

## What Becomes of the Uncanonical?

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### 1 Canons as Cultural Centres

A canon is an assemblage of distinct but similar items. A canon with one member is unimaginable. So perhaps is a canon that includes a thousand items. But it is not possible to set a numerical limit. More important is the recognition that there must be a limit. Everything in a given category cannot be part of the canon. In other words, canons are the product of distinction. The criteria against which items are judged vary considerably: they may be judged especially sacred, or authoritative, or simply of very high literary quality. From the outside we might consider them to be items in which considerable cultural capital has been invested, but those who create and use canons see things differently. Crucially the existence of a canon implies the existence of entities of broadly the same kind that are not members of the canon – the excluded, the not-selected, and the uncanonical – hence my title. Canons are all about distinction.

Canons direct attention to their boundaries. Many papers in this volume discuss the boundaries of particular canons. But it is also possible to focus on the relationships between the component parts of a canon. One such relationship is similarity. All tragedies have, roughly speaking, the same structure, as do all orations. The standardization of Mesopotamian literature in Akkadian established common principles of a different kind. There are also relations of interconnection. The books of the Pentateuch and the Prophets can collectively be read as a history of Israel from the creation to the Persian period. A given set of orations might be regarded as providing a sufficient set from which to teach Greek rhetoric. The books of the Christian Old and New Testaments together formed the basis for more systematic theological discourse, even if none were composed with that end in mind. Canons are more than the sum of their parts.

A canon suggests a map of a cultural system. The textual production of Hellenistic and Roman Egypt expressed, in genre and language and script, some of the social and political geography of the region.<sup>1</sup> More generally a

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<sup>1</sup> See Agut-Labordère in this volume.

canon can be considered as a bounded cluster of entities at the centre of a range of discursive and ritual practices. Canons function as centres in a range of ways. Canons may become points of reference, or standards of comparison. Canons attract all sorts of secondary texts, among them midrashim and scholia, commentaries and parodies.

Canons have often been contested centres. Marcion of Sinope in the 2nd century CE attempted to establish a Christian canon consisting of just one gospel (an abbreviated version of that of Luke) and ten Pauline epistles. The eventual New Testament canon was formed by stigmatising him as a heretic, as well as by positive approbation of additional books in a series of church councils. Different Christian and Jewish traditions today are distinguished (in part) by which books they include in their canons. Rejected books may be deemed heretical, or simply deuterocanonical or apocryphal. Once again, the uncanonical is an essential part of the cultural landscape created by canonisation processes.

Canonisation has something in common with classicisation and the creation of literatures.<sup>2</sup> Classics also possess accumulated cultural capital, attract commentaries and critiques, but the term often focuses on a single work such as the works of Homer.<sup>3</sup> The term “literature” denotes an assemblage of similar texts, distinguished from others on one criterion or another, typically a mixture of style, moral and aesthetic value. Some literatures were consciously assembled and curated, as was the case in the royal libraries of Assyria,<sup>4</sup> and the first Latin poetry at Rome.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps it is common for cultures in which texts are important to be structured in this way viz. around a central cluster of special texts, distinguished both from those that did not qualify, and from secondary texts that affirm the canonical or classical or literary status of the chose group by engaging in exegesis, imitation or commentary.

Canon formation is one response to an existing body of texts, but there are others. Because all these responses are evaluative, they can only be conducted retrospectively.<sup>6</sup> Encyclopaedism is one response, and Varro’s *Antiquities* is often cited as an early example.<sup>7</sup> Epitomes, libraries and curricula all also organise knowledge without necessarily defining a canon.<sup>8</sup> In classical antiquity we see all these responses beginning in the fourth and third centuries BC and they continued at intervals well into the Byzantine and western Middle

2 Porter 2006; Guillory 1993; Lande and Feeney 2021.

3 See Papadopoulos in this volume.

4 See Young in this volume.

5 Feeney 2016.

6 See Papadopoulos in this volume.

7 On Varro, see Rolle in this volume. On encyclopaedism see König and Woolf 2013.

8 König and Whitmarsh 2007.

Ages. Each episode of reflection had the potential of reshaping canons and bodies of knowledge, but what was lost in one episode was rarely available to be reinstated in later ones. The effect of successive moments of selection was a thinning of the body of texts.

