

Premodern Shakespeare

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When we decided to convene a set of essays under the theme of “premodern Shakespeare,” we wished to encourage two forms of inquiry. On the one hand, we hoped essays would address the ways in which Shakespeare’s drama might address and express the cultural revolution of the relatively recent past; on the other, we also wished to promote discussion of how Shakespeare looks as seen from the perspective of late medieval texts. The authors took up our invitation in a series of compelling and original essays. There is no party line in this special issue, no single way of approaching the questions we asked.

The provocative title “Premodern Shakespeare” prompts thought about kinds of premodernity, and, thereby, of modernity. There are many such premodernities; here we touch on three, which we call the chronological, the ethical, and the dialectical.

The *premodern* is most obviously a chronological category: it is whatever comes before the *modern*. But where, or what, or, more especially, *when* is the modern? As soon as we ask the question, we can see that *modernity*, no less than *premodernity*, is always a loaded term, bearing the weight of a revolutionary certainty that needs to legitimize its condescension, or even its violence, against the past order. When we draw lines sharply between periods whole unto themselves, *wherever we draw the line*, we are already falling victim to the logic of the revolutionary moment. It’s the revolutionary moment that needs the sharp breaks in history to define itself.¹ The line, that is, is itself a product of revolutionary rupture and of revolutionary ideology. The very ideas of worlds whole unto themselves, or of past civilizations “in their own terms” are themselves products of revolutionary thought. Our conception of historical periods, divisible into detachable segments of time punctuated by liberating convulsions, is, that is, itself the product of revolutionary aspiration to neutralize the pathologies of time and start afresh. The

modern age uniquely understood itself as an epoch and so simultaneously created other epochs.² There are, accordingly, many *moderni*; the effort to locate them is always a conceptual as much as a chronological task.

If, however, premodernity is not, most persuasively, a chronological category, is it therefore an ethical or moral category, an ethical disposition assumed in relation to the modern? From Shakespeare to William Morris there is a strong stance taken against the dark versions of Western modernity: against, that is, the ethics of possessive individualism; the reintroduction of slavery into Europe; the devastating and destructive potential of mercantile capitalism; the Protestant account of human nature as thoroughly abject, and of salvation as an intensely exclusivist matter of God's wholly impenetrable decision; the relentless disciplines of new textualities that etiolate trust, and their attendant iconoclasm; and a new form of individualism that rises into profile only in relation to a single and forbidding power whose force and novelty is certain to provoke intense self-consciousness. In repudiation of these versions of modernity, premodernity is less a chronological conviction than an ethical disposition. It constitutes a view of a different social order, utopian and inspiring, a reformist rather than nostalgic conservatism. It is a description of a mode of life that, having once existed, can show us a more nourishing and desirable form of life.

Thirdly, the premodern might be a dialectical category showing itself as a complex modernism. Here the formal innovations of modernism are a way of maintaining fidelity with tradition but in utterly changed circumstances. "It is because certain human beings crave the conservation of their art," suggests Stanley Cavell, "that they seek to discover how, under altered circumstances, paintings and pieces of music can still be made, and hence revolutionize their art beyond the recognition of many."³ Traditions are not static or stable; they "embody continuities of conflict."⁴ Even as the new dispensation attempts to repudiate the old, the old resurfaces in complex, sometimes camouflaged ways, ready to restage the battles of the past. We are all always already involved in those battles, on either side of them; they constitute us; we are part of the problem, and part, thereby, of the solution.

These are clearly large issues, which are being broached in the field more generally, as early modernists and medievalists alike initiate discussions across the boundary of early modernity. In this volume, we hope to initiate the conversation with regard to Shakespeare in particular, whose case is so much more elusive than that of literary and militant proponents of new orders (Spenser and Milton, for example). Together the essays approach

a variety of plays from different parts of the canon (early, middle, and late), and different genres (history play, problem comedy, tragedy, and romance). They also address a set of changing practices: historiography (Parker); sanctity and satisfaction (Sanok, Appleford, Hirschfeld); chivalry and neoclassicism (Davis); exegesis and exemplarity (Fulton); and the practice and concept of playing itself (Bishop).

It is possible to claim that Shakespeare is premodern in all of the preceding idioms, and perhaps even all at once. The following essays offer meditations on the role of Shakespeare in many such continuities of conflict. John Parker addresses the question of premodern Shakespeare by means of a polemical examination of the persistent, symptomatic critique of the work of E. K. Chambers in received narratives of dramatic history. Chambers, say his critics, has been superseded so why, asks Parker, does this supersession have to be endlessly rehearsed? Chambers's putative Darwinism and his teleological versions of drama history appear necessary to his critics. Yet Chambers's work is not Darwinist in the reductive understanding of Darwinism's dramatic critics; it is, on the contrary, an inventive, truly Darwinist genealogy, a meditation on the struggles for hegemony that have shaped Christian culture throughout its history. The Darwinism ascribed to Chambers is rather a "code word for a deeper grievance against anyone unwilling to grant a priori an unchanging, coherent, or 'decorous' essence to 'the Christian Middle Ages.'" In Parker's reading, Chambers's work offers on the contrary an "unflagging emphasis on the hybrid genealogy of any cultural form."

