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# Gender and the contemporary educational canon in the UK

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**ABSTRACT**
This paper presents an analysis of the gender of the authors and the main characters of the set texts for English examinations taken at age 16 in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. It presents an argument for why representation within the canon is important and places this within the context of recent educational reform in England and Scotland. The analysis demonstrates that texts by female authors are in a minority, sometimes in the extreme, and when the gender of the main character is taken into account, there is an even greater imbalance. The reasons behind this, even after a time of major educational reform, are explored and the constraints of the market are suggested as reasons why greater risks were not taken.

**KEYWORDS**: set texts, examinations, gender, canonical literature.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of the 'hidden curriculum' is a Marxist critical view which sees it "as the inculcation of values, political socialization, training in obedience and docility, the perpetuation of traditional class structure -functions that may be characterized generally as social control" (Vallance, 1974: 5). Feminist theorists have extended the concept of the 'hidden' (Deem, 1978: 46) or 'covert' curriculum (Riddell, 1992: 8) to consider the ways in which gendered behaviour and expectations are embedded within the curriculum that is taught in schools (see also Deem, 2012). One piece of evidence for this covert curriculum is the gendered ways in which students make subject choices at 14 and 16 for external examination in England, such as the 80–20 percentage split in favour of boys in the students

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who take Physics A-level[1]—a situation which has changed little in the last 25 years (Oates, 2016).

The assumption is that a gendered curriculum is 'covert', and that curricula in general are, in the 21st century, egalitarian. This paper is driven by a discovery that in a subject which is often considered to be particularly feminised—English literature (Daly, 2000; Thomas, 2006)—the curriculum across the UK is actually very far from being gender-balanced. In this paper I will present an analysis of the gender of authors and protagonists in the texts prescribed for examination at age 16 in each of the countries of the UK. The results are surprising. Although literature is no longer the preserve of 'dead white males', there are places where it would be hard to see this from the set texts studied at age 16. It is hard to avoid seeing this as a case in which sexism "is found in the content of some disciplines, which emphasize male rather than female endeavour" (Deem, 1978: 46). As well as highlighting this evidence of a 'covert curriculum', I will suggest two mechanisms which inhibit change towards a list of set texts that is more reflective of those who study it; that is to say, inertia and the demands of the market. It is also true that for there to be an impetus towards such a change, the inequity must first be identified (as demonstrated by the changes to the proportion of female literary reviewers which are identifiable in VIDA's yearly counts [www.vidaweb.org]), which this analysis aims to do.

## 2. EDUCATIONAL CANONISATION

Canonical literature can be defined in many ways, but for the majority of people, who do not study literature beyond the age of 16,[2] the canon is composed of the texts which they read or at least encountered in school, which they were told were worthy of study. For many this does include Jane Austen and Charles Dickens, and will certainly incorporate William Shakespeare, but otherwise may be a haphazard selection of texts. For many who received their schooling over the last twenty years in England *Of Mice and Men* will be canonical.

Defining the canon has been a longstanding project of critics and English scholars. For Leavis the 'Great Tradition' was composed of just four authors, two of whom were women: Jane Austen, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy and Henry James (1948). Such balance is not usually seen in lists of canonical texts. Miernik notes that the selection of a canon is "arbitrary and often ideologically charged on the one hand; on the other, it is placed in a privileged position and often is approached with reverence" (2015: 86). This leaves us with a longstanding literary canon of white middle-class men, defended on the grounds of quality. Harold Bloom in his *The Western Canon* insists on aesthetic value being the only criterion for the canon, and criticises the "academic rabble that seeks to connect the study of literature with the quest for social change" (1990: 27–28).

 
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John Guillory has argued that "evaluative judgments are the necessary but not sufficient conditions for the process of canon formation" (1993: vii). Canonical literature is formed not by the mass of thoughtful judgement, but by the "institutional forms of syllabus and curriculum" (Guillory, 1993: vii), reproduced and created by educational norms which may be stimulated by many other things than simply "the best which has been thought and said" (Arnold, 2006: 46). Guillory further argues that "it is only by understanding the social function and institutional protocols of the school that we will understand how works are preserved, reproduced and disseminated over successive generations and centuries" (1993: vii). While the 'school' to which he refers is the American college, the same holds true of the secondary educational canon, though it is not only the institutional protocols of the school that matter, but those of the government and those of the Awarding Bodies who set the texts lists that become the effective canon for education in the UK. Indeed, in three of the countries of the UK the institutional process of canonisation is incorporated by these Awarding Bodies into a much more unified process than in the US. Even where there are multiple institutions, there can be considerable congruence between their set text lists, as we will see below.