Are canons ubiquitous? This volume examines societies and cultures that do have something like a canon. It would be interesting to compare them with cultural systems organized in different ways. Several papers in the volume explore cognate uses of the term canon especially the idea of a canon as a model, or standard.<sup>9</sup> Those kinds of standards can also be used to regulate and structure cultural production. Some ancient architectures made use of proportions derived from these discussions, and some sculptural traditions used particular models. Perhaps it is not surprising that the idea of canon works best in relation to assemblages of texts. When we consider how images or ritual and routine performances are integrated into cultural systems, the idea of a canon may prove less useful. For now, however, it offers one way to explore the way knowledge and cultural artefacts were ordered by those who created and used them.

## 2 Canons and People

Canonisation processes are grounded in specific social formations. Almost every contribution to this volume considers the social context of canons and the agency of the humans who made and used them. Typically, discussions began from authority.<sup>10</sup> But the relationship between cultural and social authority turns out to be more complex than at first it seems. Christian traditions emphasise the decision making of church councils, with or without divine guidance, yet it is clear that the broad outlines of the New Testament were settled in the second and third centuries CE. Heresiologists like Irenaeus and Justin Martyr took strong positions, but often seem to have been justifying an existing selection of texts that are already the most often cited by church fathers. The complex story of how some tragedians and just a few of their tragedies were distinguished from the rest involved bottom-up initiatives, as well as the work of Lyncurgus, Alexandrine and Constantinopolitan librarians and school teachers.<sup>11</sup> Probably we would observe equally complex relationships if we knew more about the selection processes which generated other canons.

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9 See Papadopoulos, Versluys, Agut-Labordère, Gonzalez, and Bricault in this volume.

10 See Versluys, Gonzalez, and Bricault in this volume.

11 See Lardinois, and Marx in this volume.

At the heart of this we see a recursive process whereby canons derived their authority from the social power of those who selected them, while those selectors and their patrons increased their social authority by association with a canon of texts.

Canons might nevertheless be used to confer authority on other social groups. Mastery of the classics distinguished several governing classes in history, from the *pepaideumenoí* of the Hellenistic and Roman eastern Mediterranean to the Chinese mandarinates. New dynasties signalled their power by reshaping canons, as the First Emperor of Qin is said to have done when organizing the burning of Confucian texts or as Augustus attempted to do by patronizing a set of new literary creations in Latin. The brute politics of canon formation force us to qualify Assmann's proposition that the canon is the *voluntary* memory of a society. What had been decanonised or excluded was rarely available for members of a society to choose. Canons and curricula had a role in socialization.

Canons were not, however, always as mutable as authorities wished. Augustan Rome provides a good example. Horace's programme for a poetic canon, laid out in his *Letter to Augustus*, did include Virgil's epic, which effectively eclipsed the *Annals* of Ennius on which Cicero and his generation had been raised and other earlier epics. Ennius' poem now survives only in fragments. But Horace's other star, Varius, completely failed to make it into the literary canon. Religious innovation provides a helpful parallel. Attempts to remove some late Hellenistic elements from Jewish sacred canons failed. The influence of texts such as the Book of Jubilees and the Book of Enoch was long-lasting even if they did not find their way into either the Hebrew or Christian Bibles. Social, political and linguistic fragmentation created families of canons that might be thought of as cousins.

Canons might also be bound up with local authority. Textual communities grew up in monasteries, around libraries and in centres of teaching.<sup>12</sup> As well as interpreting texts and generating new secondary ones, these communities played a part in the vital documentation, curation, conservation and recopying of works. There was considerable variation in how this happened. Centralized communities like that around the royal libraries of Assyria may be contrasted with dispersed communities like those led by the rabbis of the diaspora and by Christian bishops forming their consensus by letters and occasional councils. Quite likely it was a dispersal of authority that 'closed' many canons simply because revision was so much more difficult when texts, teachers and readers were scattered. This might help explain why the canon of Latin literature

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12 Stock 1983.

remained for centuries composed of works that had become canonical in the late Republic and the principate of Augustus.

