This book issues from a particular disciplinary-historical context. I belong to a generation of literary scholars for whom periodization is a foregone conclusion. Period specialty was the essential element of our applications to graduate programs. The minimum price of entry to academia was to designate oneself a medievalist, a Victorianist, and so on. I entered the English PhD program at Yale University in 2009 as an ‘Anglo-Saxonist.’ Scholarly subspecialization by time period is old news, but it has assumed a professional importance for my cohort that feels like an intensification as compared with previous generations. We were encouraged to find common cause with peers studying our period in other disciplines, a dream of transdisciplinary period coherence that James Simpson has queried on general principle. Meanwhile, the provision of full-time academic jobs in which to deepen and transmit specialist knowledge continued its decline. Hyperspecialization is an expression of the neoliberalization of higher education, the obverse of the casualization of academic labor. The fragmentation and rationalization of knowledge shapes the smallest details of professional existence, down to who is in the room. Toward the end of my time at Yale, in 2012, the early modernists in the English Department’s Medieval and Renaissance Colloquium, true to their period, filed for a divorce from the medievalists. Periodization arose as an intellectual topic for the group(s) only at our farewell meeting, when the divorce had already been finalized. (I choose the metaphor of divorce advisedly. John Milton’s *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (1643–44), prompted by Milton’s desire to secure a divorce from his seventeen-year-old wife Mary Powell, also proposes a divorce from a reading practice he names, for the first time in English, “literalism,” henceforth a keyword in anti-Jewish, anti-Catholic, and anti-‘medieval’ rhetoric.)

Not being in the room has its consequences. Invested with a political valuation, the narrative of modernity locates premodern literature and its study at the margins of the field. The episode at Yale recapitulated, at a trivial level of particularity, the historical drama whereby modernity, via the Renaissance,
detached itself from something it could then name as its Other. A symptom of this estrangement is that medievalists are expected to engage with the theories and methods central to later periods of literary study, whereas postmedievalists can afford to ignore medievalist scholarship.3 “We understand their language, but they don’t understand ours,” a medievalist friend once observed, with double meaning. We sometimes find ourselves in the position of witnessing ‘new’ scholarly movements, associated with later periods, that unwittingly resemble the work we have been presenting and publishing for years. Medievalists who wish to speak back to theoretical and methodological trends in the field are expected to represent ourselves as newcomers, or emissaries from a faraway land. Medievalists bear some responsibility for this dynamic. When we accept modernity as the limit of our intellectual energies, we consent in our own professional marginalization. Medieval/Renaissance, or med/Ren, is a standard specification for pre-1700 English literature teaching positions at colleges and smaller universities. In these cases, the exigencies of institutional resources under austerity have reunified a partitioned literary terrain; but the nonnegotiable elective is always Shakespeare. In a sense, medievalists aren’t in the room whether we are in the room or not.

There is a history behind this. In Why Literary Periods Mattered, Ted Underwood traces an important part of that history. Underwood’s book centers on the early nineteenth century. Yet its arguments about the formation of English studies return again and again to the teaching and literary representation of the Middle Ages. More even than Underwood indicates, the book demonstrates the foundational importance of medievalism to the discipline of English. Walter Scott is the hero, or villain, of the book. According to Underwood, English studies conformed to Scott’s vision of historical cultivation to an extent that present-day English professors might be embarrassed to realize. Underwood first describes this vision in its natural setting, Scott’s early Waverley novels and other contemporary novels, poems, handbooks of chronology, and public discourse about history. Underwood shows that a paradoxical proposition about history, that our inability to understand a prestigious cultural past is “the true source of cultural prestige,” gained currency in imaginative writing during Scott’s lifetime (1771–1832).4 Curiously, Romantic writers thought of history as constituted by “the contrasts, gaps, and perspectival dilemmas that make it difficult to grasp one’s connection to the past.”5 Then comes a left turn. A Scottian sense of historical difference was “institutionalized as the organizing framework of historical and literary education.”6 Underwood tracks the introduction of periods into literary and historical curricula at King’s College London and University College London
in the 1840s. Emphasizing the status quo of the 1820s and 1830s, in which London professors regularly taught the whole gamut of English literature in one term, Underwood conveys the strangeness of periodization. Here, too, medievalism looms large. The old nonperiodized curriculum, as against the racial-linguistic factionalism of Scott’s Ivanhoe, had emphasized continuity between ‘Saxon,’ ‘Norman,’ and ‘English’ phases of language history. The first course taught in the new, periodized format was a course given by Frederick Denison Maurice on the General Prologue to Geoffrey Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales.