The introduction of new texts into institutional canons can be effected. The 'canon-opening' movement of the late 1970s (see for example Fiedler, 1981) broadly holds the position that canon opening "combats Western epistemic violence; the open canon lets those who have been silenced speak" (McGowan, 2014: xii). To 'open' the canon is to deliberately and intentionally incorporate texts from underrepresented groups into curricula and syllabuses to ensure their canonisation through institutional reproduction. In terms of secondary school there is a recognition that teachers require support—both in terms of ideas for texts and resources for teaching—to open the canon in this way, demonstrated by the recent publication of *Contemporary Black British Writing*, a set of materials to support A-level study of English, by Edexcel (2017). Other projects have sought to widen knowledge of historical texts, thus making them available for potential inclusion in lists of the canonical, such as the Virago publishing venture, which publishes 'modern classics'—that is to say, texts from the 19th and 20th centuries—by women. As Hopkins (2009: 60) notes, such projects deny "the necessity of a hierarchy of literary value based on only one kind of reading or pleasure" by establishing a female tradition in literature which does not just celebrate 'the great' but also the illumination of women's lives and the female experience. Change can also be effected through the efforts of individuals who deliberately rewrite curricula, through campaigns such as 'Reading While White', or through groups of students demanding change, such as the petitions launched at Yale and Seattle Universities in 2016 to introduce balance into a curriculum of 'dead white males' (College Fix, 2016). Once texts are taught, they are available for institutional reproduction of the sort described by Guillory.

Beside their influence over our understanding of the canon, the set text lists dominate the English literature experience of all teens for at least two years. For both reasons, the issue of representation within them is a significant one. Lillian Robinson, in one of the early

 
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feminist challenges to the canon, wrote that the "epistemological assumptions underlying the search for a more fully representative literature are strictly empiricist: by including the perspective of women (who are, after all, half-the-population), we will 'know more' about the culture as it actually was" (1983: 89). Guillory perceives the drive for representation within the canon as a misplaced allegory for the struggle for representation within the political sphere; he argues that the "social effects of a representative canon are so difficult to determine" (1993: 8) that it is simply not worth the bother. This is, however, not strictly true: we do know the effects of having 'people like me' represented in the topics children study in school. A 2010 law in Arizona banned courses that, among other things, promoted ethnic solidarity. As a result, Mexican-American Studies courses became illegal, and in particular a well-known course in the Tucson Unified School District was closed down. Yet, a study which used achievement data from Arizona from 2008–2011 demonstrated that taking Mexican-American Studies courses was strongly associated with an increased likelihood not only of passing the Arizona standardised test in 10$^{th}$ grade but also of graduating from high school, particularly among Mexican-American students, who tended to come from lower prior attainment, lower socio-economic backgrounds, and a number of other factors which would predispose them to lower attainment (Cabrera, Milem, Jaquette & Marx, 2014). A representative curriculum seems to increase attainment amongst those who see themselves represented.

No such problem with attainment is evident with girls in English in the UK, and this raises the issue of 'so what' with relation to women's representation within set texts. I can only say that it is a matter of principle, and of social justice. There is an argument that the key texts of the canon are written by 'dead white males', and that without their study, a study of English literature is incomplete. Showalter has argued, tongue-in-cheek, that female undergraduates of English literature are made to study so many male-authored and male-centric texts that they learn to think with "intellectual neutrality […] in fact, how to think like a man" (1971: 855).