### 3 Canons in History

A canon has a fictive eternity. It is never explicitly formulated as contingent, temporary, or of merely strategic importance. Yet, as most contributions to this volume show, canons take a while to come into being, and are often subject to successive revisions before they pass away altogether. The fictive eternity of canons is better seen as a means by which each was declared central within a given cultural system. A permanent canon asserted the permanence of the criterion by which it was selected and claimed enduring authority for the social groups associated with it. We are dealing with ideology.<sup>13</sup>

The concept of a canon was originally theological. The creation of canons based on literary rather than religious criteria, can be understood in terms of the secularization of cultural authority and the establishment of modern (vernacular) classics. If the notion of canon was created first by Christian heresiology and then by modernizing discourses in Europe, we should wonder how effective it may be as a generalizing tool of analysis. Once again we are returned to the question of whether all cultural systems are centralised in this way.

Canonisation does, however, have a history. Several papers make reference to Karl Jaspers' idea of an Axial Age and others to the early empires that (for Jaspers) followed it.<sup>14</sup> An alternative approach might be in terms of the history of the technologies by which texts were created, curated and reproduced. The starting point would be the Bronze Age when the first writing systems and texts were created, and particularly late Bronze Age cultures which had to deal with a body of existing texts. Not all writing media lend themselves equally well to the processes of selection, assemblage and reproduction. There is a difference between a canon inscribed on temple walls in hieroglyphs and one produced and reproduced on clay tablets or papyri. Reproducibility of texts (and images) is central to the arguments of David Wengrow about what he calls the first age of mechanical reproduction, referring to the Bronze Age civilizations of the Ancient Near East.<sup>15</sup> Royal libraries and temples are the most likely locations

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13 See Versluys in this volume.

14 On the Axial Age, see Versluys, and Papadopoulos in this volume. On Imperial context of canon formation, see Agut-Labordère, Young, and Gonzalez in this volume.

15 Wengrow 2014.

for the first efforts at distinguishing different kinds of text. Yet in Athens there is not much sign of it before the 4th century BCE.<sup>16</sup>

Canons clearly played a part in some identity formation throughout history. Several papers suggest that this was most striking for minorities within imperial states. Links have been suggested between emerging literatures and subaltern groups, such as the Jews within the Achaemenid Empire or the Greeks under Rome.<sup>17</sup> Analogies with postcolonial literatures are easy to discern. Yet perhaps canons were as important in helping ruling minorities elaborate a sense of their cultural distinction. This might be true of the efforts of some Hellenistic kings to promote libraries and scholarship, and also of the Roman invention of a Latin literature at around the time they took control of the Mediterranean.<sup>18</sup>

#### 4 The Uncanonical

Canons imply their opposite. If canonisation is a matter of selection, we should also ask what happened to what was discarded in the selection process. Christian theologians in some traditions labelled certain books deuterocanonical, meaning they had some value, but were not to be treated as authoritative in argument nor made the object of liturgical practice. The later part of the stories of Daniel and Esther remained quite well known, even by groups who did not include them in their Old Testaments. Other kinds of works were perhaps designedly secondary from the start. Post-Virgilian epic, for instance, did not seem designed to displace the *Aeneid* and depended to some extent on a good knowledge of it.<sup>19</sup> Works like these sustained the centrality of canonical works through their tacit acknowledgement of the primary nature of the works to which they referred.

Canon formation also led to the destruction of other texts. There are instances of the deliberate destruction of heretical texts by Christian authorities, and the Great Persecution was marked by attempts to gather and destroy Christian scriptures. But most texts perished in other ways. The term epistemicide has been coined to describe the process by which Roman expansion entailed the erasure of alternative memory traditions.<sup>20</sup> The literatures of conquered populations such as the Carthaginians were dispersed and devalued.

