



Theory and the Study of Premodernity: Introduction

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In 2003–4, Duke University hosted a series of speakers and discussions on theory and the study of premodernity. This series was made possible by a grant from the Mellon Foundation (“Making the Humanities Central”) with the assistance of Duke’s Franklin Institute, the Vice Provost for Interdisciplinary Studies, Cathy Davidson, and contributions from several departments and programs, including Art and Art History, Classics, English, Judaic Studies, Romance Studies, Religion, and Women’s Studies. An informally constituted group of interested Duke faculty (Sarah Beckwith, Kalman Bland, Helen Solterer, Annabel Wharton, and myself) did the initial planning for the series. To all of these, I and the editors of *JMEMS* extend our thanks.

Throughout the year, faculty and graduate students engaged in the program explored how the centrality of theory in humanities and some social science disciplines has informed the study of the late ancient, medieval, and early modern periods. We investigated the ways in which new perspectives on the past modify our understanding of the present, and how the study of these periods has contributed to major theoretical models over several generations. The emphasis throughout was not only on how recent theory has illuminated the past, but also on how the study of premodernity in its several disciplinary and cross-disciplinary manifestations is contributing to the enrichment of theory.

Four major speakers representing different disciplines and periods of premodern study visited Duke under the auspices of this series: Daniel Boyarin, Sarah Kay, James Porter, and Paul Strohm. The editors of *JMEMS* invited these speakers to contribute their essays to a special issue of the journal devoted to “Theory and the Study of Premodernity,” three of which form the core of this special-topic issue.¹ The editors’ open call for other contributions on the theme resulted in the three additional articles by Katherine

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Little, Laura Camille Agoston, and Moshe Sluhovsky that join the essays by Boyarin, Kay, and Strohm.

These six articles show how fruitful the encounter with theory—whether psychoanalytical, gender, deconstruction, or postcolonial, whether derived from New Historicism or the Frankfurt School, from Foucault or Agamben—has been for scholars of premodernity. The articles concern texts and textuality, texts and images, and the relation of texts to material culture, to “lived life” and the social order. They explore how notions of “reading” have been reenvisioned. They show how traditional intellectual history has been enlarged by attention to social history, and how categories of “source,” “influence,” “intention,” and “purpose” have been reconfigured. They illustrate how, in different periods and arenas of life, notions of the self, religion, and national identity have been produced. Changing the questions asked within various academic disciplines, they probe—and challenge—disciplinary assumptions and limitations regarding genre and periodization, including what “premodernity” might mean if “modernity” itself is conceptually destabilized. That so many of the articles engage issues of religion is an especially valuable contribution of scholarship on premodernity to postmodernist and poststructuralist conversations. Indeed, these essays suggest how poststructuralism and premodernity have closer resonance than many scholars may have suspected.



Note

- 1 James Porter's paper was already slated for publication and hence is not included here. It can be found, in a somewhat different version, as “Introduction: What Is ‘Classical’ about Classical Antiquity?” in *Classical Pasts: The Classical Traditions of Greece and Rome*, ed. James I. Porter (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), 1–65.