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## Introduction: Scottish Literature and Periodization

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## INTRODUCTION: SCOTTISH LITERATURE AND PERIODIZATION

*Juliet Shields*

The way we organize the study of literature is changing. Until comparatively recently, it was normative for scholars to specialize in the literature of a particular time and place—for instance Victorian Britain or Colonial America—and for English majors to take survey courses that traced the development of a national literature over time, in addition to classes on genres, topics, or methodological approaches. Diminishing budgets and increasingly globalized campuses, among other factors, have begun to challenge this diachronic model of disciplinary organization. Periodization has also come under theoretical scrutiny, with Ted Underwood and others arguing that it is neither a natural nor an inevitable way to organize our discipline. As just one alternative to periodization among many, Underwood points to “the discipline of history itself, where the looser concept of ‘area’ occupies the institutional role that periods occupy in literary studies.”<sup>1</sup>

This symposium examines the role that periodization plays in shaping our understanding of Scottish literary history. It contends that the study of Scottish literature reveals some of the problems of periodization and could help us to explore alternative ways of organizing literary study. For a start, Scottish literature is often conceived of as an “area” within literature departments in a way that English literature never is. Those who teach Scottish literature may be responsible for covering Henryson and Dunbar to Kelman and Welsh. Moreover, Scottish literature encompasses multiple languages. It could refer to works composed in Scots, Gaelic, English, or Latin; and each of these bodies of literature observes different trends over

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<sup>1</sup> Ted Underwood, *Why Literary Periods Mattered: Historical Contrast and the Prestige of English Studies* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 2-3. For other recent challenges to periodization as a way of organizing literary study, see Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London: Verso, 2013), and Nirvana Tanoukhi, “The Scale of World Literature,” *New Literary History*, 39:3-4 (2008): 599-617.

time. And, of course, these various linguistic strands of Scottish literature might also be considered as part of British literature.

It wouldn't occur to scholars of Anglophone African or Indian literatures on the one hand, or of French or German on the other hand, to use period categories derived from English literature to organize or describe the bodies of literature on which they work. Yet until fairly recently, scholars of Scottish literature have done this routinely. Of course, Scottish literature is not entirely analogous to Anglophone African or Indian literatures. From the early seventeenth century onwards, its autonomous literary traditions are incorporated into a corpus of British literature. Perhaps, then, it makes sense that Scottish literature should be organized largely by period categories derived from English literature—or does it? How might the periodization of British literature change if it was derived from Scottish rather than English literature? What if, instead of Scottish Chaucerians, we talked about English Dunbarians; or if, instead of referring to the Scottish Enlightenment, we described the mid eighteenth century as a period of English Stagnation?

While these questions might seem silly, recent scholarship has begun to explore how Scottish literature might challenge in more subtle ways the period categories derived from English literature. For instance, *Scotland and the Borders of Romanticism* (2004), edited by Leith Davis, Ian Duncan, and Janet Sorensen, argued convincingly that Scottish literature blurs the aesthetic and ideological distinctions between the supposed antinomies of Enlightenment and Romantic. Scholars have also begun to “re-periodize” Scottish literature to reflect the broadening of a Scottish literary canon that includes more women, working-class writers, and writers of color. Douglas Gifford has asked us to reconsider the term “Scottish Renaissance” because it misleadingly implies that Scottish literature “perished” during the mid-to-late nineteenth century before its “rebirth” in the twentieth. Without denying the sense of purpose and community shared by early twentieth-century Scottish writers, Gifford advocates including literature of the late nineteenth century, much of it written by women, in that period of regeneration.<sup>2</sup>

If the use of period categories derived from English literature has produced a Scottish literary history in which certain periods appear “dead” or “fallow,” the Romantic period has long been the unacknowledged center of Scottish literary studies, particularly in North America. The years 1750 to 1830, which saw the unequivocal flourishing of imaginative literature—

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<sup>2</sup> See Douglas Gifford, “From Celtic Revival to Scottish Renaissance,” in *Gael and Lowlander in Scottish Literature: Cross-Currents in Scottish Writing in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Christopher MacLachlan and Ronald W. Renton (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2015), 216-35.

poetry, fiction, and drama—in Scotland, provide the implicit standard against which other periods are deemed lacking. The works of Tobias Smollett, John Home, Robert Fergusson, Robert Burns, Henry Mackenzie, Joanna Baillie, Walter Scott, James Hogg, John Galt, Susan Ferrier, and a whole slew of less well known writers have made Scottish literature almost synonymous with Romanticism in U.S. higher education. And, as Helen Vendler reminds us, the philosophical underpinnings of periodization, the belief that literature expresses a *zeitgeist*, is itself a Romantic one.<sup>3</sup> It's for this reason that in organizing this symposium I sought to de-center or de-prioritize Romanticism by attending to less well represented periods of Scottish literary history.

