

Rethinking Periodization

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“We cannot not periodize,” argues Fredric Jameson in a maxim several times discussed in this collection.¹ Periodization, Jameson suggests, proves essential to the very business of thinking historically: without borders marking off points of temporal difference, it would be impossible to conceive or express historical change. Yet for those working in the early periods, the terms *medieval* and *Renaissance* or *early modern* have become increasingly vexed. In our opening essay, Margreta de Grazia brilliantly dissects the history of thought that produced the medieval/modern divide, revealing how “it works less as a historical marker than a massive value judgment, determining what matters and what does not.” As long as modernity is a sign of the *new*, it also joins up with the *now*, its relevance secured in its identification with the fundamental markers of contemporary identity and concern: market economies, national identities, the introspective subject, and historical consciousness itself.² Yet, as de Grazia argues, the “modern divide” paradoxically misrepresents the historical consciousness of the very “early modern” period that is drafted to inaugurate it, a period that characterized itself not through its novelty—then used as a term of suspicion—but through its backward-looking identification with the antique past. But however bracketed or qualified as insufficient, misinformed, or merely heuristic, the terms *medieval* and *Renaissance* continue to define our fields, their relative place in history, and their relationship with one another. How can we begin to think beyond them?

Periodization, as many of our contributors suggest, is a template for dividing up not only time but also place. The tendency to project temporal divisions onto territorial entities continues to this day: as Ania Loomba points out, the “clash of civilizations” being played out currently on the world stage maps a backward and prerational “medievalism” onto the Islamic, while

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casting modernity as the product and export of the West. The temporal/territorial scheme comes loaded with its own teleology, making resistance to Western domination look like a struggle against progress itself. As other contributors argue, this use of the “modern” temporal divide to define, and implicitly evaluate and rank, territory and people derives from earlier ages. Two essays in this collection reconsider dates traditionally employed to mark off the “premodern” from the “modern”: 1453, the fall of Constantinople, and 1492, the expulsion of the Moors and the inauguration of Spain’s colonial enterprise. These dates represent watersheds, a term we’re tempted to take literally. For as David Lawton’s essay reminds us, temporal boundaries are often marked by hydraulic metaphors such as “the stream of time,” whose outward manifestations appear not only in the gate across the Golden Horn, but also in the ocean with whose crossing, as Barbara Fuchs points out, Columbus supposedly inaugurates a new world, both temporally and geographically. Seen from the other direction, with José Rabasa, the imposition of *modernitas* onto Mesoamerican temporality and territory is also perceived as a watershed, in the image of a river dividing pre-Columbian “before” from a colonial “after.”

These essays ask what happens when we suspend the supposedly universal sway of European temporal markers; they also suggest, by way of response, a range of alternative temporalities. Fuchs’s essay invites us to consider the variety and hybridity of forms that cross the “modern” divide of 1492, thus suggesting how the past continually enters the present in new forms. While Fuchs and Rabasa show visual images opening such multiple perspectives on time and space, a number of essays in this collection show literary texts offering particularly rich sites for imagining traffic across what Judith Bennett calls “the great divide” that separates and defines “medieval” and “early modern.”³ As Loomba notes, “literature is a particularly dense repository of cultural memory.”⁴ In a similar vein, Paul Strohm and Jean Howard suggest that literary texts, particularly performed ones, establish “a social imaginary” that sees a culture both preserving and selectively recuperating its past. While a taxonomy of period divisions provides the dominant structure of literature departments, at least as projected by the dominance of period-based job listings, the periodization of literary texts is in fact a vexed business. Assigning literary texts to a specific period tethers them to the moment of their composition: yet the nature of literary texts and stories is to circulate, allowing consumption to take place at a great remove from composition.⁵ In the space between composition and consumption,