Catherine Sanok examines the popular cult of "Good King Henry VI"; she shows how this cult, operating outside of the textual traditions of chronicle history, provided a "conceptual resource" that Shakespeare deployed to investigate the nature of English community and sovereign power. The homely, ordinary nature of the devotee's relation to the body of the saintly king insisted on a personal, and not symbolic, rendering of the body. This informs the play's rejection of the allegorical strategies essential to fictions of kingship.

Tom Bishop's essay is powerfully alive to the phenomenology of performance in Shakespeare's plays. He explores the valences of the terms *acting* and *playing*, and argues that playing is an ethical, social activity rather than a kind of artistic creation or object. The theater of play deploys the "actor himself as an agent whose energies are mobilized and released by the play's invitations, challenges, and demands." Bishop produces a set of illuminating examples in which he shows those energies at play; he allows us to see the kinds of transformational possibilities obscured by later models of

acting as mimetic action and deed, models that Shakespeare himself helps to develop. The textured work on individual scenes shows what is at stake in the serious games made possible when a player's live experience is granted real authority.

Heather Hirschfeld's essay engages the legal, monetary, and penitential economies in *The Merchant of Venice*, and explores their mutual dependence on the term *satisfaction* to describe both objective repayment and subjective mood or sentiment. She argues that the sacrament of penance had depended on the assumption that a sin could be matched with a punishment in theologically and emotionally satisfying ways. But satisfaction becomes unsatisfying in reformed accounts of sin. *The Merchant of Venice* explores the play's "disavowed desire for an exact and now unavailable system of reparation." Shylock's bond stands for the most uncompromising, literal form of that penitential calculation. Here a cultural analysis of satisfaction and its discontents is brought to bear in a highly illuminating way on this famously vexing play.

Thomas Fulton asks how Shakespeare's most biblical play, *Measure for Measure*, is also his only full experiment with the medieval morality genre. Fulton argues that the play works its critique of Jacobean biblical hermeneutics through its medievalism. In particular the play questions the received readings of Romans 9 and 11, texts central to Calvinist readings of the arbitrariness of mercy, and Romans 13, the standard defence of the divine right of kings. The play in his reading exposes some of the structural contradictions in English religious culture, "which on the one hand invokes the power of the spirit over the law, while on the other it seeks the institution of Mosaic law as a 'property of government.'"

Amy Appleford addresses the late canon and reads *All Is True* as a play about a recusant heroine (Katherine of Aragon) within the cradle of English Protestantism. The play, argues Appleford, offers a version of Catholicism that is "international, deeply and affectively English by adoption, and, above all, capable of internal reform and revitalization." She situates the play in relation to the Protestant history plays produced around 1612–13. Against this background, the bold bid to make Katherine the ethical heart of the play appears all the more striking. Avoiding any biographical claims for Shakespeare's own Catholicism, Appleford nevertheless makes the claim that *All Is True* is a conscious Catholicization of the history of the English Reformation.

Alex Davis explores the Theban narratives of the Chaucerian *Two Noble Kinsmen* to question the entrenched narratives of periodization. The-

ban narratives refuse any developmental progress to history; they constitute a “poetics of incompletion,” a sense that the past will not stay buried. The ban texts “refuse completely to distinguish themselves from the history they depict.” These narratives are “desperate” and “claustrophobic.” They fail to make the past available as an independent object of thought, and so they give the lie to two of the most persistent myths of the Renaissance’s differentiation of itself from the “medieval”: the death of chivalry and the Renaissance sense of a separate past.

Putting together such a collection of essays requires a process of vetting commensurate with the sophistication of the topics. We would therefore like to thank John Watkins who served as the external reader for all these essays. John was in every way the ideal reader. Such was the speed with which he returned the essays that we wondered if he ever slept. His comments were detailed, engaged, learned, and extraordinarily canny.



Notes

- 1 For a larger account of the logic of periodization, from which some sentences here are drawn, see James Simpson, “Diachronic History and the Shortcomings of Medieval Studies,” in *Reading the Medieval in Early Modern England*, ed. David Matthews and Gordon McMullan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 17–30, at 26–27. For a still larger diachronic distinction between historiographies that “make history whole” and those that attempt to create absolutely clean historiographical breaks, see Anthony Kemp, *The Estrangement of the Past: A Study in the Origins of Modern Historical Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).
- 2 Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983), 116.
- 3 Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 121. And see also his “Music Discomposed” in *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays*, updated ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 206: “the unheard of appearance of the modern in art is an effort not to break, but to keep faith with tradition.”
- 4 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 206.

