

to students would all look different if we began with the premise that time is multicentric, multipath, and multidirectional. While scholars like Joel Burges, Amy J. Elias, and Amelia Groom focus on the present as the epicenter for nonlinearity, Friedman's important book *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity across Time* (Columbia UP, 2015) shows that an alternative conception of time can also transform the shapes of the past and the future.

In this context I'd especially like to mention the work of Kyle Powys Whyte, a Potawatomi philosopher, author, and activist who has proposed just such a nonlinear approach to the Anthropocene, giving equal weight to the past, the present, and the future. The massive disruptions that we now associate with climate change—ecosystem collapse, species loss, involuntary relocation, and pandemics—have been the fabric of life for Native Americans since the sixteenth century. Newly seen as apocalyptic in the twenty-first, these disruptions seem far less so to those who have long suffered under them and lived through them, emerging with a different relation to the nonhuman world and a time-honed practice of resilience and survival. Climate adaptation has always been key to indigenous communities, Whyte argues, a form of lived time that makes them veterans and pioneers in a “forward-looking framework of justice” shaped by memories of the past, honoring ancestors and descendants both (“Justice Forward: Tribes, Climate Adaptation and Responsibility,” *Climate Change*, 3 Apr. 2013, [www.nwclimatescience.org/sites/default/files/2013bootcamp/readings/Whyte\\_2013b.pdf](http://www.nwclimatescience.org/sites/default/files/2013bootcamp/readings/Whyte_2013b.pdf)).

*Wai Chee Dimock*  
Yale University

### Challenges in Contemporary Lyric Theory

TO THE EDITOR:

Powerfully opposing the neglect of the medieval period by many students of lyric, Ricardo

Matthews's “Song in Reverse: The Medieval Prosimetrum and Lyric Theory” (vol. 132, no. 2, Mar. 2018, pp. 296–313) enriches lyric studies by both precept and example. Previous critics had classified poetry in the prosimetrum tradition as merely rhetorical convention and hence lacking individuated subjectivity; Matthews, however, argues that by placing a lyric in a narrative situation, this genre moves from a wholly conventional text to one marked by self-expression.

Matthews's assertions about the neglect of the medieval in lyric studies are indisputable. His analyses are also germane to other historical domains in lyric studies and, indeed, to fields beyond it. The implications for global discussions of lyric would require an entire essay of their own, but we can recognize here that even more egregious than sidelining medieval literature is the widespread neglect of classical texts in many contemporary versions of lyric studies. The introduction of narrative specifications in the prosimetrum could be compared to the episodes in Elizabethan prose romances where an apparently anonymous poem, previously encountered on a stone or tree, is subsequently linked to particular authors and situations. And Matthews's posited interplay between lyric and narrative elements extends recent work that has replaced rote statements that lyric temporarily halts narrative with subtle models of their interrelation, which sometimes even extends to hybridity.

Yet despite these and other significant achievements, at some junctures the essay offers problematic contentions, and at others it exemplifies recurrent limitations in lyric studies and in the broader disciplines of literary and cultural studies. For example, Matthews claims that the knowledge that a song may have been performed before does not conflict with its potential to represent and even create the subjectivity of a performer. But does not the awareness that someone else has performed it in the past—and, significantly, may perform it in the future or even join in the current per-

formance—at least threaten that potential? Witness John Donne’s complaints about the possibility of someone else singing his songs or the complex relation between the subjectivities of Ophelia and Desdemona and the songs they sing. The principal limitations of the essay, however, arise in certain of its representations of lyric studies, a discussion that is partial in more senses than one. Its first sentence insists that “[a] historical approach to the study of lyric is now the norm” (296). But the jury is still out on the relative values of transhistorical and historical approaches, and loud disputes can be overheard even at some distance from the jury room. For instance, many papers at the first conference sponsored by the recently formed International Network for the Study of Lyric adopted a transhistorical approach, others a historical one, and yet others attempted to bridge those extremes, as Matthews himself suggestively does in his conclusion (309).

The opening paragraph of the essay also reinforces its assertion of a historicist turn by including within that putative turn Jonathan Culler, arguably the leader in lyric studies. Admittedly, Culler has on occasion acknowledged historical variations in lyric—but he insists primarily and repeatedly on a transhistorical category. The title of his magisterial *Theory of the Lyric* (Harvard UP, 2015) implies that category; its introduction unequivocally affirms that “poets themselves, reading and responding to predecessors, have created a lyric tradition that persists across historical periods and radical changes in circumstances of production and transmission” (3–4); and in the rest of the book, as in many of his earlier writings, he proceeds to practice what this statement preaches. Although Matthews subsequently acknowledges Culler’s long-standing commitment to transhistorical readings when he contrasts Culler’s approach with Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins’s thesis (Introduction, *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Jackson and Prins, Johns Hopkins UP, 2014, pp. 1–8), he underestimates this commitment in his introductory statements.

