

NOTES, DOCUMENTS, and REVIEW ARTICLES

Two Fragments on Gates: Certain Anachronisms

SEAN GURD

Facile per aureas depictasque ianuas ad
sacrosancta philosophiae penetralia perducuntur.
St. Augustine, *de Ordine* I.

They are both fragments, but differently.

I

Christ I (the Advent Lyrics) vv. 275-347 had been identified by modern editors¹ as the ninth in a series of short lyrics corresponding to a set of antiphons or choral responses from the Latin liturgy associated with the weeks leading up to Christmas. This identification is not reflected in the manuscript of the Exeter book where it is preserved. There the lyric is the beginning of the third block of continuous text, marked by an enlarged capital letter at its commencement. The next large capital is at verse 378 in modern editions. Thus lyrics nine and ten are not distinguishable by any graphic marks in the manuscript, and cover all of folios twelve recto and verso and more or less half of thirteen recto. Neither does the manuscript represent discrete prosodic units (*verses*, or turns) with line breaks or any punctuation. Old English prosody is not temporally metrical: the identity of a poetic line is established not by a specific order of long and short syllables, but by the recurrence of certain consonantal sounds. This means that the ear will hear the "verse" without investing a great deal of energy in scansion. The breaking of the passage from its continuous context which is begun by modern editors by separating it graphically from its companion lyrics, and is completed here, since none of the poem's context is presented, is therefore accompanied by a further fragmentation of the original inarticulate verses into

1 I am using the edition of B. Muir (1994).

discrete and graphically represented line endings. Christ I may also be seen as the first part in the trilogy which includes Christ II (the Ascension) and Christ III (Christ in Judgment). The identification of lyric nine is then a fragmentation of the second order.

My intention here is not to argue that the modern fragmentation of this passage away from its context is inappropriate or wrong. The association of these lines with the *O mundi domina* antiphon seems secure. It runs, in its entirety: "Oh mistress of the universe, sprung from the bridal chamber. He who appears from your womb like a groom from the manger" (Muir 58²). The nature of the rules even the stars now lies in a manger" (Muir 58²). The nature of the responson of this brief Latin antiphon with the long and complex Old English poem is itself part of an intricate world which the Advent lyrics as a whole describe. This world, of which the text is only a single element, involves writer and reader, antiphon and text, in a deeply self-reflexive process. Perhaps the Advent lyrics are best described as a series of reflections on the liturgical responses, in which the reader is intended to meditate on the relations between the two texts and the meanings immanent in these relations. Then the text would be intended as an object of some relative or hybrid of the monastic *lectio divina*, the method of reading and meditating in silence upon the words of scripture. Perhaps, on the other hand, the text of the Advent lyrics is itself a moment in a narrative of redemption which is played out in the realm of writing and reading. If this is the case, it is a very important moment, perhaps, if we mean this in a non-chronological sense, the ultimate moment.

The liturgical response is already an echo. It is the way in which the movements of the liturgy are punctuated, the answer to a liturgical challenge. But this is a practical response: the antiphon completes an action which is an element of the service. The Old English lyric, on the other hand, appears at first to be an interpretive response. Nothing demands it in a ritual sense. No movement will go incomplete without it. To say this is to misunderstand the poetry. Each Advent lyric is an utterance of faith consequent to a meditation on the part of its writer upon the antiphon in question. It is a song of praise inspired by passing through the door of the Latin text. But this new utterance, the composition of the lyric, is itself a mark of the advent. The augmentation of words, the length of the lyric in comparison with the Latin text, is itself a product of the coming of Christ, the first step in the story of salvation:

All spiritual grace pervaded the regions of the earth.
There through the principle of life
Many things were illuminated: long lasting lore

That had before lain buried in darkness,
And the songs of soothsayers, when the ruler came
Who augments the course of every word
For those who in wisdom would praise
The name of the creator. (*Christ* I.42-49)

In this acoustic play, the lyric is the first sign of the advent which is celebrated in the source antiphon which is itself an echo. It is a response of the second generation.

