used to rob present voices of power and breath under the guise

of standards and values, through the admissions system. For where do your potential students come from? How are they selected? Do you see that process as part of your concern? If you are a member of an English department in an institution of Higher Education, it is your concern, and you are implicated in the way admissions decisions are made. And that's where 'A' level comes in, pat, like the old villain.

I would have much more sympathy with radical positions in English if they began to grapple with their own place in the institutions, with their own role in cultural history. A brief mention was made this morning of the difficulties of developing cultural studies within institutionalised assessment systems, course organisation, value judgements, etc. But surely that is the first task? If that can't be done, what will the cultural historians make of the altogether more difficult and problematic judgements—and they are and will be *value* judgements, because they will select—about the past?

What I want to suggest is that it is not 'A' level which is the villain of the piece. I want to challenge the new orthodoxy in English from the standpoint of pre-Higher Education, partly on the basis of the institutional and structural terms I've just outlined, but partly on the basis of what could be seen as a Leavisite view. For I've been struck at this conference by the emergence of a number of dirty words in criticism: 'universal', 'moral value', 'individual', and, dirtiest of all, 'F. R. Leavis'. (As is often the case with dirty words, that last one got an awful lot of use.) Why the obsession with Leavisite principles? Surely no self-respecting cultural materialist is going to believe that one man could single-handedly determine the canon of English studies? Why, on the other hand, given the contempt often turned on the canon, hold on to the canonised texts—indeed, why study literature at all? As for 'policing the boundaries of truth', Catherine Belsey's description of the old-style criticism variously condemned as *passé*, narrow and elitist; I've felt a good deal more the presence of thought policing in the new English, a dogmatism of assumption and assertion which seem to me not only to be in danger of but to be actively seeking a new and reductive orthodoxy.

To consider the implications of that new orthodoxy, I want to look at the 'A' level canon in relation to three areas which have been raised in this conference, or in recent writing about new literary theory; as I do so I'd like to address myself through the eyes of the hard-pressed teacher and the hard-pressed student. The three areas I shall consider are the proposed or current demolition of the canon; the replacement of literature by literary theory at the centre of English studies; and that approach to literature which places it on a continuum with history, and sees its value as deriving from its role as historical evidence.

First then the canon. There's no doubt that the range of 'A' level syllabuses as they stand at present reflect an even narrower version of the canon than that which has been attacked so far. Shakespeare is compulsory on every 'A' level syllabus; Chaucer often appears as his stable companion. Regular appearances are made by the Metaphysical and Romantic poets, Restoration comedy and Jane Austen. Milton appears not to be quite as popular as he was. Of course, within the texts prescribed, considerable freedom is given to student and teacher to choose; in my own institution this choice is often determined by whether we already own a set of the texts, or whether a text is available in cheap paperback so that we can reasonably ask the students themselves to buy it. As a result it is perfectly possible at present to study 'A' level English without reading any poetry other than the blank verse of Shakespeare's plays. A recent HMI report showed that teachers

are on the whole reluctant to teach poetry and that students are reluctant to approach it. To me, finding out the reasons for this, and doing something about it, are at least as great a cause for concern as, say, questioning the centrality of Shakespeare to the canon.

But what about that centrality? The only agreement that exam boards could reach in their recent discussions of a common core at 'A' level in English was that all boards must study Shakespeare—just as they do now. *Would* it be heresy to drop Shakespeare from the A level canon? I haven't actually heard anyone suggesting that he should be dropped from the academic canon—only re-read. So should he be re-read at 'A' level? If so, how? *Political Shakespeare*, ed. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (1985), represents some of the freshest thinking on this question, and it is avowedly anti-elitist in its 'cultural materialism', registering its 'commitment to the transformation of a social order which exploits people on grounds of race, gender and class' (Foreword). Sinfield, in 'Shakespeare and Education' in that volume, addresses himself specifically to the question of the place of Shakespeare in the pre-HE canon. He is particularly scathing about 'the combination of cultural deference and cautious questioning promoted around Shakespeare in GCE', which he says

seems designed to construct a petty bourgeoisie which will strive within limits allocated to it without seeming to disturb the system—it does not want to break the ladder by which it imagines it can climb' (Poulantzas) (p. 142).

