

*Reading Then, Reading Now*  
A Bloomfield Conference, English Department, Harvard University  
April 18-20, 2019

**CALL for PAPERS**

In the sixteenth century reading, or at least hearing, the Word became identified with salvation. That remarkable phenomenon was coterminous with, and possibly produced by, the information technology revolution of print. In Anglo-American scholarship, the reading revolution of the Reformation remains a key platform of still vital Whig triumphalism, notably as a sign of interpretive liberty. Whether or not the Reformation was a moment of interpretive liberty, Protestant reading practice certainly produced, in time, a secular culture of reading whereby “salvation” of a (secular) kind continued to be identified with reading. It thereby produced, and legitimated, university departments of literature. The 500 years from the Reformation to the present have witnessed, in Anglo-American culture at least, the undisputed dominance of the Word, whether secular or sacred.

The second great information technology revolution, through which we are currently passing, may herald the end of that 500-year period of verbal dominance. As our own information technologies become virtual, we have witnessed at least two responses within universities: (i) a burgeoning scholarly attention, at the research level, to the material history of the book; and (ii) a heightened anxiety, at undergraduate level, concerning the ends of reading (in both related senses of “ends”). The response we have *not* so far witnessed with any force is to connect the extremely rich and subtle practices of pre-modern reading (practices for the most part dismissed as “allegorical”) to our contemporary predicaments.

The conference proposed here addresses both these recent responses to virtual technologies. It does so by looking to the longer, pre-modern history of reading leading up to the print revolution of early modernity. We do so driven by three persuasions: (i) that the early modern histories of the book and of reading have long pre-modern histories; (ii) that advance in the material history of the book as a scholarly field needs to be nourished by the so-far much less developed history of reading; and (iii) that genealogies of reading practice can help us orient our understanding of how we, and our undergraduates, read now.

The following adverbs and adverbial phrases serve as a by no means exhaustive shorthand to reading practices of current concern, each of which have pre-modern genealogies: postcolonially, cognitively, ethically, politically, post-imperially, as supercessionists, allegorically, tropologically, anagogically, literally, formally, closely, distantly, materially, philologically, suspiciously, critically, trustingly, performatively, interlingually, deeply, pleurably, lovingly, privately, collectively (say). For this conference we invite papers focused on pre-modern practices that bear upon issues of

contemporary scholarly reading and pedagogy. Our principal geographical and historical focus will be the British Isles, 7-16 centuries.

We aim to mount this conference in Spring Term (April 18-20, 2019). The following speakers have kindly agreed to offer plenary papers: Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe (Bloomfield Lecture); Suzanne Akbari; Amy Appleford; and Catherine Sanok. We would be able to subsidize speakers and graduate student attendees with vouchers for on-site and some travel expenses.

Proposals for 20-minute papers are welcome. Please submit proposals to James Simpson ([jsimpson@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:jsimpson@fas.harvard.edu)) by Friday 28 September.