William Kuskin. *Recursive Origins: Writing at the Transition to Modernity.*
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03325-5.

This book proposes that the concept of recursion, derived initially from computer science and subsequently imported to linguistics and other disciplines, provides an alternative to periodization as a way of formulating the temporal structure of English literary history. Specifically, this study aims to recuperate the fifteenth century in accounts of the relationship of medieval to early modern. To the traditional narrative that conceptualizes a decisive break between these familiar periods of English writing, recursion offers a model for thinking about their formal and rhetorical connections. Recursion sets aside linearity, progress, and originality to reveal the repetition, return, remediation, and embedding of fifteenth-century forms and tropes in the sixteenth-century vernacular canon.

Following an introduction that approaches the recursivity of early English literature through the unlikely examples of Rolling Stone Keith Richards's autobiography, *Life* (2010), and M. C. Escher's famous *Drawing Hands* (1948), five loosely structured chapters elaborate how recursion works upon the content and form of the literary page. Chapter 1 explores Martial's densely self-referential second epigram and Caxton's first edition of Chaucer's *Boece* as test cases for this study's major premises. Chapter 2 excavates how E. K. of *The Shepheardes Calender* fashions a "new Poete" from Spenser's complicated encounters with Lydgate and Chaucer in print. Shakespeare's early quartos provide the focus of chapter 3, which details how the playwright's emergence as an author in print involves a literal return

to fifteenth-century history (in the 1594 quarto of *2 Henry VI*) and a dramatic meditation on textual authority and book history that loops back to Caxton's *Chronicles of England*. Turning again to Shakespeare, chapter 4 makes a strong case for the dependence of *Troilus and Cressida* on Caxton's *The Recuyell of the Histories of Troye* and Lydgate's *Troy Book*. In this dependence the prior works function not as narrowly construed sources, but rather as immediate models for conceptualizing the relationship between history and genre conveyed in recursive bookish forms. Chapter 5 returns to early modern encounters with Shakespeare in quarto, specifically the Pavier quartos, whose eclectic and provisional representations of the English past, in history and textual culture, offer a defining contrast to the First Folio's consolidating and autonomous literary project.

One strength of this book is its declared intent to conceptualize early modern literary history apart from the "grand narratives of monarchical and ecclesiastical fortunes" (128) that have so deeply influenced scholarship on the period. Across the Tudor centuries, Kuskin shows how the recursivity of the physical book and its rhetoric furnishes compelling material for thinking differently about that history. This study thus importantly contributes to current conversations that seek to emphasize literary history's formal properties. Although Kuskin does not press the point, he also usefully spells out how familiar versions of medieval and early modern periodization take their cue from sixteenth-century writers themselves, who repeatedly claim to depart from the past even as their works recur upon its material texts and tropes.

Considered, though, in light of the ever-expanding body of scholarship that addresses the openness of medieval and early modern literary periodization to analysis from perspectives afforded by alternative temporalities and theories of modernity itself, this book's larger argument seems belated. Surely, the dominant narrative that this book so repeatedly challenges — a story of "chronological progress and revolutionary break" (99) that privileges the originality and novelty of sixteenth-century canonical writers — has lost purchase of late, except perhaps among the most diehard proponents of the modernity of the early modern. The "war on totality" (5) that the author proposes has indeed been waged for a long time. Hence this book strains to declare the exceptionalism of its departures from that dominant narrative and insufficiently acknowledges the major contributions to that narrative's dismantling by many of the scholars whose work it too often frames in opposition to its own endeavor. What is most exciting — and new — in the argument advanced here are the careful, detailed examinations of how recursion manifests itself on the sixteenth-century pages of Spenser and Shakespeare and the works of Caxton, Chaucer, Lydgate, and others that these authors encountered in print. In those readings, this book's ambitions for a literary history of rhetorical tropes and forms are most fully realized.

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