

Periodization, Conversion, Shakespeare

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Surely, Eric Hayot is right to argue (in “Against Periodization; or, On Institutional Time”), that there is something wrong with the periodization of literary history within the academy. It is rigid, even fossilized; it cannot do justice to the complexities and continuities that become visible when we lift the iron curtains that traditional thinking and institutional practice have drawn down between, say, the Middle Ages and what we call Early Modernity, or between the Eighteenth Century and the Romantic period. The capacity of periodization to misrepresent what we study is strikingly clear in the case of Shakespeare, whose works have seemed to most scholars through most of their critical history, especially in the 20th and into the 21st century, exemplary of a kind of secularism that would have nothing to do with religion or religious culture (the culture, ironically enough, in which Shakespeare and his contemporaries lived).

I have to confess that I was one of those who assumed that to move from John Bale’s *King Johan* (1538) to Shakespeare’s *King John* (c. 1596) or from *King Leir* (c. 1596) to *King Lear* (1604)—a space of less than ten years!—was to leap free from an ancient Christian world (a world where all the questions had the same answer, which had to do with God’s plan for England, for humankind, and for you) and to find oneself in an airy, question-filled, open-minded modernity where those hoary old stories about Providence could have no traction. They could not begin to explain the world Shakespeare lived in.

My work along these lines reached its apogee (or maybe its nadir) in a book I wrote with Tony Dawson. In *The Culture of Playgoing in Shakespeare’s England: A Collaborative Debate* (2001), Tony argued that it is not possible to understand Shakespeare’s theatre without understanding the religious culture of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The playhouse was not, of course, of a piece with religion (he said), but religion and theatre were nevertheless complexly and deeply connected. I was having none of that. The playhouse was so successful (I argued) precisely because it was the one place one could go to get away from the endless struggles between Catholics and Protestants. Was the bread really Christ’s body or just a souvenir of his body, was there such a thing as Purgatory, was the Queen the head of the Church or the worst heretic in the world? When early moderns had had enough of such questions, they could take a holiday in the wonderful, new, secular space of the playhouse, where the centre of attention was the social and political world, the competition for status and power, and the psychology of the person rather than questions about theology, liturgy, and the fate of people’s souls.

The Culture of Playgoing didn’t address the question of periodicity directly, but my account of the theatre in the book imagined the playhouse as if it were so remarkably in advance of its own age and so oriented toward futurity that it was as if it could give birth to a new world—our world—even while operating in the midst of an old one.

I have learned a lot since we wrote that book. This was partly because I had already, in other publications, started to explore the lines of continuity and difference between Shakespeare and writers like John Bale and John Foxe. Also because I had begun to see the sense of an argument like Debora Shuger’s in *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance* (1990) that New Historicism had been, among other things, only the latest stage in the turn away from religion in so much of early modern studies and that it was high time to turn back. It was also on account of writing the debate book itself. Tony’s complex understanding of Shakespeare and religion and his rethinking of playgoing in

terms of Richard Hooker's idea of Eucharistic "participation" made an impression on me and began to open my ears wider to the religious language (like the word "holiday," which I just used unthinkingly two paragraphs ago) and open my mind to religious thinking in Shakespeare. Shuger's argument that religion was itself the key site of radical questioning and intellectual experimentation in early modernity also helped me to move forward.

My work with colleagues in the Conversions project over the past several years has revealed to me a continent-sized field of study, or a constellation of fields of study, which I will never be able to master or even compass in rough outline, but which has nevertheless persuaded me that Shakespeare can be grasped only by taking down some of those iron curtains between, on one side, his writing and the "early modern" period that his writing exemplifies and, on the other, the worlds of writing, and the world, that came before him (and seems also to have been all around him). The Bible is fundamental of course along with writing by figures such as Augustine, but someone like John Bale or the playwrights who crafted the Catholic Corpus Christi plays, which were suppressed by the Elizabethan authorities, are even more important for me to take newly into account precisely because they are so near in time to him and yet seem so different.

