

# The classical plays of tony harrison



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

'Whether one thinks of the canon as objectionable because formed at random or to serve some interests at the expense of others, or whether one supposes that the contents of canons are providentially chosen, there can be no doubt that we have not found ways of ordering our thoughts about the history of literature and art without recourse to them. ' (Kermode, p. 20). In what ways do you believe Tony Harrison to be affected by the canon. Use analyses of the poem to illustrate your answer. There are many indications within the poetry of Tony Harrison that he considers his work within the context of the canon.

The repeated referencing of other poets<sup>1</sup> and conscious emulation of the form of other poems ('v. ' is an adaptation of Gray's 'Elegy on a Country Churchyard' ) suggest that Harrison's work is heavily influenced by other poets, despite his seemingly original style. The way that he uses his referencing is not straightforward, however; it could be suggested that the more traditional references are ironic, as Harrison contrasts his brash modern style with the more 'genteel' feel of the poets in the canon.

The continual allusions to the opposition his poetry has faced, and his subsequent under confidence, can have said to have led to a need for the reassurance of the canon: using the models of other poets to validate the worth of his own poetry. Alternatively, Harrison may feel that the only way to express the voice he wishes to project, that of a working class northern man with authority is by using the " enemy's weapons" <sup>2</sup>, and establishing a scholastic side to his work, in order to be taken seriously by the 'cultural elite'.

It has been argued that Harrison uses other people's words and forms to justify his own work; that his feeling of social inferiority reveals itself as an insecurity in his poetry<sup>3</sup>. Whereas in Gray's 'Elegy' the last stanza is a contemplation upon the life of the poet, filled with a sense of repose, Harrison ends his epic poem 'v. ' still striving to justify his choice to become a poet.

By placing it as a viable occupation alongside other more manual lifestyles, such as the production of " the beef, the beer, the bread", <sup>4</sup> and anticipating possible reactions: " How poems can grow from (beat you to it! ) SHIT" <sup>5</sup>, Harrison tries to protect himself from derision. Critics relate the closing stanzas of " Elegy on a Country Churchyard" to Gray's fears about his poetic destiny. Damien Grant states " The poet writes conscious of his own possible doom, to be 'preserved beneath deep permaverse' like any other victim of evolution" <sup>6</sup>, but he is considering Harrison's 'epitaph'.

By using a recognised canonical poet such as Gray, Harrison has a model to explore his feelings about his own destiny, investigating his own experiences regarding death: " taking a short cut home through the graves here/ they reassert the glory of their team/ by spraying words on tombstones, pissed on beer" <sup>7</sup>, within a controlled and set form. The way that Harrison himself views the canon determines his reaction, and therefore his poetry. The canon could be construed as an enabling, useful force, giving Harrison ideas and structures to work with<sup>8</sup>, and Harrison himself admits to the influence of classical authors, such as Milton<sup>9</sup>.

Altieri notes that " contemporary writers... need to address specific canonical works and engage the same degree of emotional and intellectual energy that canonical works provide" 10, and Harrison seems to have taken up this mantle, engaging it with his desire to keep poetry relevant to his experience and therefore, to him, alive. Harrison is not trying to be one of the classical authors; he is trying to respond to them in a way that is different but not necessarily inferior<sup>11</sup>. Indeed, Kermode agrees that " the best commentary on any verse is another verse, possibly placed very far away from it".

Harrison accepts that he writes from a different world perspective than many of the 'canonical' authors, but to illustrate the similarities he uses similar forms and quotes them, either to show his awareness of their work or his reaction to it. " Mute ingloriousness" 13, for instance, explores the theme of the difficulties of articulation, and is a direct quote from Gray. Harrison uses it to illustrate the difficulties he has found in developing his own poetic voice. Damien Grant draws comparisons between the symbolism in " v" and erotic images drawn by other, more traditionally 'established' poets.

The skinhead's addition of a " middle slit to one daubed v" 14 is not an obscenity, it can be argued, but merely Harrison joining a long line of established authors invoking " the erotic image... to serve public purposes".<sup>15</sup> Another way of viewing the canon is that of " codified by a cultural elite, with power to influence the way the country thinks across a broad range of issues".<sup>16</sup> If the canon reflects simply a cultural emphasis, then Harrison should be considered part of that canon, as he is widely taught and studied, to a high level.

If, however, the canon is set by the 'cultural elite', then Harrison's use of some of the more standard forms and obscure classical references may be an attempt to be accepted by this elite, in order to propagate his own cultural emphasis and make his own stance widely known and acceptable. " Harrison is provoked by the persecution of an RP English teacher to fight back with the enemy's weapons, on the enemy's own ground" 18; " So right, ye buggers, then! We'll occupy/ your lousy leasehold Poetry". 19 Harrison wishes for his voice to be heard, and is not afraid of using techniques supposedly alien to his class to achieve this.

Harrison takes canonical influences and makes them seemingly more accessible to a wider cross section of society, introducing more modern themes such as the problems of the Thatcher era. This is in part to make poetry more relevant and acceptable to those he seeks the approval of the most: the uneducated and the cynical, such as his parents. Catherine Packham suggests that the canon may seem oppressive and intimidating to Harrison; his feeling of insecurity may have led him to feel that all of the timeless themes that he wishes to cover have been explored extensively, by people who are better educated and suitable to be 'poets'<sup>20</sup>.

Harrison's poetry is full of the issue of self doubt and self worth: " Poetry's the speech of kings. You're one of those/ Shakespeare gives the comic bits to: prose! " 21 , and seems at times to want to distance his writing from the recognisable canon to show a progression of attitudes and innovation, and perhaps attempting to demonstrate that he is not competing with the established canon. This can be seen in the fact that of the many " versus" couplings in 'v. , a major one is that of Harrison's version versus Gray's. The

very title of another poem, " On Not Being Milton", shows that Harrison is aware of the canon and embraces his differences to it, but the poem itself, with its lyricism and innovative use of language in fact recalls the epic poetry of Milton himself; this is an irony that the poet seems to enjoy. Harrison obviously appreciates the fine crafting of established authors, and wishes to learn from them, whilst staying true to his earthy subject matter.

The touch of some of the word handling may hint at Miltonesque heights, but the subject matter of a man returning to his roots (" my growing black enough to fit my boots" 22) and the outsider becoming a hero (Tidd the Cato Street Conspirator), with his " Sir, I Ham a Very Bad Hand at Righting" 23 indicates that Harrison believes that education is not everything; this, in a poem littered with reference to historical figures and epic literature, hints at play. The theme of articulation is prevalent<sup>24</sup>: Harrison is concerned with the way things are said, and who they are said by, as he is aware of the impact that other works have had upon him.

It would be impossible to ascertain exactly what sway the canon has had upon Harrison's poetry: nevertheless, if we are to judge his work within the context of the canon, then we must consider his literary intentions. We must ask whether his intentions are to be considered within the same school of those that he references and quotes so copiously, or if in fact these references were designed to show the vast differences between their worlds. I believe Harrison to be stuck in between the two worlds, but supremely in command.

He is aware that to gain a recognition as a poet, certain rules must be followed; and he adapts these rules to suit his own purposes. Harrison incorporates enough traditional ideas and forms not his work to stay credible, but he fills his poetry with subjects and contexts unfamiliar to the 'cultural elite'. These are the subjects and contexts that he wishes to bring into the public domain and make issues of, and by taking on the timeless element of the canonical works, Harrison ensures that he pushes poetry forward: into unfamiliar territory, and to unfamiliar readers.