Forum

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The Term *Early Modern*

To the Editor:

A recent exchange of letters between Frances E. Dolan and Crystal Downing pivots on Dolan's decision to trace continuities over a long historical period (Forum, 109 [1994]: 119–20). Whether or not Dolan's incisive article would have benefited from a different concept of periodization, this correspondence points up a broader subject that has as yet received too little attention: the problems inherent in the designation *early modern.*

As other critics have done, Dolan defends that label by citing the practice of historians. Fair enough, but one should add that students of Tudor and Stuart history debate whether the early modern period starts with Bosworth Field or with Henry VIII's administrative reforms or with the several revolutions of the seventeenth century and so on. Freighted with their usual consciousness of the perils of periodization, historians are more likely to use *early modern* and similar terms as heuristic devices than as definitive categories. If we are to borrow *early modern* from historians, we should borrow as well the unease with which they apply it.

The term has served students of English literature and culture well in some ways, badly in others. I share Dolan's discomfort with the obvious alternative, *Renaissance*, on the grounds that it privileges certain groups in the culture. Moreover, *early modern* has had the salutary effect of emphasizing economic continuities between periods that are rigidly separated by the designation *Renaissance*. Yet the shift from *Renaissance* to *early modern* has created a number of problems, including some of the very difficulties that the newer term was designed to avoid. First of all, *early modern* serves to designate the Middle Ages as Other, an error reminiscent of Burckhardt (cf. Lee Patterson, "On the Margin: Postmodernism, Ironic History, and Medieval Studies," *Speculum* 65 [1990]: esp. 91–101). Foucauldian and Marxist models of radical ruptures may encourage the creation of this sharp divide between the two eras, but it is useful to remember that Foucault himself moved away from his paradigm of the episteme—and unsettling to remember that many recent students of the Middle Ages have found in their own period characteristics often seen as prototypically early modern.

The category of early modern may invite misreading of the period to which it refers as well as of the medieval one. The designation is rooted in part in an emphasis on protocapitalism, but England's economy in the

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sixteenth and seventeenth centuries might also be described as late feudal in at least some senses of that contested concept. In particular, regional variations, an issue that students of literature too often slight, complicate such analyses, with London and large towns like Bristol and Norfolk closer to a mercantile economy, while older agrarian patterns—as well as less centralized government, a related phenomenon—were alive and well elsewhere. *Early modern* risks imposing an unjustly teleological perspective on this diverse economy. Moreover, to emphasize the growth of capitalism in a schema of periodization is to privilege certain groups over others that were less affected by that growth—much the same mistake for which many critics rightly fault the category of the Renaissance. If the "Sons of Summer" of Herrick's "Hock-Cart" or the wife of a wealthy landowner in Northumberland did not participate in a Renaissance, surely neither did they participate in many of the economic or administrative changes subsumed under the term *early modern*.

Early modern may also invite misreadings of the period to which it refers by emphasizing larger historical divisions at the expense of smaller ones, the problem to which Downing alludes. Certainly in some instances broader units are appropriate, as Dolan rightly maintains. Yet we need to orchestrate the study of such units with other modes of periodization. Richard Helgerson has inflected the insights of new historicism by stressing generations (see, e.g., *Self-Crowned Laureates: Spenser, Jonson, Milton, and the Literary System*, Berkeley: U of California P, 1983); I have argued that the mortality crisis of 1557–59 created a significant generational divide ("The Message from Marcade: Parental Death in Tudor and Stuart England," *Attending to Women in Early Modern England*, ed. Betty S. Travitsky and Adele F. Seeff, Newark: U of Delaware P; London: Associated UP–Golden Cockerel, 1994). Even more minute distinctions are often valuable; English Petrarchism, for instance, was viewed differently in 1591 and in 1595.

The focus on the modern in *early modern* is also troubling. The concepts of modern and modernity are contested among students of twentieth-century literature. But even—or especially—if scholars simply agree that *early modern* refers to anticipations of our culture, one must confront the problems that have been termed "presentism." Emphasis on how Tudor and Stuart England anticipates our world privileges that epoch much as the term *Renaissance* does (cf. Patterson 91–101)—and thus encourages what many critics now recognize as one of the principal problems of otherwise exciting recent scholarship: the neglect of religion.

I certainly do not propose an uncritical return to *Renaissance*. Nor can I win fame and fortune, such as they are in our profession, by offering the ideal alternative. (I variously use *early modern*, *Renaissance*, *Stuart*, *early seventeenth century*, and so on.) One solution to this lack of solutions is Gerald Graff's adage about teaching the conflicts; I sometimes introduce periodization and related problems on the first day of classes by showing students several different syllabi, my own plus others written by different teachers for ostensibly comparable courses.

Studying the problematics of periodization can also be a useful way of studying the academy as text. Many professors insist on conceiving the history of our discipline in terms of radical breaks such as the apocalyptic decline that certain traditional critics date around 1970 or the millenarian enlightenment that practitioners of more contemporary methodologies are prone to locate in the same period; this predilection may well be both cause and effect of our applying a similar ruptural model to English history. Above all, the term *early modern* caught on quickly in part because it functions like a badge, a ready way for scholars practicing contemporary modes of criticism to distinguish themselves from their predecessors and recognize one another; the label *Renaissance* sometimes serves a similar function in other circles. It is an unfortunate symptom of the binary and embattled mode of thinking that haunts many decisions in the academy today that English professors often feel the need to categorize themselves and one another so glibly. "'Who's there?' 'Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself.'"

HEATHER DUBROW
University of Wisconsin, Madison

Reply:

I think it is significant that many scholars, including both Heather Dubrow and me, use a range of periodizations, adopting whichever one best suits the project at hand and recognizing that each has drawbacks. As a result, instead of a new consensus (*early modern*, for instance) replacing an old (*Renaissance*), the possibilities are proliferating. This multiplicity and the concomitant necessity of choosing mean that it is necessary to reflect constantly on periodization. Just as I position my work in relation to a variety of

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