However, children at 16 are not studying the whole of English literature; they are studying a small number of texts which should in theory represent a range of experience, in order to widen their understanding of the world and to provide them with a set of good texts upon which to practice their textual analytical skills. Despite girls' already good achievement, the question of representation is important: without it there is the recreation of both a standard of literature and a world of experience which privileges the male experience and presents it as the only experience which matters. As Spender writes, "fundamental to patriarchy is the invisibility of women, the unreal nature of women's experiences, the absence of women as a force to be reckoned with" (1982: 11). The educational canon teaches students "that the masculine viewpoint is normative, and the feminine viewpoint divergent" (Showalter, 1971: 856). This is good neither for girls nor for boys. Higginbotham (1990) points out one result of such a curriculum: when university lecturers introduce additional

 
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lectures on women, particularly on women of colour, or on white working-class women, the students think that the lecture is departing from the core curriculum—the things they 'need to know'. This illustrates the need not only for gender parity, but also for representation of BAME writers and experience, and writers of various social classes and sexual orientations within the English curriculum.

A recent survey conducted on behalf of the Royal Society of Literature in the UK (RSL, 2017) asked a nationally representative sample of 1,998 adults across Great Britain (excluding Northern Ireland) to name a writer that they would consider to be a writer of literature. Respondents named 400 different authors, living and dead; only 31% of them were female (and 91% of them were white). J. K. Rowling was the most mentioned woman, named by 132; without her the picture would look rather bleaker for the recognisability of women in literature. In 21st century Britain, in which equality of men and women is a legally recognised principle, it would seem difficult to disagree that women, the topic of this paper, should be equally included in the curriculum. Among other things, Miernik suggests that literary canons "inform readers of certain tendencies among those who establish them, and the times in which the canons were formed" (2015: 86). If this is the case, then we must be sure that we are happy to stand behind the educational canons of our own time and schools.

A focus on and an unequal valuing of the male voice are not confined to the school. Recent analysis has indicated that books about women are unlikely to win literary awards; when women win those awards it tends to be for writing as or about a man, a tendency which increases with the prestige of the prize (Griffith, 2015). In a less elevated space, Wikipedia is likely to classify men as 'novelists' but women as 'female novelists' (Miernik, 2015). A recent resurgence of feminism in the UK has underlined the lack of gender equity that still exists (Bates, 2015; Mackay, 2015; Moran, 2012; Philips, 2017); parity should begin with the school curriculum. Lobban, writing in 1975, argued that

> What is needed at this point is not more studies of sexism in British reading schemes. We need new reading schemes which show equal numbers of real females and males participating in the variety of activities and occupations that they do actually participate in, and which question sexual inequality as it exists at present. How much longer are we going to have to wait? (1975: 209)

More than forty years, it seems. Although there has been substantial improvement in the representation of women (and of ethnic minorities) in science and mathematics textbooks (and there is still globally a need for considerable improvement in gender equity, including in curriculum materials according to the UNESCO *Global Education Monitoring Report* [2016]), the texts which form the largest part of the English literature curriculum at secondary school in the UK remain dominated by male writers and the male experience (as shown below), and echoing Lobban, there is a need to say: we need new set texts.

 
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## 3. THE DATA

I have examined the set texts for examinations taken at the age of 16 in each of the four constituent countries of the UK. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, these examinations are the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE); English literature is not compulsory but there are incentives in place to encourage its study such as joint syllabuses with English language (which is compulsory), or extra league table points if students take both Englishes. Take-up of English literature GCSE is a very high proportion of those taking GCSE as a whole (a small percentage of 16-year-olds are not entered for GCSE because of Special Educational Needs or other factors). In Scotland the qualification at 16 is the National 5 (previously Standard Grade) and English is one subject which incorporates language and literature content and which is compulsory. In three of the countries of the UK there is a single body responsible for the certification of qualifications (CCEA in Northern Ireland, WJEC in Wales and SQA in Scotland). In England there are four Awarding Bodies: AQA, Pearson Edexcel, Eduqas (the English brand of WJEC) and OCR, although all four are governed by the same set of criteria issued by the Department for Education and regulated by Ofqual. The study excludes Shakespeare, on the basis that he is an exceptional case, and would skew the results if included; study of his work is compulsory in three of the jurisdictions and in each case a choice of different plays is provided. There is no equivalent female author that could have been included in the specifications.