Indeed, given that periodization is precisely what's in question, it seemed to me that it would be unproductive simply to invite contributors working in different periods of Scottish literature to weigh in on the pros and cons of traditional Anglo-English literary periodization from their perspective. To arrange a symposium on periodization solely by period surely would be to risk repeating existing patterns of thought. It seemed vital to me to approach the issue from a variety of perspectives—linguistic, pedagogical, formal, and theoretical, as well as historical.

The resulting group of essays includes two with sweeping scopes—Michael Newton's on the periodization of Gaelic poetry and Sharon Alker and Holly Nelson's on the challenges that periodization poses in teaching Scottish literature—and three essays addressing the problems of periodization in Medieval, Early Modern, and Contemporary Scottish literature. While the broader essays serve as bookends to the symposium, the remaining three, in a nod to convention, are arranged chronologically.

Lest this arrangement should obscure cross-period connections among the essays, I'd like to conclude by highlighting three issues that emerged unexpectedly and repeatedly in the contributions to this symposium, namely the intersections of geography and literary form, the role of genre in periodization, and the perennial problem of the unavailability of texts. Both Andrew Klein and Erik Jaccard turn to geography to offer ways of reading that supervene historical period and national boundaries. Klein, examining the impact of Anglocentric periodization on the study of the thirteen-line alliterative stanza that flourished in England in the fourteenth century but in Scotland not until the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, observes perceptively that “periodization creates a false sense of fossilization around national boundaries.” Poems that use the thirteen-line stanza, as Klein explains, are particular to border regions and are

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<sup>3</sup> Helen Vendler, “Periodizing Modern American Poetry,” in *The Challenge of Periodization: Old Paradigms and New Perspectives*, ed. Lawrence Besserman (New York: Routledge, 1996), 233.

concerned with issues of sovereignty and colonialism. Studying them in terms of geography reveals connections that are obscured by the designations “medieval” and “early modern.” Erik Jaccard, discussing contemporary fiction, argues persuasively that opening up Scottish literary study to the cultural materialist approaches that have proved useful to recent scholarship in world systems theory would enable us to bring together works such as George Mackay Brown’s *Greenvoe* (1972) and Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water* (2010), both concerned with the environmental effects of global capitalist industries in small communities.

While Klein and Jaccard examine the intersections of genre and geography, Rivka Swenson and Michael Newton show that attending to genre can revise accepted historical narratives. Swenson’s analysis of George Mackenzie’s *Aretina* (1660), with its thick description and free indirect discourse, suggests that a harder look at the supposed void of the Scottish late seventeenth century might challenge our teleological narratives of the rise of the British novel and broaden our understanding of the romance mode in which Scottish authors have always excelled. Michael Newton represents Gaelic poets’ and scholars’ periodization of the history of Gaelic poetry as an organic process, with new ways of describing that history emerging over time. Newton points to the problem addressed, in a different context, by Klein, when he advocates genre as a more effective way of organizing literary study than periodization: the arbitrariness of periodization sunders works that share genre-specific conventions such as meter.

Sharon Alker and Holly Faith Nelson’s contribution to this symposium addresses the many factors we consider as teachers when we grapple with choices between sweeping coverage and focused depth, and between integrating Scottish works into courses on British literature or teaching courses on Scottish literature. They emphasize that one of the most important factors we must consider in making these decisions is the availability of texts, which materially limits the kinds of courses we can design. How is it possible to teach a class on nineteenth-century Scottish literature when so many of the novels written between the book-ends of Scott and Stevenson are out of print? Or to run a survey of British poetry when major anthologies include so few Scottish works? Indeed, the scarcity of easily obtainable texts—a theme that explicitly or obliquely informs Klein’s, Newton’s, and Swenson’s essays—has shaped scholars’ sense of Scottish literary history as much as it has students. Alker and Nelson’s proposed solution—a database of Scottish literature—would at once transcend and encompass distinctions of genre, geography, and history. They remind us that the digital humanities might provide the resources and the tools we need whether we choose to work within

traditional categories of periodization or to explore new ways of organizing literary study.

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