But the augmentation of language which the lyrics accomplish is not merely a sign of the advent. It is a double of the creation, the invention of multiplicity, the fragmentation or differentiation of things which occurs as the universe emerges into space and time. This is expressed traditionally in the metaphor of the relationship of the limbs to the body, which is itself both a Christological and a hermeneutical metaphor. Just as the churches are the body of which Christ is the head or the governing principle, so discrete elements of scripture are limbs (*cola*) which must be "harmonized to the body of truth" (Irenaeus, *Adversus Haeresis* I.1.20, see Harvey). But the *colon* is not simply a sentence or phrase: it is also a half line or segment of a line of verse. In Old English prosody each half-line in a single verse must contain at least one alliterative echo of its partner. The multiplication of limbs in the poem is then a response to the advent, but also a fragmentation which must be rectified, which requires a harmonization of its elements to create a coherent and unified meaning. This is redemption, the coming of (hermeneutic) light to a world in darkness. The world of multiplicity, over-articulated and fragmented, is a world of ruin. The absence of the divine presence has reduced the house of creation to chaos:

You are the headstone, that of old the artisans
Rejected from the work. It suits you,
To be the head of that illustrious hall
And join together the ample walls
With fast joints, unbreakable rock,
So that through the cities of the earth all with eyes might see
And marvel forever, Lord of glory.
Now show your own work through your artifice,
Trustworthy, triumph-bright, and quickly stand
Wall against wall. Now there is need of that work
And that the craftsman and the king himself come,
And repair the house under its roof
Now it has fallen to pieces. He disposed that body
And its limbs from clay. Now will the Lord of life
Set free that accursed heap from hardships,
Wretched men from dread, as he has often done. (*Christ* I.2-17)

The *economy* (*oikonomia*: management of the house) is both of creation and of textuality. It is an ancient metaphor for both.³ But "we" are inside a ruined house, "bound in darkness," awaiting the sun (vv.25-26; 112-17). The redemption of the ruined house is a redemption of a fallen creation but also a redemption of the multiplied text, a hermeneutic movement into oneness, meaning. It is a coming of light and an unbinding.

This redemptive light, which is both the illumination of the world and of the text, comes through a strange set of golden gates. We read of them first in lyric eight: "Lord of high heaven, bid open the golden gates which stood long locked in the past and visit us, coming yourself to earth" (*Christ* I.249-55). These gates are the way out of time. Foreseen by the prophet in the past, opened in the near future of the nativity, their opening is the singularity which is beyond multiplicity and extension. The coming of Christ through the golden gates of Jerusalem is also his coming through the body of Mary (who is the *wealdor* (v.328), the door in the wall); his coming to repair the ruined *oikos* (house, or temple) of earth and of the extended text.

But the text is *not* the redemption itself. That can never be captured. The singularity which unifies all the limbs or fragments of the world and the text and unites also the various symbol systems that run through the text in the single figure of the golden gate must occur *outside* of time. Its singularity, the fact that it happened *only once* (*ana*: v.287; see also vv.78-79), in ruling out the possibility of repetition, rules it out of experiential (temporal and spatial) reality. The Advent lyric is written after an advent through the gates of meaning to the author meditating upon the antiphon: but the text does not present this illumination. Rather it offers another illumination to the reader who now meditates on it and its antiphon. The text is a closed door when we come to it. What the prophet, who is also the poet (*wothbora*, v.302) has seen is fulfilled in the reader's experience as he meditates upon the text. This is because the text is a multiform of the world (*loca*: enclosure, fold, v.19) which is also locked (*bilocen*: v.252). But Christ is the key (the antiphon corresponding to lyric two speaks of Christ as *clavis David*, "key of David") which opens and closes. The "limbkey" (*liothucaegan*: v.334) with which Christ locks the gates of Mary after him is not a "key made out of limbs" but a "key for the limbs": the chastity belt which Mary wears symbolically is what keeps her purity intact, but it also keeps her limbs as limbs, "holds" her in the form of an articulated body, a fragmented and extended text.

This holding together of a disunified, articulated and fragmentary collocation which is the text and the body of Mary is also its refusal. The moment of illumination, the advent of Christ the sun or meaning is always

3 For textuality cf. Aristotle's *Poetics* 1453a.29 (see Kassel), creation — St. Paul's *Ephesians* 1.10 (see Arland).

just over the horizon, outside articulated time and space. Meditation is needed to find it. Heidegger spoke (playfully) of the *epoche* of being (Heidegger 26): we can now speak of the *epoche* of texts. The *epoche* is the holding together of the text, its general resistance to fragmentation (its immaculateness, that it cries out *noli me frangere*, "do not break me," see Nancy); but it is also its holding itself away, its suspension. It is "held" in the fragmentary articulateness of its multiplicity without the ability to present a unity of meaning, the advent of Christ, which must be enacted by the reader in meditation. Thus the plan of salvation, the advent of Christ to redeem the broken economy of the world, is played out again in the projected historical schema of the text's interpretation.