texts become subject to new meanings and uses. Textual circulation is a sign not simply of “continuity” but also of cultural transformation: this belies the notion of a strict divide while further inviting us to consider the specific forms of thought that mark out the changes and continued interaction taking place over long durations. Literary texts prove especially mobile: the Chester drama cycle, as Theresa Coletti shows, reveals remarkable and unexpected adaptability across the apparently intractable Catholic/Protestant divide. Unexpectedly, the same forms that appealed to pre-Reformation readers allowed the cycle to be transported to the post-Reformation period, where viewers received and appreciated it through different horizons of reception, favoring its biblicism and penitential narrative forms. Coletti sees evidence in these plays of a “toggl[ing] back and forth between traditionalist and reformist possibilities for interpretation” — an effect that would be invisible to us were these texts anchored exclusively to the period(ization) of their composition. In a complementary vein, Strohm and Howard examine the movement and transformation of the notion of the “commons” from 1381 to *Hamlet*, where the term finds itself belatedly invoked as a site of popular politics, even after “the people are a shadow of their former selves.” *Hamlet* becomes another depository for reception in Seth Lerer’s study of Aesop’s movement from ancient to early modern contexts. Just as *Hamlet* takes up, while lifting the skull of Yorick, a literary history of Aesopica, so contemporary readers continue to make sense of their world by recuperating and transforming the texts and fragmented traditions of past literatures. *Hamlet* is a particularly rich text in which to reconsider periodization because, as Margreta de Grazia argues elsewhere, that quintessentially “early modern” text has been too often viewed as looking forward to modernity, rather than registering continuity with medieval cultural forms and meanings.⁶

In the two conferences where many of these essays were shared and discussed, we raised the question of the future of our adjacent fields and the border that continues to separate and define them.⁷ Ania Loomba, for one, argues that the boundaries of temporal and geographical specialization are crossable through collaboration. Our volume concretely exemplifies such collaborative crossing in the Strohm-Howard piece, an essay grounded in the authors’ experience of coteaching. And the conferences at Stanford and Penn showed plentiful evidence of future crossings, and of enlarged geographical imagining, in the work of graduate student presenters. At our first conference, Stanford graduate students reexamined periodization from a number of disciplinary, national, and methodological perspectives. Brian

Goldsmith considered the limitations of applying the medieval/Renaissance divide, with its European-based origins and models, to Japanese historiography; Marisa Galvez examined the editorial histories of medieval vernacular songbooks as both reflecting and defying modern paradigms of medievalness; Amanda Walling contrasted John Lydgate's models of periodization in the *Fall of Princes* with Lydgate's own literary-historical positioning; Ema Vyroubalova reconsidered England's relation to the European Renaissance through its troubled cultural ties to Spain; Jenna Lay read recusancy and its reflection in *Measure for Measure* as evidence of England's "incomplete Reformation"; and Carol Pal examined manuscript circulation among Samuel Hartlib's circle as a sign of incomplete "transition" to early modern print culture. At the University of Pennsylvania, Kurt Schreyer observed Shakespeare fashioning drama from a medieval remnant (the ass's head); Jon Hsy considered the complex urban temporalities of merchants Richard Hill and John Collins; Hannah Crawforth explored the Anglo-Saxonism of Renaissance history writer Richard Verstegan; Sarah Murphy extended considerations of nationhood to "Dames of Scotia" and David Lindsay; Ruth Lexton meditated on how notions of treason carry over and change with Malory and the coming of the Tudors; and David Coley, apropos of *St. Erkenwald*, boldly wondered, "Does historicism demand periodization?" Graduate students were thus integral to the process that led to this special issue, and the consequences of this issue are of particular relevance to them: for such meditations on periodization will certainly inform discussions of curricular space and hence the professional world that graduate students will inherit and make their own.



Notes

- 1 Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (New York: Verso, 2002), 29.
- 2 For analysis of the periodization of these terms, see Moshe Sluhovsky, "Discernment of Difference, the Introspective Subject, and the Birth of Modernity," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 36 (2006): 169–99; and Kathleen Davis, "Sovereign Subjects, Feudal Law, and the Writing of History," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 36 (2006): 223–61.
- 3 Judith M. Bennett, "Medieval Women, Modern Women: Across the Great Divide," in *Culture and History, 1350–1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities, and Writing*, ed. David Aers (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), 147–75.

- 4 Brenda Machosky made a similar point in discussion at the “Medieval/Renaissance: Rethinking Periodization” conference held at Stanford University in October 2006.
- 5 For further consideration of this point, see Russell A. Berman, “Politics: Divide and Rule,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 64 (2001): 317–30; and Ralph Hanna III, “Brewing Trouble: On Literature and History—and Alewives,” in Barbara Hanawalt and David Wallace, eds., *Bodies and Disciplines: Intersections of Literature and History in Fifteenth-Century England* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 1–17.
- 6 Margreta de Grazia, *“Hamlet” without Hamlet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- 7 The conferences, both with the same title, “Medieval/Renaissance: Rethinking Periodization,” were held at Stanford University in October 2006 (as noted above) and at the University of Pennsylvania in November 2006.