A number of the qualifications under consideration also have anthologies of poetry written by a variety of authors; I have excluded poetry from the analysis with the exception of Scotland, where one of the texts may consist of a group of poems by a named poet. This decision was taken because a single poem by a woman is not equivalent to an entire novel by a man. Where a collection of poems is a set text, that has been judged equivalent. The analysis is principally a count analysis of male- ('M') versus female-authored ('F') texts. In addition, I have made a judgement as to whether the protagonist is 'male' ('M') or 'female' ('F') for each text,[3] and included this in the analysis. In most cases this is clear-cut. In some, there are arguments to be made: for example, I have assigned *An Inspector Calls* as male because I have taken the Inspector to be the protagonist, but a case could be made for this being a mixed play. Where I have decided that it is not possible to identify a single protagonist I have used 'B' for 'both': this applies to a single text in the data, *Hobson's Choice*.

Findings are given using the categories which are used in the specifications for each country; hence, England's prose texts are divided into pre-1900 and post-1900, whereas in Northern Ireland only the group 'prose texts' is used.

 
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## 4. FINDINGS

### 4.1. England

The regulations governing examination at 16 in England were recently reformed and the new qualifications based on these regulations were first examined in summer 2017. They require study of a pre-1900 novel, and a 20th century drama or prose text (which must be British). Students will study one pre-1900 novel from the list given in Table 1:

| | AQA | EDEXCEL | OCR | EDUQAS | AUTHOR AND MAIN CHARACTER GENDER |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* | • | • | • | • | MM |
| *A Christmas Carol* | • | • | | • | MM |
| *Great Expectations* | • | • | • | | MM |
| *War of the Worlds* | | | • | • | MM |
| *Silas Marner* | | • | | • | FM |
| *Frankenstein* | • | • | | | FM |
| *Jane Eyre* | • | • | • | • | FF |
| *Pride and Prejudice* | • | • | • | • | FF |

**Table 1**. Pre-1900 set texts (England).

The picture for pre-1900 set texts is reasonably positive on the basis of author gender: between the Awarding Bodies there are four texts by male authors and four by female authors. Indeed, if we were to count authors rather than texts, there would be four women and three men, since Dickens is represented twice with *A Christmas Carol* and *Great Expectations*. Even within individual Awarding Bodies there tends to be a roughly equal mix, with Edexcel even having a choice of four texts by women and only three by men. Representation becomes slightly less strong when one considers the protagonist of the novel: only *Jane Eyre* and *Pride and Prejudice* have female protagonists, and it is notable that none of the texts written by men have female protagonists although there would have been suitable alternatives, such as Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbevilles*, which have been studied at school level (though more commonly at A-level in the UK).

Counting the individual set texts options individually, and not combining those given in more than one column, there are 13 text options by male authors (52%) and 12 by women (48%) for pre-1900 study.

Although I have separated 20th century prose (Table 2) and drama (Table 3) texts below, students are required to study only one text from either category:

 
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| | AQA | EDEXCEL | OCR | EDUQAS | AUTHOR AND MAIN CHARACTER GENDER |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Lord of the Flies* | • | • | | • | MM |
| *Animal Farm* | • | • | • | | MM |
| *Pigeon English* | • | | | | MM |
| *Never Let Me Go* | • | | • | • | MF |
| *The Woman in Black* | | • | | • | FM |
| *Anita and Me* | • | • | • | • | FF |
| *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* | | | | • | FF |

**Table 2**. 20th century prose set texts (England).

Of seven prose texts, four are by men and three by women. Similarly, four of the novels feature male protagonists, and three female ones; it is, however, important to note that these do not correlate entirely to author gender. *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro features a female protagonist, while Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black*, despite its title, rests with the character Arthur Kipps. It is also interesting to note that one of the female-author female-protagonist texts, *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* by Jeanette Winterson, is only used by one Awarding Body, Eduqas, which is also the only organisation to have more novels by women than by men to choose from. This also represents the only queer text among the prose choices.

The drama texts show a very different pattern:

| | AQA | EDEXCEL | OCR | EDUQAS | AUTHOR AND MAIN CHARACTER GENDER |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *An Inspector Calls* | • | • | • | • | MM |
| *Blood Brothers* | • | • | | • | MM |
| *History Boys* | • | | | • | MM |
| *DNA* | • | | • | | MM |
| *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time* | • | | | • | MM |
| *Hobson's Choice* | | • | | | MB |
| *Journey's End* | | • | | | MM |
| *My Mother Said I Never Should* | | | • | | FF |
| *Taste of Honey* | • | | | • | FF |