II

But the *epoche* is also the response of the skeptic, the man who trusts neither his senses nor the ability of language to convey the truth.⁴ Here the *epoche* is his suspension of judgment, his deferral for the moment of a gesture of allegiance to any metaphysical or ethical doctrine. In its classical form, skepticism was directed towards the elimination of the possibility of *criteria* or standards of truth. The most prolific skeptic writer of the ancient world, Sextus Empiricus, writes of Parmenides in *Against the Mathematicians*, book seven:

Parmenides ... assumed as criterion the epistemic, that is, the infallible reason, even abandoning trust in the senses. Thus in the opening of his work *On Nature* he writes in this way:

The mares that carry me as far as the heart can get
Escorted me, when they came to take me on the road of much speech
Of the Goddess, who carries everywhere unharmed the knowing man.
I was carried to her. For the well-taught horses took me to her,
Striving at the chariot. And maidens led the way.
The axle let out the voice of a pipe, glowing
In its hole (for the chariot was urged on by two whirling
wheels at either end) while they hastened to escort me,
The daughters of the sun, having left the house of night
For the light. And their hands had lifted the veils from their heads.

4 "But this that you say is most absurd, that you believe what is probable, if you are unimpeded in any way. But how can you not be impeded, when the false arguments are not so different from true ones? Secondly, what criterion is there of truth, if it is also connected with falsity? Whence came inevitably that *epoche*, that is the withholding of assent ... for if nothing can be perceived, assent must be withdrawn. For what is more pointless than to approve of what is unknown?" (*The Academica* of Cicero II.59, see Reid *ad loc.*). The canonical expression of the sceptical *epoche* is in Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 28-34, 196, see Mau).

There are the gates of the roads of night and day
And a lintel and a stone porch contain them.
They themselves are the colour of air and are filled with great doors,
For which much-avenging Justice holds the retributive keys.
Her the maidens whispered to with gentle words
And guilefully persuaded to lift the bolted
Bar quickly from the gates? and they made
A yawning chasm out of the doors,
Swinging the brazen posts apart in their sockets
Which were fitted with rivets and pins. Then through them
Straight the maidens led the chariot and horses.
And the goddess received me kindly. My right hand
She took in hers, and spoke a word and addressed me:
"Eala boy comfitted with immortal charioteers,
coming to our house with the mares who carry you,
Greetings. For no fell fortune sends you to drive
This road (for it lies far from the way of men).
Rather it is right and justice. And you must learn all,
The steadfast heart of trustworthy truth
And also the opinions of mortals, in which there is no true faith.
[But nevertheless you will learn even these things, how what is opined
must genuinely be and pervade all things altogether]"⁵

For in these verses Parmenides means that the mares which carry him along are the irrational impulses and appetites of the soul, and that "the much-speaking route of the goddess" they travel is that of inquiry according to philosophical reason. This reason, like a divine guide, points the way to the knowledge of all things. And the maidens that lead him on are the senses: of these, he alludes to auditory faculties in a riddling manner by saying "it was urged on by two whirling wheels," that is, with the circles of the ears, by means of which they receive sound; and visual faculties he calls "maidens, daughters of the sun, having left the house of night" and "for the light," because it is impossible to make use of them without light. And the approach to "much-avenging justice" who also holds "retributive keys" is to intelligence which holds a reliable apprehension of things. And she, after welcoming him, promises to teach him two things: "the steadfast heart of persuasive truth," which is the immovable foundation of knowledge, and secondly "the beliefs of mortals in which there is no true faith," that is to say, everything which lies in the realm of belief, because all such things are uncertain. (Mutschmann 111-14)

The passage of poetry, which is presented as "fragment 1" in modern editions (most recently, that of Gallop), is extant here and in only one other place. The writings of Parmenides are presently only extant in such citations.

5 The last two lines are not preserved by Sextus: they appear in Simplicius' commentary on *de Caelo*.

Thus I present a poem which is *already fragmentary*. Neither I nor my scholarly tradition take responsibility for the fragmentation of the Parmenidean text.