16 See Lardinois in this volume.

17 See Gonzalez in this volume; Schwartz 2001; Swain 1996; Whitmarsh 2001.

18 Feeney 2016.

19 Hardie 1993; Hinds 1998.

20 Padilla Peralta 2020.

They were not curated in libraries, nor were they enshrined in curricula. Few works in languages other than Greek or Latin were cited by authors working in those languages. The authority of alternative traditions was rejected. In provincial societies social success depended on buying into new knowledge regimes. On occasion these regimes left small spaces for alternative literatures, subaltern canons. Demotic literature provides one example, Babylonian astronomy another, Talmudic scholarship a third.

Canons ensured the survival of some texts at the expense of others. Libraries played a part in this, ensuring the storage of multiple copies and probably in some cases high quality texts of popular books.<sup>21</sup> At least some of the literature that survives from Greek and Latin antiquity was preserved in libraries, like the volume of Euripidean tragedies recovered from Byzantine Thessalonica. But the scale and professionalism of ancient libraries has often been overestimated.<sup>22</sup> It was recopying that was vital. Papyrus scrolls rarely survive for two centuries except in exceptional circumstances. Most non-canonical literature presumably perished simply because no group was interested enough in recopying it. So the Book of Jubilees, composed in Hebrew and known through Greek and Latin translation by many Jewish and Christian communities in the first centuries AD, has survived only in a Ge'ez version because only in Ethiopia was it treated as canonical. Much medical and scientific writing in Greek was not recopied, but has survived in Arabic translation thanks to translations carried out for the Abbasid rulers by some of their Christian subjects.<sup>23</sup> When a work featured on a curriculum it was necessarily recopied many times: it is to this we owe, for example, the surviving corpora of selected Greek orations.<sup>24</sup> Likewise the survival of so much Terence, Cicero and Virgil owes a good deal to its importance in western educational systems. Even works that survived in a few copies until late antiquity, like Ennius' *Annals* and Varro's *Antiquities*, disappeared through lack of recopying in the centuries that followed. Latin literature as a whole came close to being lost entirely during the centuries when only Christian texts were recopied.<sup>25</sup>

Canons were particularly vulnerable to changes in language and writing technology. Much Greek literature survived for centuries in Byzantium, but not in areas under Arab control (except for what was translated). Vast Mesopotamian literatures were lost for millennia when Aramaic supplanted Akkadian and cuneiform culture was replaced by writing on papyrus and

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21 König, Oikonomopolou, and Woolf 2013; Baratin and Jacob 1996.

22 Dix 1994; Bagnall 2002.

23 Gutas 1998.

24 See Lardinois as well as de Jonge in this volume.

25 Reynolds and Wilson 1974.

parchment.<sup>26</sup> There were similar losses in the transition from hieroglyphic to hieratic and demotic writing systems in Egypt.

Canonisation was changed fundamentally with the invention of printing and of more durable media. Non-canonical works, heretical ones and works demoted from canons in the course of their revision now survived in large numbers. Occasionally some were preserved even by groups attempting to suppress them, as was the case with the Inquisition or the libraries of forbidden books in the Soviet Union. From the 19th century the work of archaeologists and linguists has allowed the recovery of a few lost canons, notably in Egypt and the Near East. It is difficult now to imagine texts being lost forever. Yet until modern times the history of canons has been marked by quite sudden moments of loss and epistemicide. Mostly what was lost has proved irrecoverable. The history of civilization is a history of erasures as well as of accumulated cultural capital.

Canons thus form part of a discontinuous history of cultures. As the centres of temporary configurations of texts and cultures, canons helped organized creativity. In that sense they did provide anchors for innovation. But these anchors were less secure than the ideology that surrounded them claimed, and many of our classics have become detached from their anchors. Canons were vulnerable to dramatic changes, whether brought by new writing systems or new regimes, or simply to the emergence of new criteria of discrimination. Neglect and disinterest were fatal in a world without permanent media of storage. Canons were created by acts of selection, and they perished in the same way. Their history is entangled with the history of the discarded, the rejected and the devalued, that is with all versions of the uncanonical.

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26 Brown 2008; Radner and Robson 2011.



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