**Table 3**. 20th century drama texts (England).

There is far less overlap with drama texts between different Awarding Bodies: *An Inspector Calls* is the only text common to all four, with *Blood Brothers* on offer from three. This means that there is a correspondingly greater number of texts in total: nine. Of these, just two are by women. These two are also the only two plays which feature female protagonists, although I have also categorised *Hobson's Choice* as 'both'. It is clear that there are not only

 
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two plays in the entirety of British 20th-century drama by women or featuring female protagonists that are suitable for study by 16-year-olds. Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*, for example, is already studied at A-level, and Githa Sowerby's *Rutherford and Son* has clear parallels with *Hobson's Choice* and other early 20th-century plays, and is arguably just as canonical. The absence of a single female dramatist offered by Edexcel is particularly noticeable.

Aggregating the post-1900 text options gives a total of 25 text options by men (71%), and just 10 by women (29%). Just three of these text options by female authors are among the drama texts. The total proportion of text options in England, then, is 38 text options by male authors (63%) and 22 text options by women (37%); that is approximately a ratio of three texts options by men to every two by women.

### 4.2. Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland the English literature GCSE examination requires, in addition to Shakespeare and a poetry anthology, study of one novel, one play (which might also be Shakespeare) and one heritage prose text (CCEA, 2014). It is interesting to note that of the three possible poetry anthologies, the only one attributed to named poets is a study of Seamus Heaney and Thomas Hardy. In fact, only one poem in any of the anthologies, out of a total of 36 poems, is by a woman: *A Narrow Fellow in the Grass*, by Emily Dickinson. The heritage prose text is a free choice by schools, meaning that the set texts cover only novels (Table 4) and plays (Table 5). There is an additional list of heritage drama authors who might replace one of the Shakespeare plays in the controlled assessment—these are all male:

| TEXT | AUTHOR AND MAIN CHARACTER GENDER |
|---|---|
| *Things Fall Apart* | MM |
| *Lord of the Flies* | MM |
| *The Power and the Glory* | MM |
| *Animal Farm* | MM |
| *Of Mice and Men* | MM |
| *To Kill a Mockingbird* | FF |

**Table 4**. Prose set texts (Northern Ireland) (CCEA).

Only one of the set texts on the list of novels is by a woman: *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which is also a book with a female protagonist. The situation gets worse, however, when we consider drama texts:

 
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| TEXT | AUTHOR AND MAIN CHARACTER GENDER |
|---|---|
| *Dancing at Lughnasa* | MM |
| *All My Sons* | MM |
| *Juno and the Paycock* | MM |
| *An Inspector Calls* | MM |
| *Blood Brothers* | MM |

**Table 5**. Drama set texts (excluding Shakespeare) (Northern Ireland) (CCEA).

Not one of the drama texts named by CCEA is by a woman, nor do any of them have female protagonists. Like the English specifications, this qualification is a recently revised one, first taught in September 2014. The overwhelming masculinity of the Northern Irish GCSE English literature is remarkable, and yet more so in the context of a specification which was reissued recently. In total, therefore, even taking into account the poetry anthologies, which I have excluded elsewhere, there are just two texts by women on the whole specification, and one of those is a single poem.

### 4.3. Wales

In the WJEC English literature GCSE, students study one text from 'Different cultures' (Table 6) and either a heritage drama text (from Wales, England or Ireland) and a contemporary prose text, or a contemporary drama text and a literary heritage prose text (similarly from Wales, England or Ireland) (WJEC, 2014):

| TEXT | AUTHOR AND MAIN CHARACTER GENDER |
|---|---|
| *Of Mice and Men* | MM |
| *Chanda's Secrets* | MF |
| *Anita and Me* | FF |
| *To Kill a Mockingbird* | FF |
| *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* | FF |

**Table 6**. 'Different cultures' set texts (Wales) (WJEC).

The list of 'Different cultures' texts is unusual among the set texts examined in this paper: the majority of the authors (three out of five) are female, and even more of the protagonists (four out of five), with Allan Stratton's *Chanda's Secrets* adding a further female main character. There are perhaps different objections to the inclusion of *Anita and Me* as a text 'from a different culture', the inclusion of which is working to 'other' a text which is perhaps most notable for its characterisation of Wolverhampton, a quintessential English Midlands town. Asha Rogers (2015) has written about the impact the frame 'other cultures' has on the way we read texts and the potential consequent limitations on the interpretations that we offer.