The fragmentation of his poem is almost fated by the fifth century B. C. E. The minute poetry (*poiesis*) is identified with the *metron* (which was done by Gorgias in the *Encomium of Helen*, section 9, see Diels 288-94), it becomes unstable. *Metron* designates quantitative "meter," surely, but also "measure" in the sense of that which is measurable, that of and by which a measure can be taken. Once anything is measured out, whether this is light, or space, or language, it becomes incomprehensible to whoever does not know the appropriate system of measurement. The eyes, for example, do not have the measure of sound. The corollary of this is that color is incommensurate with the ears, or that poetic language is incommensurate with sight. Poetry's incommensurability means that it must always be translated or transferred to be understood. It must be explained in languages that the other senses speak. For the eyes to see a poem you must paint a picture of it. For a philosopher to know a poem it must be explained philosophically. This means that the ancient poem, as soon as it is associated with *metron*, is always in danger of being the subject of fragmentation and metaphor, of being broken away from one region and carried off to another. Its use or understanding will demand its fragmentation, its being broken up into smaller parts which can be integrated into other arguments, other forms of language and knowledge. The removal of the fragment of Parmenides from Sextus' context which modern editions of Parmenides accomplish is only a completion of the fragmentation, the loss of "original context" already begun in the ancient practice of appropriation and citation.

Sextus' allegorical interpretation of the passage is disputable. It does not seem obvious how the wheels of the chariot are to stand in for ears, or that the maidens of the sun are necessarily symbolic for the evidence of the eyes. But then we do not have the rest of Parmenides' poem. And the metaphors which Sextus identifies do seem to have a certain appropriateness. In translating the poetry into language commensurate with his philosophical aims he accomplishes a "carrying across" or a transference⁶ akin to the movement through the gate of night and day which is described in the poem itself. This kind of interpretation is always associated with a rejection of sense-evidence: to understand "ears" for "wheels" requires that we stop *seeing* concrete ears and wheels and begin imagining them in the abstract, or in the realm of reason where connections can be made on the basis of attributes (here, circularity). In later antiquity and the medieval period this kind of withdrawal is entailed in meditation, in silent and blind reflection. Sextus'

commentary is again a meditative response and it is consistent with the claim that Parmenides advises a refusal to accept sense-evidence. This is perhaps why the youth who is the hero of this narrative progresses from light to darkness, and not the other way round (see Gallop 6-7). The "steadfast heart of persuasive truth" is deep down and far away from the world of appearances, and it makes sense that it should be a dark place. Parmenides' illumination will take place at midnight.

The difference between the poem of Parmenides and the Advent lyrics is that the latter are enigmatic sensually. Images maintain themselves as objects presented to the senses and the revelation of truth is accomplished by a meditation upon the concrete *thing*. Meaning is predicated on the fusion of the roles or aspects which attach to the image. We have in our mind always the "golden gate" in one or another aspect. Each of these aspects represents a fragmentary gate, a gate just short of some totality. As we meditate upon the correspondence of these fragmentary gates, a virtual gate appears in our minds, through which the advent of meaning is accomplished.

But consider these "gates of the paths of night and day." The most striking thing about them is that they are themselves *nothing*. They are surrounded by stone lintel and threshold and *filled* with doors. When the doors are opened the gates make a yawning chasm. These gates are a meeting place of two roads, the place where the one road becomes the other. But the roads are empty. They fill no space themselves, but only reveal a wide emptiness. We cannot focus on these gates. And the doors, when we see them, are closed, allow no passage. It is only in a withdrawal from the world in which a road is a thing and a gate is understood as its border that we can begin to understand the poem of Parmenides. Gate and road as emptiness, as regions of unobstructed transit, can occur only in "intelligence," in the mind which withdraws from the region of the senses. Into the darkness.

We pass into the darkness through the gates, with the collusion of *Dike*, Justice, who holds "retributive keys."⁷ But they are not just this. They are *kleidas amoibous*, "keys of response." *Amoibos* is a word which designates the quality of answering and correspondence. Amoebic verse is verse composed of question and answer, expression and refrain. Hermes is the god of "things amoebic" (*amoibada: Homeric hymn to Hermes*, vv.516-17) because he is the god of transit, of crossing the threshold, of going back and forth. The "keys of response" are keys which correspond to the doors of the gates of night and day but also the keys which allow transit and transference between formally separated regions. It is this idea of response and balance which allows *Amoibos* to mean "retributive": it is a matter of tit-for-tat, of balancing both sides of the equation. The doors of the gates swing open in mutually opposite directions (*amoibadon*) but also *in response* to the keys which are the keys of

6 For a treatment of the etymological significance of metaphor as "carrying across," see Ricoeur, chapter 1.

7 This translation follows Gallop *ad loc.* after Solmsen 631-32.

reply, the keys which allow for a recognition of isomorphy between incommensurate worlds.

