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Special Feature

ENLIGHTENING THE RENAISSANCE

SPECIAL FEATURE INTRODUCTION

"ENLIGHTENING THE RENAISSANCE"

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Special Feature Editor

The recent emphasis in literary studies on redrawing disciplinary boundaries has blurred a number of previously entrenched distinctions: between low and high culture, for example, or between history and literature. But it has not had a similar effect on period divisions. Although young scholars in literature departments now identify themselves as new historicists or cultural critics, they continue to separate themselves into categories according to a set of more or less arbitrary dates. Nomenclatural changes, such as the much-ballyhooed shift from "Renaissance" and "eighteenth century" to "early modern," have failed to alter disciplinary habits of specialization. For Kevin Cope, the editor of this journal, "early modern" appears to mean "1650–1850," whereas for those working with Tudor and Stuart culture, it means "1485–1642." Graduate schools, meanwhile, encourage an ever higher degree of periodicity. Whereas a liberal arts education encourages students to develop their wit by see similarities in dissimilar things, today's graduate schools inculcate the more sober virtue of judgment by urging students to find similarities in similar things. Curricula enforce this bias by providing few cross period classes. In the five years that I have taught in the graduate program at the University of North Texas, we have made available only two such classes to our students—a course on British comedy from Lyly to Wilde and one on satire from Juvenal to David Lodge.

Perhaps the resistance to cross-period scholarship in the postmodern academy has something to do with a prejudice against the old-fashioned "tradition and the individual talent" approach to literary history. In addition, modern methodologies have so expanded our notion of what constitutes a text that young scholars experience difficulty mastering the primary materials of one era, let alone those from other eras. To the Shakespeares and Swifts, we have added the Haywoods and Speghts, the Swetnams and Ducks. Although this expansive canon is in many ways to be applauded, it has helped to ensure that, as Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn put it, "we are fast becoming a profession of specialties and subspecialties."[1] This is an unfortunate state of affairs for a number of reasons, the most germane being that a rigid sense of period leads to a kind of scholarly myopism. In the process of attaining disciplinary breadth, we may well have sacrificed depth.

This special feature suggests that we need not forgo either. It originates in a series of panels on the Renaissance and the eighteenth century that Chad Thomas and I organized for the annual meetings of the South Central Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies. The submissions that Chad and I received were few in quantity but high in quality. When Kevin Cope attended one of our panels and noted the large and enthusiastic audience that it drew, he asked me to put together this special feature for *1650–1850*. My hope is that the special feature will help establish cross-period scholarship as the rich field of inquiry that it is.

Thomas's essay on Interregnum drama offers perhaps the most apposite critique of our tendency to specialize. In the average English

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[1] Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn, "Introduction," *Redrawing the Boundaries*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn (New York: Modern Language Association, 1992), 2.

Department's division of labor, the years 1642–60 form something of a black hole, claimed neither by the Renaissance scholars nor by the Restoration and eighteenth-century specialists. The convenient assumption among drama scholars in particular is that the English drama died with the closing of the theaters in 1642 and was resurrected with the restoration of the monarchy in 1660. Thomas calls that assumption into question by tracking the survival of a lively and politicized dramatic tradition in the Interregnum works of William Davenant and John Tatham. According to Thomas, plays like *The Cruelty of Spaniards in Peru* (1658) and *The Distracted Estate* (1651) adapt the conventions of a conservative genre—Renaissance tragedy—to comment subversively on the miseries of living under the Protectorate. Several of the works that Thomas examines have received little or no attention from other scholars; others have been dismissed as mere curiosities. By recuperating these plays for critical analysis and by insisting on the connections of Interregnum drama to the rest of the English tradition, Thomas challenges standard scholarly wisdom on the matter.

Like Thomas, the other contributors to this collection remind us that the kind of exchanges that interest cultural critics take place not just horizontally, across a given culture, but also vertically, across time. Miranda Wilson's essay on Cavendish's use of Renaissance architectural theories in *Bell in Campo* (1662) offers a case in point. Theorists like Andre Palladio and Henry Wotton thought of architecture as a "universal language"; to these writers, buildings expressed ideas of order, hierarchy, and authority. Not surprisingly, these ideas reflected the power structures and gender hierarchies obtaining in early modern society. Wilson argues, however, that because of a lag between Renaissance theory on architecture and neoclassical implementation of that theory, Cavendish was able to redirect the masculinist discourse of Renaissance architecture towards an interrogation of early modern notions of female virtue. *Bell in Campo*'s Madame Jantil apparently conforms to the cultural ideal of feminine silence. But in fact she speaks eloquently through the monumental tomb that she designs and builds for her dead husband, whose power to speak she thus appropriates for herself. By reading *Bell in Campo* through the lens of Renaissance architectural theory, Wilson uncovers an important new mode of resistance in Cavendish's work.