 
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The gender balance of the heritage drama texts (Table 7) is similarly equitable; there are only three because of the Shakespeare options which are on offer. Excluding Shakespeare, there are two texts by men, and one by a woman; I have characterised *Hobson's Choice* as having protagonists of both genders, despite the title, so the protagonists are also balanced:

| TEXT | AUTHOR AND MAIN CHARACTER GENDER |
|---|---|
| *Inspector Calls* | MM |
| *Hobson's Choice* | MB |
| *A Taste of Honey* | FF |

**Table 7**. Heritage drama set texts (Welsh / Irish / English) (excluding Shakespeare) (WJEC).

The list of contemporary drama texts (Table 8) is mainly male, but does include a different play written by a woman to the ones we have seen in other specifications. In total, between heritage and contemporary drama, there are five plays by men and three by women; male protagonists feature in half the texts, with three female protagonists and one 'both':

| TEXT | AUTHOR AND MAIN CHARACTER GENDER |
|---|---|
| *The History Boys* | MM |
| *Blood Brothers* | MM |
| *A View From the Bridge* | MM |
| *Be My Baby* | FF |
| *My Mother Said I Never Should* | FF |

**Table 8**. Contemporary drama set texts (WJEC).

The gender representation in the prose texts (Table 9) is much less balanced. Not a single contemporary prose set text is by a woman, and only one features a female protagonist. Within the heritage texts (Table 10) two out of five are by women, and again only one features a female protagonist. Although the set texts for Wales suggest a greater gender balance than elsewhere, there is still work to be done. It is interesting that, just as in England, it appears to be easier to identify heritage texts by women for study than contemporary ones:

| TEXT | AUTHOR AND MAIN CHARACTER GENDER |
|---|---|
| *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* | MM |
| *Heroes* | MM |
| *About a Boy* | MM |
| *Resistance* | MM |
| *Never Let Me Go* | MF |

**Table 9**. Contemporary prose set texts (WJEC).

 
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| TEXT | AUTHOR AND MAIN CHARACTER GENDER |
|---|---|
| *A Christmas Carol* | MM |
| *Lord of the Flies* | MM |
| *Ash on a Young Man's Sleeve* | MM |
| *Silas Marner* | FM |
| *Pride and Prejudice* | FF |

**Table 10**. Heritage prose set texts (Welsh / Irish / English) (WJEC).

### 4.4. Scotland

The study of English literature in Scotland's 'Standard' examinations (those taken age 16) does not depend on the study of set texts, as teachers are free to choose appropriate texts for their classes, and questions for examinations are written to allow them to be answered with a variety of texts. The one exception to this is the 'Scottish texts' list: in 2012 the Scottish government announced that every Scottish child would be expected to study at least one 'Scottish' text from a prescribed list (Table 11).

| TEXT | AUTHOR AND MAIN CHARACTER GENDER |
|---|---|
| *Sailmaker* | MM |
| *The Cone Gatherers* | MM |
| *The Testament of Gideon Mack* | MM |
| *Kidnapped* | MM |
| *Short Stories - Iain Crichton Smith* | M |
| *Poems - Norman McCaig* | M |
| *Poems - Edwin Morgan* | M |
| *Bold Girls* | FF |
| *Tally's Blood* | FF |
| *Short Stories - Anne Donovan* | F |
| *Poems - Carol Ann Duffy* | F |
| *Poems - Jackie Kay* | F |

**Table 11**. 'Scottish texts' (SQA, 2013).

Of the twelve texts, just over half (7) are by men. Of the novels and plays on the list, four feature male protagonists and two female. There are no texts where the gender of the author and the protagonist differ. It is interesting that there are no novels by women on the list. The texts are in the main contemporary (for further analysis see Elliott, 2014) but the one heritage text on this list, *Kidnapped*, by Robert Louis Stevenson, is by a man. The Scottish texts are also unusual in having no overlap with the set texts of the other countries, although Robert Louis Stevenson is represented in the pre-1900 set texts from England with the novella *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (and Carol Ann Duffy was previously a key poet in England).

