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0521683068 - Shakespeare and the Middle Ages: Inaugural Lecture
Delivered 29 April 2005
Helen Cooper
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Professor Kerrigan, ladies and gentlemen

I take it that an inaugural lecture should be part celebration, part polemic and part scholarship. The ‘celebration’ aspect is an easy one to fulfil. Chaucer, imitating Dante, famously represented himself at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde* as the humble sixth in a line of great predecessors; I find myself in the same position, and I am more than happy, like Chaucer, to kiss their steps. First of those predecessors was C. S. Lewis, for whom the Chair was founded; then Jack Bennett, one of the many great medievalist New Zealanders who transformed the subject in Britain, and after him John Stevens, both of whom taught me, as graduate and undergraduate. The last two, Jill Mann and James Simpson, were so good that England couldn’t hold onto them – a wonderful reminder that medieval studies is a subject highly valued worldwide, and that England is uniquely good at nurturing outstanding medievalists. We should celebrate too that the University released the Chair for refilling at all at a time of financial crisis, when even the entire Faculty of Architecture was threatened with demolition. It’s excellent that this post was seen as too important to let go – something I would like to think of as inherent to the subject of the Chair, for it is, of course, not just medieval: it is decidedly unusual in the United Kingdom in specifying

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[More information](#)

‘Medieval and Renaissance English’ as its title. It was invented in those terms for C. S. Lewis, and so gives a specific invitation to its holder to promote literature across the chronological divide between the two periods – except that I do not believe that ‘divide’ is the right word. I have spent much of my career, as Lewis did, in emphasising the continuity of the two, and as professor, that is what I want to *profess* – my mission statement, if you will. Hence the polemic element in this lecture.

One of the first things you do, when planning an inaugural, is to read those of your predecessors. Lewis claimed to be embarrassed at not having anything to go on, at having to create the part; but it is his lecture, which he called *De descriptione temporum* (‘On periodisation’), that struck the most immediate chord with me. ‘What most attracted me in that commission’, he wrote, ‘was the combination “Medieval and Renaissance”. I thought that by this formula the University was giving official sanction to a change which has been coming over historical opinion within my own lifetime.’¹ In support, he quoted Jean Seznec: ‘As the Middle Ages and the Renaissance come to be better known, the traditional antithesis between them grows less marked.’ He also quoted, as a counter-example, an undergraduate exam paper that described Sir Thomas Wyatt as ‘the first man who scrambled ashore out of the great, dark surging sea of the

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[More information](#)

Middle Ages' – a metaphor, if you think about it, based not on an idea of a shipwrecked mariner (since there is no room in the analogy for a ship), but of the first amphibian desperately trying to make the transition from mindless fish to intelligent mammal.

That was written almost exactly fifty years ago, in December 1954, so giving plenty of time, one would think, for that traditional antithesis to grow even less marked. In some ways, it has indeed become so. An increasing closeness is visible institutionally, in the various centres of Medieval and Renaissance Studies that have been founded since Lewis's time; and many academic posts are now advertised as jointly Medieval–Renaissance. All too often, however, that linking of the periods serves as a cover for the downgrading of the Middle Ages. Joint posts are all too often a coding for the suppression of any distinctively medieval teaching: you appoint an early modernist, and that is what they teach. New developments in theory, together with the expansion of literature in the New Englishes, mean that something has to give way in the undergraduate curriculum, and that something is all too often Middle English. Even centres of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, or the Medieval–Renaissance M.Phil. here in Cambridge, still tend to provide a choice of specialisation in one period or the other rather than offering any real commitment to the

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[More information](#)

abolition of the divide between them. The only exception commonly allowed is that little bit of history between the traditional end of the English Middle Ages at the battle of Bosworth, which saw off the romantic Plantagenets and gave power to the bureaucratic Tudors, and the Reformation. That half century down to 1540 or so is often treated as if it encompassed in itself all of what 'Medieval-Renaissance' means: as if the shoreline crossed by the amphibian Wyatt were the only link between the primeval past and the bright modern future.

And 'primeval' is, I suspect, the right word. The casual use of 'medieval' to mean barbaric, primitive in a bad sense, is all-pervasive. Read any newspaper, listen to any current affairs programme, and you will find the word perpetually used as an all-purpose term of abuse. 'Renaissance', on the other hand, is entirely good: it indicates the bringing back of something lost, or almost lost, not as a reversion to the past, but as progress. Both words in practice function as value terms much more than as objective terminology for historical periods. Hence also the tendency to describe anything good in the Middle Ages as a renaissance, so that we have the ninth-century Renaissance, the twelfth-century Renaissance, or Chaucer himself as being really a Renaissance figure. We filter out the best things, in fact, as being not genuinely medieval, and leave behind just what we don't like. It's high time we had

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[More information](#)

a renaissance of the Middle Ages: we need some kind of change of heart so that when we say 'medieval', the word doesn't invoke the non-functioning or the retrograde or the barbaric.

The shift in terminology that has tended to substitute 'early modern' for 'Renaissance' has served only to intensify the problem. 'Renaissance' means the rebirth of Classics, and so the Middle Ages have to be dismissed or eliminated in order for the purity of sixteenth-century neo-Classicism to be affirmed. But the early modern, by definition, is the not-medieval. Early modernists, even more than humanists, define themselves *against* the Middle Ages; the medieval is what you reject in order to construct the early modern, and if you have rejected it, why go rooting in rubbish bins? So for both sets of scholars, the humanist and the early modernist, it appears to follow that they do not need to know about the Middle Ages. Things that medievalists, who are more habituated to thinking forward, take for granted, are therefore often completely outside not just the comprehension but the range of visibility of many scholars of the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries. And the ignorance matters, not just because it's factually wrong to imagine that the post-Reformation world encompasses everything worth having, or to credit it with originating all kinds of things it actually inherited from the Middle Ages (so confirming

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[More information](#)

the dismissal of the Middle Ages as a period of stagnation and decline). It matters because we can't fully understand the early modern world, or the literature it produced, without understanding where it comes from and what it carries with it.