It is responson which allows for allegory and metaphor and for Sextus to postulate a one-to-one correspondence between the poetry of Parmenides and the claim that the senses must be rejected as a criterion of truth. Neither is it any surprise that the poem itself offers two differing ways, the way of truth and the way of opinion (*doxa*). Meditation upon the contrast between these ways will open a way into the world of night, will open the gates. Here is another import of the *kleidas amoibous*: that the meditation which progresses away from the senses is a meditation which looks for correspondences. But they are not sensible correspondences, question and answer between symbolic objects. Rather they are correspondences in the world of logic or reason, which wants to know the *ratio* of things.

Justice is blind, and so is reason. The recognition of correspondences in meditative thought occurs on the side of darkness, where sight cannot distinguish in an analytic of space, nor sound in an analytic of time. Here identities need no more be virtual: the collusion of separate and always discrete fragmentary aspects of a gate in symbolic meditation overcomes *for the moment* the *epoche* which holds each element separate like towns held apart by stretches of road. The deaf and blind operation of asensual meditation occurs in a place where the gate is a chasm and the road is defined as empty space. But empty space offers no impediment and distance, without physical extension, is annihilated. The Parmenidean road (*bodos* or *keleubhos*) is an absolute one, which does not slow transit between regions. Minds travel at the speed of thought.

On these superhighways of thought it is very hard to slow down or to articulate a disposition in the world. Without extension there is no tension: a resistant space, giving a curvature to the road and creating form and the sense of a beginning of an end. These frictionless roads are like run-on sentences. Each item is bound to the next but there are no signposts. Noone knows where to get off. A periodic sentence, says Aristotle, is much more pleasant than a run-on sentence (*4rs Rhetorica* III.9, 1409a, see Ross). A periodic sentence has limits and borders, and we all know where our stop is. It has tension and a certain spacing in its form. To be sure this tension and spacing is helped by a series of lightning fast connections under the space of the sentence that join subjects to verbs and adjectives to nouns. But these identities are restrained by the extension of expression, the Aeschylean need to move inexorably from beginning to end. It is very difficult to break a period before its end. It holds together. Our fragments are complete. But the run-on sentence, which has no curvature, has no inherent limits. Its fragments are arbitrary. Its meanings hide in echoes. Someone might be quoting the bit you are reading. You can never know what it is because you can never be sure there is not something just after the next "and" that will change everything.

All thinking at the speed of thought is like this. Without articulation and extension there is no distinguishing things and one passes through all points before returning to the beginning: "It's all the same to me where I begin because I'll return there again" (fr.5). Perhaps this is why Parmenides says: "gaze on what is similarly far off and firmly present to the mind" (fr.4.1). An empty road brings things together absolutely.

But this fragment (4) ends by saying that what is "is not dispersed everywhere in order and does not bring itself together." The world of *the way of truth* is one in which "there is the same thing for thinking and being" (fr.3). But what is there for thinking and being is neither dispersed into an ordered economy (*kata kosmon*) nor gathered together as one (*sunistamenon*). Imagine looking at a world without lines or borders where everything fades into everything else. You would be slow to agree with the philosophers. You would be inclined to think that this thinking is unknowable. But this is what Sextus wants you to think.

What is there in the poem is not *in* the poem, which had (we assume) both a disposition (was dispersed in order) and a unity (a standing-together, *sunistamenon*). But what is not (in the poem) cannot be. There are two roads, we are told:

Here, I will speak, and you, having heard the story, convey it,
What roads [*bodos*] of inquiry there are to think.

One is that it is and cannot not be?

That is the route of persuasion since it accompanies truth.

The other is that it is not and it must not be?

I tell you that is a road altogether not to be perceived.

For you could not know what is not? since that is not possible?

Nor show it. (Fr.2)

It is not clear in the Greek what *it* (v. 3 and v. 5) is, or *how* it is or is not. Some readers have suggested that the subject of "is" is "what is there for thinking and for being" (fr.6.1: see Gallop 7-8). At any rate what is not is an imperceptible road. Or? the road that is not (extended spatially) can be neither known nor shown. But this is precisely what is there for thinking and being, the thing that is without the spacing and holding of the road. Which is beyond, to which we must pass, through the gates in the poem. With the help of *dike* and her keys of correspondence.

Whence "the things which seem had to have genuine existence and go through all things completely," which Sextus leaves out and which is added here like an afterthought. One must keep in mind *both* what is *and* what seems: if one does not the *kleidas amoibous* will close the doors on the gates and you will be left in the light. The trick is to hold to the tension between night and day, to stand directly beneath the lintel in the air colored gate and

balance both sides like the two halves of your body. One must meditate on echoes and correspondences. Counterpoint.