 
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This lack of overlap is attributable to the texts' 'Scottishness'; Wales, for example, specifically excludes Scottish texts from its British heritage texts (presumably for historical reasons: its specification could be taken in England and Northern Ireland as well as Wales, whereas Scotland has always had separate qualifications).

At the time of the announcement of the Scottish texts, Liz Lochhead, then Scotland's Makar, or Poet Laureate, made a statement promising that the texts would not be "a chauvinistic or uncritical view of Scottish society" (quoted in Denholm, 2012: para. 13). The greater gender balance in the authors of the Scottish texts is perhaps evidence of the lack of chauvinism, although women are still less than half of the list.

## 5. DISCUSSION

Although there are rare exceptions, the educational canon in the UK as represented by the set texts for examination in English literature at 16 is overwhelmingly male. In total, there are 69 text options by male authors (66%) and 36 text options by female authors (34%). Of the texts with identifiable protagonists there are 66 with male protagonists (59 by men and 7 by women), 31 with female protagonists (26 by women and 5 by men) and *Hobson's Choice* occurs twice. It is notable that of the 5 text options by men with a female protagonist, four of the occurrences are *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro, a book which speculates on the near future rather than deal with the reality of female contemporary experience. Even if it is rare for a male author to be represented with a work with a female protagonist (male authors represent two thirds of the options), the female experience is much less likely to be represented in a set text. There is a well-quoted statement by Geena Davis that in crowd scenes in Hollywood, if a third of those present are women, they are perceived by men to be in the majority (although despite its being quoted often, the research evidence to back the statement up is elusive). It is tempting to suggest that when it comes to lists of set texts, if a third of the authors present are women, it looks like equality. This is one of the reasons that a numeric analysis is useful—to highlight the actual situation rather than the experienced one.

Revisiting Lobban's complaints concerning the gender inequality in school reading schemes mentioned above, it is clear that in relation to the educational canon the situation remains the same forty years later. The vast majority of English curriculum texts in the UK are by male authors and/or represent the male experience, even when we exclude Shakespeare, the mainstay of almost all levels of English education. The educational canon continues to reproduce its inequalities. It is a repeated catchphrase that children must be encouraged to read widely (e.g. Ofsted, 2012), but if the texts they experience are narrowed to the male experience or viewpoint this suggests the 'wideness' must be limited.

 
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Having highlighted the underrepresentation of women within the educational canon in the UK, therefore, it is time to consider the "institutional protocols" (Guillory, 1993: vii) which can be seen at work in the production of these set text lists. I would argue that there are two main drivers which can be seen: inertia and the demands of the market. We may be waiting for the 'passive revolution' (Gramsci, 1971) to take effect, but these are institutional obstacles to that revolution ever coming about.

Inertia can perhaps best be seen in the set texts in England. There has been a time of major change in English qualifications, but there is relatively little change in the list of texts which are available for study. More than half the set texts are familiar from the immediately previous incarnations of the GCSE. At a time when there is significant change occurring, where there is the opportunity for stability and a lack of change, that opportunity is taken. One reason for this is that resources are scarce: schools like to be able to use books which they already have, and teachers like to teach texts which are familiar, particularly when both will have to invest time and money in new texts in other parts of the course. The new GCSEs in England came at the same time as revised A-level specifications, which put additional pressures on teachers who had to redesign teaching schemes and learn new assessment frameworks. Additionally, it is preferable to set texts for which there are already good resources (which in itself will weigh against, for example, contemporary women playwrights, as new texts are less likely to have accumulated a significant amount of supporting material). It is in this context that we can understand the large amount of overlap between Wales, Northern Ireland and England, for these are systems which used to share a common set of regulations until recently, and where schools could opt for qualifications from the other jurisdictions. The fact that both WJEC and CCEA have reissued their qualifications for their respective contexts but have not taken the opportunity to significantly update those qualifications is a case in point for inertia. The 'Welsh / Irish / English' nature of the literary heritage texts on the WJEC specification is also presumably a historical feature, remaining from the period when the GCSE was available for students in both England and Northern Ireland as well as Wales, before the change in regulations in England. Similarly, the uniqueness of the Scottish texts seems to be attributable to the fact that they must be 'Scottish', which precludes most of the traditional school texts from elsewhere, although many of them are texts and authors which were already studied in schools in Scotland, leading to a feeling among teachers that the choices had "played it safe" (Ashbrook, 2012: 7).