The claim that Madame Jantil's monumental tomb reveals her desire to speak receives support from another essay in the collection, which concerns the connections between poetic speech and images of monuments in the English tradition. Marlin Blaine tracks the trajectory of the Horatian monument topos from its inception as a device of poetic and nationalist self-assertion to its association, during the civil war and the Interregnum, with conservative values and royalist sympathies, and to its final transformation, in the hands of neoclassical writers, into a critique of the native tradition that the topos initially had celebrated. As each succeeding age re-edified the poem-as-monument trope, it accumulated a series of intertwined meanings. The ironies attending Waller's use of monumental imagery in "Of English Verse" (1686), for example, will be lost to those unfamiliar with the trope's long history. Blaine's richly evocative description of the "monumental poet" as a literary emperor, who conquers and colonizes other nations and time periods, casts light on the dynamics that shaped not just the English canon but also English national identity, more broadly speaking. By becoming "not of an age, but for all time," according to Blaine, Shakespeare simultaneously advanced the cause of his fame and that of the British empire.

As Blaine notes, however, eighteenth-century revisions of Shakespeare's works do mark the limits of the poet's transcendence of temporal boundaries. Jack Lynch's examination of one set of such revisions—the notorious case of *King Lear*—suggests that Shakespeare was the most produced playwright in the eighteenth century not so much because he was "for all time" but because he could be made to conform to another age. In the hands of his eighteenth-century readers, the imperial poet often became the victim of colonization. Through his fascinating collection of eighteenth-century comments on *Lear*, Lynch demonstrates that those who changed Shakespeare's masterpiece imagined themselves as the playwright's redeemers. They saved *Lear* not just from egregious errors introduced in the printing process, but also from more abstract forms of corruption, like those deriving from the "barbarous" age in which Shakespeare had lived. By stripping *Lear* of its alien elements, these revisers imagined themselves to be uncovering a pure, unadulterated, essential Shakespeare. To eighteenth-century editors and adaptors, Shakespeare was most brilliant when he was most like themselves.

Like Lynch, Jennifer Vaught is interested in the ways that Shakespeare shaped and was shaped by eighteenth century culture. The cult of sensibility has long been seen as an eighteenth-century phenomenon. Vaught, however, makes a convincing case for its early emergence in Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale* (1610–11). Not only does this play share many of the patterns present in later sentimental literature, it also pioneers an ideal of masculinity grounded in affect. To be sure, Leontes at first views masculinity in terms of a separation from traditionally feminine attributes, including emotion and passion. But he comes to abandon this definition in favor of one that emphasizes the successful integration of masculine and feminine. As Vaught suggests, the high levels of affect that accompany Leontes's final conversion may well explain David Garrick's attraction to *A Winter's Tale*. His 1757 revision of the play aimed to please a sentimental age by intensifying the emotionalism of the male characters. Garrick thus contributed to the emerging mythos of Shakespeare as a man of feeling.

Not all eighteenth-century readers felt the need to bring Renaissance authors in conformity with contemporary tastes. The final essay in this group, by Elaine Anderson Phillips, examines Samuel Richardson's many references to literary theories of the previous two centuries. In the prefaces to his novels, Richardson turned to the ideas of authors like Sir Philip Sidney and Madeleine de Scudéry to dissociate himself from recent predecessors like Daniel Defoe and Eliza Haywood and from near contemporaries like Henry Fielding and Tobias Smollett. Through his evocation of an earlier literary sensibility, Richardson defended his fledgling art form from the common charges of triviality and amorality. He transformed Sidney's assertion of the didactic superiority of poetry to history, for example, so as to address the particular circumstances of the novel, a possibility left open in Sidney's treatise by the inclusion of prose as a form of poetry. As Phillips's reading of Lovelace as a Sidneyan poet gone wild reveals, however, Richardson had reservations about the powers that Sidney and others attributed to poetic eloquence. Insofar as these aspects of Renaissance theory privileged textual *jouissance* over moral instruction, they seemed to legitimate the writings of Richardson's rivals. And in turning to the Renaissance, Richardson, it seems, wished to avoid what he considered to be the barbarities of his own age.

As the essays in this special issue demonstrate, far from being incompatible with contemporary approaches to literature and culture, cross-period scholarship lends itself to a wide range of critical methodologies. The approaches that our authors assay include feminism, cultural criticism, performance history, and textual criticism. Each essay makes its contribution by considering one particular mode of approach towards the past, by recording one set of exchanges across time. Taken together, the essays make a broader point. When it comes to figuring out the eighteenth century, the Renaissance turns out to be quite enlightening.