Underwood’s argument has a social dimension. The form of historical understanding displaced by Scott and other writers had been a vision of social continuity identifiable as a fantasy-projection of the aristocracy. Regency-era writers instead stressed the unknowability of the past, but Underwood diagnoses this conception of history in turn as expressive of a specifically middle-class ethos. The speakers of John Keats’s sonnets can’t afford the Grand Tour but can feel “an immediate experience of the alienation produced by historical time.” Unlike the aristocratic Oxbridge universities, which succumbed to English studies only in the late nineteenth century, King’s and University College were founded, in the late 1820s, with the explicit charge to educate “tradesmen and yeomen.”

Maurice avowedly started with Chaucer because (Underwood’s words) “the age of Chaucer dramatizes the essentially bourgeois foundation of English nationality.” In one of Maurice’s letters, a characteristic bourgeois experience, a visit to the British Museum, triggers the theologian and professor to rhapsodize about historical and spiritual transcendence. The covertly middle-class aesthetic of Scott’s historical novels became the covertly middle-class sensibility of literary studies. More embarrassing news for English professors.

We inhabit a truly bizarre cul-de-sac in Underwood’s story. Periodization is today a familiar object of critique within and beyond medieval studies. The history and limitations of periodization are the stuff of whole books, conferences, journal essay clusters. The trendy English Institute devoted a conference to the topic over a decade ago, in 2008. When the Yale early modernists divorced the medievalists, everyone knew to arrange a periodization-themed sendoff, as self-defeating as such an event would, by definition, be. We have internalized the ultimate artificiality of periodization. But the overall structure of the English department curriculum has scarcely changed since the 1840s. Underwood published Why Literary Periods Mattered in 2013. He could have published it, without altering a word, in 2020. The professors have only interpreted the curriculum, in various ways; the point is to change it. Having absorbed its principal rival, comparative literature, in the middle of the twentieth century, periodization is, if
anything, more dominant than ever as the governing principle of literary studies. Underwood historicizes this principle and brings its bourgeois politics back into focus, rescuing us from “amnesia about the whole history of the discipline before New Criticism.” In doing so, he incidentally shows that medieval Britain always had a simultaneously intimate and distant conceptual relationship to the field of study that proposed to analyze its literature. Historiographically speaking, medieval is not one period among others with which it is on an equal footing. English studies was founded on, as well as founded against, the medieval. The discipline of English contributes its small part to, in Kathleen Davis’s formulation, “the medievalism at the heart of the theoretical enterprise of modernity.”

The presently existing dynamic between medieval and the rest of the field imposes on medievalists an impossible choice between a demonstration that medieval literature differs from modern literature (justifying periodization) and a demonstration that it does not (forfeiting its historicity). The choice is impossible because the political claims of modernity permeate the fundamental disciplinary concepts. These are the concepts behind MLA-interview or job-talk questions of the form, “What does [text] tell us about [topic] in general?” To speak these concepts is already to speak the language of modernity. I want to emphasize that this is neither a peculiar character failing on the part of postmedievalists (as if more virtuous colleagues would ask the right questions) nor a general problem of institutional power (as if the tables could be turned and medievalist categories made into the unmarked terms of engagement for literary study—if only!). The whole problem of fundamental disciplinary concepts points instead to a self-contradiction inherent in the structure of modernity as a presentist European yet universalist narrative category.

A similar dynamic plays out more subtly between the subfields of Old English and Middle English, which parted ways in the nineteenth century. My first book challenged this periodization from the perspective of alliterative verse. As with the medieval/modern divide, work that traverses the two times clusters around a small number of established longue durée topics, such as historiography, religious prose, and book production. In addition to its intellectual ramifications, Old/Middle periodization has professional ones. Old English and Middle English specialists have few occasions on which to be in the same rooms. Old English specialists attend the conference of the society formerly known as the International Society for Anglo-Saxonists; Middle English specialists attend the New Chaucer Society, International Piers Plowman Society, or International John Gower Society conferences. The Modern Language Association
recognizes a separate “Old English” forum. Even at the Kalamazoo, Leeds, and Medieval Academy of America medieval studies conferences, which enforce no formal periodized subdivisions, paper sessions in English studies usually address one period or the other. While everyone becomes a medievalist in relation to other colleagues in our departments, the privileging of fourteenth-century literature in journals, lecture series, and hiring is unmistakable.

