

## INTRODUCTION

The human urge to recover and preserve the voices of the dead predates even writing itself. Part of the motivation for this perhaps lies in the hope of discovering precedents to confirm and reassure us in our own anxieties, hopes and beliefs. However, it would be undoubtedly foolish to expect - and unrewarding to find - that the voices of the past only chime with our own. In L.P. Hartley's famous phrase, 'The past is another country; they do things differently there'. The truth of this propels and gives meaning to the continuation of academic history across the world, as researchers strive to better understand the particularities of specific, historical events, people, trends and systems. Yet, in relation to historic works of human creativity and imagination, public (if not academic) discourse all too often regrets the past's foreignness and apportion value only to 'relevant' canonical works - typically those deemed 'timeless' and eloquent of a statically conceived 'human condition', or those that seem to speak directly to distinctively modern preoccupations. Against this prejudice, the MLA's chronological approach to the arts in Britain between 1450 and 1914 compels awareness of the distinctiveness of the mentalities of any given moment from those of any other – including the present. Although we may not deem certain paradigms from the past to be acceptable now, an appreciation of the mutability of the human condition and its infinite possibility challenges complacency in the present and urges innovative and open thinking for the future.

The essays in this collection are alive to difference of many varieties, not simply that between eras, and include those of gender, race, nationality and social class. Rather than conceptualising a given period monolithically as dominated by a single set of values, cultural practices and assumptions, nearly all the essays reveal a multiplicity of discourses and cultures active in a society at any given moment. Such polyphony is inscribed into the DNA of this journal, by its requirement that all submissions take the form of a juxtaposition of two or more 'artefacts' from the same fifty-year period but of different forms or artistic media. The objects discussed range from Elizabethan duelling manuals

and designs for Stuart masques to a Victorian cricket-club tie and an English translation of a Persian poem.

Historicism is clearly the dominant intellectual approach of this volume. In their exploration of the violence and absolutism of ‘Shakespeare’s’ England, Marie Harrison, Adam Diaper and Andrés Font Galarza illustrate that the foreign elements of any historical work should not be dismissed merely as archaic and disposable trappings, but recognised as integral to initial audiences’ understanding of the work. Likewise, as Alexandra Mayson and Katerina Kern prove with their sensitivity to religious angst in mid-Victorian England, even those works that seem most timeless tend to have stemmed from the particular concerns of their own period of origin. Several essays, especially Susan Knights’s and Emily Lam’s, expose the gulf between past attitudes towards gender and modern ideals.

Beyond even the motivations for the behaviour and customs of past peoples, the dominant imperatives of any society also shape how its members fundamentally perceive and understand the world in which they act. While Michelle Castelletti, Mariona Ponce Bochaca and Debbie Hicks explore the distinct aesthetics of Early Modern courtly culture, Alex Deamer and Dewey Hall reassess the relative significances of built and natural environments within the mental landscape of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century, ‘Romantic’ writers and artists.

Historical difference must, of course, imply the necessity of change over time. At least six articles in this collection explore moments of cultural transition in Britain. Some papers, such as Craig Paterson’s, Freya Gye’s, David Darbyshire’s and David Allen’s, herald norms that we recognise in the present; others, like Sharon O’Connor’s and Sopna Nair’s, reveal the emergence of a fresh *status quo* equally distinct from today’s. Interestingly, whatever the nature of the change examined, most of these essays depict the process as dialectical, resulting from the opposition of two or more cultures co-existing within British society at a given moment. Hence, the equal stress throughout this volume on both the continuance of tradition and the persistence of dissent.

The range of voices and the potential for conflict and change is expanded even further by the essays that explore encounters between Britain and overseas nations and territories. Largely eschewing the essentialist, ahistorical, ‘orientalist’ dichotomy of East and West, they reveal how British reactions to and interactions with foreign cultures have

varied enormously between period and location: Danny Evans interrogates Early Modern perceptions of black Africans; Ahmed Shokri examines the position and representation of women in Victorian Cairo; Amy Marshall uncovers how British imperialists in India struggled to confront and contain exceptions to their rigid, ideologically informed expectations of the ‘other’; and Natalia de Blasio considers the contested status of the Elgin Marbles at the time of their arrival in Regency London.

It is clear from this selection of essays that interdisciplinarity’s liberation from the confines of any one way of approaching an object of study has encouraged our original and varied voices. The front cover gives visual articulation to this. An original painting by MLA student and contributor to this volume, Katerina Kern, it takes as its literal basis a pre-existing work. By working over this, Kern has produced a beautiful, innovative work, which at once reveals and requires the original that remains visible beneath in order to give form to its own identity.

We are nearly at the end of our MLA, and our futures will be as diverse as our voices. But we hope that, both here and in the years to come, we continue to contribute to and benefit from the bracing process of intellectual reinvigoration, afforded by interdisciplinarity. As T. S. Eliot in *Little Gidding* declared:

What we call the beginning is often the end  
And to make an end is to make a beginning.  
The end is where we start from [...]

Thus, it is to every member of the MLA 2016-2018 and all our inspirational tutors that this volume is dedicated. It belongs to each of you.

Adam Diaper  
Alexandra Mayson  
Craig Paterson