But I have another confession, one even graver than the first since it might be revelatory of a certain continuing and willful blindness. I still think that something happened between, say, Bale and Shakespeare that amounts to a conversion of history—a wholesale move from one period to another—something that seems to me a transformation of the world itself. In my heart of hearts, I think about this shift as the emergence of something that it makes sense to call "modernity." So I am faced here with a question about my own entanglement in what Hayot calls "institutional time." Is my understanding of Shakespeare and history and of the shape of history itself bound within the fossilized structures of institutionalized literary periodization?

I am going to answer no, even though I'm conscious that my claim for freedom of thought and clear vision might be put in question by theoretical arguments like Hayot's, by Jacques Le Goff's large-scale historical proposal (in *Must We Divide History into Periods?*) for "a long Middle Ages in the Christian West that extends from late antiquity . . . to the middle of the eighteenth century" (x), or by a number of specific literary-historical arguments for lines of continuity between the Catholic drama, still alive in the middle of the sixteenth century, and the late sixteenth-century and early seventeenth-century drama of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. In the face of these lines of critique, however, I will nevertheless argue that periodicity is valuable and indeed indispensable when we are thinking about history and historical change. That, by the way, is Le Goff's general argument also.

Hayot's indictment of how we have institutionalized periodicity in our scholarship and teaching of literature is well taken; and he is no naïf who would claim that all periodicity is merely an illegitimate imposition on the complex flows of historical time. Nevertheless, he does not take at all adequately into account the creativity of periodization at its best, or the ways in which periodization enables historical understanding or fosters an ethical relationship with the past (more about that in a moment). On the strength of Le Goff's general argument, we can say that periodization is *the* constitutive attribute of history:

Even if breaking time into segments is something historians cannot help but do, no matter whether history is regarded as the study of the evolution of societies, or as a particular type of knowledge and teaching, or else as the unfolding of time itself, periodization is more than a

mere collection of chronological units. It contains also the idea of transition, of one thing turning into another; indeed, when change is sufficiently far-reaching in its effects, a new period represents a repudiation of the entire social order of the one preceding it. It is for this reason that periods have a very special meaning: in their very succession, in both the temporal continuity this succession embodies and the rupture of temporal continuity that it brings about, they constitute an inescapable object of inquiry for the historian (Le Goff, 2).

Without periodization, there is no history—neither the thing studied and in part constituted by the discipline of history nor the discipline itself.

Some periodizations “repudiate” (Le Goff’s word) past ages. I tend to do that when I undertake to dig out a deep trench in the little piece of ground between Shakespeare and Bale’s *King Johan* or the York Corpus Christi Plays. But some forms of periodization do not feature any strong sense of repudiation or transition. Some kinds of biographical periodization, like Jaques’ “seven ages of man” speech in *As You Like It* (2.7.139-166), assemble a number of life stages that have nothing much to do with one another except that they succeed each other and they are parts of a whole. A foundational work of historiographical periodization like Daniel’s dream (in the Book of Daniel, 7) of the four beasts that represent the four ages of human history has a character similar to Jaques’ set piece. Historical periods for Daniel add up to a succession of more or less discrete parts rather than to something akin to the chapters in a coherent, dynamic narrative.

Conversion, which is neither repudiation nor mere succession, is the most creative form of periodization with respect both to the individual life and the life of the world. Augustine does not cut away the life he led before his conversion; rather, the meaning of his pre-conversion life changes utterly by being gathered into a coherent narrative that now leads through sin toward his transformative turning toward God. His pre-conversion life, formerly a welter of desire (and real love), ambition, and sin-wracked suffering, emerges from the viewpoint of his conversion as newly and definitively meaningful. In a strong sense, he needs his early life to have been sinful and sorrowful in order to make his conversion possible. The birth of Jesus, the emergence of Christianity, and the writing of the Christian Bible do not sever Christian time from the biblical time of the Jews. It is not like some new train driver uncoupling the rearward cars and leaving them to die on the old track, but rather a new driver and a new engine taking the rearward cars onto a new track and into a new landscape so that the meaning of the older cars is transformed completely and made an integral part of a new train. The Christian Bible does that sort of thing deftly, for instance, with the Book of Daniel, where the coming of “the son of Man” (7.13) is transformed from a Jewish prophetic vision into a prophecy of the Christian displacement of the Jews from the centre of God’s concern, favour, and plan for human history.