University of Toronto

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APPENDIX

Christ I. 275-347 (*Advent Lyric Nine*)

Eala? glorious lady of the lands between:

Queen purest of all who were

Through the earth and in all times:

Each sound speechbearer here

Names you rightly and joyous in his heart

Says that you are the bride

Of the heavens' highest Lord.

Even so the highest in heaven,

Christ's servants, say and sing

That you by sacred might are mistress

Of the heavenly host and of the ranks of men

On earth beneath the heavens and of hell-dwellers.

For you alone of all mankind

Brilliantly betook in your lofty thoughts

To give sinless your maiden state

To the great Lord. No other like you

Has come from all the ranks of humankind,

Who would like you, bejeweled bride, send hence

The bright gift to heaven

With a pure mind. Whence triumph's font

Bad his archangel fly here

From his glory to quickly speak

The power of his might to you, that you should conceive

The Lord's son, through a clean birth

As a mercy for men, and that you, Mary,

Be held for ever after unstained.

Also have we heard this: that of old

A certain true bard spoke of you

In ancient times? Isaiah he was?

That he was brought where he beheld

The house of life in that eternal home.

Then that wise man looked through the country

Until he saw where was built

A noble entrance. It was all adorned,

That high gate, with costly treasure

Surrounded by wondrous bonds. Then he thought

That no man ever might

Raise up those bars

So firmly fixed for ever,

Or unlock the bolt on that city gate.

But God's angel, through glad grace

Showed him the way and said this word:

"I will tell you of a true becoming,

that one time yet will God himself,

the Father almighty, purify

these golden gates by the strength of his spirit

and through these firm gates seek out earth.

Then after him they will remain forever

Eternally so closed and everlasting

That no other but God our saviour

Will ever again unlock them."

Now that is fulfilled, what the old man

Then saw with his eyes.

You are that door in the wall, through you

The ruler came once to this earth,
 Christ almighty. And even so he met you clean and precious,
 Butressed by might.
 So did the prince of angels lock you behind him, all unblemished,
 With a limbeck, the author of life.
 Show us now that grace that the angel
 Gabriel, God's messenger, brought to you.
 Truly we city dwellers pray for this,
 That you show men joy,
 Your own son. After we may
 Unanimously all have hope,
 Now that we see that child upon your breast.
 Plead for us now with true words
 That he not let us any longer
 Heed error in this den of death.
 Let him lead us to the Father's kingdom,
 Where free from sorrow we might after
 Abide in glory with the Lord of hosts.
 (Muir 58-61).

Rereading Shakespeare

BRIAN EDWARDS

As proof of excellence, there is no doubt about Shakespeare. Or, to put it another way, there is every doubt about Shakespeare, the glover's son, working man of the theatre, pre-capitalist Renaissance business man, universalist and genius whose place of literary pre-eminence will survive the latest, and the next, round of indifference from those "economic rationalists" (captains of industry, political power-brokers, influencers of curricula, university administrators) who measure cultural capital in the most grossly capital of ways. As English departments tighten their belts, deconstruct "the canon," deplore canonicity, diversify, seek new allegiances and wonder about what they have to sell, and to which niche of a troubled market place, as "English" remakes itself as "Cultural Studies" and acknowledges, again, the multicultural base, ideology, discourse, history, politics, power and popular communication, Shakespeare anticipates the moves. Thirty-eight plays and the poems, what a diminution it would be if these were to become the exclusive preserve of small groups of scholars reading and rereading the texts ever more closely, inventively, finding other things to say or new ways to say again what has already been said, their sharings limited to specialist journals and their clutch of specialist readers. As Hamlet says more broadly, the play's the thing; and as the Shakespeare critical industry continues energetically, and as readers pore over the texts, theatre companies continue to produce the plays in different languages around the world and film-makers find that they can market this high cultural material in the market places of popular culture. As Zeffirelli, Branagh and Luhrmann demonstrate, there are many ways of doing Shakespeare.

Whatever measures of worth we might employ, there is little doubt about Shakespeare's rating. In the matter of measuring, Harold Bloom's grand claim calls loudly for attention. Deliberately audacious, idiosyncratic and provocative, Bloom presents the western canon as his readings of richness and value, of literary cultural resources measured in terms of sublimity and representativeness, with Shakespeare "the largest writer we will ever know."