But who's standing at the top of the ladder? Does approaching texts from a cultural materialist, historicist or feminist standpoint thus cancel out the current structure and status of English in the academy, or of the academy itself, of which those 'radical' approaches still remain a part? Just who is it who 'doesn't want to break the ladder by which it imagines it can climb'? Imagines? The ladder is in place and there are lots of climbers. The last who should be condemned are the hapless 'A' level students who are in the position of least choice.

Many critics would like to 'de-universalise' Shakespeare. In practice, what would that mean at 'A' level? Perhaps covering the theory which suggests that de-universalisation; or 'placing' the rise of Shakespeare in English studies; or taking students back to the historical determinants of the plays and their performances and audiences. But are we quite happy to abandon the notion of universality so readily? Shouldn't students be allowed to consider that as a position as well? When they read Hamlet's 'O what a rogue' soliloquy and encounter the self-reflexive ideas of 'What's Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba That he should weep for her?', are they not encountering universally recognisable *ideas* couched in ironies which are as much in place in Stoppard's parasitic *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* as they are in Shakespeare? Proponents of the new orthodoxy are unwilling even to discuss this; the term 'universal' has been discredited. Are we to carry this lack of discussion back to 'A' level—and thence back to GCSE? I find the implications of that lack of discussion worrying; its effects can already be seen in a mass of recent critical works which announce their assumed terms, not up for discussion, in the introduction and often show little sign of a full understanding of either the origin or the rationale for the positions the terms encapsulate. Peter Widdowson, in his editorial introduction to *Re-reading English* (1982), describing the dilemma of new materialist critics in relation to theory and practice in criticism, revealingly remarks: 'The fear of being cast as an "empiricist" has led to positions being abandoned ... before any substantial work has

been done.' Are we to introduce this fear into sixteen year-olds even before they really know what 'empiricist' means? When contradictions emerge between positions—as, for example, between Lacanian psychoanalysis and Althusserian Marxism—are we to take the 'with one leap Jack was free' position adopted by Belsey in *Critical Practice* (1980)?:

Lacan apparently leaves little room for history, while Althusser's theory of subjectivity leaves little room for change. I have therefore drawn on each position without dwelling on the incompatibilities between them ... my present procedure seems to me to be admissible if it generates a productive critical practice.

The impossibility of discussing difficulties with a position is emerging more and more strongly in the new critical theory; is this to be transferred to younger minds? By whom?

Any re-reading of Shakespeare would at this rate mean that teachers would have to spend even more time on Shakespeare, not less, within the cramped time scheme of 'A' level as it stands at present. And would the literary theory which underpins the various positions to be explored be available to the students (and I don't mean available to the publishers)? Whenever I have taught theoretical articles, as I have with students on an Access course where the freer mode and self-determined syllabus allows us the chance to do so, the students are alienated by the language and style—which is certainly paraphrasable, and can be more simply expressed, because I have to do that to make the critical texts available to students. If Shakespeare is to be robbed of his bourgeois connections, so must the new critical theory; to the eyes and minds of working-class students, as to many others, it is obscurantist, it excludes them, and they are amused by the ironies this suggests. One answer the theorists provide is itself part of the same obscurantism; they argue that a 'common-sense' exposition of their position misleads the reader into a false view of the clarity, the transparency of language. The expression must be difficult so as not to mislead the reader into thinking the concepts easy. The corollary of this is that such texts are available only to the initiated, and that attempts to explain them are treacherous. I hope that one of the theorists will come to explain this position to my students.



This brings us to the centrality of theory. It is true that a liberal humanist tradition underpins much of the approach of 'A' level, and I agree that this may need questioning. In the words of the University of London Exam Board, 'the model is, I suppose, a version of the English literary heritage which has been broadened to include a good deal of more recent writing.'

The Southern Universities Board is less apologetic; in reply to my question about whether there were any plans to include theory in 'A' level they replied 'I regret that I do not understand your reference to the more recent literary theory'. (They did not, of course, regret it at all—nor did they not understand.)