Inertia on the part of schools then plays heavily into the second mechanism, which applies only in England: that of market demands. Where change must be made, it must be made in a way which is appealing to the consumer, in this case English departments in schools in England, since each of the Awarding Bodies competes for their share of the market. The new pre-1900 prose texts which have appeared on the specifications are a case in point. The new female-authored texts, which were not previously set, are Eliot's *Silas Marner* and Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Each of these fits a clear category which might be seen to be

 
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attractive as a choice for teachers of 14–16-year-olds: *Silas Marner* is short (like another new text on the specifications, *The Sign of Four*), and *Frankenstein* is a science-fiction text, a genre popular with teens. Miernik argues a canon reveals the "tendencies among those who establish them" (2015: 86); governance by market demands certainly resonate with the mood of the UK in the 21st century.

The reforms in England in particular, but also (especially) the reissuing of the specification by the CCEA in Northern Ireland, represent a missed opportunity in terms of rebalancing the educational canon to show a more even handed approach to gender, both in terms of the authors who are selected and in respect of the range of experience which is represented. In addition, although I have concentrated on gender in this analysis there are other significant and important gaps, both in terms of ethnicity and sexuality. I have also only considered the options on offer, not the actual choices made by schools and teachers, which arguably has a much more significant impact on individuals' experiences of the educational canon.

There needs to be a further impetus for change, which is unlikely to come from policy makers, if changes in England are a guide. I would argue that understanding the social mechanisms by which educational canons are reproduced is a useful step towards changing them where there is a need. As Guillory has argued, "evaluative judgements" are "necessary but not sufficient" for canon formation (1993: vii); these texts are not the set texts because they are better than other, more representative choices, but because they are already in place, and have amassed the resources which keep them there.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

It is clear that the 'passive revolution' could be a long time coming. Leadership in hastening the gender equality of texts studied in the educational canon could come from two places. One is the exam boards themselves; within the regulations outlined for GCSE English literature in England, they have largely free rein as to which 19th century novels they set, or which 20th century plays. In Scotland the Scottish texts are entirely within the decree of the SQA, with guidance from the Scottish Studies Working Group of the Scottish Government. Within the world of a competitive market, nevertheless, it should be possible for one or other to stand up and declare their commitment to gender equality in choice of texts. Most of them also produce curriculum support materials in the form of textbooks and study guides, which could help to alleviate the reluctance of teachers to take on a text they have never taught before. As the new examinations in England become fully bedded in, teachers will have more energy and potential inclination to change their set text choices, because it will no longer be in a context of multiple changes to the rest of the curriculum.

 
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More powerfully, the governments of the respective jurisdictions (education being fully devolved to the countries which make up the UK) could make a stand and insist on two aspects. One would be to say that qualifications could only be validated if they had an equal number of female and male authors on them, putting the onus on the regulator to check the text lists. The second would be to issue a directive that all students must study at least one prose or drama text written by a woman as part of their English literature qualification at 16. This might be more or less controversial in the different parts of the UK; in England until recently there was a requirement to study texts from other cultures, which seems to be on a similar level. In Scotland there was an outcry about the imposition of a Scottish text (Elliott, 2014), and there might be a similar one, in a context of otherwise free choice for teachers. However, short of the arguments which are frequently rehashed about the underachievement of boys in English, it is hard to see what reasonable objection there could be about anything other than grounds of increased regulation and complexity, to ensure that all students read at least one book by a woman on their courses. There will undoubtedly be protesters, given the current climate of feminism and anti-feminism, but it is an important symbolic area of equality which needs real, not symbolic, leadership in order to drag our educational canon into the age of equality.

## NOTES

1 A-level is the qualification taken at the end of school in England, Wales and Northern Ireland; students typically study three to four subjects of their choice.

2 Although examination in English literature is not compulsory at 16 in every country of the UK, almost every student sitting a mainstream English qualification will also study literature, because of overlaps in the curriculum which make it efficient, or because of incentives created by national league table rules for school performance.

3 I am indebted to Kate McDonald of the University of Reading, who heard an early version of this article as a conference presentation and urged me to consider the protagonist as well as the author in my analysis, citing Nicola Griffith's work (2015).

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