That sheer blindness to the Middle Ages is often a result of the fact that we are still its beneficiaries. It is worrying enough that we can so easily practise the doublethink that at once condemns the Middle Ages for their lack of technological advance even while we marvel at the great cathedrals; but at least cathedrals are visibly medieval, whereas that other great technological wonder, the mechanical clock, is just too familiar to see at all, though its invention in the fourteenth century had colossal implications for the secularisation and commodification of time – for our modern understanding of time, in fact. We tend to have the same blindness towards institutions, which the Middle Ages were brilliant at inventing. Universities were invented in the twelfth century, along with lectures: we would not be here now, in this lecture hall, if it were not for our medieval forebears. The common law was similarly a twelfth-century invention; and representative democracy, in the form of parliament, originated in the thirteenth. The Middle Ages were also highly skilled at what you might call mental technologies. Compared with such familiar medieval icons

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[More information](#)

as knights in shining armour, double-entry bookkeeping appears utterly unglamorous, but it was an invention that made the modern economic and commercial world possible.² The alphabetical index similarly is still the greatest information retrieval system ever invented, even in an electronic age.³ The trouble is that these are all things that are so much *there* that we take them for granted, forgetting that they ever needed to be invented in the first place; and if we do notice that invention might have been required at some point, too many people would not even put the Middle Ages on their list of possibilities.

In just the same way, we take language for granted. Modern English was invented, developed, over the course of the Middle Ages. In 1100, the native vernacular was Old English; by 1500, modern English was in place – effectively the language we have now, in syntax, morphology, in pronunciation (as a consequence of the Great Vowel Shift of the early fifteenth century), and in the distinctive shape of the vocabulary, an Old English base with a generous mix of higher-register words deriving from French and Latin.⁴ The language of Shakespeare was forged in the course of those four centuries. Of course he did things with the English language that no one had dreamed of doing before; but he could not have done any of that without that infinitely morphing linguistic complex we know as Middle English, as the ground out of

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[More information](#)

which modern English had emerged. It is that history that gives English its unique richness of poly-etymological vocabulary, with its core of simple, strong, largely single-syllable Old-English-derived words, which Shakespeare (unlike many of his contemporaries) knew how to trust. He recognised that it was those that made the most powerful poetic and dramatic effects:

Men have died from time to time, and worms have eaten
them, but not for love.⁵

Light thickens, and the crow
Makes wing to the rooky wood.
Good things of day begin to droop and drowse.⁶

Comparable things happened with poetic form. The English Middle Ages produced its own mixture, unique in Europe, of lines that worked through a flexible mix of stress and syllable count, usually but not necessarily held together by rhyme.⁷ Again, we take it for granted – but poetic form, like the correct nature of the English language itself, was a matter for intense debate in the sixteenth century: such issues were keenly visible then, as they tend not to be now. And the result of all those debates, was an opting for medieval freedom over various humanist attempts to regulate and prescribe.

Those examples, of language and poetic form, should be enough to show that I am not arguing that Shakespeare

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[More information](#)

or anyone else inherited the Middle Ages and stopped there. Change continued, and we notice the changes; but we need to rediscover how to *wonder* at the continuities that underlie them too. Those continuities moreover extend into all corners of early modern (and indeed modern) culture; and we need to understand them if we are to have full cultural or literary competence – a full understanding of what we read. As T. S. Eliot noted, every text brings an entire tradition with it; if we get the tradition wrong, we are getting the text wrong too.⁸ And many, many things that are typically claimed as distinctively modern were already there in the Middle Ages. To list just a few that have recently been claimed as defining features of ‘The Modern’: a sense of subjecthood (and let us not forget that Augustine said what amounted to ‘I think, therefore I am’ eleven centuries before Descartes, as Descartes’ friends did not fail to point out to him);⁹ or the understanding of language as a sign system – again, brilliantly expounded by Augustine in his *De doctrina christiana*, and taken for granted throughout the Middle Ages, with everything that follows from that; dialogism, especially as the embodiment in narrative of the idea that the world has multiple and irreconcilable meanings; fallible narrators; implied speech and free indirect discourse and idiolects. All of those are found in abundance in (for

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instance) Chaucer, and we can't filter them off as being non-medieval.

We do not have to rely on Chaucer alone for such things: predictions of the modern are equally strong in non-Chaucerian traditions. Especially notable are a series of feisty heroines with a strong sense of their own sexual desires, who are found in (indeed, promoted by) romance in England over the four centuries before Shakespeare, and who reappear in characters such as Spenser's Britomart, and Shakespeare's Juliet and Rosalind and Portia and Helena and Thaisa and Miranda – most of whom are derived directly or indirectly from medieval sources.¹⁰ That representation of the heroine was itself a consequence of certain medieval changes to the practices of marriage and inheritance: marriage, in the mid-twelfth-century papal ruling that what made a marriage valid was the consent of the spouses;¹¹ and inheritance, in that firmer rules of primogeniture meant that if a man died without leaving a son, his land and wealth passed to his daughter.¹² The result of the changes was to give a degree of erotic autonomy to women, and significant erotic and political and economic patronage to the heiress. Together they constitute an important counterbalance to the current stereotype of pre- or early modern women as commodities traded between men.¹³ The change does not alter their status as capital assets, but it does allow them