Conversional periodization affords us the distance we need to achieve some degree of objective knowledge of the past. Since it doesn’t sever the past from what succeeds it, but rather revises the meaning of the past by gathering it into a new narrative, conversional periodization also enables (but does not, of course, guarantee) what Amy Jean Scott calls “ethical historiography.” The character Oliver in *As You Like It* celebrates his conversion from his old self—he was envious, devious, and violent—but he doesn’t disown that old self, since who he was before his turning toward love and brotherhood is the sinful ground from which his new self has emerged. The contrast between old and new is formative of who he has become. In answer to Celia’s question (are you the man who tried to kill his own brother?) he answers: “’Twas I; but ’tis not I. I do not shame / To tell you what I was, since my conversion / So sweetly tastes, being the thing I am.” (4.3.135-7). On a much larger

scale, the historical moment of *Antony and Cleopatra* stands at the threshold of the birth of Christ and the emergence of what Antony calls, with uncanny, half-knowing anticipation “new heaven, new earth” (1.1.17-18; the phrase is from Revelation 21.1: “And I saw a new heaven and a new earth”). The shortcomings of the pagan lovers are situated critically by the impending advent of the “new earth” that, we are repeatedly reminded, is just at hand (the Battle of Actium, which led to the destruction of Antony and Cleopatra, took place 31 BCE), but the extraordinary skyward reach of the lovers’ language (two examples from 4.8—“O thou / day o’ th’ world”; “Lord of lords! / O infinite virtue”) amounts to a poetic precursor of the impending world of Christian revelation.

Shakespeare took a keen interest in history. This period in England saw an extraordinary efflorescence of historical writing, including works on classical and modern history, global histories, translations of the historical writings of Antiquity and modern Italy and France, local histories, and studies of historical method. History played a central role in the struggles of the English Reformation, with a work such as Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments* (1563), arguing for the apostolic primacy of the English Church. The many histories of England inculcated national pride and aroused a sense of political belonging in their readers. Shakespeare took part in the creation of a sense of English nationhood by writing English history for the many English men and women who could not read and who could not have afforded to buy the new history books even if they could have read them. Shakespeare spent about half his time in the first decade of his work in the theatre writing plays about English history—two four-play sequences plus *King John* (*Henry VIII* came later and was co-authored).

Shakespeare’s historiographical interest, especially his critical thinking about periodization and conversion, was triggered by the destruction of the Spanish Armada in 1588, which occasioned an outpouring of prophetic, apocalyptic publications that celebrated the proof of England’s special place in God’s plan and looked forward to the definitive historical conversion—the end of history and the elevation of the English nation to the leadership of the new, permanent salvific order. Shakespeare began his career as a playwright in the heady aftermath of the Armada defeat and also importantly in the inevitable season of disappointment that set in when nothing much happened, certainly nothing apocalyptic, in the months and then years following the Armada.

Since the possibility of the end of history or even the birth of a new age had been put deeply in question by the unremarkable day-after-day movement of time following the Armada, the history plays Shakespeare wrote in the 1590s, especially the plays of the second Henriad, do not develop a model of periodization. Rather, they experiment with critical periodizing. The plays recognize that historical periods are not “out there,” somehow separate from the people who live inside them. Historical periods are in fact the creation of people’s collective imaginations, interests, and judgments. That doesn’t make historical periods in any sense unreal, but it does mean that they are always open to challenge, rethinking, and revision. In the second Henriad, Shakespeare represents critically the world-creating practices of biographical and historiographical periodizing.

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At the workshop, I’ll offer a brief summary of the argument I am developing here. I will also relate my argument to the work of Gadamer and Mark Phillips. I’ll focus in some detail on how Shakespeare rethinks periodization as critical periodizing in the second Henriad, and I’ll suggest how that rethinking provides a strong response to Eric Hayot’s complaint against institutional periodization by enabling us to fashion a far more mobile, dynamic, and critical model of historical periodization.

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