Within late medieval English studies, the divide between Chaucer and everything else repeats the pattern of exclusion and distortion characterizing the medieval/modern and Old English/Middle English divides. Through the explosive medium of early print culture, Chaucer is the one English author whose writings directly connect the Middle Ages to those who study the Middle Ages. As such, Chaucer was always prone to attain the status of a temporal exception. Study of Chaucer enjoys (suffers from) the same inclination to universalize, to colonize adjacent intellectual terrain, that marks modernity. Late medieval English studies tends to adopt a Chaucerian perspective on the field. Through the fault of no particular person, this local periodization finds its institutional elaborations. The New Chaucer Society is the wealthiest scholarly society dedicated to Middle English literature; its biennial conference is the largest platform for new ideas in the field; its journal, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, is arguably the most prestigious venue for new scholarly work, though I like to think the *Yearbook of Langland Studies* gives it a run for its money. Scholars of late medieval English literature divide their activities in the MLA between two forums, “Chaucer” and “Middle English.” Such a bifurcation, paradoxical on its face, signals that Chaucer matters as much as all Middle English literature, including Chaucer. Before 2016 the Middle English forum was named “Middle English Language and Literature, Excluding Chaucer”: a field defined by a Chaucer-shaped hole.

An incident several years ago perturbed this state of affairs, momentarily turning the organization of MLA forums into a political issue for late medievalists focusing on literature in English. In 2014 the MLA leadership formally questioned the value of retaining an author-based forum, then known as a division. The fallout was predictable but instructive. Concerned to oppose retrenchment of medieval studies in the MLA, Chaucerians responded at the 2015 convention with vigorous defenses of Chaucer as a locus for indispensable critical conversations. Ironically, one implication of the defense of Chaucer was to problematize the existence of a separate division on Middle English. Discomfort with—and yet reliance on—Chaucer’s status as ur-poet was palpable in the MLA sessions defending the division on Chaucer. “Why Chaucer Now?” asked a
roundtable organized by the division on Chaucer. The Middle English division
hosted a roundtable entitled “Rethinking the Place of the Author.” All five par-
ticipants adverted to Chaucer. As I recall, the speakers in “Rethinking” found
themselves arguing that Chaucer’s historical centrality enabled his name to tran-
scend authorship and thereby to convene other types of critical discourse valued
by the MLA membership. This was an apt statement of the situation, but circum-
stance dictated that it appear as a subdisciplinary strength, not as the histori-
ographical/methodological problem that Chaucerian universalism is for the field.
The result of this activity in 2015 was to ward off the attempt at reor-
ganization from above. Conference-goers can again take Chaucer for granted, ceding prob-
lems of periodization to MLA governance.

This book is my response to the prevailing distribution of professional time.
It is an attempt to write my way past the window frame through which I entered
the academy and toward a truer conception of the experiences latent in early En-
GLISH verse. The two, interrelated targets of the book’s historiographical revi-
sionism are modernity and Chaucer. The book articulates a general judgment.
The forms of academic knowledge characteristic of the last two hundred years
thoroughly distort understanding of earlier European metrical cultures, even as they recover those cultures for examination in the first place. Suspending the me-
dieval/modern periodization reopens possibilities for historicism. In par-
ticular, this book sets out to undo the retrospectivism of disciplinary formation. The goal
is to think of English metrical traditions as themselves unfolding historical times,
whose experience initially bore no relation to the later historical accretions
through which we inevitably conceptualize English poetics today, such as the can-
onization of Chaucer, the dominance of pentameter, the usurpation by English
of the social and intellectual spaces of Latin, Enlightenment historiography, nas-
tionalism, the institution of English departments, and free verse. Literature en-
acts a “movement toward a future that is ultimately inapprehensible,” to borrow
Davis’s summary of Bede’s philosophy of history. Belated readers like ourselves,
burdened with awareness of the literary future that in actuality transpired, must
try to recapture the, as it were, apophatic trajectories of literary history. This book
works through the friction between prospect and retrospect, practice and the-
ory, life and analysis.