The humanist tradition has been criticised precisely because it is deficient in theory; and in practice in the 'A' level syllabus this comes down to an emphasis on 'the text'. It is by now easy to see what the theorist will want—explanations of how the text comes into being, canon formation, value attachment, etc. Certainly, much of this would be interesting and useful. But perhaps it would be more sensible to ask why the text is so firmly in place in the 'A' level tradition. Most would blame it on Leavis: there is an emphasis on practical criticism, and many 'A' level exam papers carry unseens for critical appreciation. But provided the student is made aware of the underpinning of these implicit positions and assumptions, is this not the most practical way to proceed? For here we come to the question of time and evaluation. It is the universities themselves who have made 'A' level the nexus of value. If you want to read English you have to be especially skilled at doing the tests set at 'A' level. To acquire those skills you need a certain length of time. Focussing on certain key texts is the obvious way to organise that time.

Here I come to my final point. I want to identify what has come across to me most strongly at this conference, and through my recent reading around these topics. I readily admit that there is an implicit and perhaps hidden orthodoxy at 'A' level, which narrows and restricts. But what is being proposed now in English studies is the replacement of one orthodoxy with another, one perhaps more narrowing and reductive as applied at 'A' level than that which currently prevails.

The old Leavisite humanist tradition is in my view still defensible in a number of ways, and not least of those is that it is in practice capable of extension and pluralism of approach. Much has been made of Leavis' laying down of the great novel tradition—but I don't think that that ever stopped Charlotte Brontë being read, or indeed being read in ways different from the way Leavis would have read it; whereas I have heard it suggested at this conference that English departments should simply abandon the teaching of the nineteenth-century realist novel. All sorts of other approaches, readings and texts remain available and central in the 'old' approach. In terms of 'A'

level, what the emphasis on the text does is at least to leave the way open for a multiplicity of approaches which certainly need to be available in some form to the student. And yes—at the heart of that does lie individual response. In many cases 'A' level is a student's first serious contact with literature (and I don't mean Literature), and an individual response to a first reading is central to the activity of reading; it's a private activity! Confidence in relation to the work springs initially from an encouragement of that response. Nor need that emphasis rule out the questioning that theorists desire. And let me remind you that there are texts and readers outside the academy—lots and lots of them—and that one of the things that readers do is encounter immediately recognisable shared feelings and ideas in texts, whether academics deconstruct them or not. And if this response of the ordinary reader is socially constructed—so is the response of the cultural materialist critic.

But the new orthodoxy, or rather competing orthodoxies, are of course determinedly anti-pluralist. It has been encouraging to hear at this conference practical suggestions for a number of entry points to historicism within a taught course of English, as it has to hear comments about the crossing of boundaries which takes place within feminist criticism. But far more aggressive and monolithic stances have been taken by various theorists: David Craig and Michael Egan say: 'We call our approach historicist in order to mark it off from other ways of reading imaginative literature, yet recognise by implication we are also laying claim to the entire practice of modern literary criticism' ('Historicist Criticism', in *Re-reading English*, *op. cit.*). Later they assert 'the more historically accurate a piece of imaginative writing is the better it is likely to be. And the better it is aesthetically the more historically accurate it is likely to be.' Such a narrow and imperialist approach would in practice at 'A' level lead to learned orthodoxies of approach which would be incapable of elasticity according to the individual; or it would lead to the disappearance of English 'A' level altogether. Indeed this would seem to be the logical move for such theorists. I look forward to hearing that view argued where it matters—in relation to that huge mass of still silent voices who don't number amongst the 30% of candidates to achieve the required English entry grades for HE, or who indeed don't number amongst the candidates at all.

## ● **RADICAL PHILOSOPHY READER**

*Edited by Roy Edgley and Richard Osborne*

*Lucid, independent and polemical, this collection of essays by contributors to Radical Philosophy demonstrates a commitment to questions of ethics, truth and scientificity. Subjects covered include the work of individual philosophers, such as Kant, Hegel and Adorno; the realist position in the philosophy of science, morality and politics; and the relations between philosophy and gender. A group of sparkling Contributions deconstructs fashionable trends in discourse theory, post-structuralism and neo-conservatism.*

### Contributors:

*Martha Barber • D C Wood • Chris Arthur • Jacques Rancière • John Mayhew • Roy Edgley • Ted Benton • Sean Sayers • Richard Norman • John Edgar • Jean Grondin • Alison Assiter • Terry Skilling • Jonathan Roe • Peter Dovere • Andrew Bailey • Joe McCauley • Richard Osborne*

Hardback £20.00 • Paperback £5.95

*If you would like to receive our complete catalogue please write to:*  
Promotions Manager  
Verso  
15 Creek Street  
London W1V 5LF

**VERS**