Whereas his conclusion aptly suggests that medieval lyric might be adduced for both historical and transhistorical approaches to lyric, at times Matthews seems to pull his punches when representing the highly influential historicized theory of lyricization developed by Jackson and Prins. For example, Matthews blames transhistorical theories of lyric for ignoring certain centuries and literatures, but that accusation could be leveled against Jackson and Prins’s approach with as much if not more justice. (Their paradigm contends that before the nineteenth century, the period in which—not coincidentally—Jackson and Prins specialize, we lacked a conception of lyric; at that point “lyricization” developed, conflating earlier genres into a broad category that obscured cultural and political ramifications.) But a concept of lyric has been identified in earlier centuries by many critics, a few of whom include myself (*The Challenges of Orpheus: Lyric Poetry and Early Modern England*, Johns Hopkins UP, 2008, pp. 15–53), Leslie Kurke (“The Strangeness of ‘Song Culture’: Archaic Greek Poetry,” *Literature in the Greek and Roman Worlds: A New Perspective*, edited by Oliver Taplin, Oxford UP, 2000, pp. 58–87), David Lindley (“‘Words for Music, Perhaps’: Early Modern Songs and Lyric,” *The Lyric Poem: Formations and Transformations*, edited by Marion Thain, Cambridge UP, 2013, pp. 10–29), Nigel Smith (*Literature and Revolution in England, 1640–1660*, Yale UP, 1994), and indeed Matthews (297). Jackson and Prins’s contention about the blurring of genres today is also problematic; notably, many marginalized groups have written in and about the sonnet, variously documenting their alienation from it and reclaiming their right to it.

What, then, are the broader implications not only for lyric theory but also for our discipline as a whole? We must avoid enshrining the historical period with which we identify (an identification that often survives debates about issues like periodization and the emphasis on globalism) as typical of an entire literary tradition. Matthews resists this temptation, but many other critics do not. In particular, while

stopping short of casting Culler as godfather of a mafia of Romantics claiming lyric as their turf, we should observe how many critics do represent the poetry most common in their period as normative for lyric.

While withstanding that first temptation, Matthews's essay, impressive in so many other respects, succumbs to a second one—the tendency to locate the most significant developments in literary and cultural studies within one's area of specialization. In his abstract, Matthews writes that “the Middle Ages [is] at the center of our understanding of modern lyric poetry.” He is hardly alone: witness all the contesting claims from academics that capitalism originates in the period they study. Authors of such statements may on occasion have a case, but their motivations and evidence need to be approached with the caution, indeed suspicion, that should also be evoked by the many other types of competition in our profession.

*Heather Dubrow*  
Fordham University

*Reply:*

I'd like to thank Heather Dubrow for recognizing in my essay a balance between historical and transhistorical approaches. However, her impression that I am skeptical of the transhistorical project in general and Jonathan Culler in particular necessitates a response. I'm not opposed to transhistorical readings if they are historical.

In the most engaging parts of *Theory of the Lyric*, Culler's readings seem personal. Broad and creative, these readings feel open to methods not defined by periodization. Instead, they seem dictated by pleasure, the same rhetorical principle Culler defends when he asks us to resist the need to submit every “language event” to interpretation (168).

As for the historical, Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins's appeal for some historical speci-

ficity regarding the lyric should not be controversial. Such approaches are not “incompatible” with a theory of the lyric, as Culler argues (3), but a way to open song to new readings based on the particular features of a period. Trying to locate the differences, as opposed to focusing on lyric continuity or similarities, results in surprising discoveries. The medieval love poem, for example, suddenly felt fresh again once the Belgian medievalist and poet Robert Guette rediscovered its glittering surface by limiting the influences of another transhistorical project, what he called romantic. That project had universalized nineteenth-century ideas of subjective representations that may not have been present in *trouvère* poetry. That's one reason why, to answer Dubrow's question, the fictional performance of a “found” song, like the *Canticus Troili* or “The Willow Song,” cannot threaten the creation of subjectivity in a literary text, because that subjectivity is not a given. In highly conventional poetry, it is created through the context of its singing.

Transhistorical approaches are scholarly pronouncements about history, since they are studies that extend across multiple historical fields. They work extremely well when they analyze periods with shared characteristics, like Ernst Robert Curtius's monumental *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (Bollingen Foundation, 1953), which describes how classical writing practices continued into the Middle Ages and then into the era of Shakespeare and the Spanish Golden Age. My own essay is similarly transhistorical. Taking up one genre from the fifth century to the fifteenth, I hoped to show how highly conventional lyrics, whether original or “found,” suddenly appeared subjective with the introduction of a narrative. The only speculative foray is found in note 7, where I list modern examples as a way to think about the *prosimetrum* today (310).

Transhistorical theories are flawed when they are teleological and situate the author's period as the ultimate beneficiary of the past.